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ATTN Literary agent:  
  
I read on Publishers Marketplace that you’re interested in sci-fi/fantasy. My novel *Insanity of the Black Sheep*, the first novel of my fantasy adventure series, might interest you.  
  
All Katherine McAndrews wanted was a tutor for her upcoming exam. To be a normal schoolgirl and not some sort of heroine that can change the world. Sounds fairly easy to obtain right? Instead the tutor, gothic stoic girl Muchiko Kisaragi has involved Katherine in a devious plan to try and find her sister Harumi Kisaragi after a gruesome murder in a Chicago anime convention. Once the tutor gives Katherine her precious moon earrings after Harumi murders everyone in sight, including Katherine’s best friend, Rebecca, Katherine has no choice but to go along with Muchiko’s plans, no matter how far-fetched they seem. After finding out that Harumi’s next target is a popular teen idol in Russia, Katherine and Muchiko convince the idol’s best friend, Natasha Nikulina, who survived the attacks, to go with them.  
  
Their arrival in Russia and the rest of Europe does not go well with the locals; especially when the majority of the locals get killed using unusual punishments from the Bible, thanks to Harumi and her mad- obsession with getting over on one with her sister. All because of Katherine’s earrings.  
  
Wonderful.  
  
From evil frogs, a huge earthquake, and tons of explosions, the trio will have to go through Harumi’s own Biblical tortures in order to track her down and stop the killings. When they discover Harumi’s actual plan for the continent’s inhabitants however, the trio must hurry or Europe could be stained in blood forever.   
  
**Katherine’s adolescent character is designed to draw younger adults into her terribly wonderful adventure through a relatable perspective of friendship. A year working in the library and at a bookstore assistant has given me firsthand experience with my audience, readers of both young adult and fantasy-adventure novels.**  
I am a college graduate with a B.A in English at Queens College. I’m not a good negotiator and I am concerned about making sure my project ends up, with the right editor and agent so I can build a career instead of just selling books wherever I can. Those are areas where I believe an agent would be a beneficial partner in my writing endeavors.  
  
*Insanity of the Black Sheep* is a YA fantasy-adventure complete at 187,000 words.  
  
 I’d be glad to send you my complete manuscript for your review. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.  
  
Sincerely,  
 Steve Mendoza

[Chapter One](#ref_ToC)

My story begins in the same way some video games begin: Waking up to a lousy sick day with a high fever here in Evanston Illinois. It’s funny how things cannot turn up in my favor at this moment; I'm sick, on a Friday, and according to my parents, this would be the perfect time to study for that Chemistry test next week. I'm scared that I might give my homework the flu. I have been getting things done and recovering very well. I must do well in this test, or else no Anime Central convention for me in the next two weeks. What fun.

Oh I forgot to tell you my name. It's Katherine McAndrews. Yes it sounds funny, but unfortunately, unless I bribe a government official, that's the name I have to live with. I’m pretty much used to my name, no matter how weird it sounds. Anyway, as I am trying my best to get up and assure myself that I am still alive, my older sister comes thrashing in and tackles me to the bed.

“Geez sis, can't you knock?” I asked.

“Only on doors I don’t own. Except our parents’ room. Now that would be creepy,” she said

“What? You want to get sick too?”

“Mom wanted me to give you this.”

She handed me a bottle of what looked like some sort of Danish medicine. You got to hand it to mom on one thing: She goes all out on trying to make us feel better, even if it involves something that taste like the well-famous -well, almost famous- freckle juice that I read in a children’s book once.

“Well,” my sister said checking her own forehead, “as you can see, I'm not sick. So go and study.”

“Gee thanks,” I said with a frown holding the bottle.

My older sister, Jessie McAndrews -Jessica for all you purists- is what you would call those average type smarts. She's twenty-one and I'm only seventeen; about to be eighteen in two weeks. A Northwestern University veterinarian wanna-be majoring in environmental science, Jessie is actually a doll. She's tall, has short black hair and very pretty hazel eyes. She looks out for me, but doesn't look out for the things that she trips over. Once she accidentally turned off the lights in our parents' room looking for a watch that Mom says she left in her room. The lights came back on, and with two lamps broken, I don't have a clue as to how she still came out of that room alive. Call her clumsy, I just call her the wrong side of a lucky charm.

I got dressed and put on some Levi's jeans, yes I know, real mature for someone my age, and my favorite Rolling Stones t-shirt. I have long blue hair and brown eyes. Yes, you heard correctly: Blue hair. I rather not get into the details of how that happened to me; even though I really like it a lot. Let’s just say it involved Jessie and a pool. Best thing about it is that besides me being a track star in my high school, everyone knows me by my blue hair which is permantly dyed on my scalp; meaning that no matter what I do, I can never wash it off.

And I like it that way.

The only thing that seems to be a problem with me is my height. I'm only five feet. Yes, very short. I consider myself athletic and again, I do love to run track, but still, I wish to be tall like my sister. I look up to her a lot, but that's the one thing she will always pick on me on. It's so unfair.

With my slippers on, flu or no flu, I was ready to see the world and get some adventure, with some doctor recommended doses of Vitamin D, thanks to the sun; only problem was, my doll of a sister was standing between me and the stairs.

“Mom says back to your room. Your breakfast will be delivered shortly,” she said.

“Well, can I at least step out to use the restroom?” I asked. “I wanna take a shower.”

She pointed to the door next to hers.

“Just right across from you, okay sugah?” she said and kissed me on the cheek.

“Gee thanks. Oh and keep trying to get yourself sick because it isn't working.”

She turned her back and gave a peace sign while almost...almost falling down the stairs.

This is why it's fun to have two lawyers as parents: To keep me locked up in my room until I get better or else, if anyone gets sick, I'll be “locked” up here for much longer; and they're lawyers, so they will damn well make it happen. After I finished my shower, I stepped out of the door to see Jessie actually deliver my breakfast in a brown box. This is exactly why I have her as a sister; she's probably the best person who can make me laugh. I went back to my room, locked myself in my room, with my own key from the table, and started to work on studying at nine-thirty in the morning. My room is pretty much the ordinary looking room that every girl has: Just with nothing pink. It featured a computer, a closet, a bed, and a cabinet full of books. Some were from school while most of them were books I had since I was younger. I opened my chemistry textbook to the section of making experiments with usage of the periodic table. Man, I still don't get how Earth has so many elements. I would understand if it wants to make the other planets jealous or something, but it's being a bit too harsh for my taste.

At least the eggs were good.

So here I am, writing down stuff needed to make Hydrochloric Acid, or as its better known, “spirits of salt.” I just began to laugh. Probably the best sounding name I have ever heard reading a textbook.

The formula is as follows:

HCl + H2O → H3O+ + Cl−

There's a random H3O in this formula. So I'm guessing it was some sort of extreme powerful type of water. All of a sudden without knocking, Jessie comes barging in.

“Hey buddy, you need help?” she asks.

“Yes I-wait, my room was locked. How did you get in here?” I asked, surprised.

“Simple: With my trusty hairpin, I can pick the lock of your door very silently without you even hearing a thing. I'm sure I did mention that to you once before.”

Yup, she is truly a doll of a sister.

“Well, what do you know about this stuff called chemistry?” I asked.

“Not much. I'm just here to let you know that you probably won't be escaping here in this room without a good eight hours of studying.”

“Thanks.”

“Which would probably be until five-thirty if I’m not mistaken?”

“I said thanks.”

“Hey, it's only Mom and Dad's orders. They want to cram and cram all of this stuff in your little head of yours,” she said taking my head and pretending to squeeze it. For a pretend squeeze, that really did hurt.

So she left. Thank goodness. Now I can try and tell my brain to wake up without any disturbances.

Well the town of Evanston is somewhat small to live in, which is fine by me, and at least Chicago is a couple of blocks south of us, which is also fine by me. Couple of blocks means around ten miles in my language, which I can run eight without breaking a sweat.

My sister claims she walked straight to Chicago once and it took her just under an hour. I never heard the end of it, nor do I want to. The rumor of the end of that story was that she really got into an accident with her bike down the I-41 interstate. She didn't make it under an hour. The ambulance did.

I could not understand the book that much at all. I know I'm pretty okay on the subject, but unless your brain starts daydreaming about how it wants to go back to sleep, then odds of understanding anything that is written down or trying to focus would be astronomical.

Instead of astronomical, I could've easily used the term “Vegas-like.”

By the third hour, I was very cold. I guess people don't realize that studying under the flu has dire consequences. So, like a normal person, I decided to go to bed.

As I woke up around three, I knew I had to study. A convention was on the line if I didn't study and my parents are really strict about it. How? Here's a good example:

Suppose I study half time and I got a good grade - let's say a ninety- and I got to go. Since I studied half the time, I would stay half the time. Instead of me going from ten in the morning to eight in the evening, it would be from ten to three-thirty. So much for the free Trigun movie I was hoping for.

And how do they know all of this? Simple: A camera stuck to both me and my sister's ceilings. Obviously we have different rooms but still, that’s how they do things. They know I'm sick so they know I can sleep it off. But if I slack off, then half time is half time.

Jessie came back with some soup and instructions on to take the Danish medicine - or as I call it: “freckle juice”- afterwards. The she took my text book and said to me, “Parents stepped out for some meeting so it's my job to ask you this: What is the formula for...uhhh...trying to pronounce it here...barium bromate dihydrate?”

I coughed and said, “That would be -cough- Ba(BrO3)2•2H2O”.

After saying that, I collapsed in bed. I guess thinking hard has that effect on you when you have the flu.

“Hey relax okay?” said Jessie. “And you got that one right.”

I heard her step out of my room as I fell asleep. I was happy I got one thing right for a change. I wanted to have a dream where I would ask the chemical formulas to be nice to me for next week, but instead I had one where the Periodic Table was bullying little kids and I was getting blamed.

Well, that's a dream wasted. Suddenly, I felt myself getting poked in the eye.

“Dang it Kathy, wake up!” yelled Jessie.

I struggled to get up but it's pretty tough when you have a sister who's three years older than you and decides that it’s perfect to wake you up by trying to strangle you.

“What? What's going on?” I asked, unaware of what just happened.

“Its nine o'clock which basically means, you’re late for school!”

“Seriously?”

“Man you sleep like a log. I tried waking you up yesterday and the day before. When mom found out that you were still breathing, she just let you sleep.”

“You mean it's….Monday?!”

“Yup. I'm more surprised you didn't pee in your pants the whole forty hours knocked out.”

I ran to get myself changed to head to the Roycemore School; which is next to my sister's college. It's not a bad institution if I do say so myself. Just the only thing kind of bothersome is that your sister has the knack to at least peek to see if you're doing a good job in class, if anything; her own definition of babysitting, during school I may add. Good thing is, even though she starts class a bit later than I do, she'd take me there in her prized possession: The Kawasaki Vulcan Nomad motorcycle. She told our parents she won it on a state fair, but in reality and only she has told me this, she stole it from her previous boyfriend after they broke up. To this day, I have no clue how she got by all of that security in his house: lasers, dogs, and of course...her boyfriend himself. Scary thing is, with Jessie being prone to accidents, I still don't know how she got by all of that security. Even scarier is that, with Jessie being prone to accidents, I really prayed to get to school on time.

We rode through Chicago ave. which was the quickest way to the school. I really love my sister to death, and I love her more that, when she takes me out somewhere in her motorcycle, I'm glad to be alive, much less standing.

“Hey, try not to get sick again. If anything happens, I'll probably be in the next building of course,” said Jessie.

“Sure thing,” I said and she left; keeping in my head that she said the word “probably” which meant that she wasn’t going to be there

My first class was Chemistry and I realized that I wasn't late. Jessie pulled the oldest trick in the book: She switched my clock and my watch two hours behind then was originally set for an alarm. Little by little, that love I had for my sister was starting to plummet.

I saw one of my friends, Shawn Kirkland, being surrounded by a bunch of students in the classroom. He had ashy brown hair, blue contacts, and had a jacket with chains around it to claim to others that he was “cool.” He was probably the most egotistical person in the whole school. He tried his best to convince me one day that my weakness of running was himself because according to him, “I always feel weak by the knees everytime I see him, which in turn won’t help me concentrate.” Of course he had to add in the occasional flirting in that conversation. Fortunately, the one girl who decided to give him a chance on dating was running towards me, very happy to see me.

My best friend Rebecca Stalwart ran to me and gave me a hug. She was my closest and best friend for already ten years. There were many moments that I owed her for covering my hide over many things I have done in my past that it was the bond of our friendship that never kept us apart. She is just simply awesome and very funny. Other days, she can become just completely sad. I still stood by her no matter what. She was a white rose blond, had brown eyes and was wearing overalls for some weird reason. I tried my best to teach her the world of fashion sense, but Rebecca was one of those people whose mind was very tough to crack. I’m not saying she was the forgetful type, I’m simply still wondering how she is even able to pass exams. And I’m still wondering what she actually saw in Shawn.

“Kathy, the test is in three days. Are you sure you're ready for it?” she asked me.

“Unless your ribbons in your hair have any other ideas, then yeah, I'm ready.”

“I tried to call you on Sunday to review with you some material, but you didn't answer your cell phone.”

I checked my cell phone. Dang, eight missed calls.

“I'm sorry Becky. I was out cold the whole day Sunday. You know Sunday kind of ruins my mood, so that's why I slept,” I said.

Still plummeting, little by little.

“Well Shawn is prepared. He called a tutor and is now starting to randomly say formulas by memory. He said he paid the tutor sixty bucks.”

“Sixty bucks? Geez, are you sure he didn't get any 'extra time'“?

“I don't know, but I'm sure of this; he's been bragging about her for some time claiming she's the best in Chemistry.”

Well, I hoped he would be right. After all, if whoever this secret tutor is that can help me, I can probably go to the convention. It does land on my birthday after all. But sixty bucks? I turned to Shawn.

“Hey hey, can I have that tutor's number?” I asked.

“Hey hey, you got sixty bucks?” he asked, sounding a bit upset.

“Don't worry if I do or if I don't. Just give me the address or something okay?”

“You’re smart enough, you go figure it out.”

“Shawn, I'm the only one who knows about your past when you actually cheated on Rebecca. And of course I am keeping that a secret from Rebecca. But if I change my mind-”

As I thought, he led me to a corner of the room and passed me a note.

“Just go here when you have time. She's Japanese, but she knows English really well. She dresses really weird,” he said.

“Well, is she good?”

“Trust me when I say this; I don't think she’s ever met a science book she didn't like. There's like stacks of books all over the place.”

“But, is she good?”

“She'll make these entire teachers quiver in fear. With her strategy, you won't fail.”

He looked as though he was glad he was giving me her info, like he was trying to run away or something. I didn't care at all what he thought.

He went to sit back down. I almost forgot to ask him about the real price the tutor offers -since I'm not going to believe at all of that sixty dollar scam- when Rebecca poked me from behind.

“So, are you going to see this person?” she asked me.

“Well, I'm not sure. I can ask my sister to take me there. Of course, that can be an obstacle in itself,” I said in reply.

It's really hard to hide anything from Jessie, even in a dark room with the whole room painted in black. I really don't know how her sight became infra-red all of a sudden, but with her clumsiness, it's a plus in my book. So I knew I had to ask her before she would play some sort of guessing game with me. She did bet money on those guessing games; which is why she would earn one hundred dollars a week mostly. If you wanted to play guessing games with Jessie, be prepared to lose everything.

I ran to the bathroom and took the little note that Shawn gave me that featured, hopefully, her cell number and her address. I was about to text her when I realized that I didn't even know her name. I didn't even get the important part of the info. Gee, thanks for that one Shawn.

So I texted the following message:

*My name is Katherine and I need Chemistry help. Are you available around two?*

The moment I stepped out of the restroom, she immediately texted me back with a reply:

*Sure. Just don't be late. I assume you got my address from another one of your annoying classmates?*

Annoying? Guess I was right about Shawn then.

I made my way back to class, which very slowly I looked at the note of her address. It was in Sheridan Park which, unless I wasn't mistaken for my Google map skills, was on the northern part of Chicago. Instead of ten blocks, now it was nine blocks south.

Rebecca, who of course sat next to me said, “Gee that's pretty far. Are you sure you're going to make it?”

“Like I said Becky, yes I will. And in case you're thinking of any ideas, I'm going there myself. Don't worry, I'll tell you how it went.”

“Are you sure? I can use the extra help as well.”

“No no it’s fine. I’m sure I can survive a haunted house by myself.”

I just hope I can convince my sister to take me there. And if what Shawn say is true about how weird this person is, I hope I can come out alive before the day is over.

The exact moment school ended, I found my darling sister talking with some of her friends outside. Her friends knew me so it wasn’t a bad idea to interrupt their conversation. It seem as though they were talking about some sort of bet, when I tugged Jessie’s shirt for her attention.

“You must be out of your damn mind. There is no, and I mean no freaking way I'm doing it...excuse me a sec.”

Jessie turned from her friends to me. “Hey sis. What can I help you with?”

“Ummm, I was wondering if you can take me here,” I said as I showed her the address. She stared at it in a way as though the note was on fire. “It's for a Chemistry tutor.”

“On the other side of town?” asked Jessie.

“Yes, on the other side of town. She's probably the best at what she tutors.”

“Uh huh. And how much is it?”

“Huh? Oh I mean, I'm not sure.”

“Really? You're not sure? Well you better come up with an estimate quick, or it'll be your ass on that Chemistry platter.”

“Okay, I'll ask her.”

I texted her; which I got a reply twenty seconds later.

“She says its forty dollars.”

Jessie took out her wallet -which she stole from her boyfriend as well after the breakup- and gave me forty dollars.

“So when do I have to pay you back?” I asked.

“Probably when this tutor is worth a good grade,” she said.

“Gee, you sound like mom.”

“You know, that's the scary thing. I feel like I got born with her voice. So when are we going?”

“How about right now?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Right now? As in right now at this very moment?”

“Yeah.”

“You know I got class in an hour right?”

“Well, you better step on it. She doesn't want me to be late.”

“Easy for her to say.”

“Also, can you make an alibi to mom and dad? Say that I was studying at the school library after hours or something.”

“No problem.”

So we got on her motorcycle and me getting scared again, we blasted through the I- 41 interstate highway with speeds up to eighty miles per hour. I didn't even bother getting the chance to tell Jessie about the random wake up debacle. The fresh air behind your accident prone big sister just removes all of that hatred in an instant. We got to the tutor's apartment in around twenty-five minutes.

“Hey text me when you're done alright?” asked Jessie.

“Sure thing,” I said as I walked up the stairs to the apartment door.

It wasn't a bad place. Still, it puzzles me that someone superior in the world of science would be living in a place like this. I also noticed, as I was walking up the stairs that it was sparkly clean. Even more amazing was that it was quiet in the whole there was crime and such. I didn't realize that someone finally took some sort of effort to clean the street recently. A fire or two wouldn't be so bad unless you've seen the places I have seen recently. Broken glass, houses burned on the inside. Now that is a bad area.

The tutor's apartment was in the third floor and it didn't take a super sleuth to figure out her door. There was a big blow up poster of a light brown-haired girl holding a sunflower and trying to catch a butterfly. It was a real picture, not one of those fake pictures you see when you buy a picture frame. I didn't know whether to knock or something because, if this poster was any indication, she might as well be a hippie. I really hoped I was wrong. I put my hand up to knock when the door opened by itself. No breeze or anything.

Hippie factor when up by five percent. I frowned.

As I looked around, I heard a noise of scrubbing to my right. I called out to whoever was there. “Hello?”

The person replied, “Hello. Sit on the couch and don't touch anything.”

“Okay, got it.”

The living room didn't seem that rich as I had hoped. There were two doors to my left: Probably the bathroom and some other room. The door on my right was locked with a big lock with a “Do Not Go Near” sign. It was probably her room with experiments, or stolen gold.

The kitchen was right with the living room. She had a LG fridge, and a medium sized TV. There was a glass table overseeing the balcony of the view outside with a big sunflower, which was the same flower I saw at the poster on the doorway. Probably her when she was younger. I smiled.

The floor looked as though it was waxed thoroughly and well. The rest of the house was completely spotless. It smelled like raspberries with a little scent of cherry. If she went all of this way just to provide me with a nice invitation, then this was worth it. Of course there was the stack of science textbooks next to the TV, which was randomly turned off. No Biology books? I guess she wasn't as smart as I'd hoped. As I looked at the ceiling however, there was a camera staring right back at me.

So much for that warm welcome.

I heard the flush of a toilet as the tutor came out. Shawn said she dressed weird and she would make teachers freak out. He was right on both accounts.

White, grayish, silver hair with a white Lolita dress, black lace lining which looked like a skull and crossbones design on the back -as she walked by to the kitchen, I had a good view of it- blue eyes, moon earrings, white fingernails and schoolgirl shoes; although she looked nothing like a schoolgirl.

By her appearance alone, no one in their right mind would suspect her of being knowledgeable of Chemistry and Physics. I guess she owns the stats on weirdness. Fashion police, if you're listening, I found a really good person to take into custody. She offered me her hand.

“Hello. My name is Muchiko Kisaragi. My first name means ‘whip’ in English and to answer your first question no, this is not a wig. I dyed it permanently whitish gray since I was five. And that was no accident.”

Well I knew for a fact that wasn't my first question.

“I'm Katherine. Nice to meet you,” I said.

Muchiko shook my hand. “Would you like some water? It'll help you think.”

“I thought pancakes helped you think,” I said.

“Yes well, that's some silly detective rumor. I tested it, and it's not true.”

“Well sure you did.”

“I like what you’ve done with your hair.”

“Permantely dyed, kind of like yours.”

“How?”

“I rather not say.”

“I see.”

She gave me a water bottle. Something told me that if I asked her about the locked up room, she'll probably go ballistic on me. This was probably some nice ruse she puts on while entertaining guests. Lying calm, I decided to keep an eye on her to see what she would do next.

“So,” she said. “I hear from your annoying classmate that you have an exam coming up?”

“Wait a sec. How did you figure out that Shawn and I were in the same school?” I asked surprised.

“You smell like him.”

There's that weirdness in full swing.

“I know that because I just came out of school,” I said.

“I see.”

Muchiko looked at me and my book bag and frowned. “Another one,” she muttered under her breath.

“Huh?”

“Nothing, I'm sorry.” She went to the glass table, picked up something and came back. She showed me a really pretty looking stopwatch.

“Take out whatever material you need for this tutoring session and show me what you need help on. I'll see how long it takes you to find it,” said Muchiko.

She pushed a red button and folded her arms. I looked at her for three seconds before I realized that she wasn't joking. I felt as though if I didn't do what she said, she was going to either put a knife in my eye, or probably pour acid down my pants. Both are worse, but I can guess the former is much worse. I took everything out and I showed her the page on the periodic table.

“Here, here,” I pointed.

She stopped the watch. “Seven seconds. Average I suppose.”

“Huh? And what was that for?” I asked.

“If you come to class for example, and you wait until the teacher shows up for you to gather your things for the start of class, then the teacher will see you as a much ridiculed student who is not prepared to learn and a waste of their time,” she explained.

Boy, she's good. A bit of an attitude problem but she's good. Probably reminds me of some maid therapist.

“Uhhh, sure. Let's get started then shall we?” I said.

As I was about to turn the page on my textbook, Muchiko stopped my hand. “To what celebratory arrangement have you made plans for if you pass this exam?”

It took me a while to translate what she just said in my head to normal English. “Ummm, well if you put it that way, I guess going to a convention in two weeks would be my celebration, but I need a cosplay outfit,” I said.

“Oh that I can assist you with; well not me, my sister.”

“Ummm, okay. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What happened when Shawn was here? He didn't seem too happy, just more or less his usual cocky self. He said you were the best.”

“Well, I don’t pride myself. Unfortunately that little pervert thought he could get more than just studying.”

“Oh boy. Sounds like a bad scripted soap opera. So what happened?”

I was scared to even picture these two together in the same room. It was too late to take back my question now. Damn.

“He arrived and tried to break into my room. It took him fifteen seconds to take out his books and he asked me too many personal questions. I gave him mostly wrong answers. I still don't know how he even found my ad in a magazine. Then after the session, he tried to grope me.”

“What did you do?”

“Check his wrist next time when you see him. That big gash is mine.”

“Oh...well awesome. Wait, when you asked him of that celebration thingy, what did he say?”

Muchiko spit on the floor. “’For my parents' he said. I asked him if it was for a personal goal. He just said no. Young fool.”

“Hey don't call him a fool. It would be an insult to fools everywhere.”

“I guess you're right.”

“So how did he feel so confident in school today? He claimed you taught him stuff.”

“Unfortunately that is incorrect. He probably feels overconfident since he probably studied all night. I’m positive I did not help him one bit. My job is to help students in the world of science. Not to find a mate.”

“Sounds pretty interesting. So I would like to get started please?”

“Hold on a sec.”

She was really driving my patience in record time. Muchiko took out something from under her dress. It was a white utility belt. From the right side of it, she took out a test tube that smelled like hair gel. Very frankly, she poured it on my hair. I felt some sort of sting that somehow, went right into my scalp.

“Hey what's this for?” I asked.

“We're going to my parents' house for help on your cosplay outfit. From the drive on, I'll tutor you while we're on the road.”

First the dress, the weird look, the utility belt, and now tutoring while driving? Who in the world am I dealing with here?

Muchiko went inside the locked room of hers and came back three minutes later. If her dress and looks were an indication of how her room looked, I dare not even look inside.

“Ummm, why is there a camera there and why was your door left open?” I asked.

Muchiko smiled, “I knew you were coming so that's why I left it programmed to be open. My aunt designed that part of the living room in case a robber came and stuff. If they did...then they are in for a world of hurt.”

“Ouch”

“Oh they wouldn't say ouch.”

“And your utility belt?”

“Chemistry stuff. Compounds, acids, poison bases, tungsten knives, and nitrogen oxide; the usual stuff. I really adore my belt.”

“Tungsten? I thought titanium was the strongest metal around.”

“Well, that's what you get for watching the news so much.”

I was talking to her for a while when I realized that I forgot to mention about the gel in my hair.

“What exactly did you shampoo me with?” I asked.

“Mostly herbs, oranges and a healthy dose of oxygen to help your mind think. I wanted your hair to make you smell nice.”

“You mean 'cause I smell like Shawn?”

“Exactly. I don't want you smelling like a pervert.”

I tried my best not to laugh. Muchiko sprayed on some sort of perfume that made her smell like bananas. As we were stepping out, she took out something from her pocket. *A dress that has pockets?* I thought. *How awesome. She has to be a world class designer.*

It was a small keyboard no bigger than a calculator. She placed it in the door knob, punched in some numbers and removed it. A click followed telling us that the door was locked.

“No keys?” I asked.

“It'll puncture my rib cage. Plus, the small sized calculator goes great with locking things,” she replied.

*A no key girl. Very interesting,* I thought. There was one thing I had to ask though.

“Why did you make a utility belt with chemistry objects? Aren't you afraid something will break?” I asked.

“Very strong leather. Something to keep me occupied while I walk around. I also carry candy here, in case that was what you were thinking,” she replied.

There's my answer. Her very own little candy shop.

We walked to her car. A blue Jeep Cherokee Laredo. Thank goodness for something with a different color scheme. As we stepped in, the inside was white. I just had to open my big brain of thought on that one. I still haven't figured out the part of tutoring and driving at the same time.

“Oh, I forgot. If we're going to your house, and if you're dropping me off my house, I have to text my sister to cancel her pick up,” I said.

Muchiko looked at me curiously.

“What’s your sister's name?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“Something about you looks really familiar.”

“It’s Jessica. Jessica McAndrews.”

“Did she steal a bike from some guy named David?”

“Yeah. Her past boyfriend.”

“I knew it. You have her exact eyes.”

“Yes that's true. So how do you know her?”

“Well…David came complaining to me that his ex-girlfriend stole his bike under all of that security in his house. I laughed and told him 'well that's what you deserved' and shoved him out of my apartment. Your sister's got guts.”

“Gee, thanks for the insight.”

“Promise me that you'll take me to see her. I have to give her my thanks.”

“No problem.”

I texted Jessie: *I'm going to the tutor's house. She'll drop me off at my house when we're done. Claims that her house was...really uncomfortable.*

She texted back in reply: *Are you insane? You cannot go to another stranger's house.*

“Oh great. She thinks I'm crazy,” I said.

“Call her and give me the phone,” said Muchiko.

“What? You can't talk and drive? That’s illegal.”

“Just watch me.”

Muchiko took out a one piece headphone and connected to the phone with one hand while her other hand was on the steering wheel. I dialed the number but she snatched my phone and began to talk. Talk about rude.

“Are you Jessie?” asked Muchiko.

“Yeah who's this?” asked Jessie.

“I heard about your little fight with David a couple of years ago. Nice job. He showed up in my house and came crying to me for help, but I laughed and kicked him out.”

“Wait a sec. I did hear that he tried to ask for help, I didn't know it was from you.”

“Well anyway, I'm going to charge your sister nothing for the session. She really reminds me of you somewhat...just without the clumsiness.”

“How did you know about that? It's supposed to be a secret.”

“From David. Listen, I'll bring her back safe and sound.”

“How about bringing her back alive?”

“That's what I meant, only I said it in a third grade level.”

“Fair enough,” she said and hung up.

Muchiko looked at me proudly. “You see, I talked on the phone and I'm not arrested.”

“And how old are you?”

“I'm twenty.”

“Oh okay. At least that won't get me worried.”

We drove up to a well fortified house in Lincoln Park overlooking the lake. I got to admit, from the view of her parents' house, she actually got it made. The obvious thought that I had in my mind during the drive over was why she would move from a spectacular view of the lake to a view of a pizza shop. Also there was no tutoring involved throughout the whole drive here. What was she playing at? I had to admit just by looking at the area; she made a very bad decision moving out. We stopped the car in front of the house. I was about to get out when Muchiko pulled me back to my seat.

“Listen very carefully. I'll make this short,” she said with a serious look on her face. That look scared me.

“Well alright.”

“My dad hates me and so does my sister. They know I dress like this, so don't tell them it's a new fad. They don't like me being in the house. Only my mom appreciates my presence. Also, do not say anything about my utility belt or anything else of that matter about my apartment. They already think I'm weird, so I don't want that extra reason for them not to like me.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Very personal. Only my family knows.”

“Uhhh, does it bother you?”

“No, but it certainly bothers them. Just don't mention it, okay?”

“Okay.”

We went to the front door. Muchiko took a lockpick from the back of her hair and lock-picked the door. Man, how does everyone know how to do that?

As we entered, I didn't have enough time for the tour of the house but the living room was the first room I saw. It was really classy and by the looks of it, I guessed the price of the living room was in total around one thousand dollars. To the left of the living room was the sounding of someone cooking in the kitchen, but we didn't even bother going in to taste the food. I was really hungry. Instead we went upstairs to a room where there was loud music playing and a door with a sign that said: *All Normal Humans Are Welcome.* Before I could even ask, Muchiko knocked on the door.

“Hey Harumi it's me. Open up,” said Muchiko.

A voice from the other side said, “Screw you weirdo!”

“Sounds like a nice way to say hello to a sister,” I said.

The door was locked. Muchiko took what looked like clay in her pocket and stuffed it in the doorknob. Then she took a wire and connected it to the clay.

I've seen a bunch of movies to know what that piece of clay was; mostly movies from Jessie's personal collection of action movies. That clay was C4. How she got her hands on it, I have no idea, but I can tell she comes prepared for anything. And I mean anything. Even for a UFO attack if need be.

Without hesitation, I dived to where Muchiko was as she pushed a button. There was a small sounding boom as the doorknob crashed to the wall. I guess her parents' cooking was loud enough to drown out the sound of a C4 blast; as hard as that was to believe. Muchiko opened the door.

“Hey, how did you open that?” asked the formentioned Harumi. She was as tomboyish as I ever seen: baseball cap, guitar player, an almost cleavage t-shirt and sneakers. I have no idea how these Japanese girls learned to dress, but little by little, I was really starting to enjoy it. I looked around her room, and it was exactly the same as my room: The same places where the bed, window, computer, and closet were, the same identical positions and not to mention the same size. How the heck did she get that information? Maybe Jessie's involved with these girls somehow.

“And who is this?” asked Harumi in clear English. By the way she stared at Muchiko, it looked like their history of hatred was much more than a sisterly rivalry. Her eyes were the scariest part of all. The confusing thing was that they spoke English right in front of me. I guess they wanted me to understand what they were saying and not hide any information from me. How nice.

“My friend needs some cosplay help. I figure that you may have something of that matter,” said Muchiko.

“Your friend? You hate almost everyone.”

“Just shut it. You have something or not?”

“Yeah I do. For the Anime Central convention right? Lucky for you I collect them.”

She collects cosplay? That got me really jealous. Harumi rubbed my hair. “And who would you like to be little girl?”

She was indeed tall for a twenty-three year old. I noticed that her hand wasn't covered in the hair gel that Muchiko poured on me earlier. Probably dried off really quickly

“First I would like to know: How did you come up with the same design as my room?” I asked.

Harumi tapped my forehead. “Are you going to ask questions? Then there is no cosplay outfit for you.”

“Fine,” I said, feeling defeated. “I want to cosplay Sakura from Naruto.”

Harumi laughed. “Naruto is so overplayed and over-used.” Harumi went to her closet and picked out a blue colored school outfit.”Here, you can be Haruhi. You are clearly both the same size.”

“Gee thanks,” I said pretending to be cheerful since I wasn’t familiar with that specific character.

Muchiko took a half second look at Harumi's computer screen, before looking at me and then at Harumi while saying to her: “Well I guess we better be going now. Thank you for your precious time.”

She offered her hand. Harumi spat at it, grabbed her by the collar and said, “You got three seconds before Dad finds you here. And you know what will happen when he does.”

I couldn't stand it anymore. I really didn't care at all that Muchiko was weird; her sister clearly showed me that she never learned any manners. I punched Harumi in the eye, took Muchiko by the arm as we ran outside to the car. She drove, while we heard Harumi yell through the night: “You owe me a new doorknob!”

After that altercation, there was silence in the car on the ride back to my place. As she stopped right on my house, Muchiko looked exhausted. I never knew driving really takes that much out of you.

“Look, I'm really sorry about all of this drama,” she said.

“Oh it's no problem.”

Then I realized something. Whatever she put on my hair, kind of got the job done as far as studying was concerned. She claimed that it was herbs, but I'll bet she added some,”Chemistry magic” in there. I felt really awake, and I had a photographic memory of my whole textbook and some of the notes. Hippie percentage was up ninety percent.

“Uhhh, thanks for the studying I guess,” I said to her.

She smiled. “You're welcome. Hey call me and let me know how the exam went.”

“Of course.”

Muchiko got out the car and looked at me square in the face. It wasn't scary as the way Harumi stared at me earlier, but I can see how they are actually sisters. Sharing the same look was good enough to qualify.

“Listen. I obviously do thank you for that punch you gave my sister, but please let me know if you're going to do something extreme like that again,” she said.

“Why? You're in danger, and I wanted to help. I always help out a friend. Of course, you did help me out in getting a cosplay outfit for me. That is, if I do really well on this chemistry test.”

“Hey, you got help from me remember? I know you'll do well.”

“I know. I’m just worried about a lot.”

“Worried about what?”

“Well, what if your sister comes bashing through or something or tries to hurt me? She's really scary.”

“Which is why I moved out.”

“And started your own tutoring job?”

“Yeah.”

“And because of your success, you got all of those chemistry textbooks and stuff?”

“Yeah that too.”

“Hey, you should join me at the convention. My friend Rebecca is going and she would really like to meet you.”

“Sorry, conventions do not interest me. It's your prize, you should enjoy yourself.”

“C'mon. It falls the same day as my birthday.”

“Really?”

“And who knows? That creepy sister of yours might show up as well. I may need some protection from you.”

Muchiko gave it some considering thought.

“No no. It's fine. I'll be sure to send you something for your birthday,” said Muchiko.

I frowned. Muchiko looked at me with a small smile.

“Hey hey chin up. How about we do something after the convention okay?” she asked.

“You sure?” I asked with a brightly covered smile.

“Yeah. So is that a plan then?”

“Sure.”

“Well then, see you.”

“Wait, before you go.”

“Yeah?”

“The poster...and the flower...”

“My sister...before she turned into a ravenous jerk.”

“Oh okay.”

“And don't tell anyone or your sister about my...belt hobbies.”

“No problem. And I love those earrings.”

“My most prized possessions, given by my great aunt when I was two.”

“Cool. Well then, bye.”

As she drove off, I went back to the house with renewed feelings on my head. I knew almost everything I needed for the test. Guess that showed how Gothic/hippie she really was.

Jessie waited for me in my room.

“You know you have your own room to sleep in right?” I asked nicely.

“Relax. So, how did it go? I kept thinking of you and was starting to get worried.”

“You got a building permit, 'cause I know I'm going to nail it!”

“Sounded corny enough but whatever.”

“Did the alibi work?”

“Like a charm. All we need to see is how you go about your business in two days from now.”

She rubbed my head and went to her room; which afterwards I heard a slipping noise and something falling on the ground hard. Adding that noise was a small voice of a whisper, “I'm okay. Just bruised my chin.”

I threw myself down in my bed thinking of Muchiko, and Harumi. I already figured out that Harumi doesn't like Muchiko very much and as far as I can tell, it wasn't because of her love of science or her dress. I remembered seeing a Physics textbook, Chemistry -which took mostly the whole shelf-and even an Astronomy book in her room, but there was nothing regarding Biology. Of course there was the poster in her front door. She cares about her sister so much, she even kept her favorite flower in her living room. The confusing part for me was how Harumi's room looked exactly like mine. How did Muchiko get all that much of an arsenal of chemistry stuff on her utility belt? And how in the world did she get a hold of Tungsten and C4 clay?

With every thought came a whole set of crazy new questions. And woe is me that I'm now involved with a Lolita girl who's your everyday James Bond with her weird gadgets and her tomboyish sister.

I got all of the chemistry stuff wrapped up and needed for the test all in my head. As I struggled to sleep with all of this new info, something tells me I'm in for one world of a roller coaster ride. Oh well. At least I don't have to wait in line.

[Chapter Two](#ref_ToC)

The day before the test, I did not speak to anyone, either on the phone or online. I was in full chemistry mode; although I hate it with a passion. I still remembered a certain Goth girl I met yesterday who made it cool; even if it was with gadgets. I did eat somewhat, but now I wasn't that hungry. I threw the cosplay outfit that Harumi gave me in the closet when Jessie came in.

“Oh, I thought you weren't in here,” said Jessie.

“As you can see, I am,” I said.

“That girl from yesterday...she drives a Jeep Cherokee? That is so not fair. Is she rich or something?”

“No, no. She's just been saving up...from all of that tutoring stuff.”

“I see. I really didn't know she was the one who shoved my ex boyfriend out of her apartment. David is kind of strong you know.”

“You told me that eight times already.”

“Anyway, I got you something.”

Jessie left the room and then came back ten seconds later with...a punching bag? Only my sister would come up with something this crazy for me as a gift.

“You're kidding me right? I'm training for a test, not the golden gloves,” I said, very surprised.

“Relax. I know that. This will help you with speed and to think on your feet to make an accurate guess if you don't know the answer.”

“Well, that's what Muchiko taught me.”

“Who?”

“The tutor.”

“Oh. For a minute there, I thought it sounded like you said 'rice flour.'“

“That wasn't even close to calling her rice flour.”

“Well anyway. I never said once that this punching bag was for the test.”

“Yes you did. You just mentioned that it was for help on guessing an answer.”

“Well for the most part. I'm training you to fight.”

“Why?”

“Well, in case you pass your test and a group of kids want to kick your ass for getting the highest grade, then you can shake them off.”

“Thanks, but I can run really fast. I did star in track you know.”

“I know, but you will kick ass right?”

I sighed. “If anyone tries to kill me, I'm sure it will come in handy.”

I already knew that this conversation was dragging along like our usual conversations, but of course in the back of my mind, I knew Jessie meant well for me and my safety. Plus she already had plans to take over the house for a party while I was away at the convention on the weekend. If I failed, I know for a fact that she'd let me have it. Believe me, I don't like it when Jessie of all people would let me have it.

“Thanks Jess. I'll take it from here,” I said.

“Good girl,” she said.

“You’re welcome, I guess.”

I shoved the punching bag into my closet without paying much attention until I noticed a little tear inside. Knowing Jessie, she would never give me something worn out, unless it was a joke. I took out an old pocket knife I had next to my computer that Jessie gave me. After slashing the bag and discovering what was inside, all of that hatred I had about my sister yesterday about waking me up early went out the window.

It was a Sakura Haruno cosplay outfit, just like what I wanted. I ran to my sister's room where she was on the phone. I didn't care if I interrupted her conversation, I was too happy to get beaten up. I tackled her in her own bed.

“Thank you!” I said. “But how did you afford it?”

She hung up the phone. “It's an early birthday gift. And please don't yell so loudly.”

“You sure it wasn't that expensive for you?”

“Trust me it was alright. It's something to inspire you to do well on that test.”

I hugged her again and ran back to my room. I called Rebecca to tell her that I finally got my cosplay outfit.

“Awesome!” she said. “Now I can be Ino just like we planned two years ago.”

“I know. We can finally cosplay together.”

“I'm sorry we couldn't last year. I felt really sick.”

“Hey don't worry about it. At least you feel okay this year.”

“So tell me. What was it that the tutor taught you?”

That was a hard question to answer. Of course Muchiko didn't teach me anything, but in reality she showed me a couple of neat things: More importantly that oily substances are really useful for studying exams. I did promise Muchiko secrecy, but Rebecca was my best friend for the past ten years. So of course, to get myself out of this pickle, I had to think of something.

“Well, she just told me a good strategy of what to use during the exam,” I blurted without thinking.

“Which was?”

I didn’t want to tell her that it was all in usage of hair gel. Not even Rebecca would believe that. “Use...use music as a good studying technique.”

“Huh?”

“You know, as lyrics.” That was something I used when I was younger, which I completely forgot until this moment on this phone call.

“Okay sure, I'll try that I guess,” she said to me.

I hung up. Then immediately, I got a call from Muchiko. At least she was patient enough to wait until I finished talking on the phone to call me. That was very accurate.

“Hey,” I said.

“So, are you ready?”

“Yeah of course, thanks to you teaching me absolutely nothing.”

“Relax relax. You'll be fine. I'm sure of it.”

“How is that possible? I haven't learned anything from our session except how to get a sibling of yours angry.”

“That was your fault.”

“Well she provoked me.”

“Listen, just relax. Oh and I forgot to ask you something. Ummm what was it...oh. How far is it from your school from your house?”

“Ummm, it's kind of far. Why?”

“Well, wake up early first off. Then drink some water but hold it in your mouth. Then jog to school.”

“Huh? That sounds crazy.”

“Hey, some exercise before an exam couldn't hurt.”

“You saying I need to lose weight?”

“No. It's something to warm up the senses. Understand?”

“Yup. Loud and clear.”

She hung up. I took a deep breath and just shook my head. I'll admit that she's good company, but of course really crazy; she really needs to get checked somewhere. She does have a bit of a point though: I am in due need of an exercise. Not that it mattered; I really looked fine by my view. I checked my mirror just in case something actually didn't seem right. Everything looked fine and normal, so I didn't know what she was talking about.

I began to study a bit more for a half hour when I decided to go to the front lawn to do some pushups. My body felt really stiff as I stepped outside. I guess Muchiko was right on that part. I don't know how she saw the stiffness of my body, but I guess I owe her on that one. It still bothered me as to how Muchiko called me just to insult me. I got to remind myself that she really needed a smack upside her head.

Jessie came outside five minutes later, and stared at me. I stopped to look at her. It wasn't a distraction for me; it was someone I love but I knew many people who would consider their older sibling a distraction. That was their opinion. She motioned me to keep going. As I did, I felt her place something really icy on my back. I tried to pick myself up but it was like the force of a hammer pushing me down. I never tried doing any type of exercises with something cold and icy on my body. Sure it will help, but it was really uncomfortable.

“Keep going and don't even bother spilling that water,” said Jessie.

“But it's so cold,” I protested.

“You're the one that decided to randomly start doing exercises outside, so I figured I might as well help you out.”

So, with the cup of icy water on my back, I continued. It lasted for two hours as I felt the cold rush through my body. I stuttered when I stopped on the first hour. I gave the cup back to Jessie, hoping that she would go back inside while she gave me time to myself for a much needed rest. She stopped and stared at me again. I waved to her that I didn't want to do anymore, but I laid down on the grass doing sit-ups with the ice cold water on my stomach. Once I knew I was done, I ran inside and got in the shower before Jessie could do any more damage to my already fragile body. The warm water eased the pain on my back as I stayed in the shower for as long as I could. At least it was a perfect place to think about what I was ready to endure on the test. I sat in the bathtub thinking of some questions that I couldn't get the answer to off the top of my head. It was no use. Muchiko didn't do anything resourceful.

At nine in the evening, I told my sister that I was going to jog to school and for her to wake me up early. I thought against the jog to my school, but realized that Muchiko at least gave me some sort of help through my way of getting through with this test. At least she tried to be helpful, so there's no blame there. Jessie looked at me as though I was crazy, but then nodded her approval and gave me a hug as I went to my room for some really well deserved sleep. I know that my sister is one of those types that really doesn't want to let me go, but I'm also scared that, because of her accident prone skills, I'll stay on one of her hugs and not be alive the next morning.

Jessie's a doll, and I'll always love her for that.

I woke up pretty refreshed after what Jessie put me through yesterday. My back didn't ache, but thinking of that moment really got me scared. I shook it off and realized a split second later that Jessie didn't wake me up; the alarm did. That didn't get me angry but if the alarm wanted to be my new older sister, then by all means.

I got breakfast done in the kitchen. Jessie was still in her room; proof of that was music coming from her door that was at full blast. I'm so glad we didn't sleep in the same room. Too much of a danger of a heart attack.

I was already dressed and all I needed to do was get my book bag from my room. I left the cup of water there in the kitchen, ran to my room, heard the shower on, got my book bag, and ran downstairs. I took one full cup amount, held it there, took a breath through my nose, and started off jogging.

Well it was comfortable for the first eight miles, then afterwards, I began to become out of breath. Usually I do breathe out of my nose when I jog or run, but the water turned out to become a distraction. I tried my best not to swallow it, but the temptation turned out to be too great. I started to slow down. The school was on my horizon. I actually felt the water start to evaporate under my warm breath. Taking another deep breath through my nose and noticing that I was going to collapse from the exhaustion if I stood next to the lamppost too long, I began to start again.

I saw the worried look of Rebecca up ahead. The one face I can look upon no matter how tired or how much blood I lose, it's the one face where I could be sure that everything will be okay. I just had to reach that face very quickly. She's the one who's always in school before me. I'll take that sometimes: She's the one who usually buys me Twinkies beforehand. “I'm out of breath, but I made it,” I said to Rebecca as I swallowed the water in my mouth. It was tiring, but I actually got through with it. I have to remind myself to send Muchiko a “thank-you” card.

“Okay. What was that all about?” she asked.

“Just something I wanted to try. By the way, have you seen Shawn?” I asked. “I have to ask him something.”

“He's not here yet.”

“But he's always the first one here.”

It was strange. As much as I didn't like Shawn and as unfortunate as I was to have him as our cosplay buddy, he was always the first person to show up in school. He always believed that having an advantage over the teachers as to who got in the school first would be a big boost to your intelligence. Trust me, if I hear him say anything weird like that to me, I'll be the first one to send him to a mental hospital.

We went inside to take the exam and there was still no sign of Shawn. I didn't care about him that much; the exam was my main concern. Still, I couldn't help but notice that someone who claims to be really prepared wouldn't show up at all in a exam as such as this. I had everything memorized from my textbooks and my notes. Whatever the white witch did, it certainly worked. I just hope no one searched through my brain to see if I was cheating. I looked over at the corner of my eye. Rebecca looked calmer than usual on taking the exam than I originally would have thought. That's always a good sign. The last thing I needed was my best friend to have a huge heart attack.

As school was over, I turned to Rebecca as we were outside the steps of the school.

“We get the results next week right? Then it would be determined if I go to the convention or not with you,” I said.

“I hope you do. We really have to cosplay together,” she said.

“Where would Shawn be? It’s not like him to be sick on an exam day.”

“Why? Are you that worried about him? I’m surprised Kathy.”

“No. I was just-”

As on cue, a trail of ambulances and police cars passed by us at high speeds. Damn, what now?

“You don't think something happened?” I asked, sounding frightened. The only reason that ambulances would join up with police cars is that something really bad happened.

“Well, maybe not. But I am afraid because they are heading towards Shawn's street. Maybe a fire?”

“I think it could be something worse.”

“So what, you want to try and find out to see if it leads us to Shawn?”

“If not, then we're short one member of our cosplay group.”

That sentence made Rebecca feel in shock. The last thing she needed was to be one person short of a cosplay group. She was really into getting this perfectly organized. “Hurry and find your sister,” she said.

“And if she isn't available?”

“Then we follow the ambulance trail.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No I'm not Kathy. But it'll give us something to do instead of us standing here like lawn furniture.”

“Good point. You remembered where he lives right?”

“Unfortunately yes, since we did used to date.”

They dated for only a year and I really didn't mind them together since Shawn was really romantic towards her. As long as someone took care of Rebecca while I wasn't there and without hurting her, then that was fine by me. She took the same oath with me; if only I had a boyfriend. The lowering rank of them being friends…well we'll save that for another story.

So we split up. I snuck inside the college but was stopped immediately by security. I knew I was never good at covert missions. It was never my forte. I went back to Rebecca.

“No good. I couldn't find her,” I said. “What about you?”

“Nothing on my end either.”

“We got to do this ourselves.”

“Okay. We got to steal some bikes.”

Never in my life knowing Rebecca all these years would she say something crazy like that.

“Are you insane?” I asked.

“Of course not. C'mon, I got a chain clipper.”

“When did you start carrying a chain clipper in your bookbag?”

“I always liked riding bikes. Also, it's something just in case of an emergency for situations like this”

“Since when?”

“For about three years.”

“And you didn't tell me this why?”

“Well, I didn't want you to judge me.”

Wonderful. I guess I didn't know her very well as I originally thought. “I wouldn't do anything like that to you. Never,” I said.

“Well fine.”

So we got some bikes out of a bike stand just two blocks from the school. As luck would have it, I found one that was entirely my size. Oh joy. We sped past some cars and a police car until we reached a house about four miles from the school. Since we stole the bikes, we couldn't let the police catch a glimpse of us. So we had to sneak in the house somehow, with the house completely surrounded. If Jessie was here, she would have me pay fifty dollars to do something like this with her, but miraculously, she would actually get it done all by herself. Rebecca looked around, as we were posted behind a car.

“What in the world is going on here?” asked Rebecca.

“I don't have a clue Rebecca. You think he was robbed?” I asked her.

“Oh sure, blame it always on a robbery.”

“Hey relax alright? I'm just saying that it could be, but of course it isn't a possibility.”

“So why are they all here?”

“You don't suppose that...”

After hearing that trail of words I left behind, Rebecca pulled me as we ran inside the house and crashed inside the window. Of course, the police and other officials all swarmed in after us but we were quick running up the stairs. We're two teen girls and we both have stairs in our houses. That proved to be a huge advantage for us. As far as I know, I didn't think Rebecca would take extreme measures to get inside the house. There was also the added bonus of her “ex-boyfriend/cosplayer that we needed to complete the group” inside, so I understood her worry. I however, would just knock on the door or at least ask the police of any information. That's my polite way no matter what the situation was.

We ran upstairs, and pushed over investigators -Rebecca not me- until we saw what we feared.

Shawn hanging on the ceiling, completely naked and beaten to death.

Rebecca screamed and looked as though she was going to cry. I couldn't blame her for that emotional outburst. His shirt was ripped and blood was coming out of his hands and feet. Rebecca began to tear up so much that I held her really close. Ex-boyfriend or not, she couldn't stand anyone getting hurt like this. It showed me that she still cared about him a lot. I saw a huge gash in his arm. From the way it looked from the rest of the beatings that I can see visually, it seemed a little out of place. Was there any reason why the person, whoever it was, would slash his arm? Rebecca was breathing heavily and still crying as I led her outside.

“Becky, calm down alright?” I asked.

“Calm? Are you insane? Did you see what I saw?”

“I know.”

“That's just sick okay? What did he ever do to deserve that kind of punishment?”

“I really am not sure at all. How about we at least get some ice cream?”

“What? After all of what just happened?”

“It will at least help us get through the pain of what we just saw alright?”

Rebecca was still visibly shaken, but she slowly nodded her approval. I couldn't think of anything else to do.

We went back outside, with much grief in our hearts, avoided the investigators who tried to question us, took our stolen bikes and went to an ice cream parlor. Thank goodness we weren't being followed. I didn't need to add to the stress that was already inside my brain after what I just witnessed. After about five minutes of just staring at our ice creams, it was Rebecca who spoke first.

“So, did we see what I think we saw?” she repeated, still visibly shaken.

“Hey keep your voice down. I don't want anyone to suspect us.”

“Keep my voice down? He was crucified damnitt!”

There were many stares in my direction as her face was red from the tears as she couldn't even eat her ice cream. I couldn't speak in the midst of still being in shock. Annoying or not, Shawn was still a friend to both of us and this was starting to be a whole lot like a mystery. I was too angry to talk, but mostly because I was suspecting someone I knew who I vaguely trusted, which in reality scares me. I called Muchiko on my phone. She answered me right away. I tried my best not to jump to conclusions, but it was hard with every second racing through my head trying to hold it in.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Hey did you hear what happened to Shawn?”

“I heard. I'm investigating it right now. I'm sorry about it.”

“Investigating?”

“Yes. That's what I'm doing.”

Now I knew this was too weird.

“I'll stop by okay?” I said.

“Well okay.”

I hung up the phone and ran off.

“Hey, where are you going?” asked Rebecca.

I left a twenty dollar bill from the forty that Jessie gave me from the tutoring session. “Keep the change. I got an emergency to attend to,” I said.

“Hey, wait a second. Can I come with you?”

“Rebecca, I need you to head home and relax. We got a convention to plan.”

“Katherine. I need you here with me.”

“I promise I will figure this out. Just for you.”

She began to cry again. I gave her a hug. Then she took me by the face and stared at me. Her face was now in full anger mode.

“Listen and listen well Katherine. I want you to kill whoever did this to Shawn. Do you understand?” she said, her tone in her voice scaring me.

“Relax Rebecca. I'm pretty sure I'll find out who did this.”

“You didn't answer me. Do you understand?”

I looked around to see a few faces stare back at me. Getting Rebecca angry was something I didn’t have listed on the day of things I wanted to see. Most of the time, she usually cries or gets worried, but never angry. I tried my best to look away, but she forced one eye open and continued staring at me, not blinking. I slowly nodded.

“Good,” she responded, now calm. “I'll see you in school tomorrow.”

“If there is school,” I responded.

“No, I do believe there will be school. I’m positive about it.”

Something tells me I may not have to pay my sister back.

I took my bike, looked at Rebecca through the window, and started down the road. Something about her face was really disheartening. There were times that I've seen her sad and I was able to comfort her easily. This was different. Ice cream didn't help and neither did paying for it. I promise her that I would find the perpetrator and to try and bring that person to justice myself. Hopefully, that person who I was going to confront was only a couple of blocks away. I threw the bike down and jogged the rest of the way. Jogging three miles didn't hurt me at all. It was the person who I was going to meet that frightened me the worst.

I busted through the door as I saw Muchiko on her laptop. She looked right at me as though nothing was wrong.

“What did you do to him?!” I screamed.

So much for holding it in. I can hold my bathroom duties for two days, but I couldn't hold an outburst.

“Here, let me show you something,” said Muchiko.

She showed me her laptop. It was a surveillance video of her day. She woke up, stayed in her living room, went to that secret room of hers -which didn't show-, cleaned the bathroom and stayed watching TV.

“I know that video trick. You probably left a fake tape to show me while you stepped out,” I said.

“Really? Is that what you think?”

“It's what I know. You’re the one who beat him to a bloody pulp and the crucified him to the damn ceiling!”

“You over think yourself a whole lot.”

“Really? That gash in his arm. I know it was you alright? Tell me the truth.”

My tone was a little bit threatening. For my safety, I really hope that she didn't catch that.

“Listen. It wasn't me,” she said.

“Prove it.”

“Cause I'm not that big on religion. Plus...”

“Plus what?”

“It was…my sister.”

“Is that a guess or the truth?”

“It's the truth, I'm sure of it.”

“Well, let's bust her ass then!”

“It's not that easy. Were you there when it happened?”

“Well, no. And how did you know it was her to begin with?”

“Her computer. I saw a couple of faces there that looked like targets. I recognized your annoying friend.”

“What list?”

“I don't know what those faces were referring to. It didn't look like some sort of project I recognized.”

“So if it's her, how did she get away with it?”

“Harumi is the special type of person, who can get away with anything. Probably she found out about you when I introduced you to her. She looked you up at the school and just attacked.”

“And she randomly chose Shawn?”

“Exactly. I don't know why she would go that low of a person.”

“Damn. So wait...then Rebecca's next!”

“No she isn't.”

“Yes she is.”

“I saw the faces there. She isn't next.”

“Why didn't you question her about it?”

“I thought it was some art project.”

“Really wonderful.”

“And take a gander of a guess at when and where she will strike?”

“Oh boy. This is not going to sound pretty.”

“No it won't. So what are we going to do?”

“You better hope that you pass that test.”

“I know I did.”

As I left, Muchiko gave me a smile. I was really happy she gave me a smile. At least I know that means that she's happy. As for me, the stress was reaching the breaking point in my head. The week of the convention better hurry soon or else we were going to experience a huge bloody mess.

[Chapter Three](#ref_ToC)

I woke up to the sound of a very accurate sounding of the Liberty bell. I checked my alarm clock: Eight in the morning. I knew the exact reason as to why Jessie would do such an evil thing: It was my birthday. Double the happiness factor since today begins my convention adventure.

I paused before I leaped out of bed. Jessie was prowling the hallway to see if I was up and ready and waiting for me to jump on me. Luckily, I locked the door, really well this time. But that was also bad, since I had to run to the shower. If only I could outsmart her this year, then I would be home free. Jessie and I knew that the bathroom was right across from my room. I grabbed my towel from the rack and slowly, but quietly unlocked the door. I waited a few seconds for some footsteps before opening the door and running inside the bathroom. Lucky for me, it was open. I stood still in front of the door, scanning the area looking for any traps. I was still staring at the bathroom, when I heard footsteps running to my direction. I counted to two on my head, when I went inside the bathroom and closed the door. I heard the sound of Jessie’s nose making contact with the bathroom door as I locked it. Right on the mark.

I took a deep breath and started to think about what I was about to go through in the later mark of a couple of hours; both good and bad. Someone really mean was about to go after cosplayers who are either just having fun or on the wrong place at the wrong time. I made a mental note to call Rebecca immediately after I got out of the shower. Of course, she was the very first person to call me during a day as special as my birthday, so that would be the easy part. The hard part about all of this is telling her about the danger that loomed within the confines of the convention. I wasn’t sure whether Rebecca would believe me if I said to her, “hey Rebecca be careful because there’s a very angry mean Asian cosplayer that’s about to bring bloodshed to the convention.” As much as Rebecca was my close best friend for the past ten years, she would probably say, “sure thing Kathy. It’s just a skit.” It wouldn’t have been the first time that she didn’t believe me.

After the refreshing shower, I, with nothing but a towel on, had to be vigilant with the doorway. There was a good chance that Jessie was waiting for me right by the doorway. I checked under just to be safe. It was all clear. I took a deep breath and opened the door. Once again, there was no one around. I took a step forward and felt a strong scent of cherries. For a second, I figured it was coming from the kitchen; Jessie probably planning something big for her party that she planned since my parents were out and I was about to go out as well. Then I realized the obvious ploy: Cherries, no matter how tasty the fruit actually is, it didn’t have a strong scent like that one. I looked up at the ceiling, but didn’t see anyone. I paused while my hand was grabbing the doorknob. The scent wasn’t coming from her room but Jessie was really good at hiding. I turned to the kitchen and looked around….

….when Jessie tackled me to the ground.

“Hey there,” said Jessie to me while I was on the floor. “You sure look taller than the last time I saw you.”

“Gee, thanks for pointing out the obvious.”

“Did I hurt you?” she asked very carefully as if I was a celebrity. In a couple of hours at the convention, I sure as heck will be acting like one.

“No you didn’t sis. Can I please get up?” I asked.

“Why?”

“I want to go to my room to see how much calls I’ve missed.”

There was a pause that was from Jessie as she was still holding me down. A feint sound of a cellphone was heard with a ringtone that was really unfamiliar to me.

“I got to take this call,” she said. “Hurry and put on your outfit. I just want to make sure it fits perfectly.”

“Wait a second,” I began. “Did you really have a tough time taking my measurements?”

“Believe me when I tell you that it really wasn’t easy.”

She got up and left, without even lifting me up. How nice. I checked my body to see if there were any scars or anything broken in my system. Older siblings tend to do accidental things to your body when they really want to show you love. Jessie was obviously no exception.

I ran upstairs to my room and checked my phone. Two missed calls; Rebecca and Muchiko. It was really odd that Muchiko would call me so early. Rebecca I understood perfectly, but I guess Muchiko was as normal as I thought. I flipped a nickel, saw that it landed on tails and called Muchiko first. It took two rings before she answered.

“Hello?” she asked, as if she didn’t know it was me.

“Muchiko it’s me, Katherine.”

“Oh right. Where were you?”

“I was in the shower. Today’s the day of the convention remember?”

“Oh right. I expect you to be vigilant understand?”

“Yes I know. I’m still as surprised that you won’t come by the convention after actually figuring out what will actually happen.”

“Oh right. Enjoy yourself and congratulations on the exam. I knew you could do it.”

“You’re welcome. I’m going to try out my outfit now. Not the one your sister gave me, it’s one that my sister gave me.”

“Oh ri-”

“Please don’t say that again. It tends to really get annoying.”

Muchiko gave a laugh. “You remind me of myself.” I heard her shed a tear. I didn’t know I had that natural ability to hear tears of sadness from through the phone. “Well, I’m sure you will be fine. I can see your strength the moment I tutored you and you posses a well defined confident character.”

“What if, well, whatever your sister throws at me will be too much for me to handle?” I asked.

“No matter, birthday girl. You’ll be fine.”

“Gee thanks.”

“Enjoy your day.”

“No problem.”

She hung up without warning. I stared at my phone, hoping that she would at least call back and give me some well nurtured advice. After about ten seconds of staring at the pretty wallpaper I had on my phone of roses, I closed it and took out my Sakura cosplay outfit from the closet. As I placed it on the bed, I began to get really nervous. I knew nothing about Harumi or how much of a sick person she was. Muchiko basically gave me a quick order in hopes of finding her sister in a sea full of teens and older teens in costume. It wasn’t going to be easy to spot someone right away; adding the fact that I had no clue which anime character she was going as, or if she was going to cosplay at all. Man, why are all these things never easy?

What made putting on the outfit really easy was the simple aspect of me being covered in only a towel. The shorts would come first, then the pink shirt, the comfortable black boots and finally the pink wig. I never thought that I would be wearing boots in the spring or at least for my birthday. Hey it was a very special occasion, so I may as well give it a try.

Finally I placed the headband over…my head of course. I stared at it in the mirror. It didn’t put a mark on my forehead the way hats do, so I knew that it was comfortable. Still, I couldn’t get the sisterly argument out of my head. The mark of Harumi’s nose was still imprinted on my knuckles. Whatever revenge she had planned on me, she might as well place it on me and not anyone else. I didn’t want to see anyone get hurt today because of some Asian psychopath with a grunge on her sister. Muchiko had a lot of faith in me. I wondered whether something happened between the two and she couldn’t manage to hold down Harumi long enough for….something. I shook it off. Even though I knew nothing of the two sisters, this I do know: Muchiko was the one who tutored me and Muchiko helped me get a grade of a ninety seven. Anyone who can help me get through Chemistry as a birthday present is okay in my book, no matter how weird they seem.

I checked the time as I ran inside Jessie’s room without knocking. She was on the phone very distracted, lying in her bed face down, reading a magazine -which I couldn’t see the contents-, and dangling her legs on the other side of the bed. Sometimes she can act as young as sixteen which scares me.

“Jessie, Jessie, I look awesome,” I said to her as I showed her my new look.

Tapping her on the shoulder would seem like a polite way to get someone’s attention, but not Jessie. It was a risk I had to take but even in a day like my birthday, she would still have some excuse to hit me.

Jessie looked a bit in shock like I just found out her password to her secret stash of gold. She finished her conversation in two minutes before getting her cell phone camera and taking a picture of me. “Hey, you look hot.”

I will admit, it did make me look slender, which was what I wanted. I also like how the pink wig looked with the rest of my outfit. It really goes well and actually gave me the urge to dye my own hair pink. The good thing about the outfit was that it wasn’t a peeping hole for any Peeping Toms through the convention. I sure hope Rebecca, cosplaying as Ino took similar steps in preventing that from happening to her as well. Which suddenly reminded me that I had to call her as soon as Jessie finished making her own album of thirty pictures; containing me in my Sakura cosplay outfit standing in her room. What fun. Personally, I wanted my own album to feature myself actually in the convention, not my house. Seems weird to me.

“Thanks sis,” I said.

“So you ready to go, miss newly made eighteen year old?”

Her saying that made me smile.

“Yeah I'm ready.”

“So do we need to pick up your friend?”

“No no she'll meet me there.”

“That’s good. If she did come with us, I would have to charge her with gas money.”

I laughed. “Okay cool.” With that being said, I was painfully forgetting to call back Rebecca.

“I’ll be right back Jess, I forgot my phone,” I drastically called out as I turned and headed up the steps.

I heard the hard smack of Jessie’s hand hitting her forehead as she called out, “That’s the one thing you do not forget!”

I ran to my room and grabbed my phone. There were no calls to me. I dialed Rebecca’s number. No answer. It was off. Even though we were best friends, I too wouldn’t answer the phone in a day like today. If anything, saving the battery for pictures and videos of people in costumes doing insane things is worth the entire battery. Smart girl.

I ran downstairs and was heading out the door when Jessie stopped me.

“Hey listen,” she said. “I know you’re still a bit traumatized over Shawn's death.”

It took me a week to get over it, and very lovely, for my birthday, Jessie reminds me of it again and makes me cry. Good job sis.

“I know sis. He was supposed to be our Naruto today,” I said.

She gave me a tearful hug. We had all of this planned the three of us. Now there’s one missing. What a birthday this turned out to be.

“Thank you,” I said.

We stepped out into the front of the house as I hopped on Jessie’s motorcycle. I checked my pockets to make sure I had my cellphone and some money. Once that was all in place, we headed to the center for the annual Anime Central convention. People started to stare at me as Jessie drove by the busy streets. It was as if they never seen a cosplayer on a motorcycle before. It wasn’t as if I was trying to pose for playboy on some bike issue. I was right on those aspects since there were mostly guys that stared at me. I didn’t know why they were looking at me. I knew that the cosplay outfit made me look cute -and only cute- but not that attractive. I was pretty sure that they were whistling at my sister, but when she turned to me and said,”The whistles are not at me,” I covered my face on my sister's back in embarrassment. Jessie was more attractive than me, but these perverts look at me, see that I'm wearing a cosplay outfit for only one day, and they think I'm free lunch. I liked a few guys at school, but so far I haven’t had a decent boyfriend. I wanna hangout with someone respectful, not someone who will say, “hey beautiful, you gonna wear that for me?” I'm sorry, but if I'm wearing it and the guy is somewhat of a creep, I'm beating his brains out. And he won’t like it.

We made it to the convention center. Jessie gave me a fist pump.

“Well enjoy,” she said.

“Remember to take care of the house while I'm gone, understand?” I asked in a good impersonation of Mom.

“Yes mom. I'll be careful.”

“Okay. Bye sweetie.”

Jessie shook her head in laughter. She always made me laugh, but my impersonation of mom always got her in a good mood. With her clumsiness alone in a room however, I was afraid to come back to a burning roasted house with its own barbecue sauce. I took the thought out of my head and focused on the adventure inside the building ahead.

I entered the front doors of the great spectacle and as expected, it was insanely packed with cosplayers. Seeing the big crowd of teens and young adults dressed up in costumes to make Halloween come six months early really puts a smile on my face. What gave me a bigger smile was seeing the familiar yet friendly face of a cosplayer sipping on soda. I poked Rebecca on the shoulder, something I've been doing to her since we started being friends.

“It’s a quarter after ten in the morning and your drinking soda?” I asked. “I guess you really came prepared to waste away throughout the day haven’t you?

She poked me in the shoulder. “Hey, I need my caffeine”, she said and gave me a huge hug. I saw it in her eyes that she was still feeling the effects of seeing Shawn's mangled crucified body in her mind and not complaining about why I missed her calls this morning. As she was telling me the things that were on schedule for today, I couldn’t have felt any happier than seeing her. Besides my family and of course my sister, Rebecca was on that “top people who will forever make me happy” list. And she was well worth that position. Rebecca then took out something from her pocket and immediately put it around my neck.

“Hey wha-?” I said surprised.

“It’s my birthday present for you. Remember that day ten years ago when we went to the carnival and you offered me some ice cream after I took it to the roller coaster and it spilled all over the seat?”

“Yeah I remember. It was also rather embarrassing.”

“Well, look at it.”

The necklace was a small picture on a silver platting that her mom took of me giving her my piece of ice cream and placing it on her cone. I remember the picture on her room and I had no idea she would make this sort of surprise for me. Rebecca showed me the same necklace on her neck. I cried because it was one of my favorite moments. And it was the day we started our friendship. The fear in my heart was washed away. Maybe things would work out really well today.

“Thank you thank you so much!!” I said.

“It was the least I can do on something this big of a day just for you.”

“Really? You didn’t have to though. I mean-”

Rebecca placed her hand on my mouth as a notion for me to keep quiet.

“Please don’t talk okay? Let’s just paint the convention red,” she said.

I shrugged it off as we headed down the big hallway through the huge crowd. No one looked our way at all, not even for a picture. Maybe later I suppose. Rebecca was dragging me along through the big crowd, weaving through teens and not getting tripped.

“Hey Rebecca calm down,” I said. “I almost tripped over someone’s shoelace a minute ago.”

“Well we have to hurry,” she responded.

We were about to go down an escalator when behind me, I overheard a reporter talking and what sounded like a camera breaking. The person throwing down the camera looked all too familiar. Who else would you know besides a bride would take wearing white to an extreme level? I knew only one person.

“Hey hey I got first amendment rights here,” said the cameraman.

“I just amended them,” said Muchiko.

And that person couldn’t be any more insane.

I waved at her direction. She saw me and was holding a big present.

“Told you I won’t forget,” said Muchiko.

“And here I thought you wouldn’t show up,” I said to her.

Immediately I looked at Rebecca and remembered the meeting between me and Muchiko regarding Harumi and her line of victims. I looked at the necklace on my neck. I was worried. No one would ever come close to touching her as long as I was near her which got me even more worried. Rebecca poked me to hint at me that she was still next to me.

“Hello Kathy? You okay up there? You’re not going to introduce me to your friend?” asked Rebecca.

I dazed off a bit before I shifted my senses back to reality.

“Sorry. This is my friend Rebecca,” I said looking at Muchiko. “Becky...this is, ummm.”

“Just call me a better version of Chii from Chobits,” said Muchiko.

“Oh uhhh, pleased to meet you,” said Rebecca.

Muchiko looked at my face and gave me a really quick shake of her head. Rebecca randomly pinched her cheek and asked for a picture. Surprisingly, she didn’t flinch.

“Sure sure. Can I borrow Sakura for a moment? I promise to bring her back,” said Muchiko.

“Okay,” said Rebecca as Muchiko dragged me to another part of the convention. Muchiko’s face was very distraught, as if she witnessed a car crash. She pinned me to the wall. For a second, I was about to scream for help. Her face and blue eyes turned from sadness to a faint smile.

“Okay, so now what?” I asked. “You don’t want your identity revealed or something?”

“Open the present,” she replied, clearly avoiding my question.

“But wait a minute.”

“Just please…open the present,” she demanded with her hands raised.

I did as I was told and was astonished. After opening the box, it was a smaller box, then a smaller box, then a smaller box, until I saw:

“Your moon earrings? These are your prized possessions. I really can’t have these,” I said, a little hesitant to put them on. They felt rather warm when they were in my hand.

“They look better on you than they do on me,” she replied. “Please put them on.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

I put them on my ears, which were pretty small. I thought I was hearing things, because when I put them on, there was a clicking sound, as though they were a perfect fit.

“Okay, but answer the question first: Why the secret identity?” I asked again.

“Listen. I saw my sister arrive here half an hour ago and she's looking for someone. Then she headed for the bathroom, probably to try out a cosplay outfit.”

Once again, completely avoiding my question.

“Okay and?”

“Remember that I mentioned that your friend wasn’t the next target?”

“Yeah?”

“She wasn’t on the list.”

“And who's the girl she’s looking for?”

“I looked through the list of names as quickly as I could. It’s a girl by the name of Natasha Nikulina; of Russian decent obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“For your question: The reason I gave a secret identity to your friend, besides the fact that I do trust her, is that I don’t want anyone knowing who I am. Plus, a majority of Harumi's friends all work here.”

“Here? At the convention?”

“Yup.”

“If I get my hands on one of them, they better tell me where to fill an application.”

“And you already know why I'm here.”

“Not the earrings.”

“Besides that of course.”

“But why her? Not to sound without a lack of justice, but why is she so important?”

“That’s what I'm here to find out. I didn’t get any connection from the people on the list, but it has to be something.”

“Just great. I'm sure Harumi is dying to tell you.”

“I'll send you back to your friend. I think Natasha is in cosplay, but I don’t know as whom.”

“Good luck searching, but please don’t involve me in any of this okay? I would like to enjoy my birthday in peace.”

Muchiko smiled. We walked back to where Rebecca was, drinking another cup of soda as they posed together. I took the picture of them together as Muchiko bowed to both of us and walked in the opposite direction.

“Wow. Nice earrings,” said Rebecca as soon as Muchiko was out of earshot. “I couldn’t see those fitting in that big box.”

“Yeah well, they did,” I said.

I was about to start the anime adventure of a lifetime, when Rebecca pulled me, turned me around and saw a group of cosplayers outside and looked as though they were about to have a outdoor photoshoot.

“C'mon can we go see?” asked Rebecca.

“But I wanted to meet up with some voice actresses first,” I said. “Besides, they’re not even in our same anime as we are.”

“That’s a really dumb reason don’t you think?”

I sighed and smiled. I figured a nice morning photoshoot would warm me up for some anime shopping. I also figured as much that this would be something for Rebecca to get herself happy again and not think of Shawn much. So I went with it.

As we stepped outside to an area just outside of the convention, there were many cosplayers from an anime I vaguely remembered hearing about. Some wore black, others were dressed like fancy twelve year olds who were rich, but the majority of them wore a red jacket, red wigs, and a plastic chainsaw. A really interesting group of cosplayers. One of the cosplayers, who were not with the group but across the street with a camera looked at me and said, “Hey, go with the group. It would look like a nice crossover.”

“Well, I don’t know,” I said. I honestly did not want to be rude and interrupt any type of photoshoots they were doing. They looked a whole lot more experienced than I did.

“Oh go ahead Kathy. I’ll be taking the picture. And it’s your birthday so why not?” said Rebecca.

I gave her a huge smile. It was my first time cosplaying and I was already invited to a cosplay group shot. How exciting. I ran happily to the side where the one who were dressed in red were. The majority of them were girls on that side. Some were guys, but most of them were girls. That put an even bigger smile on my face. I always thought girls cosplayed characters a lot better than guys.

I stood there and gave an okay pose for Rebecca to work with. Rebecca was across the very small street on the bottom of the outdoor convention area smiling. Everything was working as well as it should’ve been. Then there was the strong scent of oranges. Oh boy, it couldn’t be...

Rebecca was going to take another picture, when suddenly one of the cosplayers next to her grabbed her by the neck and pulls out a gun. I knew for a fact that this had nothing to do with an anime scene in the first place, so I knew this wasn’t any ordinary anime roleplay scene -an interesting scene by the way-. How did the person even sneak a gun in the first place? Where’s the TSA when you need them before the show?

“Hey what’s going on?!” I yelled.

The rest of the cosplayers that were with me began to say the same things I was saying. One of the cosplayers’ that was on my side of the street in particular took out a plastic chainsaw that actually revved up like a real one. She was really tall and got the jist that it was a real gun. Thank goodness someone was paying attention.

“Let her go!” she demanded.

“Quiet!” yelled the cosplayer with the gun.

That voice. *Oh no, not her again.*

“Harumi, let my friend go!” I said.

“You know this loon?” the girl with the chainsaw said in a strong Russian accent. It looked like she knew English really well.

As on cue, a small knife whizzed past me and pinned the gun to the wall. The orange scent that I smelled before came out from behind a pole as Muchiko gave a little scratch of her hair before stepping in front of me. First bananas, now oranges?

“She doesn’t concern you sis,” said Muchiko.

“Oh really?” asked Harumi, still holding on to Rebecca. I was in a frenzy of panic. This wasn’t the birthday party I had planned.

“Everyone get out of here, hurry,” I told the rest of the cosplayers who stood there, looking stunned. Something told me that the girl with the chainsaw -who undoubtedly was Natasha-wasn’t staying with us on our side of running away but rather staying with us on our side of the small street. I would as well, if I was a mad as hell Russian with a plastic chainsaw. As I turned around, the other two cosplayers who were on Harumi's side of the street both whipped out guns.

“Oh boy,” I said. “I should've taken my own advice.”

“Don’t worry little one,” said the forementioned Natasha, who looked around twenty-six years old. “The time for games is over! Release her, you evil demon of a child!”

Man she’s tough. Probably the best quote I've heard in years.

Muchiko nodded, acknowledging Natasha's help as the Russian did the same. Now I've got two nutcases to send birthday presents to. One's a mad scientist and one's a chainsaw wielding maniac. How fun.

“Enough,” said Muchiko as she took out what looked liked two small acorns out of her “little goody bag.”

“Well, you want to save her don’t you?” asked Harumi, with a keen smile. “Hand me Natasha, and I'll spare you this girl’s life.”

Forget I ever mentioned calling Muchiko and Natasha nutcases, because there was a real one standing right across from me. I was mouthing the words “be calm” under my breath to Rebecca without anything coming out of my voice. Rebecca and I actually learned to read mouths pretty well since we started being friends. Rebecca gave me a small nod.

“Trade me for Rebecca,” said Muchiko rather sternly. “If you want me sis, you would leave her alone.”

“Are you insane? Give me the Russian now!”

“Hell no! Unless you tell me what you want with her, then maybe I will consider it.”

“Don’t stand there and try to argue with me. You know you will never win.”

Natasha gave Harumi a long hard stare. “I don’t know who you are weirdo,” she said. “But you’re not touching me.”

“Surrender or the girl dies,” said Harumi, very frustrated.

Muchiko had two little acorns ready in her hand while I was trying my best to hopefully calm Rebecca down so she won’t have an embarrassing accident. I stepped in front of the street between the two groups. It was a risky maneuver, seeing as how two crazy sisters were on opposite sides of the street, but when your best friend is close to getting her brains blasted, you have no other option.

“Harumi! Let her go! Now!” I screamed. There was no common sense in my voice telling me that it was a stupid idea and to retreat. I’ve ignored the little voice in my head before. Usually when I do that, it often results to me having a very grave injury; thanks to Jessie of course. This one was not even close to just calling it a “normal injury.” This was as well as signing my own death warrant.

Then we looked at Harumi who took out a test tube from her pocket filled with purplish liquid.

“I'll pour this down her throat if I don’t get what I want,” said Harumi.

Natasha looked really angry. “You hide behind a hostage and are scared to face me. You said you wanted to try and capture me. So go ahead and try.”

She revved up the plastic chainsaw and was ready to charge. I didn’t know what kind of damage a plastic chainsaw would do to human flesh, but by the way Natasha’s face looked, I wouldn’t want to be Harumi right now. Muchiko pulled me back to our side of the street. Then Natasha stopped on the middle of the street where I was a few seconds earlier. Rebecca elbowed Harumi in the gut and started running towards me. Idiot. That is something you do not do if a maniac has you hostage. Even a maniac wearing cosplay.

Muchiko threw the acorns at Harumi's cohorts while I ducked. Harumi threw the purple liquid at Rebecca while Natasha stood frozen in the middle of the street ready to grab Rebecca with her arms outstretched. At an instance, it all felt like slow motion. Both objects the sisters threw were thrown at the same time. Muchiko wanted to try and knock the purple liquid tube on the floor but missed. Unfortunately, Harumi threw the liquid at Rebecca and landed right on target. The acorns were filled with gas and landed on the floor near Harumi and her hooligans. Harumi looked as though she knew it was coming because she made a loud whistle and a car came by, picked them up and they were gone. As for Rebecca, the liquid hit on the head like a hammer as she fell down. The car drove off. Natasha and I came to Rebecca's aid. Damn Rebecca, very stubborn.

“Hey buddy, you okay?” I asked, as worried as I could be. She was extremely pale and breathing heavily.

“I....I think so,” she said struggling to talk. This was turning out to be really scary.

“Let me help you up-”

“Don’t touch her!” said Muchiko.

“Hey what’s the big idea?” asked Natasha.

“She needs medical help!” I shouted.

“I’m sorry Katherine. Nothing will save her,” said Muchiko.

I started to grab Muchiko’s collar, when I turned to stare at Rebecca, really scared that I couldn’t do anything. If someone who knew Chemistry like the back of her hand said not to touch her, either it was poison or something way worse. That idea got me frightened. There was no help around our area, only the four of us. A thought followed up on my mind that someone must’ve have contacted security.

“We really have to go,” I said hurriedly. “Like now.”

Rebecca got up by herself. I swallowed at the paleness of her face.

“Chii, what’s the matter? I feel fine,” she asked Muchiko.

“In a few seconds, you probably won’t look fine,” she said.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Muchiko looked at her and frowned. A tear ran down Rebecca’s eye, but she wasn’t crying. Natasha, since she had gloves -part of her cosplay outfit- touched it and gave it a little lick.

“Tastes like salt,” she said.

Tears were salty, but looking at Natasha's face after the taste, too salty was a bad thing. I kept staring at Rebecca, not knowing what do, and hoping Muchiko had some sort of magic potion to rescue her. The look on her face said it all; she had nothing.

“Rebecca? Are you doing alright?” I asked.

She just stared at me, a confused look on her face and continued crying salt. I was about to grab her -no matter what Muchiko said not to do- and run to the hospital, but then the scariest thing I have ever seen from the whole situation began to happen: Rebecca’s cheeks began flowing rivers of salt.

“What’s happening to me? Stomach pains...my bones feel weak. Kathy....Kathy. Help me!” she screamed.

Salt was continuing to flow down her cheeks, then out of her mouth as if she was vomiting. She leaned on me and kept crying. I just looked at her with tears of my own. In five seconds my best friend was left in a hill of salt. Only the picture of us was left on the small salt hill. Muchiko laid there in stunned silence. Natasha took the picture from the hill and placed it on her back pocket while she grabbed me and comforted me, very silent as well. I didn’t care why Harumi wasn’t in a mental institution yet; I just wanted my friend back. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t be the case. Muchiko grabbed me from Natasha’s hands as I smacked her.

“What was that all about?!! You let her get killed?!” I shouted.

“Listen it wasn’t my fault,” she said.

“Not your fault? No offense to Natasha, but we protected who you said you wanted to protect which is fine. You couldn’t even save my best friend!”

Natasha stared at both of us in complete confusion. She shook her head, looked at the hill of salt and said softly: “And Lot's wife disobeyed the Lord's command by looking back at the doomed city, and was turned into a pillar of salt,” while giving it a blessing.

Both Muchiko and I looked at Natasha as she knelt there in silence. I knew that quote very well from the Bible of course, but the shocking thing was that I just experienced it firsthand. Harumi was way past being a psycho; she was a psycho who used the Bible as a terrorist handbook. To add to the festivities, we got a Russian nerd who knew these passages by heart. By the way she held me again from grabbing me away from Muchiko, she reminded me of my older sister Jessie. I pushed Natasha’s hands away gently and started to walk away.

Rebecca was gone. She was really gone. I couldn’t believe it. The one person who I trusted among everything else, the one person who wouldn’t mind having a party just eating ice cream the entire day, and the one person who gave me probably the best birthday gift ever. I took hold of my necklace and kept it under my shirt. I didn’t know how in the world I was going to tell her parents about what happened, but I wasn’t going to be around when the police start to question me. We prepared for everything together. I never thought I would start preparing for her eulogy speech. I wanted to cry, but the tears couldn’t come out. I kept walking down when Muchiko called out to me.

“Hey where are you going?” she asked.

“Hey, you better leave me alone.”

“Wait a minute,” she replied, but I kept on walking. Two people I knew were dead and her crazy sister was behind all of it. I wanted to deal with her myself, but then Natasha chased me down and stopped me.

“Hey kiddo, relax. I’m very sorry about your friend, but we will extract vengeance upon that witch of a woman,” she said. I guess I had to really admire her determination, among other things. I turned to Muchiko.

“What does our new friend here have to do with all of this?” I asked really confused. I didn’t mind the company at all. I just wanted to know what kind of business she had in all of this. Natasha was innocent enough and she didn’t look the type who would flip the script in front of us. Probably a bit scared of Muchiko.

Muchiko looked at Natasha. “Show Katherine your tattoo.”

“Wait a minute. How do you know about that?” asked Natasha.

“Just do it, okay?”

She sighed and rolled up her right sleeve. It was a tattoo of a girl with a pipe. Behind the girl was a Russian flag. I still looked dumbfounded.

“That’s my friend Anya,” said Natasha.

“And that’s Harumi's target,” said Muchiko.

“And why is she important. Is she a part of the KGB or something?” I asked like an idiot. I hoped for my sake that Natasha wasn’t offended by it.

“Well she is somewhat….in a weird way. She’s also-”

“Nevermind. We’ll see what we can do to rescue her.”

“Sure. No problem.”

“We just need someplace to hide.”

Now this wasn’t making sense at all. Was this Anya character rich or something, or was there something that Muchiko wasn’t telling me. Muchiko got in her blue Jeep Cherokee. Without saying another word, I also got in. Natasha sat in the back with me. She was trying her best to cheer me up, but after what I just saw, that will be really hard to do. I was just completely angry. I still didn’t know how Harumi was able to escape unscathed. I remembered the promise I made with Rebecca. I guess I’m going to fulfill it after all.