

~I. The Young Lady and the Shrine~

The sun rose again on the streets of Tokyo, illuminating the many buildings choking the sides of the streets. It was hard to find a moment's rest in such a busy city, and the neighborhood of Sendagaya, within the special ward of Shibuya, was no exception—the bustling neighborhood served as a hotspot for fashion designs of all sorts, couriers dashing to and fro to deliver the next season's designs.

Despite its place on the cutting edge of fashion, though, this neighborhood also served as a home to several scenic, tranquil, old-fashioned Japanese landscapes—why, just two minutes from its main train station was an entrance to the Imperial Gardens of Tokyo.

One old vista in particular was graced with a visit on this morning. The Hato-no-Mori shrine to Hachiman, nestled in a thicket of 300-year-old pine trees, rang out with the songs of the doves that made it their home. A miniature replica of Mt. Fuji sat within it, and had the visitor been a different sort of artist, she might have taken a moment to indulge a bit of childish fun and play upon the stage for performing arts the shrine also housed.

—The thumb and index finger formed an L, and two of those together formed a rectangular window. This was a habit that the young lady visiting the shrine had gotten into to separate her image from the rest of the world. She stared through her own window, and then nodded to herself. “Mmhm. Perfect.”

She had brought with herself an easel and a canvas, as well as a set of paintbrushes. She had wanted to try painting this particular shrine for some time—as a young girl, she had come here and been immediately struck by the air of this peaceful slice of the world, and even eight years later, at fourteen years old, she could not forget about this.

—'Peaceful', in a way, was also a good word to describe Chisa Inomiko herself. If one wanted to be more specific, they could say that she exemplified a certain set of qualities known as the 'yamato nadeshiko'—a placid, patient demeanor, reserved yet poised body language and speech, kind, charitable, and gentle in her ways. It was endlessly difficult to bring her to anger, and raw fury had not occurred to her once in her fourteen years of life. She did not fret, she did not worry, and she did not raise her voice—never once had her parents received anything but a glowing review of her performance as a student.

She was a lithe, fit girl, with a wiry, thin frame that belied the lean muscle she possessed. On this morning, she had worn a casual white yukata to the shrine, as it was a Sunday, and she had nowhere to be afterwards. Her thin fingers and light, untanned skin—though not pale—along with her well-cared-for, yet naturally agreeable features, made to match each other near-perfectly, almost as though she were a doll, were enough to tell anyone at just a glance that she was very solidly upper-crust—a modern noblewoman.

Of course, the most striking thing about Chisa Inomiko was none of that. It was her hair—most of it was a dark brown, currently tied back in a long ponytail, but she was instantly recognizable by one swoop of brilliant red hair, falling just to the side of her left eye. Nobody

had any idea where it had come from—certainly it had not been present in any of her relatives, going back generations.

Chisa had recently begun her third and final year of middle school. Having something to relax with, then, was always handy—that sort of situation would stress any student out, to say nothing of a straight-A student like her. Having a place where nothing would interrupt her, then, was a wonderful boon—

...Or, no. It was Sunday, and that bush had just moved. There was one thing that would interrupt her. “Hmmm,” Chisa said, a playful singsong to her voice. “It’s a good thing I’m all alone, or else something might jump out of those bushes and attack me.”

“Yup,” the bushes said. “Totally alone.”

Chisa giggled. “One *hundred* percent. Why, it’s almost as if everyone on the face of the earth just vanished in an instant.” She continued making light strokes upon her painting of the shrine, letting a few more moments pass by—

“Surprise!” Without a doubt, the frizzy-haired beast that leapt from the bush was some manner of wild child! Perhaps raised by wolves, with no compunctions about attacking his own kind—what a horrific sight! Here he came now, ready to attack—!

Oh, wait, no. Chisa had just stood up to receive a hug from him around her waist. “Hi, Taichi,” Chisa said with a little laugh, reaching down to ruffle his hair. “Shouldn’t you still be in bed?”

Taichi Inomiko, on the other hand, was a little ragamuffin who was currently missing one of his front teeth in the big grin he gave his older sister. He was a bit dirty at the moment, and had slapped together whatever he felt like to follow Chisa. His hair was a bit lighter than his sister’s, and overall, despite definitely being blood-related, the two of them looked nothing alike; he was rougher, a bit rounder, and even at a young age was set to grow wider than her, not to mention the different shapes of their noses and eyes, even down to the cheekbones.

Not that that mattered at all, of course. “What? C’mon!” Taichi said, huffing into the folds of his sister’s yukata. “I’ve slept plenty. It’s eight hours, right?”

“But you got out of bed and immediately decided to follow me, hm?” Chisa said, grinning. “Running all the way here, no doubt. What are Mother and Father going to think if they see you out of breath when we get home?”

“Just say you took me with you,” Taichi said. “They’ll listen to you better.”

That made enough sense, so Chisa turned on her feet, sat down on the edge of a stone lantern, and began painting again. Taichi sat down next to her. What Chisa held in refinement, Taichi utterly lacked—he was an eight-year-old boy, for one, and not even remotely in consideration to inherit the family headship, so he had no reason to be refined. As a result, his

legs, dangling off the side of the lantern, bobbed to and fro to hit the backs of his shoes against the lantern.

“Pencils are definitely easier,” Chisa said, looking down upon her easel then back up at the shrine. “Don't think I'll be switching main disciplines any time soon.”

“I coulda told you *that*,” Taichi said. He rolled his eyes. “What's with artists, anyway?” The missing tooth meant his 's' sounds had a cute little whistle that Chisa couldn't help but find darling. “There's this girl in my class who keeps drawing in her sketchpad just like you. I don't get it. How do you stand still for that long?”

“Well,” Chisa said with a wink, “sure, it might seem a bit odd, but it's just a question of discipline. You've got a while to go before you pick up on that virtue, Taichi.”

Taichi blew a raspberry. “Discipline, schmiscipline. You think if it was autumn, there'd be a bunch of leaves on the ground? Wish I could roll around in a pile of leaves.”

“I could draw you a bunch of leaves,” Chisa said with a smile, “and you could roll around in the paper.”

“What? No way!” Taichi shook his head. “It's not the same. Plus, you'd have to draw enough for two.”

“Oh?” Chisa tilted her head.

“Duh! You'd have to roll with me! You're taller, and you could crunch more of 'em. Plus you need to have more fun!” Taichi leapt off of the lantern and poked his head around Chisa's easel to affix her with a very firm look. “I mean, you don't wanna be boring like Mom and Dad.”

Chisa giggled. “I don't think boring is all that bad. Boring is peaceful. Boring means nothing catastrophic is happening. One of these days, you'll learn the value of boring.” She nodded to herself, then crossed her arms and stood up. “...But not today.”

When Chisa's hands darted in to start pinching Taichi's cheeks, he reacted lightning-fast to duck down and start running away, laughing. Her easel sat away, Chisa began to chase behind Taichi, and her longer legs gave her a bit of an unfair advantage that she intentionally downplayed to let the chase go on longer. The two of them ran in circles around the grounds of the shrine for a while until Chisa grabbed Taichi under the arms, and, laughing, sat down on the cobbled path, holding her younger brother in her lap.

“I'll be taller than you eventually,” Taichi said, huffing. “Then I'll outrun you!”

“I look forward to it!” Chisa said. “Until then, though, I'll enjoy still being your *big* sister.”

“You'll always be my big sister,” Taichi said, raising his eyebrow. “C'mon. That's how

time works.”

“You know what I mean,” Chisa shot back.

—It wasn't a memorable day by itself. The two of them whiled away another hour or so like that, then returned home. But it was these unmemorable, 'boring' times that Chisa valued most with her brother, because it was for those times that the tribulations of life were fought.

~II. The Young Lady and the Family Legacy~

Amidst this bustling neighborhood, one might not expect to find an old-fashioned manor, and yet the Inomiko residence stood, a plot all to itself, seemingly mocking the passage of time. Miniature irrigation systems of bamboo pipes ran across the gardens within the manor's walls, and as it was nearly spring, the plants dotting those gardens were beginning to bloom into a field of color. It was a vast building, with two floors spread across three different segments of the main building connected by a rim of walkways.

The northern segment dedicated a solid amount of its ground floor to a flat, spacious dojo, where the family's young lady was currently standing, her hand on the hilt of a blade on the wall. The chrysanthemum emblem was a tell-tale sign of a *kiku-ichimonji*, which Chisa's studies told her meant—well, that's a long story that bears little weight on the subject of the young lady.

At any rate, this blade, passed down through generations, was a treasure of the Inomiko family passed down to its current head. At the moment, it belonged to Chisa's father. Eventually, it would belong to her. At first, Chisa's parents had despaired at the idea of their firstborn being a woman—however, her innate aptitude for disciplines both physical and intellectual were near-impossible to deny, and so the family received its first female heir apparent in some time.

“—so take up your blade,” he said, “and duel me.”

Chisa had outgrown her latest sensei, so it was time again for an inaugural duel against the man before her—her father, Yuuya Inomiko. Like Taichi, neither of Chisa's parents bore her much resemblance—her father's hair was short and brunette, and he had a stern, strong-jawed countenance with a heavy build, much like an unmoving statue. Chisa couldn't see much of that behind the dueling outfits the two wore, though—and the wooden swords they both held didn't help, either.

Taichi sat on the ground to the side, in a ramrod-stiff posture that did not befit him in the slightest, and to his side was one Ikuko Inomiko, a short woman who nevertheless wore a hawk-like gaze at seemingly all times, her long, beginning-to-gray hair flowing down the back of her yukata.

—Traditionally, women of the Inomiko family were taught in the naginata, and men in the katana. (It is worth noting that while Ikuko was the one who married into the family, she did so quite early—their marriage occurred when she was sixteen and Yuuya fifteen, and any arrangement such as this would be between families with similar values. As such, Chisa's parents

held a united front.) However, Chisa's talents with martial weapons were such that it was felt she was 'wasted' on the naginata.

Ikuko raised her left hand, and swung backwards to strike the gong to her side.

—It was Chisa who stepped forward first, going in for an overhead swing. Yuuya threw up his sword to parry the strike, no doubt a bit surprised at her immediate, showy attack—but Chisa used the momentum from being parried to swing around the other side in a spinning strike to the side. It did no damage to her father, but the momentary surprise was enough for Chisa to make a 'sheathing' motion and ready her alternative combat stance.

Iaijutsu was not something one would expect in a duel without scabbards, but practicing the discipline was as important as winning the duel—so Chisa laid in, dodging past a blow from her father to let loose a lightning-quick slash to his stomach before whirling around his back and jabbing her blade backwards into him. An 'unsheathing' followed, and before he could turn around she slashed him diagonally on the back once more, staggering him.

Ikuko struck the gong once more, then looked down at her stopwatch. “Twelve point eight seconds. The last time, it was one minute, twenty-four seconds.”

“Oh, already?” Chisa blinked, then removed her helmet, shaking out the sweat from her hair. “I can keep going if you like.”

There was no harm done to his body, but Yuuya Inomiko's pride was doubtless hurt, from the way he knelt on the ground. “...Your talent is... *undeniable*,” he sighed, shaking his head. He hadn't yet removed his helmet, probably so nobody could see his face. “In the span of the last year you've improved tremendously.” He clicked his tongue. “I'm only thirty-seven. I can't be getting old that quickly.”

“There's no point in continuing a battle when you've been struck down so thoroughly,” Ikuko said. “I imagine if she continues on this path she'll be able to fell you with a single blow before long.”

Chisa bowed to her father, who stood up and removed his own helmet. “Thank you for this match,” she said. “Of course, in a real duel, I have no doubt you would defeat me handily, Father.”

“...” Yuuya narrowed his eyes, making a grumbling sound under his breath. He did, however, bow back.

—Later, in the kitchen that evening, Chisa asked her mother, “Have I done something to upset Father?” while chopping some vegetables.

“Men don't like to be shown up,” Ikuko said. Since Chisa had become old enough to assist her mother in the kitchen, it had become a regular occurrence. “I imagine he feels a bit emasculated.”

“Is there anything I can do to make it up to him?” Chisa asked, her hand briefly hesitating.

“I doubt it,” Ikuko said, “but that is simply the way of things. The time will likely come when Taichi feels emasculated by you, as well.”

That got Chisa to sputter aloud. “That's ridiculous! Taichi and I—”

“It's *simply the way of things*,” Ikuko said. “It's how men are. Your ability to be even-headed is what makes you a quality woman of the Inomiko family—so don't worry yourself.”

Chisa couldn't help but let out a sigh. “Even so, I will have to succeed the head of the family at some point. Are you saying I'll have to expect any sons I have to hate me, too?”

“My brother hated my parents,” Ikuko said, and that was that. “...Still, your father is something of a petulant man. To see a woman who can do a man's job is likely making him thrash about just as badly as he did when he was a boy. Perhaps he'll be in his room, crying.”

...That didn't feel good to hear. Chisa continued moving despite it, but her mother continued, “Crying is a sign of weakness, and if he thinks himself weak, then he'll cry. Personally, I find myself proud to have a daughter who is too strong to cry, no matter what happens.”

—Right. “Right,” Chisa said.

~III. The Farmhand, After the Battle~

It was on a chilly late-winter evening that things shifted in a manner nobody could have expected. The time was 2:14 A.M., and outside was a night-time rain splashing against the window. The consciousness of the young lady had been fading in and out that night, so some foggy bit of her mind could hear the rain, though it didn't reach her consciousness. It calmed her, eased her mind—she found something soothing in the pitter-patter of the rain.

And

THEN

the

W

ORLD

came

CRASHING IN,

“MIO?!”

and Raven Hillshead came stumbling, crashing out of bed in a ridiculous tumble that probably just looked like the silliest thing ever to anyone who was watching him, oh GOD, it was dark and there were rain sounds and he hadn't been feeling anything and all of a sudden he WAS feeling something and AAAAAAAAAAAA—

Okay, he could read numbers, and that clock there said that it was 2:15 A.M., so he stifled his own screaming. There might have been people who would be disturbed if he yelled too loud even though he wanted to yell really loud because WHAT just happened, okay—

He found a light switch on the wall, which was something Mio had mentioned, and before even taking a second to register the room he found himself in, he began pacing.

Okay, he thought to himself. Okay, hi, Raven, so, okay. Let's recap. Okay, so a flashing light came out of Mio's gaming thing—he could only remember the name when he was talking to her to be honest the whole thing was so foreign and out of his realm of understanding that—that was a tangent. And then he'd—okay, then there was an unspecified amount of nothing, just being in this weird state of pure consciousness with no understanding of anything about it like he was a brain in space or something, and then—

—Okay. Okay, so there was a bed. It was a bed, and frankly it looked like a pretty nice bed—it had those nice steel bedframes and lovely sheets, the kind there was no way his family could afford, most likely. There was a window out to the street but there was too much rain to see through at the moment, and anyway it seemed dark. That was a closet over there, and a dresser in a style he didn't recognize—it was wooden, but lacquered and put together and decorated in ways he didn't recognize, with a number of... awards? atop it, golden and bronze and silver things in shapes that he was pretty sure were some manner of award.

Wait—no, that one there, that was for first place in the middle school Archery Club competition. Okay, yes, he recognized that one—wait, what?

Back up. Okay. So the door in here was one of those sliding doors like you'd find in Yamato, where the Therians lived, he knew those. This room felt like it had an odd mixture of that manner of décor and more... well, was it 'modern'? It felt like it was probably 'modern' on a level past his own understanding of 'modern', considering... wait wait wait, was that a fan on the *ceiling*?! This room had a fan on the ceiling that you could control by switch on the wall, like with the lights?!

There was an easel set up near the wall, with its own space in the room set up, which implied that the room's occupant was probably into art of some manner. Huh. Maybe Raven could take tips—he wasn't an expert by any means, but Mio—

Oh, he thought. Mio.

The 'otaku' girl he'd come this whole way with—Mio Akaneno. He'd met her when she'd literally crash-landed atop him on his way to the city of Iorys, and the two of them had caught a ride with a pair of traveling merchants into the city. Even in that short time, he knew she was like nobody he'd ever met—besides her clothes, of course, and that guitar case she carried obsessively with her, not to mention those weird implements of hers, she was... she just talked differently, carried herself differently.

She'd told him that she found herself enjoying life a lot more in Iorys than the place she'd come from... 'Tokyo'. 'Tokyo, Japan'. A foreign land Raven had never heard of, that apparently her gaming device had taken her from. And now that device had whisked him away somewhere, too—somewhere he had no idea of, never been before. Huh. Was this how that felt? This sense of raw confusion, of all this new information?

There was a mirror on the wall, a tall enough one that Raven could see himself in the mirror. Someone had put him in some manner of local sleep clothes, and removed his ponytail, but other than that it was definitely still him. ...wasn't it? Wait... No, the more Raven looked at himself the more he felt like there were a few minor things off. He felt sliightly taller, and like his body was lighter somehow... but fundamentally he was the same, right? Even if a few angles were a bit weird, maybe his body had just gotten shaken up a bit in the transition to... wherever this... was wait, okay,

It was then that Raven realized that the sleepclothes he was in were not the kind he was usually used to wearing—it was a sleep *dress*, with an empty bottom, and he wasn't wearing any manner of bottoms under it. He squeaked and blushed aloud, his mind racing with the ideas of some shadowy otherworldly figure placing him in this bed while not giving him any underwear, and oh how rude that would be, and how embarrassing! And—

And besides, weren't dresses clothes for girls?! Sure, that sundress they'd made him for the end of the Labyrinth was... oddly nice and all, but that was—that was one thing and this was entirely another! Why had they put him in a dress?! That wasn't—if he had no underwear on, clearly they would've known—

This odd, primal, almost unconscious urge occurred to Raven as he flipped the hem of his dress up, and then everything made sense, and also nothing made sense—

Okay, no. It wasn't like that. It was more like, some things made absolutely no sense at all, and some things suddenly made a lot of sense.

No, no, wait. That—Okay, within a certain definition of 'sense', it made sense, within the definition that a magic game device zapping you into another world made sense, so if you were working from that basic premise—

Why was he a girl?!

That was what finally got Raven to squeak, was seeing his genitals in a configuration he wasn't expecting. It was also higher-pitched than he was expecting. Okay, no, no, hold on—wait, was he a girl? Was that how this worked, if he was—

SOMEONEWASKNOCKINGONTHEDOOR!!!!

Raven found himself petrified in a pose stuck on one foot, his dress now thankfully back over his waist so he wasn't, you know, looking at, the, the thing that was there instead of the thing that was supposed to be there if that was how it was supposed to—

The door slid open into a dark hallway, and there was a young, sandy-haired boy rubbing his eyes and yawning in the doorway. “I can't sleep,” he complained. “Can I hang out with you for a bit?”

W. What? What? What? What do you mean, can you—Was there nothing odd to you about seeing an unfamiliar teenager with weird hair in your room?! Who was this boy, anyway?! Did Raven know him?

Well, of course. This was Taichi, her younger brother. It was frankly ridiculous to think she'd ever *not* recognize him—

“Yeah, uh,” Raven nervously chuckled, “c'mon in... little... bro.” He awkwardly sidled out of the way of the doorway and let Taichi come in.

The moment the door was closed, Taichi appeared to wake up enough to turn around and look at Raven, going, “Did you have some kind of really weird dream or did you huff too many paint fumes before you went to sleep?”

“Puh-puh-p-p-paint fumes?” Raven said, his eyes nervously darting around. “Paint fumes. Would I have been huffing... paint fumes?”

Taichi hopped up on the bed, hunched over, and fixed Raven with a very curious stare. “Are you okay?”

“Do you promise not to freak out if I ask you any really weird questions?” Raven asked, and Taichi nodded. “Really?” Taichi nodded again. “Where am I?”

“In your room,” Taichi said.

“Okay, yes—I mean, um, in a wider sense. Like, where am I? What city am I in? What nation? What is this *planet* called?” Raven said, gesturing wildly.

“...What's with the accent?” Taichi asked.

“The—the accent?” Raven put a hand up to his throat, and then and only then did he

realize that he was saying words in a language he only barely recognized. “The—”

Then his brain caught up to something or another, and he started talking again, this time actually hearing how he sounded. “I-I reckon I ain't got a clue what you're talkin' about,” he said, and suddenly realized he sounded terribly like a hick, “a-and that ain't got nothin' to do with—!”

Chisa cleared her throat, once, twice, then said, “That has nothing to do with what I just asked you, so please answer my question—where am I?”

“These are some pretty weird questions to ask an eight-year-old,” Taichi muttered, before rolling his eyes and saying, “You're in your bedroom, in the Inomiko mansion, in the Sendagaya neighborhood, in the ward of Shibuya, in the city of Tokyo, in the country of Japan, on the planet Earth, in the Milky Way galaxy, in a whole lot of space.”

“I'm—” Raven blinked, something in his chest jumping. “I'm in... I'm in Tokyo? Tokyo, Japan?!” He lurched forward and put his hands on Taichi's shoulders. “I'm in Tokyo, Japan?!”

“Yeah, wha?” Taichi gawked at his sister's weird behavior—

Wait wait wait wait wait! Hold on! No, no, no. Hold on a second here. First off, Raven only had one sibling, a just-born sister his parents had written to him about, a girl with pretty yellow eyes—certainly no brothers. He'd never met this boy before in his life, so why did he not only know this boy's name and recognize him, but also fundamentally understand him as his younger brother—

wait, and... and himself as Taichi's older *sister*? What was going on?! Why was he speaking words in a language he didn't recognize—no, no no no hold on HOLD ON HERE. This—

“I,” Raven said to himself, and then took a moment to mull it over in his mouth, and then continued, “I, I, I, I am, I do, I see, sphinx of black quartz, judge my vow!”

It *was*! This was Mio's native language of 'Japanese'! She'd only spoken it a bit before quickly adjusting to Arcanian Common, but Raven would recognize that tongue anywhere! So this—this really was Tokyo, Japan! The city Mio was from! So—So Raven was in Mio's hometown!

Suddenly, he was filled with an intense excitement, and he started pumping his fists and giggling to himself as he closed his eyes and paced around in excitement. “I'm in Japan,” he said, “I'm in Japan, I'm in Japan!”

“Do I need to call a doctor?” Taichi asked.

“No!” Raven said, holding up a hand. “No, no, you don't. I'm—I'm okay, I think. I think? I just—haha, wow, I'm really in Japan! I'm in Mio's world! I'm in the world she came from!”

“*Nee-san*,” Taichi asked with a concerned frown, “are you sure I don't need to call a doctor? You seem really weird.”

“Huh?” Raven asked, and turned his head. “How so?”

Taichi blinked, and then threw his arms wide and said, “Uhhh, everything?” After Raven blinked back in confusion, he sighed and continued, “You're talking weird, you're moving weird, you're acting weird, you're saying things that aren't making any sense, and you're up at 2:30 in the morning.”

“So are you,” Raven said.

“I'm a kid, these things are normal,” Taichi said with a huff. “Is this what puberty is like, or are you hallucinating? Was there something bad in the tuna?”

—Wait. Okay, all of a sudden gears were starting to turn in Raven's head. Hold on a second. Mio fell from the sky, yes, but how was Raven to know that that was how it worked... every time? Was there an every time? Was this something that happened regularly in Japan, magic gaming devices blasting people into alternate realities? No, no, tangent. Okay, no, it made sense, then—Raven recognized a form of himself in the mirror, though there were some... *obvious* differences, and by and large it appeared that this boy recognized him, and Raven also on some level recognized the boy.

“...I'm... your sister, right?” Raven asked.

“I'm calling a doctor,” Taichi said, and Raven had to physically stop him from grabbing Chisa's cell phone, which he somehow knew was a cell phone (because it was hers, obviously).

“No! No, no, please don't call a doctor. Okay—something *really, really weird* just happened to me, actually, in the middle of the night, and I'm still recovering from that, and I'm really sorry if I'm acting or talking weird, *hopefully* it'll go back to normal? I'm not trying to scare you and I don't THINK I ate anything weird or huffed paint fumes, just...” Raven took a deep breath in. “I think I might have a case of temporary amnesia? There's a lot of thoughts in my head that I'm having trouble connecting together and I only *kind of* recognize you, even. You're—talking to you is helping, thank you.”

Taichi's concerned frown became a look of just plain concern. “Oh, man. That sounds serious.”

“Okay, so help me out here,” Raven said, “what is *my* name? How old am I? What am I doing here?”

Raven's name, apparently, was Chisa Inomiko—older sister of Taichi Inomiko, daughter of Yuuya and Ikuko Inomiko. She was just recently fifteen, and this was, as it turned out, her bedroom. None of that sounded wrong, as obviously bizarre as it was, so Raven had no choice but to accept that it was probably all true—after all, even in the side of his brain that had only

just met Taichi, the boy was too young for such deceit, and seemed trustworthy and earnest besides.

She had just ended her last term in middle school, and was due to enter high school in a few weeks. She was apparently an artist, and quite a hand with a katana, and had been president of the Student Council, and a deft hand with a bow, and good in the kitchen, and—

“Whoa whoa whoa!” Raven held up his hands. “Are you sure you're talking about me?”

“Yeah?” Taichi said.

“I mean, this girl you're describing here,” Raven said, “she sounds... almost embarrassingly perfect! That can't really be me, can it?”

“No, it is,” Taichi said. “You're almost embarrassingly perfect.”

“...Me?” Raven asked.

“Yes,” Taichi answered.

“That's me,” Raven said. The look Taichi gave him meant there was no room for argument here.

~IV. The Farmhand, After the Rain~

Finding his own shoes took a bit of work, but it felt oddly familiar that morning as Raven ran out the door of the mansion, ignoring the people who were apparently his family. The cityscape of Japan was unlike anything he'd ever seen! This astonishing garden around the house that was apparently where he lived besides, the sight of so many buildings packed together, and these paved concrete roads—the sight of all these people, and those *cars*! Mio had talked about them, but they were insane, weren't they? How did they move?!

Well, that one part of his brain said, they move by burning—

Right, yes, okay, apparently he knew that, but come on! Look at this place! He threw his hands out and laughed a little to the gorgeous morning sun, clear as could be, and really digested the fact that this right here, this was a *city*, truly unlike anything he'd ever seen!

Then he realized he was still only in a sleep dress, with no underwear on, and turned around and walked, a luminescent blush on his face, back through the garden and through the front door, shutting it behind him.

“Sorry,” he said, kneeling down to the breakfast table, hands still on his face (taking off his shoes, of course, which appeared to be a custom here,) “it was... a really beautiful morning, and I couldn't help but... y'know?”

There was a moment of silence where Taichi looked at his sister with sympathy, and Raven's new parents stared at him in confusion.

“...Y'know'?” Yuuya asked. “I know what?”

“Well, I just... had to take it in, is all,” Raven said, trying his best to maintain his composure in the most bizarre situation he'd ever experienced. “It's. It's a really nice morning! I mean, it's really nice. It's really nice!”

“Don't repeat yourself,” Ikuko said, chiding her daughter and then turning to the breakfast she'd made by herself since her daughter was apparently too busy riding high after having only gotten a few hours of sleep.

Raven had spent hours poring over books that he had in his room, or, well, Chisa's room, which was also his room, because he was Chisa. Art books, nonfiction, fiction—to be honest, it was reading the kind of books that Chisa liked that made him really understand that he really *was* Chisa, because it really wasn't all that different from what he'd liked before. So this was probably a sort of reincarnation situation—this Chisa *was* him, but a different him, and he just had the memories of Raven because of whatever had happened with Mio's magic gaming devi—

Nintendo 3DS. It was the most recent gaming handheld from Nintendo. Right.

So, if this Chisa was the same person as him, that meant that fundamentally they couldn't be that different. Right? So it couldn't be too hard to adjust, even if he was currently missing proper access to her memories for... some reason. Was that permanent? Raven really hoped it wasn't permanent. That would make things really hard to explain to Chisa's parents, who he already, from just a bit of interaction, understood were totally unlike the Hillsheads.

Frankly, he wished they'd go away! He really needed time to himself to sort these things out, but apparently family meals were regular here, even when one member of the family was having an existential crisis on a near-unimaginable level! Oh god! This food was good, by the way! It was good food!

Wait, okay. If Chisa was really such a perfect girl—which Raven still didn't quite believe—then, maybe if he just took a deep breath in, tried to still his heart—

“I'm sorry, Mother,” Chisa said, getting down to her breakfast as usual, “I think I might've breathed in a few too many paint fumes last night. I had the strangest dreams, and it's made me have a very odd night.”

The posture correction was near-instantaneous, and came nearly as natural as breathing. Oh—so there was Chisa. Raven registered the fact that Chisa existed in a place that he could understand.

For Chisa's part, she was eating breakfast, because she was really hungry. She'd hardly

gotten any sleep, because she'd been up all night reading books she'd already read because she was having an existential crisis.

Okay! So the existential crisis was mutual in both halves of this brain that was two people and also one person maybe? Raven decided to just take a moment to rest his... brain, until breakfast concluded.

It was the shrine Hato-no-Mori that Chisa's feet took Raven as a place to consider, because she'd been there recently and it was often quite quiet. Raven sat down on the lantern where just a few weeks ago she'd been hanging out with Taichi, and looked up at these sights, familiar, and yet not. "Okay!" He yelled to the sky, yelling in a way he couldn't before. "Okay! Okay! Okay, here I am! Okay! I exist and I'm in a place! Okay!"

He bent his neck down and pressed his thumbs into the sides of the bridge of his nose, just on the edges of his eyes, to try and get some pressure in them. The center of gravity was different in this body, but by now he'd started to get used to it.

Sitting in front of the shrine, he took in the air of the mountain shrine—*Japanese* air, air she'd been breathing all her life, and yet air he'd never breathed before for a second. He sighed out, and groaned, "Oh god, this city is so big!"

Approximately thirty-seven million people lived in the city of Tokyo, which was apparently not only the most populous metropolitan area in the world, but also quite possibly its biggest. Nearly 2,200 square kilometers—the scale of such a city was nearly unimaginable to Raven, and in this, Chisa, who had never considered it either, was in agreement.

"How am I going to find one person out of *thirty-seven million?!?*" Raven yelled to the skies.

Wait, Chisa thought. Wasn't it possible Mio wasn't even here? After all, I only saw what happened to me when the light happened. She might not be here—or she might be here, but not recognize me. Also...

Also?

Is Mio interested in women?

Oh, god, I'm right, what if Mio isn't interested in women?! Raven broke out into a cold sweat, holding his head in terror at the idea of being rejected by his own girlfriend for being a woman! I—wait wait wait wait. Wait! No, hold on! Hold on! Mio said that her mother was into both men *and* women, and Mio didn't seem averse to the idea of, you know, *queer people*. So even if Raven was in the wrong body now, it was fine, right? Right?

...Are you in the wrong body?

That got Raven to stop cold, and that was a thought that needed mulling over. Hold on,

okay, yeah, that was a good point, *why the hell was Chisa a GIRL?* Raven wagged a finger at the other half of his own brain, or at a chirping bird to an outside observer, and kept pacing around, thankful nobody was here. If it was some kind of crazy magic, was there just a mistake? Why would Raven be *reincarnated* as a woman, and made to keep his own memories?

Okay, there were a few possibilities there, Chisa thought, so let's run through them.

Option 1 was that it was just some kind of cosmic error, and that would be awfully unfortunate, but would also mean that Raven and Chisa were fundamentally at conflict. That would be bad, so that was a last resort option.

Option 2 was that Raven had perhaps been *born* female, maybe? No, no, Raven thought, no, my parents would've told me that. They were honest people, and anyway, who has the money to enchant a baby's genitals? It wasn't as though Raven's parents were hard up to have children and needed to reproduce.

Option 3 was that Chisa was actually a man somehow—*no*, Chisa thought, no, that was not possible. Chisa was not a man. Chisa recoiled at the thought. *Raven* recoiled at the thought, even, it was so obviously incorrect. No way.

So okay, Option 1 was still on the table, Raven thought, and guessed that—

No, Chisa thought, no, Option 4 is still here, too.

Option 4? Raven sputtered to himself, looking around at nobody. There's clearly no other options here! Right? There was no other—

Option 4 was that Raven hadn't been born female, but was *spiritually* female, and had been born into an incorrectly-shaped body originally but had been given a more proper body upon reincarnation. *But I like women!* You were friends with two women who were dating, weren't you? *But... I'm strong, and I do... son things!* That's kind of sexist, isn't it? *But I—*

Then that stupid sundress, that damned, blasted sundress had to force itself into Raven's mind, and maybe it felt *kind of nice wearing it, because it made him look CUTE, maybe,*

okay that was the only logical explanation, wasn't it. Like, well, within the realm of logic where this was possible, that felt like a logical explanation, right? Sure, Raven didn't know any people like that—'transgender people', his mind supplied—but that didn't mean they didn't exist, and he unfortunately had to admit that there was a very real possibility that he was one of those.

Wait, unfortunately? Why was that unfortunate, exactly? Wait, hold on. Was it unfortunate? Everything about Raven's life had already been upended, and he was in a female body now, so did it really make sense to *fight* that? It just made *sense* that he was a woman, right?

No, but wait, he fought back. But if I'm not a woman, what keeps me from just being the

same as—if I'm a woman, am I myself? Do I still—will I retain my sense of self, and—

“I'm a woman,” Raven said aloud.

“I'm a woman,” Raven said aloud again. “I'm... a *woman*,” and again, “I'm a woman. I'm a woman.”

It didn't really make sense. He'd heard of people who showed signs in early childhood, but maybe he just hadn't recognized his own signs, or maybe he just wasn't like that.

“*I'm a woman!*” Raven shouted.

But could he really claim that he hadn't kind of been afraid of the moment the rest of puberty caught up to him, giving him too much body hair, or the deep voice and tall, muscular figure of his father? Could he really claim that he hadn't kind of wished he could've stayed like that, high-voiced, smooth, lithe... *feminine*, forever? Could he *really* claim that he'd always fit in with other men? Of course not! That was laughable! So it just made sense to be a woman, right?!

“I'm a woman! I'm a woman, I'm a woman!” Raven yelled.

It just made sense that he was a woman!

No, wait! It just made sense that *she* was a woman! Right?! That was what this meant, right?! That she was a woman, had probably always been a woman, right?! So if she was a woman, then she was a woman! She was a *woman*! Not a man, a woman, and all of a sudden, she was a woman! She was a woman! Raven—

“*Raven Hillshead is apparently a WOMAN!*” That one scared the birds a little.

Wow! It would have been so much more comfortable to come to this realization on her own, but hey, here Raven was, contemplating her gender after waking up in a female body in Mio's hometown! Having just the most normal day around, wasn't she?! Just the **most normal!**

Raven collapsed to the ground, supporting herself on her hands and panting. It turns out exploring your gender in such an explosive manner took a lot out of a girl. “Okay,” she admitted to nobody and also herself, “maybe I do need to be concerned about whether Mio is interested in women.”

Having to find her center every time Raven wanted to let her previous learning take over and impress her new parents was a bit tricky, but one got the hang of it. She opted not to inform the Inomikos of anything even remotely approaching her situation—she knew enough, and could do enough, to pass for an unaltered Chisa Inomiko.

Still, she didn't *really* remember being Chisa—just feelings, emotions, and the ability to ride on the girl and occasionally understand her thoughts. So, she was a different person still, most likely.

“Okay,” she said, looking to the side at her younger brother and winking, “on three. One... two...”

Taichi burst off running just before Raven called out 'three', and that made her protest, “Hey, not fair!”

The boy's legs were short, but even on a straight path like this, it was pretty simple for Raven to catch up in a run and keep apace with her younger brother. With a cheeky grin, she ruffled his hair as the two ran across this out-of-the-way trail they'd found on an expedition out, and then laughed as he loudly groaned and pouted at her. This wasn't really a 'race' so much—both of them understood that Raven was the faster of the two of them, but it was nice to pretend and run with each other.

They'd opted to have a picnic out, since the two of them were on break, and it didn't seem their parents were particularly interested in them that day, so Raven had called on all of his own culinary knowledge *and* all of Chisa's to prepare them some simple foods to eat. A lot of this was new, food that Raven wasn't used to seeing, but the culinary palate was really something!

Of course, Taichi horfed it down like he was a vacuum cleaner, which made Raven grin bashfully and rub the back of her head. “Are you even tasting that?” She laughed.

“Of course I'm *tasting* it,” Taichi said.

Raven put up a finger and put on her best 'authoritative big sister' voice—which was pretty easy, as it turned out. “Now, now. Opening your mouth while you eat makes the taste molecules fly out.”

Taichi shut his mouth with his eyes wide, chewed, swallowed, and then exclaimed, “It does not! You made that up!”

“Nope,” Raven said. “It's totally real.”

It was odd—Raven had hardly known Taichi for a few weeks now, but it was hard not to love the boy. Even with Chisa's love in the mix, Raven had always really wanted a younger sibling, she had to admit—it was lonely being an only child, and always being the youngest in every situation got a little tiresome. Plus, he was cute, and he had a good heart. In her heart, Raven had already long since accepted Taichi—this was, indeed, her younger brother. If some

massive cosmic coincidence ever occurred, she might not mind taking Taichi to meet the Hillsheads, and really have all of her family all in one place—

“Oh,” she said, staring down at her own food, her mood suddenly darkening.

Oh. The Hillsheads. Right. It had been such a whirlwind, Raven had almost managed to make herself forget the fact that she was likely never going to see her family again, *especially* if she never managed to find Mio in this city of thirty-seven million. Her mother's kind heart, her father's loving, loud energy—those were things of the past. She would never even get to meet her own younger sister.

“Huh? You okay?” Taichi said.

“Oh, I...” Chisa muttered. “It's just... I just realized I... I'm never going to be able to see people I was close to again.” She shook her head. “Sorry. I don't want to depress you.”

“Huh?” Taichi said. “...Like, your classmates in the student council?”

“No, uh...” Chisa shook her head. “It's... it's complicated. They're people important to me, but they live in another country, and I don't think I'll ever be able to see them again—they're over there, and I'm here.”

“The internet is good for that,” Taichi answered, and Chisa couldn't deny that. He came over to hug his sister. “I'm sorry, though. That stinks.”

“Yeah,” Chisa said, “it does. Thank you, Taichi.”

—Huh. She'd almost not noticed, but there was something different in herself when she was alone with Taichi. Chisa loved Taichi—Taichi made her feel like herself. Had that always been the case? Of course she'd always loved him, but this was different, wasn't it? This...

“Oh,” Taichi said, “how's your amnesia going? Are you getting stuff back?”

Amnesia? Chisa blinked. ...Was there something she was *forgetting*? She didn't think so—wait, no, she'd told him she was suffering from amnesia a while ago, hadn't she? “I think so,” she said. “Yes, I remember... well, I can't think if there's anything I've really forgotten. Thank you for asking—I appreciate it, Taichi.”

Taichi was looking at her funny. “Okay, that was normal.”

“What was?” Chisa asked.

“You're talking normal again!” Taichi said. “And moving less. You're moving like normal. You weren't a bit ago!”

—Eh? “Eh?!” Raven exclaimed. “I'm what now? Wait, was I talking weird before?!”

“And now it's back!” Taichi said, narrowing his eyes. “Are you *sure* this is just amnesia? Did you hit your head and get a foreign accent like some people do?”

Raven looked down at the ground, and away from her brother. “I'm... I'm real sorry. Is it bad?”

There was a moment of silence, before Taichi said, “I didn't say that it was bad.” That got Raven to look up a bit more. “I like it,” he said with a smile. “It's neat seeing you not as perfect, *nee-san*. It makes me feel less bad for being such a little brat, y'know? Whatever happened, you seem...”

“Messier?” Raven asked.

“Happier,” Taichi answered.

—That made something click in her mind, and suddenly Chisa realized something that was a few weeks late by now. Maybe this wasn't as unnatural as it seemed—maybe 'Raven' was what she'd been missing this whole time. Maybe—Maybe it wasn't that Raven had come in and had to adjust to Chisa, but just that the two of them could coexist—that Raven was what Chisa needed and Chisa was what Raven needed.

“But is it still me?” Chisa asked.

Taichi nodded. “Yeah, it is. A new you, but it's you.”

He looked a bit stunned when his sister let out a tear, and then came in to hug him herself. “Thank you, Taichi,” Chisa said. “I needed that. Don't worry—I remember everything. Hopefully I'll be able to stop acting weird now, aha.”

“But you won't stop running around with me?” Taichi asked with expectant, pleading eyes. “You won't stop getting messy with me and actually showing stuff?”

“Not on your life!” Chisa said, ruffling his hair.

—Of course. As long as she had this boy, surely she could remain herself. Surely—

~VI. The Young Lady and The Farmhand's Beloved~

Well, that was one thing, but honestly, Raven was a worrier, and that meant Chisa was, too. She could feel confident in her relationship with her brother enough to tether herself to sanity despite being basically two people, but that didn't mean she didn't have a mountain on her plate. First off, she had to get used to the idea of high school *all over again*—by herself, Chisa had never been able to admit her worries, but now that Raven was part of her, oops, now someone who'd never been to Japanese school was also in Chisa's brain!

Not to mention, considering the idea of Raven's gender was something really wild—and keeping this whole thing under wraps from her parents—and... finding Mio...

...Right. But first on the itinerary was high school. Chisa knew what middle school was like, and couldn't imagine that high school was *that* different, but it would be worrying having a whole new brain layout to get used to. Still, all she could do was grin and bear it—well, not actually grin, her parents would think that was weird.

...Speaking of, they'd been giving her odd looks when she'd started coming home a bit dirtier with Taichi—something she could only shrug and say, “I was a bit careless with him,” about.

But, that aside, the first day of high school came in with the wind on that brisk April morning, and with her chest held proud and high, Chisa strolled forth out of the house, pumping her first, sure she would manage to make this a good one! Chisa Inomiko was just starting in at Hibikino High School, a prestigious high school—though frankly, 'prestigious' seemed to mean 'you got a scholarship', 'you have rich family', or 'you bribed someone'.

It was a larger school than Raven had ever seen, to be sure, and even Chisa found herself a bit dwarfed. Coming in on her first day amidst all the new students, her briefcase in her hand, her uniform, shirt, bow tie, skirt, and tights all firmly cleaned just the evening before, she could only take solace in the fresh morning air and the confidence in her stride—

—and that was when she saw that *massive* tree in the front of the school.

She'd heard about it before. Hibikino had a colossal tree, a 'Legendary Tree'. They said that if a couple confessed their feelings for each other under it on graduation, they would remain happy together forever. It was almost laughably cliché, but the students certainly seemed to believe it—Chisa wasn't the only person looking at it that day, but she *was* the only person coming so close when everyone needed to get in, standing in the shadow of the great oak.

“So, this is the tree I've heard so much about,” she mused to herself. And, in a moment of vulnerability, she knelt and put her hands on it. “If you grant wishes, then—”

In that moment, for reasons she couldn't fully grasp inside her own heart, Chisa nearly wept as a bevy of feelings burst forth. Hopelessness, stress, the adrenaline of so many battles to the death—“Then let me see her again,” she said, “just one more time.”

There was some manner of whining noise in the background as Chisa knelt before the tree, but even as it came clearer into focus, Chisa wasn't very concerned—she stood up, dusted herself off, and went to pick up her briefcase—wait, was that someone screaming? Kind of a nasally voice, just going, 'raay'. Just one long—oh, they took a breath.

Chisa picked up her briefcase this time.

“—AAAAAAVEEEEEEEEEEEEEEN!!!!!!!!!”

Oh, here was an absolute whirlwind. Suddenly, Chisa was being grabbed from behind in one of the tightest grips she'd ever felt, spun around as a girl's voice squealed in her ears. “*Oh my god! Oh my god!* Raven! Raven I can't believe it it's really you is it really you tell me it's you oh my god—!”

Wait. Chisa recognized that voice, and this awfully tight grip. They were both rather familiar, but there was no way a coincidence like that would just occur, right? This had to be a mistake—right? Someone else named Raven who'd been separated—

Chisa was let go from the tiger grip, and managed to hack and wheeze for a second before turning her head. Wracked with a sort of apprehension behind her, covering her school uniform in the same sweater and scarf as usual, with that guitar case on her back, her cute little pigtails in perfect form for the first day of her second year, was sixteen-year-old card-carrying otaku Mio Akaneno.

“Muh—” Chisa coughed for a bit.

“Oh my beans, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do that! Please tell me you're okay!” Mio said, rushing over to pat Chisa on the back.

“I'm—I'm fine—” Chisa hacked a bit more before gasping out, “M-Mio...?”

That was when Chisa decided to fall over onto the ground, to let the air fill her lungs properly and look up at Mio. No, yeah, that was Mio. Definitely her. She was unmistakable.

“I mean, I—I woke up, and it was the next day, and I thought—I wondered if—” Mio was gesticulating wildly, clearly full of energy that had just been drained from Chisa through that vice grip of hers. “—I mean, I thought it might've all been a dream, and I couldn't—and I just—”

“Nope,” Chisa said, waving a finger in the air as she supported herself with her other hand to get up, “no, no, definitely not a dream unless dreams work *very differently* here. It's me, I think. I think.” Mio was crying. Oh no, Mio was crying. “Hey—hey, don't cry please, I, uh—”

Oh, no! Chisa was crying, too!!

—The two of them sat beneath the tree to catch their breath, and Mio said, “So, I guess the same thing happened to both of us this time, huh?”

“Seems like it,” Chisa said. She took a deep breath in. “Japan is really different. I mean, I know that, but—”

“Wait,” Mio said, and then she had a look that said she'd just registered Chisa was

wearing a school uniform. “Are you a student here? ...How are you a student here?”

“My family is rich,” Chisa said with a shrug. “Wealthy socialites, I guess you could say?”
Pause. “Um, I mean my family *here*. I’ve—I mean, as you can see I’m not physically the same person—I didn’t get just, warped through like you did.”

“Huh?” Mio said, and then the second obvious fact about Chisa struck Mio. “Wait—you have *boobs*?”

Pause. Chisa blushed. “*Yes*,” she said, “I *do*, in fact have boobs. I’m a fifteen-year-old girl named Chisa Inomiko. I have a younger brother named Taichi.”

“That must’ve been *weird*,” Mio said, with a sympathetic nod.

“Oh my god,” Chisa said, whipping around to face Mio and put her hands on Mio’s shoulders, “you have *no idea*.”

There was a moment’s pause, before Mio looked up at the leaves above her, shrugged, and said, “Okay, well, I guess I’m bi now. Cool beans!”

“Wha...?” Chisa blinked and shook her head. “Cool b—is that something you can really just 'cool beans' away like that? Isn’t that kind of important?”

“It’s how my mom did it,” Mio said.

“Ah, okay, that makes sense,” Chisa said, and then in roughly two point eight milliseconds she registered the fact that Mio’s mother existed, the fact that Mio’s mother was a person, the fact that Mio’s mother existed on Earth, the fact that Mio’s mother existed in Japan, the fact that Mio’s mother was part of Mio’s life, the fact that she was still apparently Mio’s girlfriend, the fact that girlfriends usually met their partners’ parents, and all of that coalesced to the fact that Chisa was going to have to *meet Mio’s mom*.

Mio swiveled over to hold Chisa as the young lady stifled a scream into her hands, blushing up a storm and nearly letting steam loose from her ears. “Hey, hey, it’s okay!” Mio said. “It’s cool! My mom’s kind of a lot, but it’s fine!”

—Chisa very nearly missed first bell for new student orientation, but she wasn’t about to lose her perfect attendance record now, or she risked her mother’s scorn.