

CHAPTER 3

UNITED NATIONS

The morning news with Cocona was unpleasant half the time, but there was a new face on it today. "...Councilman Ryuji Kozakura, hailing from Shimane, taking the stage, representing the United Nations Party."

He was about sixty, this Councilman Kozakura, and his hair was turning white. He had a mustache and a beard, both quite pointy, but the most striking thing about him in Youka's eyes was parading on stage with a *chonmage* topknot. His stance wasn't too sturdy, but he carried himself on stage with a strong enough presence to command silence.

"My fellow citizens of Japan, let me first express what an honor it is to be on stage speaking in front of all of you." His voice commanded presence, too—he didn't move much behind the podium, but he didn't need to. "I can scarcely believe it—that a humble man from a humble country town like myself might one day reach the peaks of Parliament. I can only ascribe this to the support of the myriad Japanese citizens who have supported me and the ideals I hold so dear. Thank you."

From the sound of it, it was not universal across the room, but the applause that Councilman Kozakura received was loud and very fervent from those who supported him. "In the past years—"

Cocona turned off the TV, and stood up with a loud stretch. She was sixteen now, and in Youka's eyes, she'd certainly grown up to be more... how would she put it... conventionally attractive? She wasn't as top heavy or as tall, but she had her mother's eyes and she accentuated more properly. These were the things Youka thought about at times like these—politics were a bother. "Ugh," she said, "I donno. You ever just think you aren't gonna like what you hear when you listen to the news and you just turn it off, Mom?"

"Yeah," Youka said, "all the time. I'm glad you're mastering that skill."

Youka had come in to do some inventory in the back room of the brothel—a room that always seemed to have clutter coming from somewhere—when there was a knock on the door. "Yo, Sensei," said another worker at the brothel (who, incidentally, was a young woman named Chiyo who is not particularly relevant to this story, but Youka knew her well for her insistence that Youka teach her how to become a pit fighter (a request that Youka had always turned down because she knew that Chiyo had family who would be quite disappointed if she died), which here is the reason that she refers to Youka as 'Sensei'), "you've got someone asking for you."

—Apologies. That was far too deep of a parenthetical for matters that are irrelevant.

At any rate, Youka went into the prescribed room. She only had to wait a few moments—the doorknob hesitantly opened, and in the door was a young man in far more shabby clothes than Youka expected in this sort of place. A baggy, faded trenchcoat, khaki pants with suspenders, a striped shirt with a tie... and a particularly raggedy flat cap. The man's hair was dark and curly, and thick-lensed glasses sat in front of his eyes. He was a bit tall, and definitely pudgy—and he was taking deep breaths to steady himself.

“Ah, aha, my apologies,” the man said, grabbing one of the seats in the room, “I'm sure this is quite the inconvenience... Er, well, I suppose I did pay for this, but—”

(It is worth mentioning here a return of a Japanese conversationality that does not translate to English. This young man uses the first-person pronoun 'atashi', which is largely associated with young women. You may think of him, perhaps, as having the opposite effect of the conversational style of one Koron Nagataka.)

“Youka Fudoji, yes?” The young man pulled out a notepad, and raised his hand. “Hello, it's, ah, lovely to finally meet you.”

Youka blinked, then raised an eyebrow. “Okay? Nice to meet you too. Do you know that creep Inoue?”

“Inoue? Er, I've heard the name, but—ah, no,” the young man said, shaking his head. “No, no. Um, ah—oh, my apologies, of course. It's only polite to introduce myself first.” He stood up out of his seat, and quickly shuffled over to shake Youka's hand. “Jong-ki Park, ma'am. I'm a, uh... I'm a friend of Botan's?”

“Oh!” Youka's eyes widened, and she sat up a bit straighter, raising a finger in realization. “Oh, you're the... you were the... you're the community theater guy.”

“Yes! Yes. That would be me, unless she has another friend who is particularly into local community theater in the town of Yotsuya, which I suppose isn't impossible. Hello!” Park cleared his throat, and shook his notepad a touch. “Ah, yes. Hi! So, I, ah—I understand from what Botan tells me that you're not exactly the chattiest person, and given what I'm here to do I only thought it right to pay you, you see.”

He produced a pen—a fancy one, decorated like a magical girl's staff from some kid's anime—from beneath his hat and said, “Now, if you'll forgive me.”

“Oh, I get it. This is an interview, huh?” Youka asked, with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes, yes. I, ah, well. I need to pick your brain in order to 'accurately review your services', yes? A-hah.” Park winked. “You understand.”

“—lost my job recently, you see,” Park said, now that their allotted time was up. Youka had at first thought to take him to a bar, but Park had protested—according to him, he was

attempting to stay away from alcohol. “I was told I wasn't suited for it, but Botan at least managed to find me a position as...”

“An *adult entertainment reporter*,” Botan concluded. She picked up a french fry—they'd gone to a fast food place. “He's one of those literary types, see.”

“W-well, certainly, but I'm... aha, well, I'm not very suited to it,” Park said, shaking his head and taking a sip of coffee. “Hence the, ah...”

“Ah,” Youka said. Park had gotten started typing away at a laptop on an article about her, and Youka had to admit she was curious what he would make up about her services. “That's rough.”

“It's rough!” Botan said with a nod. “But he's got a way with words. He's got this one manuscript he's like two-thirds done with, fantastic stuff.”

“Manuscript?” Youka raised an eyebrow. “Like a novel or something?”

“Yes, yes,” Park said with a nod. “It's a thriller—somewhat outside of my own personal lane of interest, but one does what one does, and I've found myself interested in writing the story, at any rate. But I must pay the bills! Jong-ki Park will not allow himself to become homeless!” That particular statement was appended with a little fist-pump.

It was about twenty minutes later, though, that Park let loose a heavy sigh. “Still. It doesn't feel good to be pushed so close to 3K territory. I don't have the stuff for that on the best of days!”

—‘3K’ is a neologism used to describe dangerous work performed by blue-collar laborers—in Japan particularly, the word was used to describe the work often done by descendants of low-class Japanese laborers before reaching its common usage. It stands for ‘kitanai, kiken, kisui’—‘dirty, dangerous, demanding’. As such, the American appropriation of this term, ‘3D’, is similarly alliterated—‘dirty, dangerous, and demeaning’. You might think of a 3K worker as, perhaps, a coal miner, or a cattle feedyard worker, or a construction worker. If one is in a 3K position, one should not think to envy them.

Youka Fudoji, at many, many points, was a 3K worker in some position or another—so she picked up a french fry she hadn't eaten that had long gone cold, pointed it at Park, and said, “Hey, you're in a dirty business, you've got a quota to hit and you might get shanked or mugged by some passing yakuza. Sounds 3K to me.”

“No, no, I've heard stories about your work ethic, Miss Fudoji,” Park said, shaking his head and raising his hands in defense, “I would never dream to approach your level. Your spirit is unparalleled, Botan tells me! Er, not in those exact words, but that's what I gathered.”

“Yeah, Park's a flowery theater boy,” Botan said with a wink, “he'd shrivel up and die if he had to do half the things you do.”

“So would you,” Youka said with a snort.

“Did I say otherwise? I don't think I did,” Botan said. “Did I, Park?”

“No, but you did imply it through the statement being applied to me,” Park said. He huffed a little. “And I'll have you know I am not that much weaker than you, Botan! Harrumph. I'm simply horribly unlucky.”

Park became something of a regular visitor to the brothel from that point on. He paid, but he never actually used the services—instead, Youka and her coworkers jokingly said he treated it rather like a hostess club. He'd come in, make conversation for a few hours, thank them for their time, and then make something up in whatever review rag he worked for based on his time.

Astonishingly, this worked—whatever way Park had with words gave him quite a way with expressing the unique charms of each girl, as well. Youka often thought, despite the joking, that he would have a hard time at a hostess club—he seemed like the sort of man who would not do well with the put-on mannerisms in that sort of establishment. Youka, of course, knew from experience—her time at a hostess club was brief and not very successful.

Of course, this was not a wholly consistent work, especially to afford time with a girl from the brothel, so Youka would often find Park working small jobs at a nearby pachinko parlor, or something that effect. He was still swearing off bars, but having to run a table at a gambling den wasn't much safer.

For instance, one day, he wilted away when a very large man who'd just managed some small victory at the colosseum lost his earnings at a rousing game of oicho-kabu. “Bastard! You're cheating!” the man had shouted, brandishing a knife and causing poor Park to recoil away in terror. Park, of course, was wholly honest aside from the ways they were instructed to be dishonest, but that was beside the point. (Luckily, guards had escorted this nice man off the premises before he could vivisect Park.)

“I can't tell my parents what I'm doing, or they'll be so terribly disappointed in me,” Park said, one day, over some more french fries. “They wanted me to be a lawyer. Oh, I don't have the stuff for that. I know that they weren't able to be lawyers, but still! What firm would take in a man like me? What law school would take a shabby man like Jong-ki Park, I ask you?”

“I don't think you're *that* shabby,” Youka said, before popping a fry in her mouth. “You're kinda shabby, but you're not that shabby. And don't they have that Korean lawyer's association these days? You'd probably get hired there—not that you should be a lawyer, I'm just saying. What do you wanna do?”

“Promise you won't laugh?” Park mumbled, and Youka nodded. “I'm actually such a massive fan of *PreCure*, you see, and my greatest dream is to direct a series of it. I've been watching it ever since it released, and I love it so dearly!”

—'PreCure', or *Pretty Cure*, is a long-running series of magical girl children's television specifically aimed, unsurprisingly, at young girls. Beginning in 2004 with *Futari wa Pretty Cure*, by this time, it would be on its seventh series. Encouraging young girls to get up there and try to express themselves, it would remain a staple of children's television in Japan for some time to come.

“My daughter likes those shows,” Youka said. She swallowed another fry. “And I know these other two girls who are into it.”

Being a theater kid as he was, Park's animated, emotional responses to actually getting to watch PreCure with other people should not have surprised Youka, but it turned out that having a boy like him and three teenage girls on a couch together watching anime was a loud experience. (It was, for the record, Youka's couch.)

...That said, the fact that Park had apparently memorized every word of the opening and ending songs was really impressive to Youka. Cocona had only managed about thirty percent of the opening.

“Mom's never been into this kinda stuff,” Cocona casually mentioned while leaning back on one side of the couch. (Mimiko had politely requested the other, so Satoko and Park were in the center of the couch.) “All the manga she read as a kid was the kind about buff guys beating each other up.”

“There's definitely something to be enjoyed about all of that, yes,” Park said, “but personally, I enjoy stories with a bright veneer and good cheer!”

The first time Satoko had watched an episode of PreCure, Youka had happened to be in the house, and she had studied it incredibly closely. At the time, she had muttered something like, 'oh wow, so this is what girls grow up watching'. The gaze she affixed the screen with had never become any less intense.

Satoko had, for Mimiko's most recent birthday, hand-crafted her a little blue ribbon to keep around her neck. Mimiko still had this ribbon on tonight. “Mr. Park, excuse me,” she said during a commercial break. “Are you a girl like Satoko is?”

Youka had to hold down a brief spout of laughter. Park, for his part, was only surprised for a moment, and then took it in good cheer. “No. Why do you ask?”

“Because this is a show for girls,” Mimiko said, “and also you talk like a girl.”

“Ahaha. No, no, I've just never been very manly,” Park said. “I'm just the sort of boy who'd like to become PreCure himself.”

“He looks good in women's clothing!” Cocona chimed in. “He was the old handmaiden in

that show we saw a few years ago, remember?”

It took Mimiko a moment. “Oh! Wow! You look good in women's clothing.”

“Ah, ahahaha.” Youka couldn't see him, but she could hear that blush. “You're both too kind.”

“Mr. Park, I have to know,” said Satoko, her gaze still firmly fixed on the screen. “What sort of PreCure would you be?”

“I think I'd like to be called Cure Speedstar,” Park said, “because you see, even if I'm not strong, I can run surprisingly quick when I need to! And I think I'd like to wield something unorthodox... oh, perhaps a deck of playing cards? I've become surprisingly good with those, you know!”

—Youka had to tune him out at this point to focus on cooking, but she couldn't help but smile. Maybe they'd make a decent magical girl team themselves, she thought.

It was late when Youka managed to return Park to the apartment complex where he and Botan roomed, so seeing an intense flash of light from the apartment building was that much more obvious. “Eh?” Park said, before a loud crack of thunder, like a gunshot, blasted their ears.

There were stairs on the front of the building, so Youka was able to quickly run up the stairs, Park trailing ever so slightly behind, to climb up to the fifth floor—where Botan was knelt, panting, on the ground, with an unconscious man in a dark mask (whose body was, it should be said, ever-so-slightly smoldering) sitting in front of Park's apartment door.

“Oh, shit,” Botan said with a gasp, “Park, I'm—I'm real sorry, the... the other guys got away...”

—The front door to Park's apartment had been spray painted in red. Park used his cell phone camera to light it up—

Maggot Korean. Cockroach. Parasite. Enemy of Japan.

“Ah,” Park muttered. “I see. They didn't manage to break in, did they?”

“No, but—”

“It's fine, then,” Park mumbled. “I'll clean it up in the morning.” His head hung low as he mutely found his key, opened the door, and went inside.

After taking a moment to digest what she'd just seen, Youka looked down at the guy that Botan had managed to knock out. The loud sound was finally managing to rouse other tenants from their slumber, so Youka turned her head and said, “Call the police or something. I'm gonna

check him.”

“What?” Botan said.

“Fuckers vandalized my friend's apartment. Not in my town,” Youka said.

—It was easy to find the evidence she was looking for. It was in his jacket pocket—a card he'd received from a political party. “United Nations, huh,” Youka mumbled.

“... Yes, Mother,” Park mumbled on the phone the next day. “Yes, it... it was mine. No, I'm alright. I was at another house when it happened. Yes. I'm alright. I'll... I'll let you know if they catch them, yes. Yes. Thank you. Goodbye.”

Cocona was off at school, so it was just Youka—who was probably going to get fired from the job she was skipping—and Botan on the sofa in Youka's living room to comfort Park. “I'm...” He squeaked out through snuffles. “I don't understand. I haven't done—I haven't done anything wrong! I've lived in Japan all my life! I love Japan as much as anyone! How—how could—?”

“There's the bastard,” Youka said.

—And there he was, on the television once more.

RYUJI KOZAKURA

HEAD OF THE 'UNITED NATIONS PARTY', SEATED AT THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

“—our identity as members of this nation, in this modern age, often comes under fire by foreign powers,” said the man from Shimane. “However, our Japanese spirit is not so easily quenched. Even under the force of violent attack by the West all those years ago, our people stood strong. The 21st century, I believe, is the time for Japan to stand strong and loudly reclaim the spirit that we have needed to stifle—”

“On the ticker there,” Botan said, pointing it out. The man would be speaking at a gathering of proponents of his party soon, here in Yotsuya. “What're you gonna do?”

“Isn't it obvious? I'm gonna protest,” Youka said. “It ain't illegal for me to protest.”

“Er. When you say, 'protest'?” Park said, his eyes widening.

There were roughly one hundred and forty people present in the—relatively humble—conference hall when Youka Fudoji threw open the wooden double doors. “Hey, *assholes!*”

Where's Kozakura? I want a word!"

A group of armed security guards made to block Youka's path, but the conference hall was loud enough that the voice of Councilman Kozakura resounded all the way through. "Wait! Lower your weapons."

He'd arrived to the podium where he meant to speak, and so Kozakura could now speak to the audience as well as Youka. "A tall woman with an astonishing physique... I can only imagine you are the infamous 'Ghost of Yotsuya', Youka Fudoji. Correct?"

"Yup," Youka said. "That's me. Kids from this party of yours trashed a friend of mine's place a few nights ago! Gotta keep a better leash on your dogs."

Kozakura shook his head, as Youka slowly advanced through the guards toward the front. "I will admit their zeal was misplaced, but I bear no responsibility for sentiments held by young folk such as that." Citizens in the seats fidgeted uncomfortably. "What business do you have with me, ma'am?"

"I wanna make one thing real clear," Youka said. With the security guards still trained on her, she hopped up onto the stage and faced Kozakura directly. "You and your shithead party have no place in my goddamn town. I don't care where else you go, but not in Yotsuya. You aren't holding any speeches or any gatherings. You're getting the hell out."

"On whose authority?" Kozakura asked. "I could have you arrested, you know. You're disrupting proceedings quite thoroughly."

"Are you gonna?" Youka asked with a raised eyebrow.

There was a moment's silence, before Kozakura turned to the podium and said, "I'm sorry, but I believe I'll have to briefly postpone. If everyone could please exit to the front and wait until further notice."

—It took a few minutes for everyone but Kozakura's guards to finally clear out, but they did. "Miss Fudoji," Kozakura said, "I would rather not. You see, I believe you have much to offer this nation of ours."

"...Really," Youka said.

"A talent like yours only comes around once in a generation, if that," Kozakura said. "I've heard quite a lot about you. The woman who has remained undefeated for years in the deepest pits Japan has to offer... You are an incredible warrior. Perhaps even a 'hunter', if my intuition serves me correctly."

"...You want me to hunt big game?" Youka snorted.

"If the need arises, you might call it that," Kozakura said. "Our nation has need of

talented individuals like you. You may disagree with my own personal philosophies, but I can assure you that if you were to accept this offer, I would grant you anything you wish as payment.”

“Anything I wish, huh?” Youka said. “You wanna know what I wish?”

“Anything,” Kozakura said.

“I wish you'd shove it,” Youka said. “You know where.”

There was a long, long period of silence. One of the guards coughed.

“I see,” Kozakura said. “Unfortunate. Having heard tales of your fights, I have no doubt that you would kill me if I attempted to have my guards attack you, and I have no desire to die as of yet. As such, I will acquiesce. However, I'm unsure this will have the effect you desire.” He turned around, but continued speaking with his back to Youka. “The people's spirits, yearning for the honor their nation deserves, cannot be so easily doused.”

Youka snorted. “Hypocrite.”

“Hm?” Kozakura turned his head over his shoulder. “Did you say something?”

“I said you're a hypocrite. Trying to recruit me while letting your friends try to kick out innocent citizens who've lived here their entire life, based on their parentage. Or didn't you realized? I'm an orphan. I was disowned. By your logic, I'm just as bad as he is,” Youka said. She cracked her neck at an opportune time to punctuate her statement.

“By the law of *jus sanguinis*, you are not,” Kozakura answered. He began to walk away. “I'll see you again, then, Miss Fudoji.”

It was a few days later that, at a quiet dinner at the Fudoji home, Youka spoke up and asked her daughter, “Cocona. Do you feel... safe here?”

“Huh? Yeah,” said Cocona. “Of course.”

There was a moment's pause before Youka said, “I've made another enemy. Sooner or later, all this is gonna come crashing down on my head. I don't want you to be in the crossfire. Are you absolutely sure?”

“Mom,” Cocona said, “I'm always gonna be safe around you. You're, like, the strongest person in the country.” She sighed, leaned her chin into her hand, and stared her mother in the eyes. “What? You're acting like I should be rebelling or something. I might be a teenager—”

“No, no, it's just...” Youka averted her eyes. “I'm not normal. I've never been normal. I've... I've been trying, for a long time, to give you as normal a life as I could. I'm worried for you. I'm a bit boneheaded, and I always get in trouble—”

“I love you, Mom,” Cocona said. That got Youka to go silent. “I mean, I know things with you aren't really normal, but I'm glad they're not. I think I've learned a lot from being your daughter that I might not have otherwise, y'know? So... yeah.”

“...Thanks, Cocona,” Youka said, her head lowered. “That means a lot.”

—That night, with the phone on speaker, “I think that I'll try and finish my manuscript as fast as I can,” Park said. “If I find the money to obtain my own home, I'll feel a bit less... ah, how do I put it... I'll feel less at risk, I suppose? ...Well, supposing anyone takes me.”

“We'll find you something,” Youka said. She laughed. “I mean, Botan found *me* a house. You okay over there at the moment?”

“I'm living, thank you,” Park said. “Botan tells me that she'll, ah, 'unleash three percent of her power' in order to keep me safe. Something about... making my doorknob shock people? With her mind?”

“Oh, yeah, 'cause she's psychic, right?” Cocona said, nodding.

“I still can't believe she was serious,” Youka said, rolling her eyes. “Yeesh.”

CHAPTER 4

GANG OF GANGS

“Okay,” Youka said, hiding inside of a bathroom to get on the phone, “you there?”

“Mmmmmhm,” Botan said, with a little smile on her face that Youka could hear. “What’s up?”

“It’s... well, you know, ugh.” Youka’s hair had started to go grey, and tapping her foot like this probably wasn’t helping that stress. “Cocona just graduated. Y’know.”

“Oh, yeah, mmhm,” Botan said. She was smirking. Of course she was smirking.

“What the hell should I buy? I mean, we’re out here, at a damn mall—you know how often I go to malls? And I don’t know what to buy her! I mean, I’m her mom, I need to buy her something, but I don’t know what—?”

A rustle-rustle in the background. “Have you considered some manner of nice jewelry?” Park asked.

“...What are you doing over there?” Youka said.

“If she doesn’t intend to move out immediately, then I would say that something sentimental, but non-essential, would be ideal,” Park said, his tone rapid, sounding more earnest about the whole thing than Botan... which was embarrassing in its own right. “Oh! Or you could get a head start on that. Have you considered a set of personal cutlery?”

—Yeah, these two weren’t helpful. Youka re-adjusted the bun on her hair to ensure it was in the right position before she left the restroom.

“Isn’t it weird that they make such a big deal out of leaving high school, and then you’re not even really an adult for two more years?” Cocona said, as the two of them looked around clothes stores that Youka felt awfully awkward in. “I mean—”

Being that Youka didn’t graduate high school, she wasn’t sure how to answer that, and Cocona quickly realized that. “Oh! Yeah, haha, right,” she mumbled while leafing through a bunch of tops. “It’s weird, though! I do all this work and then they don’t think I’m an adult ‘til I’m twenty. Am I expected to move out while I’m still a kid? Who’s gonna take me seriously, anyway?”

“Yeah, who the hell knows?” Youka said. “Uh, pick anything you want, by the way. I mean, you know, within reason.”

“Within reason,” Cocona said, giving a thumbs up and nodding, nearly buried amidst all these bright colors. “Right, got it.”

This post-graduation shopping trip wound up taking them around several stores, and Youka, with her incredible power, carried several bags and boxes at once. To Cocona's benefit, 'within reason' could go quite a long way if you were careful—she picked up a few appliances, some nice clothes, a few candies for herself, a nice little bracelet... the list went on.

It was the middle of the afternoon by the time they left the mall, and while Youka was nowhere near overburdened, the heft she took on would stagger one without her grit. Parking today had been busy—likely a bunch of other graduates coming by to shop and celebrate—so the two of them had to walk down a number of streets, past a few local businesses. The two waved to a waitress they knew in a window, passed a chop shop—

“Owww!”

Youka's vision had been blocked by the boxes, so she had not seen the brief collision between Cocona and a stocky guy with a shaved head, wearing a green hoodie. Cocona had let out a little 'oof', but this guy, here, he'd staggered to the ground, clutching his arm. “Shit! Ow!”

Another guy, taller and lankier, in another green hoodie, came over and knelt down beside his buddy. “Bro! You alright?”

“Um, sorry?” Cocona said.

“Ah, shit! I think it's broken! Owww! Fuck!” The guy with the shaved head said. “Ah, god!”

“Hey, Aniki! Get over here!” A rough-and-tumble muscleman with black shades, with a more ornate, jade green coat over his shoulders, walked out of the alley. “They broke his arm!”

'Aniki' knelt down and took a look at the thug's arm, squeezing it and allowing the 'victim' to let loose a few more theatrical wails. “This's gonna cost a lot at the hospital,” he said. “Hey, girlie. You got a hundred thou for my friend's hospital bills?”

By this point, Youka had placed the boxes and bags on the ground, and both she and Cocona were staring blankly at this guy. “Nice coat,” Youka said. “Can I have it?”

“Nope,” Cocona said, shaking her head. “We just went shopping, see.”

“Fine, then have a heart. Give us all you got, then!” Aniki said. Cocona turned her head to Youka, looking at her with her best 'is this guy serious' stare. Youka shrugged. However—

“No! I won't allow it!”

Out of the alley jumped one more guy in a green hoodie, this one a bit shorter than

Youka... which still made him pretty damn tall. He was the kind of pretty boy who looked like he wanted to look tough, but really probably should've been going for 'dashing' instead. His dark hair was in the most thoroughly old-fashioned pompadour Youka had ever seen, and he looked a lot less threatening, posing in his jeans and sneakers, than he probably thought he did.

“...Fuck're you doin',” Aniki said.

“Aniki, I can't let you do this! I know you guys took me in when I had nothing, but I just can't stand for you guys muscling in on innocent women like this!” He rolled up one sleeve of his hoodie, revealing an arm that was so desperately trying to be muscular.

Cocona snorted behind him, raising a hand up to her mouth. “I like this guy.”

The lanky guy said, “Quit joking around, man.”

“This is no joke!” Pompadour Boy said, hunching over and clenching his fists. “I might be a street ruffian, bereft of family and permanent home, but you know what I still have? A sense of justice! And this is—”

“Look, kid, move over,” said Youka, putting her hand on his shoulder. “I got this.”

“Huh?” Pompadour Boy said, his eyes wide in disbelief. “Wha—but c'mon! I'm supposed to be defending you!”

“Do I look like I need defending?” Youka said. “Here, watch.” She briefly looked around to see nobody was around who would tell, and then—

One step. Youka brought up her foot and whirled it around into Aniki's side before he could respond, sending him hurtling into the alley, his coat flying off of his shoulders. “You too,” Youka said, grabbing the lanky guy and bodily hurling him in there, too. Both of them collided with each other on the ground, and from the sound of it a few bones really did break. Then she knelt down to the guy who was injured, and said, “You want me to actually break that?”

He didn't. He ran away, instead, screaming. Youka picked up the coat off the ground and gave it a good once-over. “Okay, pretty good condition,” she said, “no real tears. Must be pretty new, huh? Yeah, I'll take it home, give it a wash. I like this thing! I like the little lotus deca—”

Pompadour Boy was staring, wide-eyed, at her. His jaw would be on the floor if human jaws could stretch that far. “Oh my god,” he said, “that was incredible.” His head twisted to Cocona, to whom he asked, “Is she your sister or something?”

“My mom, actually,” Cocona said. She was smiling.

“That was incredible! Absolutely stunning, man!” Pompadour Boy's fists pumped in the air. “Yeah! You were like, WHAM! And then, POW! All casual, like an experienced predator crushing all oncomers—!”

Then, Pompadour Boy perked up, and nearly immediately deflated. “Oh, god. Where am I gonna go? I've betrayed the gang!” He crouched down on the ground, gently holding his pompadour and starting to wail. “I've got nowhere to go! I can't do this!”

Youka and Cocona looked at each other. Cocona gave Youka a knowing smile.

“Yes! This is the best gyudon I've ever had!” Pompadour Boy said, pounding his fists onto the table with the food in his mouth. “Miss Fudoji, you're incredible!”

—The boy's name was Ryoma, and he was seventeen years old. He claimed not to have a surname—he had been in a poor orphanage for some years, and then had fallen in with some gang or another, hence the green. Seeing him hungrily wolf down the food she made, Youka was almost reminded of herself at that age.

...No, there wasn't any 'almost.' He was much more dramatic than she was, obviously, but who wouldn't be reminded of themselves in that sort of situation?

“Aww, c'mon, don't give her a big head,” Cocona laughed. “I compliment her enough!”

“It's worth complimenting! I haven't had food this good since...” Ryoma had to put down his bowl and think for a bit. “Since... I-I donno when. I might never have had food this good. Well, maybe that one yakisoba pan from the convenience store? Maybe.”

About all of Ryoma's possessions managed to fit in one backpack, which was sitting next to the table. To say he was excited about having room and board would be an understatement, but... “Okay. Did you graduate middle school?” Youka asked.

“Mhm. Definitely,” Ryoma said with a thumbs up.

“Great. Have you been going to high school?” Youka asked.

“Barely managed to pass this year!” Ryoma said with another thumbs up. Youka let out a long, long breath. “What's up?”

“Oh, it's just... you can't really get into any colleges if you don't graduate high school, see,” Youka said. She shook her head. “But fine. You mind looking for a part-time—?”

“Absolutely!” Ryoma gave a salute. “Anything. No doubt about it!” He pumped his fists again, leaning in with an almost puppy-like intensity. “You got it!”

Youka blinked a few times, then looked over to Cocona, who was laughing. “You're making sure he doesn't get held back.”

“Whaaat?!” Cocona exclaimed.

It was two weeks later that one day, just before Youka had to leave for the evening, a knock on the door came. Cocona and Ryoma were holed up in what had become Ryoma's room, looking for job opportunities, so Youka went to the door to open it. "Who's—"

Apparently, in his casual time, Fuhito Inoue had started wearing a burgundy, fur-lined coat over his suits. Frankly, every time she met him—which had happened more times than she'd liked in the past few years—he became more ostentatious. "Fudoji. Good evening," Inoue said.

Youka slammed the door in his face. A few photos hung on the walls shook from the impact.

There was a moment of silence.

"Fine, what the hell do you want?" Youka asked, grimacing as she opened the door again, then stepped outside, forcing him off her doorstep. She closed the door.

"Surely it would be more comfortable to invite me in—"

"I don't want you in my house," Youka said. "I don't like you."

Inoue laughed aloud. "Fair enough! You know, I do appreciate that straightforward honesty of yours. How is Satoshi?"

"A lovely adult, thanks. Growing up to be nothing like you, which is a plus," Youka said.

"Good, good. I'll have to go see him sometime. He has kept in some minor correspondence, and I hear there's a woman he has his eye on somewhere or another? Good for him," Inoue said.

—Inoue didn't look unhappy about that, but Youka did not want to talk about Satoko's love life whether or not he was going to wind up *approving* of his daughter's feelings. "What do you want, Inoue?" Youka said, crossing her arms and leaning back against her door.

"Word's traveled up the grapevine, you see. My slice of the pie in Yotsuya's underworld, it's grown quite large, so many street gangs technically answer to me. A well-respected one of that sort of thug—his name was something like Yagumo or something—he's in the hospital, and they say that a behemoth woman who did it to him also stole his coat," Inoue said. He looked at Youka, who was, in fact, wearing said coat.

"It's a good coat," Youka said. "I don't get to have nice things often and the fucker tried to mug me. I deserve it. What about it?"

"Oh, I'm certain it looks much better on you than it does on him. You see, this Yamada or whoever, he was the leader of this particular gang—the, ah... Lilyskippers?" Inoue said.

"Lotus Runners," Youka said. She gestured to a decal on the bottom of the coat. "It's the

Lotus Runners. There's lotus decals on it, see? A boy I met recently made that very clear.”

“Yes, yes. It's a well-respected gang. This Yunohara fellow—very well-liked. And stealing his coat, you see, it's quite the power move, or so I'm told. I hear quite a few rumblings about people wanting to take down the Ghost of Yotsuya, this mythical woman who defeated him in one strike.” Inoue had a smile on his face through all of this.

Youka's fist clenched. “Oh, I get it. So you're siccing your flunkies on me?”

“I'm doing nothing of the sort. They have yet to actually do anything, after all. I simply figured I should let you know in advance, is all. One parent to another, yes?” Inoue smirked. “Of course, I could call them off if you wanted me to—”

Thankfully, Youka had just before taken a drink of water, so she was easily able to spit on Inoue's fancy coat. “Piss off. I don't care if this is about me or your kid, I'm not gonna let you get one up on me.”

“Very well, then. Have a nice evening,” Inoue said, turning around and waving over his shoulder.

First, it was while coming home from the grocery store. Youka had insisted she could do it by herself, but Ryoma's enthusiasm to assist was hard to deny. These days, he was wearing his student uniform even on his days off—according to him, 'if I'm gonna take my studies seriously, then I gotta act serious, like a student!'

...Of course, when a bunch of guys in matching white shirts and dress pants show up in your path, you put down the perishables and sigh aloud, and that is what Youka did. “Can I help you boys?”

The guy at the front was combing his hair even as he spoke, and he said, “You bet your keister you can. I hear that the lady who took down the Lotus Runners—”

“Get back, Miss Fudoji! I got this!” Ryoma said, putting down his own bags on the ground and standing in front of Youka. There were twelve guys there, of course, but Ryoma rolled up the sleeve of his uniform. “You guys wanna fight her, you'll have to go through me! Watch out!”

While Ryoma was hustling in front of her, Youka took a step in front of him and said, “Okay, so which ones are you?”

Comb Guy put away his comb and pushed up his shades before striking a coordinated pose with the rest of his guys. “We're the Squeaky Cleaners! We're the only street gang in Yotsuya with a one hundred percent hygiene rating—”

Youka went for a double-handed overhead crush that sent the frontrunner into the ground with such force that he rebounded into the air, and followed that up with a front kick to his

stomach while he spun in the air that hurtled him into his dance formation flunkies. In the sport of bowling, the remaining formation—aside from two men who were not in bowling pin stance at the far sides—was known as a '7-10 split'.

When three of the remaining four leapt over the bodies of their friends to get into a brawl with her, she let loose a spinning lariat that clobbered one, then followed up to him with a series of three punches that bent her out of the way of the fists of the other two. With her stance fully established, she whirled around in one clean motion and shoved her palms into the stomach of a man to her right, and then launched her leg upwards behind her directly into the crotch of the third. One more spin, and she knocked him out with an uppercut that likely broke his jaw.

Eleven to one, clean knockout. Youka turned around to see Ryoma locked in fisticuffs with the twelfth member of this gang, and while he was obviously untrained and not very skilled at it, he was strong and had a good grasp of the fundamentals—he blocked his opponent's strikes well, and was clearly coming off better.

“Keep your dukes up!” Youka said. “Go for a body blow!”

Ryoma went for four, capitalizing on an opportunity to send the last goon down with a series of punches that left him groaning and clutching his stomach. “Yeah!” He had a black eye, and his pompadour was a bit messed up, but he pointed his finger at the guy on the ground and said, “That's right! 's what you get for messing with someone off the street, yeah!”

The groceries, thankfully, were untouched. Youka walked over to put a few licks of Ryoma's pompadour back into place, then said, “When we're home I'm taking a look at that eye, kiddo.”

Well, didn't look like she was keeping this job. Some yahoo without a shirt, just wearing this bright orange blazer with the character for 'luck' on its back, waltzed on in and pointed at her during a shift at a convenience store. “Ghost of Yotsuya! You've got ten seconds to get outta this store or the Lucky Clovers are gonna—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Youka said. “Sorry about this, boss!”

At least half of this bunch of guys were wearing chihuahua ears, including the boss, who otherwise looked like a real tough guy, all scarred up in the face. “We're big fans of chihuahua racing, see. You always bet on Lucky Clover! Orange number four, baby!”

“ALWAYS BET ON LUCKY CLOVER!” the entire gang said in unison.

“Where the hell do all you guys even come from?” Youka said. She shrugged and took off the apron she'd been wearing. “There can't be this many guys with nothing better to do, can there? Are Inoue's gangs just elaborate fan clubs?”

Betting on Lucky Clover was insufficient for these men, as their chihuahua racing earnings earned them nothing in actual battle prowess. There were sixteen—four squared,

naturally—and by the time Youka had finished laying into them with a good clothesline or german suplex thrown in for good measure, all of them would need good luck recovering.

“As soon as my daughter turns eighteen,” Youka started grumbling, “the fucking *instant...*”

The three of them had been playing a board game, since Ryoma had managed to ace his tests with Cocona's guidance. “Okay, lemme go get my brass knuckles,” Ryoma said, standing up from the table.

“Good luck out there!” Cocona said, raising a hand and waving to them both.

This group were a proper biker gang, so Youka got the chance to beat people over the head with bicycles. Ryoma, for his part, managed to take out two guys at once this time. They had been polite enough to drag the fight a few blocks from their house, so when Youka and Ryoma returned home, they casually started washing their hands of blood.

“How'd it go?” Cocona asked.

“Eh, y'know, same ol',” Ryoma said, shrugging. “I'm getting better, though, right?” He looked up, eyes wide with hope, to Youka.

“I mean, I'd rather you didn't feel like you had to, but yeah. You're doing good out there, kiddo!” Youka patted Ryoma on the shoulder.

“Oooh, getting a compliment from my mom,” Cocona said with a little wink. “I bet someone's happy.”

The noises coming from Ryoma's throat said as much. They said, in fact, a bit more than that. “Yes!” He exclaimed, pumping his fists before he was entirely done cleaning off the blood.

Sitting down around the Morishima household's dining table, Satoko started drawing up a plan on a sheet of paper. “Alright, so, your gang, Ryoma, and these other ones you've been fighting, are about... here,” and she pointed to a very low branch on this tree. “My father is all the way up here, at the top.”

“Mmhm, mmhm,” Ryoma said, munching on a few cookies that Mimiko had made. “Okay, hold up. This is great. Good food. How much, uh, how many of these can I have?”

Mimiko sat down at another seat, next to Satoko, and said, “You know they're mine because they come in threes.”

“So, if you want to stop this harassment, you'll probably want to go...” The ladder here was far more complicated than Youka could fully digest, but Satoko went up... a bit over halfway the corporate ladder. “Here. The Sumadera Family Third Enforcer Corps. If you defeat some of

them, that'll send ripples down. A lot of this sort are guardsmen and whatnot, but you might find a professional assassin or two, so be careful.”

“You know where to find them?” Youka asked.

“Not exactly,” Satoko said, shaking her head. “It's not a very centralized group... oh, but I think I might be able to get some intel. Hmm... Actually, I'm starting to form a thought. Mimi, do you mind if helping Miss Fudoji bothers one of your professors?”

Satoko started looking through the contacts on her phone, and Youka couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. “What are you thinking?”

“Well, Miss Fudoji, having lived this long as a woman, I think I've picked up a bit of a woman's cunning, is how I'd put it?” Satoko said with a little smile.

Youka, Ryoma, and Satoko arrived at the front of Mimiko's college (a technical school for something called 'infophysics',) and as they left the car, Youka shook her head, grunting. “A 'woman's cunning', huh? That's what you call this?”

“If I know my father as well as I think I do,” Satoko said, gripping her purse strap tightly, “this is going to work just fine. Just be aware—your opponent won't be pulling his punches.”

—At 3:30, today's lecture would end, and the room that this particular professor used would be clearing out for him to start cleaning up and preparing for another in a few hours. The campus wasn't too large, but it did possess two buildings—an older and a newer—and this was in the older building, which was a bit of a further walk.

...When Mimiko didn't leave the building at 3:33 exactly (a coincidence that nevertheless pleased her particular peculiarities), Satoko laughed a little and said, “Ah, yup. He's in there.”

—It'd been a long time since Youka was actually inside a school building of any kind, and this one threw her back quite a ways—since the discipline was quite new, they'd appropriated an old middle school for the original building. Ryoma and Satoko had split from her, so alone as she was, she couldn't help but run her fingers along the walls in a bout of nostalgia—

“So, young lady, you're a student here? What exactly is this discipline of 'infophysics'? Does it pay well?”

Coming up to the second floor, an annoyingly familiar voice was audible at a table in the hallway. This particular stairwell was behind Inoue's gaze, as his was fixed on Mimiko—who was very much not making eye contact. His fingers were steepled, and hunched over as he was, Youka had no doubt that he was gazing quite intensely at her.

“...Um? It's a very new industry, so I don't know,” Mimiko said. “But to describe it, have you ever heard of Maxwell's Demon? It's a thought experiment that—”

Yeah, nope, that was enough. 2C, that was the hall. There was a bit of rustling inside, right on time, and then—“W-who the hell are you?! I'm calling security!”

“Arashi Sunamori,” said a much more even voice from inside the room, “you're going to have to come with me. I'm sorry.”

“That's not—” Then, the louder man's voice started sputtering. That was the moment to produce the gun, and then—

“*Arashi!*” Youka shouted, shoving open the door and running full bore in, skidding to a stop in front of the desk.

—There were two men in here—her opponent and their hapless victim. The victim, well, he looked just as Youka remembered, with his fair, curly hair, and that face that told you he would probably be totally helpless in a fight more severe than arguing with a clerk at a convenience store—

Wow, Youka reflected, her standards had changed quite a bit. A long time ago now, Arashi Sunamori was a man she quite fancied. Of course, looking so hapless now that he was in 'approachable but still adult' levels of teacher chic had altered his image somewhat.

“Wha—what the hell? What's going on? Who are you?!” Arashi sputtered, having collapsed to the ground behind his desk. When he looked up and saw her looking over her shoulder, though, he started sputtering louder. “I—Y-Youka?! Youka Fudoji?!”

“Real sorry, Arashi,” Youka said, waving her hand casually over her shoulder after turning her head back forward, “but we needed a patsy and you were pretty much perfect.”

Youka had never personally met the young man holding the gun in front of her, but she had seen him before, just one time. Tall, broad, with a short, rounded head of white hair and the sort of stern gaze that made Youka expect him to bust out a katana more than anything. A black turtleneck sweater and nondescript grey pants—it showed off his form, lithe, wiry, and agile, well.

He put away the gun into its holster, and said, “I can't hold back. You're friends with Satoko, so I'm sorry about that.”

The two started circling each other around the chairs in the room, an open window illuminating Satoko's cousin against the sun. His hair was pretty bright like that. “Oh, sure. A fight against a real high-ranking enforcer from my own region's not half bad, anyway.” Youka cracked her knuckles. “You seem like a nice boy, so I'll try my best not to injure you too bad.”

“What the *hell is going on?!!*” Arashi yelled, poking his head up from his desk as Youka and her opponent began moving all of the chairs to give themselves a freer arena.

“Can it,” Youka said, cocking her head in his direction. “Think of this as making up for all that child support you never sent me, how's about?”

—The arena was clear, and a clear round ring was clear. “Take the first shot. You are the 'aggressor' here, after all, right?” Youka said, winking.

Her foe, standing against the light, took a step forward with a punch—and Youka thrust past his own head, their arms crossing in a perfect parallel line—

MITSURU SUMADERA

SUMADERA FAMILY THIRD ENFORCER CORPS CAPTAIN, CURRENT HEIR APPARENT TO THE 1ST BRANCH FAMILY OF SUMADERA

Mitsuru was by no means a slow opponent—apparently, according to Satoko, he was quite the cat enthusiast, and there was something about that that translated into a liquidity of movement. He broke from the cross counter attempt with a smooth retraction of his arm and near-instantly ducked down to tactically roll to the side. However, he didn't get greedy and go for the trip up, instead taking a step back to bend backwards and past a spinning backhand from Youka.

A lightning-quick backflip sent Mitsuru into a crouched position on top of one of the chairs—perfect poise, Youka couldn't help but admire. Youka took a step back herself, then grabbed onto the top of another chair and hurled it at him. Mitsuru met that throw with a guard by flipping behind the chair he crouched atop, releasing it at the right time to send both flying into the air. With the brief blocking of Youka's vision, Mitsuru slid underneath them and right into her space, giving him the moment he needed for a straight strike to Youka's face.

Youka threw up her arms instinctively to defend from his punch, and bent her arms downward to catch the follow-up hook that he sent her way. His eyes widened slightly as she caught his arm, then transitioned into a single-arm lock. She massively outdid him on raw strength, and that liquidity of his wasn't going to help him out of this one. She crashed his arm down onto her shoulder, causing an audible grunt of pain from the young man, before spinning around behind him to grab his other arm too, in a moment of weakness.

However, he managed to leap off of the ground, and in a genuinely fascinating beat of acrobatics, used a moment's momentum to swing from in front of her to *underneath* her legs. His legs got the space they needed to catch her waist, and wrapped around her in an attempt to use momentum to send them both crashing down. Youka had to give up the arm lock to catch his legs and transition out of the grapple, which gave him time to catch himself on his hands and flip back into position.

“Yeesh, what're they teaching kids in school these days?” Youka laughed, her breath just a bit heavy. “I know you're in your twenties, kid, but really, gotta be something, right?”

“How long should we keep fighting?” Mitsuru asked.

“Until Ryoma gets here,” Youka said. “Until then, hit me with all you got!”

Before Mitsuru could even blink, Youka had stepped in for a jab to his stomach. He blocked it, but when Youka Fudoji struck you, even a block with the arms wasn't going to fully prevent damage. Mitsuru gritted his teeth, and Youka followed up with an uppercut to send his arms flying, shattering his guarded stance. Since she, as stated, was attempting not to injure him too badly, she just went for a hook to the face—sending him down onto the side, several drops of spit flying onto the floor. She transitioned into the reversal, a spinning backhand, but he was smart enough to avoid that, crouching down into his rolled stance again.

Youka's stance was far too solid on the ground to knock over with a simple kick, so Mitsuru's legs launched him forward in a full-body tackle to Youka's left leg. It managed to briefly unseat her foot before she stomped back down, but that gave him enough space to swing around to her backside using her leg as an anchor. Then—one, two, three punches in rapid succession to Youka's back, which she had to admit hurt a fair bit.

As Youka turned on her heel to counter, Mitsuru had back-stepped toward another chair, where he stepped on it strongly enough to send the chair up into his arms. He turned around and ran toward Youka, using the chair as a makeshift battering ram. This was a standard, stationary chair made of wood, so Youka held up her arms and grounded herself. Her arms managed to fit between the chair's legs, and she flung them to the side with enough force to break off all four of the chair's legs. (One nearly beamed Arashi in the head.)

That show of resistance managed to stagger Mitsuru, and Youka punched into the bottom of the chair in his moment of weakness, once again causing him to grit his teeth and stagger back. “You're strong,” he said, clutching his stomach. A bit of blood was starting to run down the side of his mouth from the hook earlier. “I would already be dead if we were fighting to kill.”

“Sure, but this is pretty fun too, right?” Youka said. Sweat rolled down her forehead as she retook her stance. “Been too long since I just had a friendly match. You're pretty good yourself, kiddo. Now, c'mon—”

At that moment, one of the doors to the classroom opened up, and Ryoma, his pompadour thoroughly un-pomped, looking quite worse for wear, staggered into the open door of the classroom. Both Youka and Mitsuru turned to look at him, and he gave a thumbs up. “They're... right behind me,” Ryoma said, swinging into the room and slumping onto the wall. “Gimme a bit, I'll be... right back up...”

There were two doors to this classroom, and through both doors, a solid three dozen men—of two different colors, one set purple, another set black with red streaks—entered the room, some of them holding crude weapons. Arashi's terror was perfectly audible in the background. “Hey! There she is,” one man yelled from the crowd. “It's that Ghost of Yotsuya chick!”

From the other side, “We're gonna take her down before you dickbags do!”

“Like hell! It's gonna be us!”

Youka and Mitsuru squared up, back to back. “What do we do if this doesn't work?” Mitsuru asked.

Taking stock of them all, Youka thought for a moment, then said, “Might be tough if one more shows up?”

“Should I handle that one?” Mitsuru asked. Youka was about to answer, when—

“Silence!”

A booming roar rocked the room. Everyone present understood the change in atmosphere when Fuhito Inoue finally entered the room. “None of you little shits,” he said, his teeth gritted, his fist clenched, “are going to attack this woman.”

The leader of the purple side, who was closer—a guy with this technicolor mohawk that looked absolutely hideous—poked his head out of the crowd and said, “But... boss, that's the Ghost of Yotsuya! She's the toughest person in the whole damn town!”

“*The* toughest?” Inoue said, his eye twitching, his nostrils flaring.

“Uh—s-second after you, of course, boss! But she's—”

“Despite her circumstances, she's fighting to save her daughter's father, knowing what he did to her. A fight that nobody will appreciate—that's the kind of woman Youka Fudoji is, even in the dark,” Inoue said. He grabbed Mohawk by the front of his hoodie. “You think any of you little bastards can even touch her? She's the only person in this damn town who's even *close* to me, and you think some little punks fresh out of high school have the right to *touch* her?”

Mohawk was making noises of fear as he struggled against his boss's grip, but Inoue raised him up in the air. “Disrespectful little *shit!*” Inoue roared, as he slammed Mohawk's head into the floor. There was an audible cracking noise, and a wail of pain. A pool of blood began to form under him, and before long Mohawk had passed out from the pain. “None of you little fuckers know what it means to really be alive! People who've really lived, who've clawed tooth and nail for everything they own, they're the only ones who can understand each other! They're the only ones who deserve to fight each other!”

“—So, what?” Youka asked, and the crowd parted so the two could face each other directly. “Is that what you want for your kid? A life in the mud?”

“That little girl of yours is going to grow up pampered and weak,” Inoue said. For once, he met Youka with a glare. “If she doesn't get down in the mud, who is she going to be? She'll

never live up to you if she doesn't become strong—”

“Cocona doesn't... need to—!”

Ryoma had staggered to his feet, and was now standing in front of Youka, throwing his arm in front of her (and by extension, Mitsuru). “Cocona ain't gotta be strong like her mom,” Ryoma said, gritting his teeth (one of which was visibly broken). “Cause I'm... I'm gonna be there for her.”

There was a pause. “Who the hell,” Inoue said, his teeth gritted, “is this cocky little punk?”

“I'm... I'm Ryoma! I ain't got a last name, but that doesn't matter!” Ryoma threw his arm to the side. “Fudoji and Cocona, they took me in, they've been real nice to me! I used to be in one of your gangs, but I'm not anymore, because I know what's right! And if you wanna fight her, you're gonna have to go through me!”

“She doesn't need your protection, kid,” Inoue said. He took a step forward, but Ryoma did not flinch. Instead—

“You think I don't know that?!” Ryoma yelled, louder than he should've been able to given the state he was in. “Yeah, she's way stronger than me. Stronger than anyone. But even the strongest person out there...” A pant, a cough. “...even she deserves to be protected sometimes! And I'm gonna do it! For Cocona, and Miss Fudoji, I'm gonna protect 'em when they need it!”

“...Ryoma,” Youka muttered, her eyes wide.

“Even if it doesn't mean shit! Even if you take me down in one punch, I'm still gonna protect her from that one punch! You hear me?!” Ryoma yelled, squaring up. “Now c'mon and fucking fight me if you're gonna, boss man!”

In response, Inoue—

—turned around, and said, “I see. You really are an incredible woman, aren't you, Fudoji.” And he left the room. “All of you little bastards come with me.” And every single gangster in the room awkwardly filed out.

“Yeah! Yeah, that's right!” Ryoma said, shouting his heart out as they all left. “You... you better run! You better...” And then he unceremoniously fell onto the floor.

“Ryoma!” Youka said, rushing over to his side to pick him up. He wasn't too badly injured, but to her eyes he was gonna need a bit... even with the dumb smile on his face.

Mitsuru, for his part, had an observation to make. “There were thirty-six of them,” he said, “but those two gangs total forty-four members, and they should've all been there.”

At that, Youka couldn't help but laugh. "I just told you to bother 'em, idiot, what'd you do that for?"

"Ah, see," Ryoma said, "some of those guys, they were these punks at my school... said I'd gone soft cause of that 'girl I'd been hanging with', and I always kinda wanted to punch 'em anytime they said something bad about Cocona, y'know? She's a good girl, way smarter than me. So when I saw 'em, I figured, hell, why not sock 'em one while I was here?"

"Yeah. Attaboy," Youka said, laughing and meeting his smile with her own. "Attaboy."

—It was wholly a coincidence that Arashi Sunamori, of all people, happened to be a professor at Mimiko's young college, but Youka didn't find it that surprising. After all, 'those who can't do, teach', and he was very bad at taking action.

"Giving me this mess I'm gonna have to clean up," Arashi complained, once the room was back together aside from the bloodstain. "Can't ask the janitor for this one. Who was that freak, anyway?"

"Head of the yakuza around here," Youka said, going at it with her own washcloth.

"Huh," Arashi said. After a moment, he started speaking. "You know, honestly, I don't get a word of all this infophysics crap, I'm just one of those general curriculum teachers nobody cares about. Seems like you've got a more exciting life than me, at least. You're yakuza?"

"What? Hell no," Youka said. She scoffed. "That creep just has a thing for me. I work in a pretty shady area's all, I run into a lot of weird types."

Neither of them were looking at each other as they cleaned, but Youka could hear the awkwardness in Arashi's voice as he said, "So... I'm sorry," he said. "For—"

"You don't have to apologize," Youka said.

"I don't?" Arashi asked.

"Yeah, because it's not like it matters," Youka said with a snort. "Even if you feel bad about it, and even if you were just a kid in a bad situation, you fucked me over. I'm gonna be a bit bitter. Nothing you can do about it."

"Still," Arashi said. "I'm glad you're... y'know. Alive. And... the kid's alive." He paused. "What's she like?"

"Excuse me, are you her dad?" Youka said, and that got her to turn her head to scoff at him. "Why should I tell you that?"

"Well, it's just..." It was at this point that Youka finally, finally noticed that there was a

ring around Arashi's finger. "You know. I'm sure this is gonna sound stupid to you, but being a parent changes you. I, uh... I've got two myself, now, two boys. Real rambunctious, lots of energy. It just makes me wonder."

"Yeah, it does," Youka said. "Your wife a good woman?"

"Oh, yeah," Arashi said. "The best."

—The bloodstain was as cleaned up now as Youka could get it, so she stood up, put everything back where it needed to be so Arashi could put it back in its proper place, and went to leave. "Glad you're happy, then," Youka said. She waved over her shoulder.

"Are... you happy?" Arashi asked.

That gave Youka pause, and she stopped in the doorway before shrugging and saying, "Eh, enough. Bye, Arashi. See you never."

"See you never," Arashi said back. And that was that.

At the front of this college, Ryoma had managed to stagger far enough to pass out in the car, and Satoko, with Mimiko by her side, was speaking to Mitsuru. "I really can't thank you enough," Satoko said, bowing.

"It's fine," Mitsuru said. He rubbed the back of his head and said, "It's really no big deal. You're... family. So it's only right for me to help." At that point, though, he frowned, and said, "But... the hair. I wonder."

"Hm?" Satoko said.

"It's not quite red, but... you are a woman, and—" Mitsuru cut himself off, shaking his head. "Never mind. I'll... explain later, maybe."

Youka caught up at that point, and said, "If you ever need anything, come on by my place. You're an awful helpful kid, aren't you?"

"I try," Mitsuru said. He gave a little smile, and then turned and started walking away—presumably toward a train of some kind.

"What about you two?" Youka asked Satoko and Mimiko.

"Satoko says that because she made me have to talk to her dad to keep him here," Mimiko said, "she's going to take me around some of her favorite places that I don't know about." The blush on Satoko's face—which Mimiko did not seem to notice—told Youka all she needed to know about that.

“In that case, I'm gonna take this guy home and see about making sure he doesn't bleed out,” Youka said. “See you girls again!” The two of them waved to her as she drove off in her car.

It wasn't too far of a drive to her home, where Youka picked up the passed-out Ryoma and took him up to the door before ringing the doorbell. When Cocona answered the doorbell, her face said 'shocked', but her gasp said 'miffed'. “What did Ryo do to himself?!” she asked, before grabbing him to help Youka support him in and onto the sofa in front of the TV. “Ugh, this idiot boy!”

He woke up a few minutes later, with Cocona buzzing about cleaning up his wounds, and said, “Whoa. What's the rush?”

“The rush is you hurting yourself, idiot! I know you all had this scheme but you didn't have to get yourself so banged up doing it!” Cocona grunted, before applying some antiseptic to a wound, utterly heedless of Ryoma's wails of pain.

“Hey, hey, I was doing it because those guys were dissing you! Hey—oww! Owww!” Ryoma cried. “Be nice! I've been a good boy, ow, ow!”

“You'll be a good boy if you quit yelling!” Cocona said, and though her tone was rough, she had a soft smile on her face.

—It was this moment that made Youka say, “Say, Ryoma,” from the nearby table. “How's 'Fudoji' sound for a surname?”

“What? Like yours—ow! Ow, ow!” Ryoma yelled. “Sure, yeah, sounds good—ow!”

“Hey, c'mon! You can't say that so lightly!” Cocona said. “Fudojis take their licks with grit and guts! Don't be a baby, Ryo.”

—It was gonna happen sooner or later, from Youka's viewpoint, so why not? Cocona... was going to have someone else to protect her, now.

“Astonishing, really!” Park said, once he, Youka, and Botan met up again for a late, late-night dinner. (He had no need to stay up these days, but apparently writing regularly did things to his schedule. ...Hopefully that money was good, Youka thought.) “I believe this is a victory for the power of teamwork, no?”

“Teamwork, yeah,” Botan said, laughing. She patted Youka's shoulder, since Youka was, at the moment, quiet, and seemingly lost in thought. “What's up? You not feeling teamwork-y?”

“Hey,” Youka said, “Botan, Park. You mind if I ask you something serious?”

“Oh, please, go right ahead,” Park said, nodding. “Botan is terrible at 'serious', but I like

to think I'm alright at it.”

“I'm thinking... it might be time for me to retire from the ring,” Youka said.

There was a moment's pause, and then Botan exclaimed, with every facial muscle she had stretching as wide as it could for maximum shock, “Whaaaaaaaaaat?!”