

“—So, you too, huh?”

Cigarette smoke had begun to flood the ceiling of the room. This was the first time this man had visited, and from what Youka could tell, he was not all that affluent; the stains of the smoke wouldn't make much difference to the room he'd bought.

He was about half a decade older than her, and while the suit he'd put on looked the part of an ordinary businessman, his physique was anything but—the heavy-set, angular-faced man looked like he could probably break a tree trunk with his bare hands.

Youka had also put back on her clothes—while the man had theoretically come here for sex, it looked as though he was really more interested in having an honest conversation. The two sat at the end of the bed, and Youka hunched over.

“Huh?” Youka turned her head.

“I hear you're also working for a child,” the man said. He lacked facial hair, and his narrow, dark eyes shined with something or another—Youka didn't know what, but she cocked an eyebrow at the statement. “I was curious, so I asked around.”

“About me?” Youka scoffed. “What, are you into that? More power to you, but it's not like I'm that popular. I'm too tall for most of you guys.”

“I have a son,” the man continued, not answering her question. “My current wife—she's a Sumadera, you see. I had my son when I was but a boy—he's twelve now, and nobody in that family respects him. He only even has one fair-weather friend, the head's son—but living like that is tough for any child. My wife has no love for him, and it's a struggle for me to keep him alive.”

“Huh,” Youka said. “Got any relatives you can send him to?”

“Not a one. I'm a bastard, you see,” the man said, blowing out some smoke. “My father doesn't want anything to do with me. It would ruin his career if it got out that I was his son. All I have are my own two fists to fight with to ensure happiness for my son, even in a world that seems to refuse him at every turn.”

“Well, aren't you a badass,” Youka said with a snort. She turned away from the smoke—even when she occasionally partook, she didn't enjoy the smell. “So, what?”

“...Tomorrow is a meeting of the Sumadera family heads to determine which young officers will rise up the ranks. I'll become the head of my own family. I know for a fact the other idiots there won't be expecting me to be so prepared, but I'll beat them all out. Soon—soon, I'll be the one shaping Yotsuya's underworld,” the man said. “I wanted someone to understand that before I head into the lion's den. You seemed like the best pick around.” He stood up. “Thank you for your time, miss. I'll be off, then.”

As he headed for the door, Youka turned her head one last time while still hunched over at the end of the bed and said, “What, you're not even going to give me a name to put to those big words?”

The man, against the low light of the open door, turned his head and said, “My name is Fuhito Inoue. Remember it.”

Please, Arashi, I'm telling you, I don't have anywhere to go!

L-look, I didn't want this kid anyway! You're on your own!

What?! How can you say that?! I—You told me you loved me!

I know what I told you, now leave me alone!

I—

The beep of a phone rang out.

...God damn it! God damn it, Arashi! You son of a bitch! You son of a BITCH! What am I... what am I supposed to do?!

Youka had gotten used to operating on short bursts of sleep by now, so it was about two hours after she got home that she woke up and began preparing breakfast. The home that she rented was only one floor, and only had two bedrooms, but it was plenty for the needs of a mother and daughter.

It had to be simple today, since Youka was off to the local department store for a morning shift, so she started stretching out her muscles, whirling around her arm. She was keeping her hair shorter than she'd like these days, and she was starting to get pretty buff with all the lifting and carrying... Ah, but she didn't have time to worry about that. She called her cheeks and continued working.

Unlike Youka, Cocona was already shaping up to not be a morning person. She mostly resembled Youka, but her hair was darker, more akin to her father's.. and she already seemed like she wasn't going to be tall as hell, Youka thought. Youka took a quick dive away from food to quickly tie up Cocona's hair into a ponytail.

“Morning, kiddo,” Youka said, patting Cocona on the head. She couldn't help it—with those sleepy eyes she was desperately trying to rub the sleep out of, the little backpack, the little uniform, sometimes Youka was certain she must have the cutest daughter in the world.

“Mornnmmom,” Cocona mumbled, before walking over to their small table and sitting up on it, already starting to doze off.

There wasn't much around the table, just two simple wooden chairs, and the table itself wasn't much to look at, either. There was a small couch for two in front of a television, and the kitchen, which was stuck in the same room.

“You ready to get out there?” Youka said with a smile.

“No,” Cocona said with a yawn, “but I'm gonna anyway.”

“Hey, you and me both, kid,” Youka said. “You sleep okay?” Cocona gave a little 'mhm'. “Alright. I'm gonna be home about an hour after you, so make sure you lock the door, okay?”

“Okay,” Cocona said. “Is it the department store today?”

“Yeah, and after that it's roadwork,” Youka said. “Sorry about that.”

“It's okay. But can you help me study for my test tomorrow once you get home?” Cocona asked, and Youka gave a thumbs up. “Okay, thanks.”

It was about an hour after Cocona woke up that it was time for her to go. The bus stop was right outside their apartment, but Youka always made sure to walk Cocona out there and accompany her until she couldn't anyhow. With a hug and a kiss, Youka gave her daughter one more, “I love you,” before she left.

“Love you too, Mom,” Cocona said.

And she was off. The school bus sped away, and it was back into the mud for Youka Fudoji.

CHAPTER 1

THE RAGING BOMBER

“—And that's *another* win for our reigning champion, the Raging Bomber Youka Fudoji! Her opponent should be lucky he's getting out of the ring alive—!”

Youka tossed the unconscious body of whoever it was she'd just fought to the floor, and walked off of the ring. A few people in the stands of the colosseum booed that she didn't finish the job, but she didn't enjoy getting more blood on her hands than she needed to, and lord knew she was dirty right now.

A quick meeting with an agent to get the money transferred, and she was back out of the pit of hell into some fashion of normalcy. The red-light district where Youka worked the evenings was largely indoors, having been built out of what used to be a short-lived shopping mall. Perfume and cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air as Youka stepped out of the alley into the red-lined street, lit by paper lanterns on the sides of the building.

The street was tightly packed with wall-to-wall establishments—to Youka's side were two different competing casinos, for instance. The place Youka actually worked was about twelve establishments to her left, but she headed three to the right instead, then squeaked into the building in question.

She'd come here quite a few times, but never for the building's stated purpose. Youka Fudoji was not a woman to whom strip clubs were very interesting, but it had a nice bar, and she usually met someone after a match. The clerk at the front knew her by now, so she was let in, and went over and got her usual—she'd gotten turned onto White Russians at some point.

It wasn't long before the stool next to her at this relatively full bar counter was occupied. The lights in here were gaudy and in flashy colors, but it was hard to miss headline performer “Pink Harley” wherever she went around here—chalk it up to the bombshell figure, of course, but also the white hair, pale skin, violet eyes, and the fact that she really did just dress that skimpily most of the time down here. The leopard-print jacket Botan Kaminari wore (above, it should be mentioned, thigh- purple socks and shorts that were so short they didn't even meet those) was so light it was almost an insult to jackets to call it one.

“Gimme a Dimensional Fissure if you please,” Botan said, spinning around in the stool to put her head in her hand and stare at Youka. Compared to Youka, Botan had a skill with makeup—she *stuck out* in a crowd, everything on that face of hers just *popping*. “Well, someone looks not dead! How's it feel?”

“Well, my fists sting,” Youka said, “and I took a real nasty one to the shoulder, but I'm fine. You?”

“Great night! Great night,” Botan said, gesturing smugly with her thumb to a wad of bills stuck in her bra. “But enough about me—I'm not interested in me, that's everyone else's job. How much did you get on this one?”

“Enough to pay the mortgage for the next three months or so,” Youka said. “How the hell did you even find that place? I couldn't have asked for a better location.”

“A girl's got to have some secrets, doesn't she?” Botan said with a laugh, flapping her hand a bit at Youka. “Cocona's in middle school, right? Has she met anyone?”

“In *middle school*?” Youka snorted. “That's a bit early even for me.”

“Hey, I'm just saying, you've gotta make sure she doesn't get whipped up too soon or you might find yourself having to fight off the guys! She's a cute kid!” Botan said with a clap. The two's drinks were set down in front of them, and she continued, “And if you do that, you might break them, and you'll scar her for life.”

“Shut up,” Youka said, nudging Botan in the shoulder.

A drink or two later, Botan continued. “So, this community theater near here's got a show going in a week or so, and this guy I know's gonna be in it. Is Cocona into theater?”

“Never asked,” Youka said with a shrug. “I don't know if she knows.”

“Anyway, you should come, I've got great tickets to this Sunday showing. They're playing *The Tragedy of Ulrich and Royston*.” Botan said, crossing her arms and nodding to herself.

“The cursed one?” Youka asked, and Botan nodded more fervently. “So, what, you want me to be there in case something breaks and you need someone to catch a support beam or something?”

“Hey, now, that's a fringe benefit!” Botan had a high-pitched laugh. “No, seriously, I think it'd do you some good. You're so uptight most of the time, see.”

“Well, I need to be,” Youka said. “I'm busy.”

“I know, I know,” Botan said, reaching over to pat Youka on the back, “but c'mon, my treat? My classes are off that day since it's a Sunday, see.”

“Right. Yeah, I'll see if I can find some time,” Youka said with a nod, before downing the rest of her drink.

The lady who ran the brothel was at least in her seventies, and nobody knew her real name—everyone called her Mama Orchid, after the building itself. It wasn't the largest place, but

it got good work, since it was right near the largest casino in the underground of Yotsuya *and* not too far from the colosseum.

Youka was still technically on the roster, but these days that was largely a formality—she served more as a bouncer when she was around. She couldn't always be around, but Orchid had a way about her even in her old age—apparently she was an old classmate of some martial arts master or something, so she had a decent way about an iron pole. She was small, withered, and a bit hunched, but it was a poor idea to underestimate her.

However, when Youka entered the door to check in, she found Orchid in the middle of a situation she did not seem to have her way around.

“Mimi will work, she swears she will!” There was a girl with her arms pressed on the desk, sending Orchid's small form reclining further into the seat she used. “You have to let her work, please!”

—From Youka's perspective, this girl couldn't be more than fifteen. She'd come here in her school uniform, and she was definitely the sort that didn't get out much—her skin was fair, untanned and unblemished. She was pretty round, too, though that didn't say much. Her hair was down long, not very kempt—she wasn't an ugly girl by any means, but she didn't look like she paid much attention to her appearance.

You did occasionally see this; girls who were far too young for this did sometimes come around trying to do it, but any self-respecting brothel had standards about that sort of thing. However, from the look on Orchid's face, this one was abnormal.

“Hey. Fudoji,” Orchid said, some of her stringy, white hair flopping over to cover her eyes as she slumped forward. “You take this one. I can't deal with a kid this chirpy.”

“Sure thing, boss lady,” Youka said, coming up behind and putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. The girl recoiled from Youka's touch, shrinking back a small distance and putting her hands on her head. Youka was a fair amount taller than this girl, so she knelt down a bit to get to eye level. “Hey. C'mere. My name's Youka. Do you mind if I talk to you?” She softened her voice as best she could.

It wasn't very proper to talk to a young lady in the back room of a brothel, but it was about the only place Youka had for it. It was, at the very least, quiet, since the walls were soundproofed.

The girl had stayed cowering for a bit on the edge of the bed, but she finally managed to un-furl herself and take a deep breath. Youka had grabbed her a glass of water, which she drank greedily. There was, Youka noticed, three bracelets around the girl's left wrist, all three in three-leaf clover print.

“So,” Youka said, pulling up a chair and sitting down in it, “first off, what's your name?”

There was one last gulp of water, and then the girl said, "I'm Mimiko Morishima. You know it's me because it comes in threes." She held up the bracelets. "See?"

Youka nodded. "Mmhm. You're... are you a high schooler?" Mimiko nodded. "First year?"

"I just started a month ago," Mimiko said.

"You know we can't let girls your age work here, right?" Youka said. She shook her head. "Why are you coming by a place like this for work?"

It seemed like Mimiko had trouble maintaining eye contact, but now she was actively averting her gaze. "Daddy said to look around here for a job," she said. "He said it was my job to help pay his debts."

—Deep breaths, Youka. "Your father is in debt and he sent his teenage daughter down here?" Youka repeated, and Mimiko nodded. "...Why does he think that's your responsibility?"

"He, um, says they're my fault," Mimiko mumbled, looking at a very interesting speck on the floor and repeatedly fiddling with each of her bracelets in a row. "That he has to take out loans to keep me in school, because I'm a weirdo who can't talk to other people."

Youka loudly cracked one of her knuckles, which got Mimiko to start. "Sorry, sorry," Youka said. "It's just... That sounds pretty rude, kid." She leaned a bit further forward. "Do you believe him?"

"I'm weird and I can't talk to people," Mimiko said, raising her head up and nodding. "And I talk wrong when I'm flustered. I like reading books better."

"...And your mom?" Youka asked.

"Mommy left. Daddy says it's because she hated me," Mimiko said. Youka cracked another knuckle, which got Mimiko to squeak. "Um, I think you look very angry?"

"Sorry, I just..." Youka sighed. "I think your father's blaming you for things that aren't your fault. I don't think a father should treat his kid like that." She shook her head. "Can you go home?"

"Daddy said that if I didn't come home with a job, then I shouldn't come home at all," Mimiko said. Youka pressed her fingers into her temple, fully aware of what was about to happen and fully aware that it was only her own fault.

It was after school when Youka came to her front door, unlocking the door of the modest two-story house she'd managed to purchase through being successful at bloodsport. "Cocona? You home?"

The kitchen was one turn away from the opening door, being just around the corner from the living room, so Cocona's voice was pretty audible as she said, "Welcome home, Mom! I'm fixing up the soba from the store for a late lunch."

"Can you fix up three servings if you're doing that?" Youka asked, turning around to keep the door open for Mimiko—who had, apparently, never visited another person's home before. When she stepped across the door, her nervousness changed into wonder, staring around at a house that—to Youka's understanding—was a lot cleaner than she was used to. "Got a visitor."

The sound of the microwave started up, and Cocona's head poked around the corner to see Mimiko taking her shoes off and marveling at a clean carpet. Cocona's eyes first turned to Youka to silently ask, and Youka said, "This is Mimiko."

"You know it's me because it comes in threes," Mimiko added.

"She came in asking at one of my evening jobs, but she's way too young for that, and she needs a place to stay," Youka said, "so—"

"Being the kind, generous woman you are, you offered her a place to stay for no price while you help her sort these things out?" Cocona asked.

"You're, like, thirteen, right?" Youka asked, walking over to ruffle her daughter's hair. "Who let you get that canny?"

"My mom, duh," Cocona said, giggling with a smug little look on her face.

It didn't take long for dinner to be ready, and Mimiko bowed thrice before she sat down. "I'm, um, very sorry for the intrusion—"

"It's fine, I don't mind company," Cocona said. She definitely wasn't going to be as tall as Youka was, but she was a far sight sportier than their visitor—she was still wearing a bandanna she wore at baseball practice, for instance. "You're in high school, right? What's it like?"

"Lots of walking," Mimiko mumbled. "Lots of people."

"Mmhm, mmhm, I see," Cocona said. "Any interests?"

"Maxwell's Demon," Mimiko said. Yeah, the whole eye contact thing was definitely a problem for her.

"Don't think I know that one," Cocona said, after a moment's consideration, with her finger on her chin. "Is that a book, or—?"

"It's a principle in infophysics proposed in 1867 by James Clerk Maxwell for a theoretical violation of the second law of thermodynamics by a finite being," Mimiko said. She was staring at Cocona's face now, her fists on the table. "Essentially positing an idea wherein

energy can be transferred entirely through the vector of information. No actual applications of the idea in its purest idea—the decrease of entropy without work—have actually been found yet, but studies into the subject are getting closer and closer to—”

Then, Mimiko stopped dead, and slumped her head. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not very interesting.”

“Hey,” Cocona said, shaking her head after taking a moment to reorient herself, “it’s interesting, I’m just not smart enough for it.” She turned her head to Youka. “What about you, Mom?”

“I think I got the word ‘idea,’” Youka said. She chuckled. “Anything else?”

Mimiko hummed for a moment, then said, “I also like dinosaurs. Have you ever watched *Jurassic Park*? It’s a Western movie based off of a novel by Michael Crichton with lots of dinosaurs in it. I bring my copy of the DVD with me everywhere I go in case anyone asks to watch it with me. Nobody has ever asked to watch it with me.”

“Can we watch it with you?” Youka asked, and Mimiko looked like she was about to rocket out of her chair in glee.

“The guy’s name is Tsukasa Morishima,” said Botan, dressed in her best formal dress for the occasion. She was leaning in closely to Youka in the seats, and the two kept their voices down so as not to disturb the rest of the show’s audience. “He’s a manager over at a department store on Shinjuku Avenue, only married once, divorced about nine years ago. This charge of yours is an only child.”

Youka scanned the papers Botan handed her as Cocona sat, watching with rapt attention, and beside her, Mimiko looked absolutely stunned at the idea of theater at all. “These look oddly official.”

“I have my ways,” said Botan with a little laugh. Youka knew she had some sort of a day job, but had never really gotten a straight answer what it was, other than that it involved ties. “Anyway, the debt he’s in—” Mimiko gave a little gasp about the events of the play. “—you’re never gonna believe who it’s to.”

“Try me,” Youka said.

Another few papers. “It’s the Fukuda family,” Botan said. “You know, like Mountain Fukuda?” Youka’s eyes widened. “Yeah, the eldest quit the business so now it’s down to the youngest Fukuda brother to run the thing and they’re in kinda dire straits, got a little office in a building a few streets down from Hotel New Otani. They run a lot of rackets like this—the guy’s in pretty deep for a mortgage on a vacation home a few prefectures over that he visits every so often.”

“...Well, that’s gonna make negotiation difficult,” Youka said.

“His meeting with them's on Wednesday,” Botan continued. “I went and checked, and the house he's got here is paid off, but it's pretty nasty. The guy doesn't clean up after himself—spends most of his time at home drunk.”

“How the hell do you learn all this crap?” Youka asked.

“I'm very persuasive,” Botan said, wiggling her eyebrows. Youka rolled her eyes.

Cocona and Mimiko, in the short time Mimiko had been staying, had gotten into the habit of watching TV together after they'd finished their schoolwork (the buses stopped at similar places for Mimiko to go to school). This time, Youka was making dinner. “Okay, I'm gonna have to go a bit early tonight,” she said. “You two gonna be okay on your own?”

“Gonna be fine, Mom,” Cocona said. “If anyone comes, I'll just hide behind Mimi.”

“Oh, no! Please don't!” Mimiko said, leaning over to grasp Cocona's hand as they sat on the sofa. “You're stronger than me. I wouldn't be much help.” There was a pause. “Miss Youka?” Youka grunted in response. “What am I going to do?”

“Tomorrow, I'm going to go talk to your father,” Youka said, “see what I can do for you.” Mimiko squeaked and almost instinctively started cowering, but managed to stay sat up. “What would you *like* to happen?”

“I would like my books back,” Mimiko answered, “and I think I would like to live in a clean place like this more often than just now. And I would like to know more nice people like you.”

“Well,” Youka said, “I was thinking I'd try and get your father to agree to let you live at your place by yourself. He has another house, see. We'd get the place cleaned up and get you able to live there until you're an adult, at least. I'd come by, obviously, I'm not gonna leave you in the lurch, but you'd be able to keep going to school. We'll see about the money, but that's my basic plan. How does that sound?”

Mimiko had to think. “That sounds nice. Will Daddy be okay with that?”

“I can be very persuasive,” Youka said.

“Who cares what he thinks?” Cocona scoffed. “He sounds like a big jerk, is what he sounds like.”

There was quiet for a moment before Mimiko, curled up on the couch, said, “I know Daddy doesn't like me, but I don't think he's all bad.”

“That's not your problem, kid,” Youka said. “As far as I'm concerned, you shouldn't have to pay for whatever problems he has.”

Another moment of silence, before Mimiko said, “Okay.” Then, she sniffled. “Thank you.” She didn’t leave the sofa, but Cocona and Youka sat beside her for a while after that. Being together with them had a way of making Mimiko smile.

Knock, knock. It was the middle of the afternoon, and it was still a bit hot even inside the building. Youka hadn’t come to this office as formally as might be expected—she didn’t want to sweat too hard. Some guy in a suit with a tight mug and distrustful eyes opened the door. “Welcome to Fukuda Loans & Taxes. We’re busy with a client right now—”

“Oh, yeah, I know,” Youka said, “but is your chairman in? I’m Youka Fudoji, I’m sure he’ll let me in.”

The goon poked his head in and said, “Hey, boss, there’s a ‘Youka Fudoji’ here to see you.” Then, a moment of cold, cold silence. “C’mon in,” he said, and opened the door properly.

Fukuda Loans & Taxes wasn’t a pretty place. It was a pretty small operation, with only a few computers, and as far as Youka could tell, only one direct meeting place. There was a tacky, fake tiger rug, and corporate slogans littered the walls on whiteboards. Partitions were scattered about, along with a few chairs and glass-front file cabinets.

In the center was the chairman’s desk and the client’s chair. The client, one Tsukasa Morishima, sat, nervous and sweating—Youka recognized the color of his hair, and she saw some definite resemblance, but he had a much narrower overall figure, and his shoulders were a bit wider... and the eyes were a bit off, too. Probably resembled her mother more, then.

“The Raging Bomber,” said the man at the desk—grey-suited, black-gloved, a scarred-up fellow with dark sunglasses and a shaved head. He took a drag of a cigarette, then put it out in an ashtray. “Isn’t this a fuckin’ honor.”

KATSURA FUKUDA

HEAD OF THE FUKUDA GROUP, A SUMADERA FAMILY SUBSIDIARY

Fukuda slowly stood from his desk, but kept his hands on the desk. “I’m in the middle of trying to run a business here,” he said, his gaze slowly turning to sit on the nervous, shaking Morishima, “and who should come in but you. What is it this time? You here to wreck my business like you wrecked my brother?”

“Well,” Youka said, hands in her pockets as several of Fukuda’s goons started moving slowly around her into more advantageous positions, “that depends on what you’re gonna say. I’m here about this guy,” and she cocked her head at Morishima.

“Um—m-me?” Morishima stammered, clutching his briefcase. “I’ve never seen you

before in my life!”

“Right. I know,” Youka said. “Anyway, Fukuda, I came here with a request. Forgive this guy's debts. That's all I want.”

There was a moment's silence before Fukuda laughed. He'd approached a bit closer to Youka, and now crossed his arms. “Forgive this guy's debts. You know how much he owes us?” Youka shook her head. “And you come in here and ask me for an act of charity?”

“Yup,” Youka said.

“And why the hell do you care about this guy's debts, huh?” Fukuda said. “What? You standing up for some kid again, butting in on someone else's business?”

“Your brother mistreating my coworkers was my business, Fukuda,” Youka said, cocking an eyebrow. “Do you not know how the pit down there works? He knew what he was signing up for.”

“Doesn't mean I have to fucking *like* you!” Fukuda hissed, crushing another cigarette in his hand. “So what're you gonna do if I don't, huh?”

“Oh, simple,” Youka said. “I'm gonna pound all your goons, wreck your office, and *make* you forgive this guy's debts. You can walk away from this with your face intact, y'know.”

“S-should I be hiding?” Morishima said. “I feel like I should be—“

“Boys!” Fukuda raised his hand. “Kill this bitch!”

—Counting Fukuda himself, there were about twelve of them. Nobody had a gun, but one of them at Youka's back-left had a knife, and a few of them had picked up chairs. They were pretty evenly placed, so—

Swiveling in an instant, Youka grabbed one of the partitions and swung it wide, slamming it into one guy and tossing him to the ground under the wreckage. She snapped back up and slammed her right fist backwards, back-handing a guy on her six before picking him up by the neck and hurling him into a bunch of file cabinets.

Two of the guys with chairs were starting to crowd around each other, so Youka took a step back, then delivered three lightning-quick punches into the stomach of one guy. The chair he dropped took a kick to one side to send it hurling into two more guys, before Youka tripped the second guy before he could react, grabbed his chair, and threw it down to crush him on the ground.

One man with brass knuckles had come in to throw a few punches, so Youka caught it with her own bare hand before twisting his hand until his wrist broke, causing him to scream in agony. He crumpled to his knees as Youka grabbed a nearby water cooler and swung it into a guy

who'd been on his cellphone, desperately calling for backup—the water tank shattered from the force, and he landed on the floor, unconscious, very wet, and covered in plastic.

The last three goons had been hiding behind the partitions, but one, holding a cheaply-made sword, jumped out to take a swing. Youka cleanly stepped past the blade as he let loose a clumsy overhead, then gave him a jab, into a series of punches, into the brutal double hook that sent him down, bloodied. Shoving her boot through another partition, she stepped through the flimsy wall to deliver a stomp to the back of the guy who'd been hiding behind it, who wailed in pain for long enough for Youka to pick him up like a ragdoll.

“Wait—oh shit, I'm sorry—!” the last goon said, as Youka, holding his buddy by the head, hurled him at his screaming comrade as he tried to flee. The two crashed into each other, and fell to the ground in a heap.

And then—there was again silence. This battle had taken, in its totality, twenty seconds.

Morishima, who had managed to remain unscathed on the sofa the entire time, muttered, “S-strong, strong, she's strong.”

“Wha—what the fuck's *with* you?!” Fukuda sputtered, tossing his sunglasses to the side. “What kinda freak are you?”

“Still wanna fight me about it?” Youka asked, tilting her head.

Fukuda blinked, several times, before stepping back, sitting down at his desk, and slumping, holding his head in his hands. “Fine. Just go. This asshole ain't worth it. Go!”

Outside that room, Morishima was still shivering, clutching his briefcase. “You're—you're incredible. Who are you? Who—?”

Youka started walking, and gestured for him to follow. Once they reached the elevator doors, Youka held down the door close button to lock them in. “I don't like you, so I've got a few orders for you. You're gonna clear out of your house and move down to that vacation home you've got.”

Pause. “...H-huh? But, uh, my job—?”

“I don't give a shit. You're quitting and you're moving, but you're not selling the house. Take whatever you like, but anything that belongs to Mimiko is staying, and she'll be staying in the house herself. You don't touch her, you just keep paying the bills. Any questions?” Youka asked.

After a bit of sputtering, he did, in fact, have questions. “M-Mimiko? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your daughter. You know any other Mimiko Morishimas? Any other Mi-Mi-Mimiko,

you know it's me because it comes in threes?" Youka snorted.

"Yeah, I get that, but who—what gives you the right to—for *her*?! That kid isn't normal! What's someone like you doing getting in my business for that girl's sake?" Morishima, now that he was on the ropes, was sweating, cowering in the corner of the elevator, his eyes darting about for escape.

"Someone had to take care of her after you threw her out like that, y'know," Youka said. She turned to him, still holding the button. "I'm a single parent myself, see. I know it's hard. I also know she'd be better off without you. And let's be clear here—if you bilk on this, I'll find you and I'll make you pay. You don't have a choice."

Morishima fell to his knees, pounding the floor. "For that damn kid... I knew she was a mistake! Nothing ever goes right when she's around! You don't understand! She—!"

"I don't give a shit about your sob story, asshole," Youka said, and then let go of the button. She walked out of the elevator onto the ground floor to leave, and had a hand up behind her shoulder to wave goodbye. "Get out within the next few days. Bye. Don't make me meet you again." A few workers waiting for the elevator were quite confused when she passed them by.

"I'm telling you," Botan said, tossing a third pile of old takeout into a trash bag, "it'd be much easier if you'd just let me incinerate it."

"Prove to me you can do this whole lightning-shooting thing," Youka answered, taking it outside, "and I'll think about it."

The Morishima house was a single-story two-bedroom home that, to Youka's eyes, looked like it had plenty of space for a single teenager. Cocona had wanted to help, but she *was* only thirteen, so she was now sitting outside with Mimiko. Youka opened the door to place the bag in its proper receptacle, and waved to the two of them.

"...You won't stop coming over, right?" Mimiko asked.

"As if I'd let her!" Cocona laughed, and Mimiko smiled at her. Youka laughed, too.

Deep scrubbing of kitchen tiling was hard enough when it was her own home, but it also wasn't anything new to Youka—she'd worked in some pretty bad places. Botan was sligher, so she got the job of scrubbing out the dishes. "You're way too nice for your own good, I swear," Botan laughed. "Doesn't sound like someone who's already been betrayed."

"I'm just sensitive, I guess," Youka said, very furiously scrubbing out a deep smudge of dirt on the tiling. "So sue me."

"You've already got enough on your plate with the one kid," Botan said, giving a plate a real shine. "You sure you can take care of two like this?"

“Well,” Youka said, “you're gonna be there for me to bother to help, so I'll be fine.” Botan laughed. “Hey, by the way. Which one of them was your friend? At the play.”

“Oh, he was the villain. The old handmaiden,” Botan said. Youka sputtered aloud. “He looks great in women's clothing, doesn't he? I'll have to introduce you sometime.”

CHAPTER 2

BABY BIRD

“—and so I'm telling you, you need to get more in touch with what kids are into these days!” Botan was definitely drunk, and she was laughing, high-pitched, like a hyena. “Otherwise, now that Cocona's getting a bit older, you'll lose touch and suddenly she might think you're *uncool*.”

“Me? Uncool?” Youka said, putting her hand against her chest in faux shock. “Please. I like to think I'm a pretty cool mom, myself.”

“You're out of touch!” Botan said. Then she started singing. “I'm outta time, and I'm outta my heaad when you're not around~”

“You're the out of touch one,” Youka said. “You're still named after a damn motorcycle, 'Pink Harley'.”

“Hey now, hey now, my Harley is my dear companion!” Botan said, leaning over and putting one arm around Youka. “Do you wanna go for a ride behind me sometime? Roll through the night air together? Get...” She waggled her eyebrows. “...up close and personal?”

“If you're gonna be like this, I'm leaving you with the bill,” Youka said. Botan squawked.

Another few drinks later, Botan, paradoxically enough, became a touch more lucid. “I don't know if you've noticed, but there've been some new guys around the block lately. They're still Sumadera, it looks like, but there's a new emblem I don't recognize. Stay cool on the streets, alright? If they're new, they might wanna pick a fight, see if the rumors are true.”

“Or they might get rowdy at the brothel,” Youka said. She sighed into her glass. “But do I look like I'm worth mugging?”

“Not quite, but you're a pretty fine thang, if you ask me,” Botan said with a wink. “Some hotshot might start trying to schmooze in all cool-like.”

“...Me?” Youka snorted, turning her head away. “I guess. Aren't I a bit old for that?”

“You're in your early thirties! You're still plenty young! I'm only four years younger than you!” Botan threw her hands up. “Quit playing this old lady card. Plenty of people are into women who'll step on them. I should know! I'm leggy, I'm sexy, I get people hankering for a pankering!”

“What the fuck are you talking about? What's a 'pankering'?” Youka asked. Botan opened

her mouth. “I know it's sex, but what the hell kind of sex sounds like a 'pankering'?” Botan started laughing like a hyena again. “Right. Of course.”

“Ohhh, man, ahahahahaha, you're killing me, Youka! You're killing me!” Botan's laughter was usually accompanied by her rocking back and forth, holding her stomach as though she'd just been struck. Youka worried about that sometimes.

It was roughly two weeks later that Youka had her first encounter with the new guys around the block. She'd just come back with some groceries for the girls at the brothel when she found, what else? Trouble at the front.

Specifically, three pompous-looking gits were standing in front of the brothel. One of them was in a hawaiian-print blazer with a bright blonde pompadour, with a real bony face, and he was patting a person right in front of those three on the back. The punks looked like they were probably at least a little drunk. “C'mon, c'mon! What's wrong? Ain't got the balls?”

The person he was speaking to was, while not short, small—in stature and in overall presence. They were androgynous, but Youka's immediate thought was that she was more likely to be a girl than a boy. She had an uncommon head of orange hair, falling just below her neck with the ends feathered, and she appeared to be visibly cowering—a lot of her body was covered under a dark, baggy sweater and sweatpants that were certainly out of season.

“Hey, hey,” said another guy, a dark-haired, dark-clothed punk with a bunch of studs in his ear, “what's wrong? C'mon, grow some balls!”

“Little Satoko's spooked!” said Pompadour, starting to laugh. “What's wrong, *Satoko*? Scared Daddy'll yell at you if he finds out?”

“N-no, I, I, um,” 'Satoko' muttered. Now that Youka was getting closer, it was clear that she wasn't exactly strong—she had pallid skin that implied a lack of health, and by looking at her face and the bags under her eyes, Youka was pretty sure that neither body fat nor muscle found a place on this girl. “P-please, I just... I-I, I don't. I don't, um, want...”

“Hahaha, Satoko, Satoko!” Studs laughed.

“It's all part of growing up,” said a third goon, who had a real ugly goatee—kind of a greasy-looking goon. “We've all been in this kinda place once or twice.”

“Once or twice'? You?” Studs asked. “As if. You're a fuckin' addict, man!”

Goatee was about to fire back, by the look on his face, before Youka strolled in and put an arm on his shoulder. “Boys, I think I'm gonna need to ask you to step back. You're making a public nuisance of yourself.”

The first to react was Pompadour, who gaped. “Holy shit, you guys, that's the—that's the

lady the boss mentioned!”

“You sure?” Studs said, and all three goons got a bit closer to each other to huddle. Youka could still hear them perfectly. “I mean, the boss mentioned a lady, yeah, but—”

“You see any other crazy buff Amazons around here, idiot?” Pompadour said. “No shot! That’s the Raging Bomber! The fighting pit around here, she’s the champ!”

“Oh, is that what he said?” Goatee said, snorting. “She’s huge, sure, but a lady, champ of a death pit?”

“She’s the one who took out Mountain Fukuda, ain’t you ever heard of him? Broke the guy’s spine clean in half with her bare fuckin’ hands!” Pompadour said, his face becoming increasingly red. “I’ve seen the photos, you do not wanna see the photos.”

“Sure, sure, let’s say I believe you,” Goatee said. “What’s some gonzo Amazon doing around here?”

“I’d think she’s a whore, right?” Studs offered. Goatee snorted, but Pompadour nodded. “See? I knew it.”

“So you’re telling me there’s a mythical lady who works at a brothel and is also some kinda combat god?” Goatee laughed, and then stood up, turning around. “Sorry, ma’am, I think there’s been a bit of a misunderstanding.”

Youka’s arms were crossed, and she nodded slowly. “Uh-huh. A misunderstanding.”

“See,” Goatee said, putting his arm around ‘Satoko’, “our friend here’s just getting acclimated to the life, y’know? About time to get some real adult experiences, work on getting up to inheriting the family business.”

“Ah, um, I,” Satoko mumbled, “well, ah...” She started twiddling her fingers.

“Mmhm. Inheriting the family business,” Youka said. “Sure.” She walked around them and stood in front of the entrance to the brothel. “Well, boys, if you want to come in yourself, you’re gonna have to be respectful, but try not to force in someone who doesn’t wanna be here.”

“Eh? Ehhh?” Pompadour said, then ran over to put his hands on Satoko’s shoulders. “You wanna be here, don’tcha, buddy? Don’t wanna be Satoko for the rest of your life, do ya?”

“Ah, well...” Satoko mumbled again, vaguely squirming under his grip. She looked rather like a beaten puppy, and that was, as it happened, a good way to incur Youka’s sympathy.

“...Hey,” Youka said, leaning against the wall, just between the door and a brightly-lit sign on the front of her workplace, “you know, there’s just one thing you’ve gotta do to get out of this.”

“Oh?” Satoko raised her head and looked at Youka.

“Just say you want my help,” Youka said. “Tell me these guys are being assholes and I'll do something about it.”

It took a moment, but Satoko balled up her fists, closed her eyes, and yelled, “Please, please, help me! Get me out of here! I can't take it!”

“Hey, what the fuck, man?!” Pompadour said, but as Youka got off the wall and started cracking her neck, he let go and started backing away. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on!”

“You heard the lady,” Youka said, and started cracking her knuckles.

“L-lady?” Pompadour looked around for a bit, but before he could respond further, Goatee was coming in with a knife. “Dude! Hey! That—”

Before his knife could reach its target, Youka delivered a counter punch directly into his stomach. For just a moment, time seemed to slow down as his mouth opened, letting a pained gurgle fly out amidst a torrent of spit, and the knife he held fell to the ground. His eyes bulged in shock and agony as her fist buried itself into the core of his body, and the wind almost seemed to distort from the force and speed of the single blow Youka let loose.

Then it was over, and Goatee crumpled to the ground, lying in the fetal position as he wept in pain. Youka put her hands in her pockets, then turned her head to Pompadour and Studs, cocking it over her shoulder as she asked, “Either of you wanna be next?”

They did not. They instead chose to run away screaming, leaving Satoko, still very curled into herself, standing there staring at the crumpled form of Goatee. Her eyes then turned to Youka, looking vaguely awed. “I, um... t-thank you,” she said. She twiddled her fingers, and then averted her eyes. “I'm... I'm sorry. I know I—”

“It's fine, it's fine,” Youka said. “Trying to force anyone into something like this is pretty messed up, if you ask me.”

There was silence for a moment, amidst the small wave of traffic along the red-light district that had resumed without the disturbance, before Youka continued, “So... your pops left you to those guys?”

“Ah, yes, well,” Satoko said, “I... not necessarily? You see, he... um, it... The air is so heavy in here, is it heavy in here to you?” She started adjusting her collar, and Youka could see sweat. “Well—”

Youka walked over to the brothel to open the door. “I'm signing out early,” she said to Orchid, who was sitting at the front.

“Another situation?” the old woman asked, to which Youka gave a thumbs up. “Do what you will.”

There was a 24-hour fast-food joint nearby when you went back above ground, so Youka ordered drinks as quick as she could and sat down with Satoko. “Oh, thank you,” Satoko said, taking deep breaths of the much lighter air. “I thought I was going to suffocate!”

“So your father,” Youka said, gesturing to continue.

“He's been trying to ensure I become more self-sufficient, you see,” Satoko said, balling up her fists and placing them on the table to attempt to appear more dignified, “and he'd like me to eventually inherit the family business, so I was supposed to, ah, mingle with people in the business? And they were the, um... only ones who would give me the time of day—?”

“Hold on,” Youka said, raising her hand. “Is your pops yakuza?” Satoko nodded. “...Huh. Fuckin' weirdos in that business, I swear... What about your mom?”

“We don't speak much,” Satoko said. “The two are members of rival factions, you see, so—”

“Oh my god,” Youka said, turning her head up to the ceiling and groaning. “Fuckin' weirdos in that business! Look, take it from me—you're not gonna learn anything he wants you to learn hanging out with assholes like that. If you wanna—how old are you?”

“Sixteen,” Satoko said.

“I'm sure your pops means well and all, but he's a goddamn idiot,” Youka said. Satoko threw her hands up to her mouth to gasp at the terror of this verboten outburst. “When you've got a kid who's not even twenty yet, what you should be doing is teaching them the things that you're actually gonna have to do, not—ugh. Are you expected back?”

“Not for some time,” Satoko said, shaking her head. “Dad said that I'd have his blessing if I managed to find somewhere to live, so long as he knew someone who knew the ropes was around.”

“I think I can help with that,” Youka said. “Gimme his number.”

“Er, you, ma'am?” Satoko's eyes widened. “But you aren't—er, are you?”

“No, but apparently he knows my name,” Youka said. “Anyway, I know this kid who could use a roommate, same age as you. I'm sure she's up, it's a Saturday and she's *always* up at this time on Saturdays.” Youka pulled out her phone, but then paused. “Oh—what should I call you?”

Satoko went quiet, and looked away. There was an odd bit of silence, during which their

drinks were finally delivered, and Youka made an order to be polite. "...Nothing?" Youka said. "If you don't say anything, I'm just gonna have to call you Satoko."

The young girl looked up, averted her eyes for a moment, and then returned them to meeting Youka's gaze. "That's, um... that's fine. Satoko is fine."

Knock, knock, knock. Knock, knock, knock. Knock, knock, knock.

"Three moments, please!" came the voice from inside the house. Youka held up her fingers to count. One, two, thr—

"Hello, hello, hello!" Mimiko had been getting more sunlight in the past year, and she'd started putting her hair in pigtails. "Good evening, Miss Fudoji!"

"Hey, hey," Youka said, putting a finger up to her mouth, "it's the dead of night, a bit quieter, okay?" Mimiko put her hands to her mouth.

The place was far more palatable to live in now, so Youka sat next to Satoko on a sofa across from Mimiko, who sat in a chair. "So this is Satoko," Youka said.

"Your knock is unique," Satoko observed. "And... 'three moments'?"

"You know it's me because it comes in threes," Mimiko said, nodding, her hands on her waist and a proud smile on her face. "Miss Fudoji's friend Botan says that my numerological fascination emphasizes my unique personality and charms."

"Oh, I see!" Satoko said, smiling and nodding. Amazingly, she sounded serious—most of the time when people smiled and nodded in Youka's experience, it was to belie a lack of understanding.

"She's a yakuza heiress whose father wants her to become self-sufficient or something," Youka said. "Let her go off on her own in the red-light district—"

Mimiko leapt up and grabbed Satoko's hands. "Oh! Do you also have a father who doesn't love you?"

"I-I—um, no??" Satoko squeaked.

"Oh," Mimiko said, and let go of Satoko's hands before quickly retreating into her interview chair. "I'm very happy for you! But that does sound messy and like a bad idea, I think. Mhm."

"So you, um... you live here alone?" Satoko said, looking around at the living room. Mimiko nodded. "Do... you have anything that needs doing? I wouldn't mind handling some of the chores."

“Mmhm, mmhm, yes,” Mimiko said, nodding. “Do you like dinosaurs? I have other interests, but those can come later when you're more used to the way I speak and think, I think.”

“I, ah, don't know that I have an opinion on dinosaurs but could be convinced to like them?” Satoko said, clasping her hands together. Mimiko, to Youka, seemed reasonably pleased by this answer.

—Apparently, Satoko didn't have all that much she felt the need to bring over, clothes included. Thankfully, Mimiko had become, in her own words, a shopping *expert* in her time living alone, so Youka felt reasonably comfortable leaving that to her.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring. Click. “Who is this?”

“Well, you know me, apparently,” Youka said. “This is Youka Fudoji.”

There was a moment of silence before the man on the other end—Satoko's father—responded. “I see. And how did you get this number, exactly?”

“Your kid gave it to me,” Youka said.

Satoko's father laughed aloud. “I see! What a coincidence. It seems I'll be in your debt—I heard about you and the Morishima girl, so I imagine this isn't outside your wheelhouse, either.”

Youka knew how to feign politeness, so she did. “It's no skin off my back, but shouldn't she be in school, not running around in the underworld?”

—It is worth noting that despite this text being in English, they were, in fact, speaking Japanese. Conversational pronouns do not work the same way. This is to explain why the man on the other end of the line did not find what Youka just said surprising, for reasons you have likely gathered before this point.

The bit of joviality in the man's voice disappeared. “He needs to learn the way of things if he's going to survive in a world like this. Satoshi is a fragile boy, but I believe in his ability to adapt. He knows where to go to obtain his study material.”

“—Right,” Youka said. “Well, we'll see about that.”

With a click, the call ended. Youka, who had been standing by the doorway for a moment of privacy, did not have to turn around to sense Satoko behind a wall, listening in. “You know I can tell you're there, right?”

“A-ah, well, um—” Satoko did come out from her hiding spot, but once again she began twiddling her fingers, looking at a fascinating spot on the ceiling. “You know... well, ah—”

“Let me ask you something real quick.” Youka turned around, and put her hands on the

much shorter girl's shoulders to ensure they were looking at each other. "It's Satoko, right? You're sure that's what you want me to call you?"

It took a few moments, with tension heavy in the air, but at last Satoko nodded. "Yes. Yes, please."

"Gotcha," Youka said. "Okay, then."

"Hey, Cocona," Youka said one night over dinner. Cocona looked up, her face full of noodle. "Okay, finish that first. I wanna ask you something."

Cocona did so, vigorously slurping her noodles before leaning forward, her chin in one hand, a coy little smile on her face. "Wow, my mom, asking me something. I'm really getting older, aren't I?"

"Aw, can it," Youka said with a smile and a chuckle. "Met another weird kid at one of my evening jobs, and I let her move in with Mimiko. She calls herself Satoko, her dad's some big-shot yakuza I don't know the name of, didn't feel like asking."

"Uh-huh," Cocona said, nodding.

"Now, you're younger than me, so I figured you might know better than me," Youka said. "What'm I supposed to do if someone calls themselves a girl, but their dad says they're a boy?"

Cocona blinked, and her chin slipped slightly out of her hand. "Huhwha?"

"I mean, she acts and talks like a girl. Looks pretty well like one, too, sounds like she could go either way. But her old man called her Satoshi, called her a boy. She was staring at me while I was on the phone like she was nervous about something, I imagine it was probably that. Is this a thing? Should I know this is a thing?" Youka asked.

Another blink. Then—"Oh, it's like *Wandering Son*. Or *Claudine*, I guess," Cocona said. Youka blinked. "You know, the manga? That was 1978, Mom, that was when *you* were a kid."

"I read shit that was more for boys," Youka said with a shrug.

"Well, that manga's a tragedy about this guy who's like, born a woman, but he's got the heart of a man. And the whole issue is that he can't be treated like a guy because of how he was born, so I guess it's like that?" Cocona said with a shrug.

"And what's this *Wandering Son*?" Youka asked, tilting her head.

"Oh, it's about this kid who's born a boy, but is a girl," Cocona said. "It's in *Comic Beam*, been running for a while now. We could go grab some tankobons at the store next time we go."

Youka nodded, pursing her lips. “Okay, so this is enough of a thing that there's been manga about it from when I was a kid to when you were a kid?”

“Seems like it,” Cocona said. “I mean, I don't know if I know any, but it's probably something *like* that. I think it's called 'transgender'?”

Leaning back in her seat, Youka sighed loudly. “See, this is why I need to ask you these things. I'm so glad you're smart. Why are you reading manga like this, anyway?”

Cocona shrugged. “I like Comic Beam.”

Mimiko, it should be noted, did not dress to conventional standards of fashion. She was the sort to wear two different colors of socks, for instance, or clothes whose colors decidedly did not match. She was a fan of suspenders no matter the outfit, and liked to wear colored glasses—and sometimes she would simply wear her school uniform on days out. Cocona was the sporty sort, meanwhile, and she had gotten that from the rough and tumble stylings of her mother.

As such, when Satoko gravitated toward soft colors, like pinks or yellows, or traditionally feminine clothing such as skirts, dresses, or cardigans, the sudden appearance of 'classical' femininity (albeit trending more Western in the sensibilities of her fashion,) it was quite a culture shock. Only Botan, who had invited herself along the second she heard of this trip, could keep up with Satoko's sensibilities.

“I've been lectured on the subject, you know,” Botan said. “The best authority I know tells me that a young girl's individuality can be expressed well through fashion and outward expression.”

While Satoko was inside the changing room, Youka took Botan aside—inside a local mall, it should be mentioned, with many bright lights and people passing by, amidst rows of clothing too chic and cool for either of them to wear—and said, “You said that like it was profound, but that's just common sense.”

“I thought it was incredible he knew that much, considering he's a man,” Botan said. That got her to let out another laugh. ...Considering the dress she kept, Youka attempted just a little bit to hide her so that nobody complained—something Botan swore was unnecessary, but that Youka was always just a little bit paranoid about.

“Do you think this would look good on her?” Cocona said, lifting up another fluffy, unthreatening pink cardigan that would probably have incinerated Satoko to wear just a month ago. Botan gave it the pass and the nod.

“Mmhm, mmhm, mmhm!” Mimiko nodded thrice, before holding up a pair of garishly bright green shoes. “And these?” Botan gave it the pass and the nod.

When those were passed under the door of the changing room, Satoko squeaked. “I-I'm

not a dressup doll, please! I can only wear so many clothes so quickly!”

“Yeah, but we wanna see!” Botan said, and Mimiko chimed in her agreement.

—When Satoko opened up the door, in that fleecy pink cardigan and with a white button-up dress beneath, her face was bright red. Youka thought for a moment, if her understanding of this whole business was correct, that Satoko was awfully lucky she was so slight and effete to begin with. Of course, puberty wasn't over, so perhaps she was just a late bloomer. ...Were there ways to do something about that? Youka wondered.

Cocona waved a hand in front of Youka's face, and Youka started back to reality. “Huh? What?”

“Well, we're thinking about whose money to use ,” Cocona said. “Satoko says she has money, but it might be like, dirty money. Botan says she can pay, but I'm worried she might—”

“Bilk her for all she's worth,” Youka said. Over where the other three were flipping through their purchases, Botan recoiled as though she'd been physically struck. “She has a job with suits and ties.”

“You *do*?” Mimiko blurted out. “Is this a daytime job or a ni—”

Botan lurched over to put a finger over Mimiko's mouth, grabbing the top of her head with her other hand and turning her head together with Botan's own to keep a vigil. “Be quiet. You don't know who around here might make note of that information.”

By the time Satoko had been at Mimiko's house for only a month or so, the yard already looked better. It wasn't uncommon that Youka would swing by to find Satoko with gloves and a trowel maintaining the yard, covered in sweat and with a big smile on her face. “You a fan of all this?” Youka asked, one time.

“Oh, well, I didn't necessarily think I was, but I've been looking into it while I've been here and it's awfully rewarding!” Satoko said, patting down some dirt. “Mimi's, haah, not a fan. But that means I get to do it, so I don't mind!”

“Rewarding, huh?” Youka said, raising an eyebrow. Ordinarily she'd help, but she felt like that would make Satoko help, so she just stood there, maybe slightly angling herself to keep the sun from bearing down quite on hard on the slight young lady—it was an unseasonably warm day.

“Sure. When you plant something, the... haah, the progress is slow but you can always find just a little bit each time you come out. It's stable—it's the kind of project that implies you're committed to sticking around for a bit. Not the sort of thing... I've, haah... Papa and I had to move... a lot when I was a kid, would you please hand me my water?” Satoko asked.

There wasn't really a front porch, so to speak, so the two of them just sat on the doorstep. "I hear that," Youka said. "It took a hell of a lot of work to keep me and Cocona stable."

"You remind me a lot of Papa," Satoko said, and Youka raised an eyebrow. "You're both very muscular, for one thing, but also you're both very determined, the sort to carve out a place for yourselves no matter what."

"Self-made man, huh?" Youka asked, and Satoko nodded. "So you wanna stay for a while?"

"Mimi says she doesn't mind, it's just..." Satoko sighed, and this one was a deep one. "Papa... you know. He wants me to become a yakuza, like he is. But I... I don't think I have the strength to do that. I'm not strong like him, or like you. I'm a very weak person." She shook her head. "I don't even have the strength to tell him that sort of thing to his face. He thinks that if he becomes strong enough, he can make that world accepting to a slight, weak person like me... or maybe he thinks I can become stronger? I don't know."

"It's not about being 'strong'," Youka said. "Who the hell gets into that kind of business because they *want* to? You're just not that kinda person. I mean, shit, you know, uh..." She started waving her hand around. "Look. Can I say something that might sound kinda dumb?"

"Go ahead," Satoko said.

"I don't think any of those big tough guys in Yotsuya's criminal underworld are gonna take kindly to someone who's like you," Youka said. Satoko tilted her head quizzically. "You know, like... ugh, what's that damn word..."

"Oh, I see," Satoko said, her eyes widening slightly. "It's about my body, right?"

"Yeah, you know." Youka said, then shook her head. "Sorry. This is new to me. Obviously you're you, but I don't know how to talk about it."

Satoko laughed a little, then looked down at her hands in her lap. "I don't either. I wasn't... I didn't think I was... that being a boy was necessarily wrong, I suppose? You and Mimi were the first person who treated me like I was anything else. Not making fun of me, just... treating me that way, and I think I like being treated that way. Like a girl. I think I do like it better than being treated as a boy. I can't know completely—if I went back home, would I go back to being Satoshi like none of this happened? Or even a Satoko who's like none of this happened?"

"Fuck if I know," Youka said. She shrugged. "All I know is you're a nice young lady."

Mimiko, wearing three sets of colored glasses and with a bunch of neon scrunchies in her hair, opened the door with a trio of ramune bottles. "Miss Youka, you've never told me what flavor of ramune you like, so I guessed!"

Now they were inside, and that was nicer. “What were we talking about?” Mimiko asked. “Was it about Satoko's Papa?”

“Kinda,” Youka said. “I think she's scared of losing the time she's spent here.”

“Uh-uh-uh,” Mimiko said. She and Satoko were on the sofa this time, so she leaned over to hug her roommate, who lit up blushing. “Mimi ain't gonna let that happen, no, ma'am!”

“G-gosh,” Satoko said, wilting a little inside a hug from Mimiko's much larger arms, “Mimi, that's...”

“If you're scared of that, then you just have to not leave, I think,” Mimiko said, and then nodded to herself to punctuate the obviousness of her statement. “And Miss Youka's real good at making that happen!”

“—I'm what now?” Youka said, raising an eyebrow.

“Good at convincing dads,” Mimiko said.

Youka scoffed. “Then why am I single?” Mimiko and Satoko both blinked blankly at her. “I—never mind. Long story. Fine, I can try. But, uh... I need to know the guy's name.”

It was pretty hard to get a suit and tie in Youka's size, but Botan managed somehow. The Sumadera Family, a matriarchal yakuza family who were easily Yotsuya's top dogs, had an old castle as their headquarters. The entryway was paved with tiles bearing the family crest below a cloudy sky, and a bunch of guys in suits were milling about the front, slowly being let in.

Youka got a few weird looks, but she *was* dressed for the occasion, so she just got in line and slowly made her way to the guys allowing entry. “Name?”

“Youka Fudoji,” she said. “I'm not on any list, but I'm looking for someone at—”

There were two men at the table, and both of them burst out laughing at her. “Yeah, sure,” the bald guy on the left said, “and I'm the Emperor.”

Youka gave a blank stare. “What.”

“You know how many people come in claiming they're Youka Fudoji?” said the guy on the right, who had surprisingly long hair in contrast to his partner. “You're the third today.”

“...Why?” Youka said, her nose scrunching up. “People think my name is good to get them an invite in? ...Look, I don't give a shit about your meeting, I'm just looking for someone in particular—the Inoue Clan captain.”

“Well, that's a better excuse,” Cueball said. “But listen, lady, shove off, we've got

business here. It's real serious stuff here, you gave us a very funny joke—”

One moment the table they were sitting at was standing perfectly still, and the next it was split cleanly into two pieces from a single slam of Youka's fist. The legs of the broken table managed to bury themselves into craters a bit into the tile, and the entire courtyard went completely quiet. “He'll, uh,” Long Hair mumbled, “he'll be in the third room on the right, can't miss it.”

It was true—there were three doors on the right just in the entryway of Sumadera HQ, so Youka pushed open the Western double doors (which she presumed were a recent installation) and stepped in.

“Ah,” said her quarry. “My apologies, but I need to take this.”

There were only two people in the room, and one—a tall young man with sturdy musculature and a striking white head of hair—quietly stood up and walked past Youka out the doors. Youka let the doors go, and then sat down in a seat across from her target.

“It's been a long time,” said a man she'd only met once, several years ago.

FUHITO INOUE

HEAD OF THE INOUE CLAN, A SUMADERA FAMILY SUBSIDIARY

Inoue's short head of dark hair was visibly beginning to grey, but the man's physique hadn't faded with the years—it had only gotten stronger, from the look of him. “A few boys who ran into you tell me they think they saw a ghost. They're starting to talk about you as though you're a new Oiwa. Isn't that something?”

Youka slouched in the chair, but Inoue's posture was straight as a rod. “Pff. Must be because of that gravestone. You busy? I'd like to talk.”

Though the two were a room apart, Inoue symbolically extended his hand. “About Satoshi, I would imagine.”

“Yeah. So, Satoshi's staying with—you heard about her. Morishima, that girl I helped. The two of them are getting on real well. I'm here to request you let Satoshi stay there indefinitely,” Youka said, and Inoue raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“That's an odd request. Did he ask you to ask me this, or are you using your own sensibilities?” Inoue asked.

“Eh, he didn't ask me directly, but he made it pretty directly clear it's what he wanted,” Youka said. She shrugged. “I get it. But no, I can assure you it's what he wants.”

Inoue stood up, and walked over to a securely locked wine cabinet in the corner. “Do you drink red wine or white wine?” Youka shrugged and mumbled she'd have red. “As I believe I mentioned when last we met, I didn't have the luxury of my own father's assistance,” he said, pouring their drinks, “in much of anything.”

“Mmhm,” Youka said.

“I obtained some modicum of power through marrying into the yakuza of this region, but it was largely political—my wife simply wanted to do something to act out against her family, and we both knew it. I have fought tooth and nail to gain the respect and power I've obtained, and it is, as I'm sure you can surmise, all for my son's sake,” Inoue said. He handed Youka her glass, then sat down with his own glass of white wine.

“Yeah, and?” Youka asked, taking a sip.

“You're asking me something that I find somewhat uncomfortable, Miss Fudoji,” Inoue said. “You must understand that you are asking me to place the parenting of my own child into the hands of another.”

“Hey, babysitters *are* a thing for normal people, y'know,” Youka said with a shrug.

“What sort of person is my son when he's near you? Can you give him the strength he needs in order for him to survive in this world?” Inoue asked. “I know you know what it takes to survive in this world.”

“Can I stop you for a second?” Youka asked, raising her hand. Inoue nodded. “You're Satoshi's dad. It's your job to make sure he doesn't have to go through what you had to.”

“And I won't. I'll give Satoshi a world he can live in better than I did. Nobody will threaten my boy's safety if they know what's coming to them. Surely you'd say the same for your daughter?” Inoue asked, before taking a sip of his own wine.

“Have you ever considered,” Youka asked, “that maybe he doesn't want to be yakuza? That maybe Satoshi would be better off living a normal life like other kids his age?”

There was a pause, before which Inoue said, “For the record, the stock here is somewhat poor. If we were to have another meeting like this, tell me—would you be more interested in a chardonnay? Zinfandel, perhaps?”

Youka had to take a moment to presume that what he'd just said were real words before answering, “Where does a beer fall into that scale?” Inoue laughed aloud, clapping his hands.

“I'll mark you down for a cabernet sauvignon, then,” Inoue said. “Oh, or a syrah. You seem like the sort of woman who would enjoy a good syrah. It's quite bold, you know.”

“Uh-huh,” Youka said. “What does that mean?”

“It means it's bold,” Inoue said. “It's a strong wine, very dark—”

“If you want to hit on me, you know where to go for my rates, Inoue,” Youka said.

“Is that what your time is worth? Some paltry fee?” Inoue shook his head, leaning back in his seat and placing his hands in his lap. “No, the time of a woman like yourself is worth much more than that. I think I'd like to thank Satoshi for giving me this opportunity.”

“Shut the hell up and answer the question,” Youka said.

“What do you believe is passed down from parent to child?” Inoue asked, standing from his chair and beginning to pace about. “Do you truly believe my son would be best served out there? Those wolves would devour him whole.”

“You really think that a den of criminals is safer than the streets aboveground, huh?” Youka asked with a snort.

“I would think that if anyone understood, it would be you,” Inoue said, turning his head to Youka as he paced.

“You know you and I are really, *really* not in the same profession, right?” Youka asked, raising an eyebrow. “And we've met... what, once? I—”

Youka then shook her head, stood up, and went for the door. “Oh, fuck this. There like a garden in here somewhere? It'd be a lot easier for me to beat the shit out of you.”

“Alright,” Inoue said.

There was a moment's silence.

“Alright as in 'sure, I'll show you to where you can pound my face in', or—?”

“I can think of nobody else whose care I'd want Satoshi to be in, and I am fascinated to see what your perspective would do for my boy,” Inoue said. He sat back down. “My meeting is in seventeen minutes and twelve seconds, so I don't know that I have time for a bare-knuckle brawl at the moment, much as I would absolutely love to fight you.”

Youka turned around and said, “You know what I hate more than anything else, big guy?”

“What's that?” Inoue asked.

“Getting my time wasted. Like, if there's a locked door that shouldn't be locked, or people keep making me walk around to get to somewhere I could get to just fine if they'd leave me alone, or something like that. I really, really hate it.” Youka took a breath. “So now I can add

another thing to my list of ways I've had my time wasted—some smarmy shithead talking my ear off about *wine and genetics*. Not gonna let me beat the shit out of you but you still took this long, what an inconsiderate jackass! It's a wonder you had such a sweet kid, and the less time he spends near you the better, fuckboy.”

Despite a slight distance, the spit Youka let loose still managed to land on Inoue's suit. She turned, opened the door, and walked away, no doubt imagining correctly the smile Inoue had on his face.

In the middle of a conversation about nothing in particular, Mimiko took off her brightly-colored jacket and said, “No, this feels bad,” and that was the last time she wore it. Youka wound up taking it home to give to someone else at some point.

“—So remember, call me the instant anything happens,” Youka said, pressing her finger down on the cell phone in Satoko's hand. “I mean the *instant*, you got it?” Satoko nodded.

“How... was he?” Satoko asked, as Youka opened the door to crane her head around and get the picture. “I mean... did he... did he seem worried about me?”

Youka let out a heavy sigh before closing the door and turning back to Satoko before answering, “I'm not sure what the hell his problem is. Sure, he seemed concerned, but...” She shook her head, and turned to the kitchen to make something before she had to head home. “Buddha fuckin' help me. Guys like that love to talk a big game, don't they...”

There was late-afternoon sun streaming through a window in the house's small kitchen. “Hey, Satoko,” Youka asked—she was looking at the food she was preparing, away from Satoko, but she had heard Satoko sit down. “What do you think of men?”

“Of... er, you mean in general?” Satoko said, sounding a little surprised. Youka nodded and made a noise of assent. “Hm... that's a hard question. I'm technically a member of the Sumadera family, too, but I grew up largely with my father. I think... well, I would need to meet a more pleasant man before I answered that honestly.” There was a pause, and then, “Well, no. I think that there is one pleasant man I know—my cousin. He's quiet, and he loves his cat very much. When we've spoken, we've gotten along quite well, since we are both somewhat outcast.”

“Enlighten me,” Youka said.

“The Sumadera family is matriarchal, so neither he nor I are eligible for the headship. And the current head's eldest daughter disavowed the family—I don't know I've ever met her—so things are in a bit of a state right now. I don't think I would be welcome to begin with,” Satoko concluded. “I don't know many men outside of... the greater criminal underworld, I suppose. I've never had many friends in school. So, yes, I would need to meet more 'normal' men before I can give you an answer I would be satisfied with. Why do you ask?”

“Just thinking,” Youka said, shrugging as she ran some water. “You meet all kinds in my line of work, but there's something that kinda uniquely pisses me off about blowhards like your

father. No offense.”

“None taken,” Satoko said. “He's...”

She didn't finish that statement. It would be hard to, you see—this chapter in the sagas of the Inoue Clan and Youka Fudoji was far from over.