

The Strange Medium Guy with a Bad Haircut

(aka Pearson "Doc" Mui")

Presents

Anime Detective: Birthday Blues

My Dad once told me that being a cop and being a detective are two different things. A cop enforces the law: They follow orders and, ideally, make sure that nobody gets hurt. They dot their I's, cross their T's, and make sure that everything is settled to the best of their ability. A cop is frequently overworked, underappreciated and always the butt of so many jokes by the average citizen. We're often seen as an unfortunate, but necessary part of a functioning society, the bully that's on their side. Politicians love and loathe us in the same breath.

A detective, on the other hand, is a seeker of truth. You get a mystery and you follow it through. It could be a niggling little oddity that doesn't quite sit right. It could be a big murder case, a robbery, or maybe just some poor soul who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. A good detective is suspicious of many, trusting of few and determined to see things to the end.

To enforce the law and to seek the truth aren't always goals that are aligned. But that's the world my family's lived

in for three generations. It's what they call a "blue line." Each generation of my family has at least one cop. Grandpa Adam and Dad are lucky that they've been able to retire. There are days when I see retirement as this distant, unattainable goal.

Do I sound fatalistic? I try not to be. But when you work with living anime characters who can wreck buildings, blast roads or otherwise ruin your day, I think that I'm justified. Honestly, there isn't a day where I'm surprised that I have all my limbs. I don't want to think about how many close calls I've had during my career. But that's the way things are.

I'm Andrew Mays. I'm the Anime Detective. Some people call me the liaison between Animates and regular humans. Me, I think that I'm just the poor idiot who was still standing when everyone else took a step back.

Well, I could think of worse people for the job. There were any number of rotten apples in the department who would have loved a "cushy" assignment. Every job has those people--the lazy, the entitled, the ones who throw their weight around and the ones who just love using the badge as a bludgeon. One of those people in the wrong position would have just flared things up even further.

I knew a guy like that back in high school. For me, he was the epitome of everything you didn't want in a police officer. He was a smooth-talker who could make almost anyone feel special just talking to him. He had four inches and 20 pounds of muscle on me--which made sense, since he was the quarterback of the football team. He was with the "in" crowd, surrounded by his teammates, cheerleaders and those who hoped that some of his awesomeness would rub off on them. And he'd stab you in the back with a smile if it suited him.

His name was Andy Hero. Kids back then joked that he was "everyone's hero."

We had a few, superficial qualities in common. Like me, he came from a blue line dating back to his great-grandfather. We both wanted to continue the line. We both had the same first name.

Other than that, we had nothing in common. Back then, I was the stiff who was always trying to do the right thing. He was the guy who smoothed over everything with a smile and a few words to the right people. I was fairly well-known, but he was the popular one.

There'd been whispers about him, of course. Some of his dates had come to school with bleary eyes and more makeup than

usual. Some of the smart kids had dragged themselves to school and handed him a sheaf of papers. It was all very suspicious and nothing that I could prove--because nobody was willing to talk bad about Andy Hero.

You know how monsters get to be so bad? They're supported and enabled. It's a conspiracy of silence that emboldens them. I wanted to investigate, to drag the truth into the light, but nobody wanted to cooperate. Hell, my girlfriend from back then shrugged and said that it would all work out. She'd pointedly ignored all the evidence. Everyone did, because Andy Hero was the golden boy--a perfect, untouchable paragon with a bright future ahead of him. Never mind the possibility that he was a cheat, a liar and possibly an abuser. Nobody wanted to hear that in those "innocent" high school days. In fact, the yearbook paired us up as the "dynamic duo of law-enforcement."

His "meteoric rise" ended when we both went to the police academy. His father was a Lieutenant, my dad wasn't. He breezed through just about every physical test and apparently aced every written one as well. He probably would have ended up in a nice, cushy assignment with plenty of exposure if I hadn't caught him buying answers from a test proctor. The fact that some female recruits suddenly started wearing extra makeup without looking at him was also a big factor.

The last I saw of the guy was at our 10 year reunion. It was a little after I'd first met Nene and partnered up with Ryo. I didn't feel comfortable asking Nene to be my date for the evening. I also didn't like Ryo's suggestion that I rent a "companion" for the night and claim that she was my girlfriend. That last crack got him a one-ton mallet to the head.

What? Look, Ryo's an Animate. He's damn near indestructible and a holy terror in a fight. But this counted as a disciplinary measure. All he got was a bump on his head that faded away in no time. Besides, if I'd knocked him out the window again, it would have been taken out of the budget. Oh, and he probably would have made a nuisance of himself when he recovered.

Anyway, the reunion wasn't terrible, but it wasn't the greatest experience I'd had. Most of the people I'd been close to back then weren't there. My best friend Jake was out of town at the time and couldn't make it. My gal pal Tricia was on a hot story and left a message in her absence. I was actually kind of grateful that my ex-girlfriend wasn't there.

I tried not to choke on my punch when I saw the blown-up picture of me and Andy Hero. Of course, someone had pinned the caption of "the dynamic duo of law-enforcement" under the picture. And just next to the picture was Andy Hero regaling

the crowd of his glory days in a cheap suit and forty extra pounds around the middle.

He caught sight of me and suddenly, I wished that I hadn't left my trenchcoat in the coat check. I wasn't packing tonight, but it would have been nice to have the one-ton mallet around for...discouragement.

He'd tried to pin me with a lance of pure hatred from those green eyes of his. It was a look that said "you ruined my life. Look at me now. This is all your fault."

For a moment, I might have felt guilty about calling him out. Then again, the guy had been coasting on connections and charisma for pretty much his entire life. Add to that his way with women and he would probably have been the worst apple in the barrel.

Look, I'm not a big believer in "shameful joy," but I do believe in "just desserts." I only wish that someone had stopped him earlier, like in high school.

I returned his glare with a little salute with my punch cup. For a moment, he looked like he was going to surge through the crowd of former football players and cheerleaders. Then he settled down and went back to reliving the glory days of old--before he sold used cars (or I'm given to understand).

Why was I concentrating on this one guy? I wasn't usually one to morbidly reminisce about the past. There were times when it was tough getting through the day.

I guess my mind was wandering because I was getting older, and you think of things that might have been. And there wasn't a day that signified that better than my birthday. I'd been dreading this for a while, since something always went wrong on my birthday. If my Dad wasn't pulled into an emergency call, something happened to another family member. I've had my older brother choke on a chicken bone, my little sister go berserk around pretty boys and my mom nearly get run over by an ambulance. Something was bound to happen, especially on my dreaded 30th birthday.

I'm not big on celebrations. I'm just not a very festive person. But as tempted as I was to just call in or claim that a portal had sucked me in, I had to face the party that was waiting for me at the precinct.

Okay, it was kind of flattering that the precinct thought well enough of me to go through the trouble. It would have been a real shame to let everyone down--especially Nene. I hate disappointing her.

Okay, Nene and I might have this sort of...thing. Maybe it's a thing. "Things" might involve sudden, inappropriate urges to hug her from behind and kiss the top of her head, right?

I grunted at my so-called not-love-life. I had to get prepped for work and a party.

Twenty minutes later, I was as ready as I'd ever be for work. I'd had an actual healthy breakfast in preparation for the calorie-laden buffet that the Chief usually preferred. I'd opened my door and stopped short.

Sailor Pluto was standing in front of my door. Now, you could call her a lot of things. She was pleasantly leggy, with the appropriate curves. She had a sense of humor, but it was subtle, almost fey. She was powerful, well-meaning, and damned cryptic.

That made me worry for the uncertain, hesitant expression on her face. Sailor Pluto did not show weakness often--and never in front of a regular Joe like me.

"Something I can help you with?" I asked automatically before mentally kicking myself. The idea of a guy like me helping someone as powerful as her was, honestly, pretty laughable.

She stood there, looking uncomfortable. It was like she was considering her next words very carefully.

"I am," she confirmed. For a moment, her discomfort was replaced by a tiny hint of mischief.

I decided to roll with that for a minute or two. Besides, with everything on her plate, a moment or two of humor couldn't hurt.

"So, what's with the long face?" I asked. "Did you lose a staring contest with that guy in the encounter suit?"

Pluto's lips twitched ever so slightly. "Hardly," she replied.

"Did the Doctor stand you up for a lunch date?"

Now, there was both a twinkle and a hint of annoyance in her eyes. "Which one?"

Oof. Okay, let's try another subject. "Let me guess: You tried to get Quantum Leap back on the air."

This time, she actually suppressed a chuckle. "Detective, even I have limits." She paused. "There's only so much I can do against the mindset of a network executive."

Well, I had to give her that. "So, what brings you to my very humble apartment?"

For a moment, she looked pained. Then she straightened up.

"You're going to need some very, very strong coffee," she said. "The kind that isn't normally from around here."

Criminately. That was something I generally played pretty close to the vest, so to speak. Everyone at the precinct hated when I made the coffee. Super sober cops aren't much fun to be around. More than one of them had sworn to find and torch whatever plantation I sourced the good stuff from.

I winced. "You know where I get that from?"

She gave me a bemused look from those deep, red eyes of hers. "The Librarian is a very gracious host, banana peels notwithstanding. He's very appreciative of your contributions."

"I'll bet," I deadpanned. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"You already have," she said calmly.

I resisted the urge to groan and rub the bridge of my nose. I'd barely had my first cup of coffee and I had to try to figure out twisty time travel stuff. Even when I'm fully awake, that twists my brain into a pretzel.

"You'll get used to it," she said, trying to sound reassuring.

"Really?"

She paused. "Well, no. You wouldn't get used to it, but I am. And I wouldn't worry too much about being late for work."

I considered the implications of that statement. "You didn't stop time, did you? You know that never leads to anything good."

"`Stop?'" She shook her head. "No. It's just a little slow outside--long enough for two more messages."

"Those being?" I prompted.

"When the blight is removed from the tree, the trio shall return," she said sagely.

"I have no idea what that means," I grumbled. "And the second message?"

"The one who claims to be the happiest is the one who is in the most pain," she declared. "Happy Birthday to you, and good luck."

"What do you--" was all I got before she vanished.

Okay, call me crazy, but if you get an Ominous Sign and Portent from Sailor Pluto, it's not something you just brush off. Besides, she'd let her cryptic facade down long enough for

me to see that she'd been straining. I wasn't sure if I wanted to know what could test her limits.

I tried not to mull it over on the drive to the precinct house. I should emphasize the word "tried" and I failed miserably. See, some detectives take cases for the thrill of accomplishment or the intellectual challenge. Others like the fame and the glory that solving big cases gives them. Still others take mysteries as one paycheck after another, solving them mechanically and efficiently.

Once I got a mystery in my head, it annoyed me to no end. My Dad said that it offended my sense of order, nipping like a persistent little puppy, but without any of the charm. This was going to bug me until I got everything settled--which, come to think of it, was probably what Sailor Pluto wanted.

For once, the drive to the precinct was pretty smooth. Checking in, I groaned as I saw the door to my office festooned with decorations, complete with "Happy 30th Birthday" draped over the top. I tried to glare at some passing cops, but they turned away with a snicker. I half-expected them to hand me a cane, some Geritol and maybe some Depends in celebration of my impending decrepitude.

Thankfully, what awaited me behind the door was a lot more welcome. At my desk was a birthday card and nothing else, just as I requested from the Chief. And next to my desk was an adorable redhead with emerald eyes that lit up when she saw me.

"Good morning!" Nene greeted me brightly. "Or should I say `Happy Birthday?' Speaking of which, I got you a present." She handed me a piece of paper.

I frowned as I looked it over. "This is an organization chart," I said.

"And?" Her eyes were shining with mischief, as if she were playing a prank that was about to be sprung.

I took another look. "Your name isn't under my name and Ryo's."

She nodded. "And?"

I frowned. "Your name is under the Chief's. You're going to be working directly under him?"

"Technically...though I'm not going anywhere," she said slyly. "I might have added network troubleshooter and computer forensics expert to my title. So, you know, I'm not just your Girl Friday--is that the right term?"

"Sounds about right," I agreed. "So, why the big change?"

She hung her head and a sweatdrop rolled down the side of her face. She stayed that way for a moment before shaking her head.

"Andy, you do know that I like you, right?" she said, sounding vaguely exasperated.

"Pretty sure that you don't kiss people you hate," I remarked.

"You see, that's the thing. I don't want anyone to think that you're pulling rank on me for--us." She twiddled her index fingers together and blushed mightily. It was adorable.

Criminately, that was something that I should have thought about. The last thing either of us needed in order to **be** an "us" was to have any higher-ups talk about impropriety and power dynamics in a relationship. And since, until now, I was her boss, going too far was a big no-no.

Nene had solved that with a little creative rearrangement. True, she probably should have consulted with me first, but--well, I couldn't argue with the end result. She'd managed to eat her cake and eat it, too. It was kind of flattering, when I thought about it, since I never considered myself much of a prize. She wanted to stick with me and avoid trouble. That said a lot.

"Smart move," I told her, and she beamed. "And I notice that you are on an `as-needed' basis for assignments. Gives you a lot of flexibility."

"Y-yeah..." She blushed. "So...if we were, say, holding hands or other stuff--nothing naughty, I swear!"

"Really?" came a voice from behind the door. "Nothing naughty? Why do I even come to work, anyway?"

Both Nene and I sighed. "Come on in, Ryo," I said.

Ryo Saeba sauntered into the office. He was my superior in height, muscles and hormones. I trusted him with my life, but I really didn't trust him around the ladies for the most part. Lately, though, Ryo and Kaori had been making efforts to buck their status quo.

"You two are just so cute together," he remarked. "So, should I make an appointment for a love hotel anytime soon?"

"NO!" Nene and I exclaimed. Then we blinked simultaneously.

Ryo chuckled as he settled in his desk. "Are you sure? I know some places that offer some really great discounts. They also offer discreet billing, so that the department won't raise any eyebrows."

Nene and I shared a look. Ryo was a decent guy at heart, but there was only so much ribbing that I was willing to take. It was time to go on the offensive a little.

"About as discreet as your neck?" I remarked.

Ryo's hand moved ever so slightly to his neck, most likely to cover a hickey that wasn't there. He stopped himself, looking first confused, then annoyed.

"Cheap shot," he muttered.

"So, how's couples therapy going with you two?" I asked. "As I recall, the one that you're going to has reinforced walls in their office."

"It's come in handy," he admitted. "Kaori doesn't hold back when she vents." He snorted. "Never thought I'd be talking to a shrink about relationships."

A lot of people had wondered why I didn't just dump Ryo as a partner. After all, the guy was a walking sexual harassment suit just waiting to happen. Most people reasoned that I tolerated his shenanigans because he was excellent at his job-- and I could administer immediate discipline when I had to.

That was true. But that was only part of the story.

One day, I started to think about what made Ryo tick. I looked past the hormones, the muscles, the annoying goofball behavior and the superhuman feats. I talked to his friends and looked up his history. What I saw was a guy who'd lost a lot and just kept losing. Some of the things he'd endured would have broken another man. Hell, I don't think that I could have survived half of what he'd been through.

During the time when Ryo and Kaori had been on the outs, he got the job done. But he seemed to have been just going through the motions. Once he started to patch things up with Kaori, he seemed to settle down a little bit--for a given value of "settled down," that is.

Funny what love does to a guy. I speak from experience.

Any further rumination and analysis was broken by the phone ringing. With a sigh, I noted the Chief's extension and answered it.

"Mays," I said, as crisply as I could on my first cup of coffee.

"Andrew, I'm going to need you to get to Teensborough. There've been reports of--" he sighed heavily. "Spontaneous reality alteration."

"Who is it?" I asked dully. It must have been important for the Chief to call me in on this.

"Haruhi Suzumiya," he said, his voice leaden. "I figured I'd send you in first before people started panicking. She seemed pretty steamed about something."

I did not groan. I did not slap my palm into my face in annoyance. I may have tightened my grip on the office phone, but it wasn't as if the thing was going to break.

"Chief, the last time she started losing her temper, people got trapped in those enclosed spaces of hers," I reminded him. "And why me?"

"It's not like you haven't fixed some big things before," he reminded me.

This time, I did groan. A little while back, there'd been a case where reality itself was being warped by perfumes and colognes made from self-insert author egos. Ordinary people who were dosing themselves with that stuff found themselves jumping across buildings, stopping cars with their bare hands and attracting harems of their favorite types of characters.

No, I'm not kidding about that last part. I wish I were. My old friend Jake had to practically peel about a dozen girls with glasses who kept following him around. Oh, and that was

after he'd mysteriously obtained a suit of cyborg armor--which was odd because he was an ordinary guy like me.

Okay, you can stop laughing now. When you take away the one ton mallet, the bulletproof trenchcoat and the pocket that leads to Who Knows Where in said trenchcoat, I'm just an ordinary Joe.

There's an old saying: "The reward for work well done is the opportunity to do more." So, I guess that little incident cemented me as the go-to guy for the truly weird stuff. The thing is, when you've gone to the go-to guy too much, he becomes the went-to guy. That is, you went to him before, but not anymore because he got burned out.

Still, the Chief wouldn't do that to me. He was my Dad's partner and he's known me since I was a kid. I had faith that he wouldn't put me in a situation that I couldn't get out of.

"All right, I'll check it out," I grumbled. "If she hasn't already gone critical, it shouldn't take too long."

"Good luck," the Chief said before he hung up. I put down the phone and sighed heavily.

"What's wrong?" Nene asked.

"We have to calm someone down before they wreck reality as we know it," I said, perhaps adding a lugubrious tone in my voice.

What? "Lugubrious" is a perfectly valid word for how I felt. Just because I'm a cop doesn't mean that I can't use fancy or florid language. You'd be amazed at how sometimes I try to spice up my reports.

"Who?" Nene asked.

"Haruhi Suzumiya."

Both Ryo and Nene grimaced. It was as if they'd rehearsed it.

"Of course it couldn't be a sexy lady," Ryo grumbled. "No, it has to be a teenager with a terrible attitude." He sighed. "Too bad. She looked good in a bunny suit. Probably would look even better if she were legal," he mused.

"Weren't you leering at Sailor Mars a few times?" I asked.

"I was **flattering** her," he said. "I mean, really--I like **women**, not teeny tiny jailbait. You know, women with long legs, slender waists and full--"

He stopped short as I took out my mallet from Who Knows Where. He put his hands into his pockets, away from his chest where he'd been gesturing.

"You know, dating hasn't mellowed you out any," Ryo observed. "The offer for a love hotel discount still stands."

WHAM! The floor shook as I slammed Ryo to the ground.

Nene sighed. "It's not even 9:00 yet," she complained. "So, who's going with you?"

"I'm dragging Ryo along with me," I said, grabbing the collar of his suit jacket. "It may be a simple run, but it's still in Teensborough."

Nene winced. She knew that the place was filled to the brim with not-so-ordinary high school students. Along with Mechatown, Teensborough had the highest number of people with Licenses to Run Rampant. As long as they stayed in their assigned area, the insurance companies wouldn't go after them.

Okay, yeah, it's a crazy system. But somehow, it helps make the city work. I'd hate to think of what would happen if it didn't work.

"So, I guess I'll wait here," she said with a sigh. "It shouldn't take long, right? You still have a birthday party to attend."

"Right, right," I said, distinctly lacking much enthusiasm. "I wonder what kind of gag gifts the precinct is going to present to me this time, now that I'm an old man of thirty?"

"Thirty is not old," she protested. "You look good for thirty!"

I arched an eyebrow at her. "I look good for thirty?" I asked slowly.

The implication hit her. "You look good," she reiterated. "I mean, some guys your age would have started to let themselves go, but you keep fit. Well, you're eating healthier with fewer donuts, but you could probably lay off the coffee a little."

"Unless you want to carry around a defibrillator, I'm going to need that coffee," I joked. "This won't take long."

Driving to Teensborough in the late morning rush was a challenge. Thankfully, traffic started getting clearer the closer we got to North High School. Of course, that may have

been because cars and buses had STARTED DISAPPEARING BEFORE OUR EYES.

Ahem. Sorry. But when you see things just wink out for no reason, that definitely wasn't a good sign.

The radio hissed with static. Then, an oddly calm female voice came through.

"Detective Mays," the voice began. "You are attempting to intercept Suzumiya?"

I grabbed the radio. "This is Mays. Who's this?"

"Yuki Nagato," she said quietly.

I blinked. "How did you--?"

"I am manipulating data to transmit to your specific frequency," she explained in a near-monotone voice. "The Data Overmind determined that you would be the most likely respondent to the current situation."

"That being...?" I prompted.

"Suzumiya and Kyon had a disagreement. Suzumiya's dissatisfaction is now at a critical state. As a result, she is generating random closed spaces. These should dissipate when she stabilizes."

"So, I calm her down," I said. "How do I do that?"

Yuki hesitated. "Kyon is the key. Though often in conflict, she frequently defers to his suggestions. Find Kyon and bring him to Suzumiya."

"And what are you doing?"

She hesitated. "Asahina, Koizumi and I are navigating in a closed space."

I tried not to roll my eyes. Of course they'd be sidelined.

"I'll do what I can," I said before the connection cut out. Replacing the radio, I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

Ryo groaned as he came to. "So, what's the plan?" he grumbled. "And you didn't have to hit so hard, you know."

"Plan?" I asked. "You search the school grounds for Kyon and get him over to where Haruhi is. After that, hopefully things will settle down."

"What, you don't trust me around her?" he asked. The guy almost sounded offended.

"I've got a better chance at calming her down than you do. After all, you've got a reputation," I pointed out.

He grinned. "It's well-earned."

I parked the car in the school parking lot. People seemed to be fading in and out of existence as closed spaces formed randomly around the campus. Ryo hit the ground running as soon as I stopped.

That left me to face off against a girl with god-like powers. Yeah, I'm living large now!

It actually wasn't that difficult to find Haruhi. She was sulking on one of the benches outside the school, utterly oblivious to the chaos she was causing. Then again, it probably would have been worse if she knew that she was responsible for all the chaos.

Contrary to popular belief about cops, I can get along very well with young people. I waited for her to look up, noting that her eyes were red.

"Yeah?" she asked, her voice husky.

"Mind if I have a seat?" I asked.

"You're a little old for high school," she pointed out. She didn't mean it as an insult, but it still stung a little. "Go ahead, nobody else is here."

I sat down. "I'm Andrew Mays, the Anime Detective.
Something bothering you?"

Her nose flared as she sighed heavily. "It's nothing."

Right, it was "nothing." "Nothing" was causing closed spaces to appear out of nowhere, trapping people. I didn't want to snap at her, though. I mean, she was a reality warper. The last thing I wanted was to get wiped out of existence for saying the wrong thing.

"You want to talk about it?"

She eyed me suspiciously. "Am I in trouble?"

"Nah, I was just in the neighborhood," I said breezily.

"So, dare I ask what happened?"

She sniffled. "Nothing."

I didn't say anything. Instead, I lifted an eyebrow and waited for her to talk.

"He just doesn't get it," she said at last. "I mean, what is so wrong with what I want?"

I decided to let her rant a little bit. After all, it was easier than trying to talk her down.

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to explore another world," she said. "Maybe there's a version of this world that's more interesting than this one."

The hackles on my neck started rising. Looking around, the area around the bench started to twist and warp, complete with ripples.

"I mean, this world is so boring," she said, punctuating that with a grunt. "Do I actually make a difference in the world? Am I actually unique?"

"Miss, you might want to calm--"

"I'm TIRED of being calm!" she exclaimed. "Kyon doesn't understand me when I'm calm! Why do you think we have all these arguments?"

Because your worldview is so odd, it's hard to get a handle on what you want, I didn't say. Of course, Kyon was the only person who tried to really relate to her. All the others were there to pacify her or minimize the damage she could do.

"Look, I've seen some people argue all the time," I said, trying to sound reasonable. "I mean, I know one couple--"

"Couple?!" she exclaimed, blushing furiously. "We--we're not a couple! Never in a million years!"

And that was when the tenuous soap bubble that was surrounding us decided to pop. I vaguely heard Ryo screaming my name as things started to fade. Everything went dark as I found myself tumbling backwards.

Have you ever taken a header off of a skyscraper? Or maybe you were in such a hurry that you forgot to put on your parachute before you jumped off the plane? Or maybe some joker told you to lean over a tall bridge and, just for laughs, they smack you on the back and you topple over? I mean, I'm sure that somebody found that funny, but not the poor sap who decided to demonstrate that yes, gravity works.

You know, I could say something descriptive, poetic and utterly contradictory about the fall. I could say that it lasted an eternal second or something like that. But the fact is, I wasn't really concentrating on the fall.

I couldn't see anything, but I could definitely hear voices. And one of them sounded suspiciously like the parrot from Disney's Aladdin.

"Place your bets! Place your bets!" the voice crowed. "We got one, count 'em, one mere mortal who's been sucked into a dimensional vortex! He's a classic of a poor schmuck who was in the wrong place at the wrong time and now, he's paying for it!

Round and round the dimensions go and where he stops, nobody knows!"

I grimaced. Crimminately, I knew that someone upstairs had an odd sense of humor about my place in the universe, but now people are placing bets on me? Are you kidding?!

"Hey, it's nothing personal, Mays!" the voice said. "When we see someone as connected as you, of course you're gonna attract some attention! Now, where are you going to end up?" The voice seemed to be rubbing his hands in glee. "Maybe you'll land in a dimension where carnivorous plants are the dominant life form and you're on the menu! Or maybe you'll end up in a post-apocalyptic wasteland! Oh, how about this--you end up in a world where everything is the opposite of what you know? How does that sound?!"

"That sounds terrible," I muttered. "Why me?"

"Hey, I don't make the rules!" the voice said. "You're the one with all the connections, right? I mean, you know a lot of people, including some honest to goodness GODDESSES! So yeah, you MIGHT have attracted some attention for those of us who bop around the cosmos."

"Oh yay, lucky me," I said without much enthusiasm. I noted that I was still falling, but I didn't feel any wind. At least I hadn't started spinning around or anything.

"Yeah, we don't want you tossing your cookies on the way to wherever you're going," the voice agreed. Then he (?) sighed. "Well, tough luck, Mays. Looks like you're not headed to anyplace that's really exotic. Might want to watch yourself, because it's a world where the DDO's been."

"The DDO?" I repeated. "Who--?"

"Dynamic Disaster Organization, Mays. Without going into too much detail, let's just say that the world you're headed for isn't exactly a war zone, but it's not sleepy and peaceful either." The voice snorted. "Good luck! You're gonna need it!"

"Hey, you sound like that guy with the gibberish name--"

"It's NOT gibberish! In the Fifth Dimension, that's a perfectly valid--oh, crap, almost gave it away."

That was the last thing I heard before I landed on my back. It felt like soft grass, so I had that going for me, at least. It still knocked the wind out of me, but at least I didn't break anything. And I didn't hit my head on anything hard.

I laid on my back for a few moments, if only to stop the vertigo. At least it wasn't so bad that I needed a wastebasket.

Part of me wanted to get up and start looking right away for Haruhi. Another part of me said that I was in a different world, and that I had to get out ASAP. As curious as I might have been to see how things ended up in this world, I had to prioritize.

Okay, this was a different world. I had to keep cool and not act like George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life" when he ran through the corrupt streets of Pottersville, freaking out at each and every difference. No, wouldn't have done me any good, especially since I preferred to not get locked up.

It's like Sam Vimes said: A copper doesn't keep flapping his lip. He doesn't let on what he knows. His mind works like mad but his face is a blank. Until he's ready.

Yeah, I know Sam Vimes. We've had drinks together at Dupin's, a kind of interdimensional detectives' bar. Okay, he drinks fruit juice and nonalcoholic cocktails while I have my coffee. I haven't been on the streets nearly as long as he has, but neither of us are shiny, idealistic rookies anymore.

I'm a good cop, but I also have a good poker face. Something tells me I'm going to need it.

"Hey, Mister! Are you okay?" It was an adult male voice, but with authority melded with concern. I had a feeling it was a cop.

I opened my eyes. Sure enough, a cop was looking down on me. He was outfitted with a bulletproof vest, heavier than what I was used to seeing. He still looked fairly young, maybe in his mid-twenties, but I could tell that he'd seen some things that wouldn't go away.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I grunted. "Sorry officer, I just took a bit of a spill here."

"That takes a bit of doing," he said dubiously, "because somehow you're on the anime side of town. Do you happen to have your crossing pass?"

Oof. That wasn't a good sign. Where I come from, the various anime-related suburbs surround the city proper, with the possible exception of Ecchiville. That was done to help integrate Animates and humans.

Okay, I could try to bluff my way through this or I could play it straight. And judging by that wary look in his eyes, it was very likely that he was going to shoot first and ask questions later if I made the wrong move.

"I don't have one," I admitted. "I literally just got here."

"On the anime side of town? Near a high school?" the officer asked.

"Look, I can explain--" I began, just before he pulled his gun on me. He aimed straight for my head.

"Mister, you'd better keep your hands where I can see them. Now, explain to me why you're packing?"

Inwardly, I sighed. After Sailor Pluto's little warning, I decided to take my Glock out of Who Knows Where and strap it on. He must have caught sight of it. I didn't think that I'd get in trouble for it.

"I'm a cop," I explained. "I've got a permit."

He frowned. "You don't look like a cop that I know of. Everyone in the city knows to stay out of the anime side of town, especially near any of...**their** high schools!"

I tried not to narrow my eyes. It's not like we didn't have racists back in my city. A lot of them had banded together and called themselves "Natural Order," a group of "respectable citizens" who respected only "real" life and not Animates. Back

there, they'd done mostly protests, but it just took a few hotheads to make things flare up.

"Do you know every cop in the city?" I asked. "Look, if you grab my wallet, I've got my badge inside. Now, what I'm going to do is to show you the inside pocket of my trenchcoat and you can dig around from there." I said it slowly so that he wouldn't panic.

"Let me see your wallet," he ordered. "And keep your hands where I can see them."

I let him dig around my trenchcoat pocket. The fact that he hadn't sunk his hand in any deeper than a normal pocket worried me. But then again, at least he hadn't been sucked into the dimension where I usually keep my wallet.

"`Andrew Mays, Anime Detective,'" he read aloud. "Well that's odd, I've never heard of you."

"I'm kind of from out of town."

"Not that out of town," he countered. "The badge design is the same as mine. We're from the same precinct." He frowned.

"Wait, the Anime Detective office doesn't exist anymore."

"Really?"

"Yeah, they got rid of it a while back. Merged a lot of departments all together under the Multimedia Detective. Everything runs a lot smoother now that you don't have to run around like a headless chicken."

Whoa. All those departments under one person? One person handled anime, sentai and all the various genres? That didn't sound likely. Even in my department, we're frequently flooded with paperwork. Stan, the Sentai Detective, also had similar complaints. To have one person do all that meant that 1) they were extremely good at their job or 2) there wasn't all that much crime for them to take care of.

I ruled out option 2 immediately. The cop in front of me looked like he was almost ready for a war to break out, what with the vest and the heavy tactical gear. I mean, I know that in some police newsletters, you had to maintain the "warrior mentality," but this was ridiculous.

"Sounds interesting," I said, trying to keep my voice as bland as possible. The last thing I wanted to happen was for the guy to shoot me. And though it's true that my trenchcoat is bulletproof, I'd rather not have to find out whether or not this guy was packing Teflon rounds.

Thankfully, the decision had been taken out of my hands by a call from his radio. He took it out, still training his gun on my head.

"Wright here," he said in a stiff, clipped voice. "Yes sir, I've found the source of the disturbance. Yes sir, they're alive and well and--they claim to be a cop from our precinct, sir. No sir, I couldn't find anyone else at the site. Yes sir, I--sir, you want to meet this man? Sir, I don't think that's a good idea, as he is packing a--yes, sir. Yes, sir, I'll bring him in as a guest, if that's your order. Yes sir, Wright out."

Officer Wright holstered his gun and held out a hand. I took it and he levered me upright.

"This is your lucky day," he remarked. "Not only did I get to you before any of those Animates could swarm on you, but you get to meet my boss."

"`Lucky?'" I repeated. "What do you mean, `lucky?' And who's your boss, anyway?"

He jerked his head towards a nearby patrol car. It was a lot more reinforced than I was used to seeing in a police car. It was almost like a tank pretending to be a car. The only thing that was missing was a turret and maybe a machine gun on the side.

That wasn't a good sign. This was something that belonged in a war zone, not cruising along a highway. And the way that Wright was talking about Animates, it was like he had some kind of grudge against them.

Okay, that could wait until later. Right now, the important part was to find out more information about where I've landed.

At least he hadn't decided to cuff me. Still, he looked wary of me as I entered the back seat. I tried not to make any sudden moves. He seemed to relax slightly as he activated some kind of glass divider. It was probably bulletproof--and overkill, really. Then again, everything I've seen seems to be overkill compared to what I've seen back home.

"You're not on a riot squad, are you?" I asked, my voice muffled by the glass. "This looks like awfully heavy equipment."

Wright snorted. "This is standard issue stuff." He paused. "You know, the way you're acting, it's like you've never encountered Animates before. Nothing but trouble, all of them. If it weren't for them, I'd probably be walking a beat like a regular--" He stopped short, as if he'd said something

he shouldn't have. "Anyway, you've had some experience with Animates yourself, right?"

"Some," I allowed. "But they're not that much of a problem where I come from."

Okay, that was a lie. They weren't a problem in comparison to, say, a natural disaster like a hurricane or a nasty storm. Most Animates were pretty much ordinary people, power-wise. But for all the destructive potential that some of the stronger Animates had, at least most of them attempted to keep things under control. If they hadn't, the world probably would have been blown up a hundred times over.

Wright spared me a dubious glance. "You're not from around Toontown, are you? I can tolerate those guys. I would have gotten myself reassigned to there, but...the boss wouldn't hear of it."

"What's he like?" I asked.

"You'll find out when you get there. You still haven't answered my question," he reminded me.

"Well, that depends on whether or not I'm being arrested or interrogated," I pointed out. "I know how this goes."

He let out a small sigh. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

I kept quiet on the way there. It was one of those "soft skills" that a cop learned on the job. Casually getting information out of people without raising their defenses was part of being a cop. I wouldn't say that I was really sneaky about it, but at least I didn't give people the creeps when I did have to get some info.

The way there was oddly familiar, almost like back home. As I looked out the reinforced window, I could see the differences. There weren't any signs leading to Teensborough, Mechatown, Kawaiiville, or any of the other Animate urban centers. I did manage to catch sight of a few Animates in crowds, but they were all hunched over, trying not to draw attention.

That definitely wasn't a good sign. After the Miyu incident back home, regular people realized that they still had a long way to go in really accepting Animates. On the other side of the equation, Animates started getting pretty resentful of being treated as just line drawings. Things got pretty heated, with the Animate delegation calling regular folks "still life"--which, I'm given to understand, is meant to be something nasty.

I'm not going to say that my city's perfect. I'm not going to claim that we've eliminated all tension between regular

people and Animates. It's something that people have to work for--but not by riots and violence but by actually talking and listening to each other.

I didn't see anyone stop that Animate for their autograph. What I was seeing were people giving the Animate a wide berth, then shooting dirty looks at them. It definitely wasn't any kind of treatment that I'd be proud of, anyway.

What the hell had happened to this city? What had made them turn their backs on Animates like this?

In the back of my mind, I wondered where Haruhi might have gone. I wasn't in any position to search for her. Right now, the best I could do was to get some answers. Maybe I could coordinate with this "Multimedia Detective" so that I could find Haruhi and get out--assuming, of course, that this world had a means to put us back where we belonged.

There were way too many variables. Too many things were up in the air and I didn't have enough information.

Did I mention that I really hated mysteries? Part of me wasn't going to be satisfied until I'd found out where exactly history might have diverged.

On the way there, I caught a sight of the corner of Morgue Road and Baker Street. There was a small shop that declared

itself "Dupin's," an unassuming place. I smiled because, if things held constant, I might have found a little help there. Then again, this might have been an actual bakery or something else unhelpful. I made a note to check it out when I could.

The precinct house was the same, but different. You know that feeling that you get when you return to your childhood home, but everything's changed? The walls are smaller, the ceiling seems lower and that sense of homey comfort you had as a kid just wasn't there anymore?

This wasn't anything like that feeling. This was me trying to keep a grip on the fact that this wasn't my precinct, but it was so much like mine, the differences were all the more jarring.

I didn't see a single Animate on the walk in. Usually, I might catch Natsumi and Miyuki tuning up their car, or maybe Inspector Zenigata was searching for Lupin. I'd gotten along with them pretty well for the most part. Of course, there was always one cop that you wondered how they'd managed to stay on duty. Every once in a while, someone in Internal Affairs wouldn't do their job right, or they might have been bribed. As a result, you got crazy, corrupt cops like "Sleepy" Joe Estes, better known as "Mad Dog." Now there was a guy I would have

been glad to kick out of the precinct, if he hadn't already been busted for some nasty stuff.

People gave me odd looks as Wright escorted me. We went up a familiar flight of stairs to where my office should have been. I could have found my office drunk and blindfolded if I needed to--not that I'd been drunk very often or blindfolded.

Ryo, Nene and I only had one room on the entire second floor. Next door to us was Stan Tai, the Sentai Detective. There were other offices as well as some closets and the like.

This time around, there were only two doors that I could see. That in itself could have probably violated a fire code somewhere, since you needed multiple ways out.

That wasn't the shocker. Ever since Wright told me that the departments had been merged, I'd been preparing myself for who might have been in charge. Since Wright didn't recognize me, it was probably a safe bet that my counterpart (if I had one) wasn't running this office.

To my credit, I really tried not to react when I saw the name on the door. It was a name that I didn't expect to see anywhere near the police department--at least, not after I'd ruined his life.

The door read: "ANDY HERO, MULTIMEDIA DETECTIVE." And judging by the random scratches in the glass and on the letters, he'd been at this office for a while.

Andy Hero. Criminally, why the hell did it have to be Andy Hero?

"You recognize the name?" Wright asked. Obviously, I hadn't put on as good of a poker face as I'd thought.

"I knew a guy by that name," I said, trying to sound noncommittal. "Probably not the same guy, though."

Wright gave me another scrutinizing glare. "Probably not," he said. "If you did know him, you probably could have dropped his name and we would have avoided any...unfortunate misunderstandings."

Ah, there we went with the significant pause. There was the implication that Detective Hero shouldn't know about Wright pulling a gun on me instead of, well, helping me up. Since everything had to be documented, Wright would have had a difficult time explaining why he was about to shoot me. Or he might have been a cop who was on the take. Regrettably, that's been known to happen.

My nose twitched slightly as Wright opened the door. I was smelling something familiar and very unpleasant. It was like

someone had mixed every possible "manly" cologne or aftershave like Brut, Old Spice and others. It was a very familiar smell because I'd just had a case involving that same substance.

"You get used to it," Wright reassured me. "Detective Hero just has to have that cologne." He paused thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, I can't remember a time when he'd gone without that stuff. Maybe it's his lucky charm or something?"

"Or something," I muttered. I didn't say anything further.

That reality-altering perfume I was talking about earlier? There'd been two varieties. The first one was Mary Sue for the ladies. The second scent was for the men, called Power Trip. I'd been sprayed with the latter and it had been some pretty heady stuff.

If I was right, "Detective Hero" had been dousing himself with Power Trip, or whatever they called it here. That just complicated things more.

In the back of my mind, there was the faintest hope that this version of Andy Hero would have been different. Maybe this Andy Hero was actually a halfway decent human being instead of the fallen golden boy of his family. Maybe this was a guy that I could actually work with so that I could find Haruhi and get both of us home.

I had to drop that line of thinking. From what I'd seen, Animates were worse off here than back home. Hell, Wright was showing signs of being a long-time bigot against Animates. And any department who would encourage that kind of mindset probably wasn't going to be the most helpful.

"Wright!" a voice bellowed from behind the door. "Did you find whoever landed near the Northern border?"

Wright quickly opened the door and strode past multiple desks of officers. It was practically a duplicate of the first floor's layout, but with less room.

Andy Hero was...definitely not the way I remembered him. He still had blonde hair and green eyes. Looking at him, I knew that he was roughly the same height that I'd remembered him. The difference was in his build. The man's muscles rippled underneath his long-sleeved shirt. The guy that I knew hadn't been nearly as built. He made Ryo look emaciated in comparison. He looked like he could have bench-pressed a car in the street and barely break a sweat.

Criminately, no wonder Wright had such confidence in his boss. With muscles like that, it was a pretty foregone conclusion who would win most of the fights.

Andy Hero held up one finger as he typed on his computer. Then he grinned, and his teeth actually sparkled.

You've got to be kidding me. Who the hell has teeth that sparkle like that?

"So," Andy Hero began, "I was wondering who the new arrival was. And you're a cop, too." He smirked and I resisted the urge to crack him one against that solid cleft chin of his. He then nodded to Wright. "Thanks for bringing him in, Joe. Give my best to Shirley."

"Yes, sir," Wright nodded. He did a smart about-face like he was in the military and left, closing the door behind him.

I took a quick glance around the office. Andy Hero had the place all to himself. There wasn't a desk where Ryo or Nene would be. I half-expected the place to be sparse and practical, but it was filled with knickknacks.

"So, do you have a name or am I supposed to guess it?" Hero asked. I knew from experience that his temper could change very quickly. Given that he was hopped up on Power Trip, that would have ended very badly for me.

"Mays," I said briefly. "Andrew Mays."

Okay, maybe I was being a bit of a smartass not telling him right off the bat. Maybe I was letting my prior history with a guy like him cloud my judgment. Or, maybe I was exercising the smart option and not volunteering any information unless he asked. Because from where I was standing, he and his team had done a damn poor job of treating Animates right.

Hero lifted an eyebrow. Did he recognize the name?

"You know, there used to be a blue line for that family," he began. "I heard stories that Tony Mays was one of the best." He snorted. "Well, even the best can have an off day."

I didn't ask. I wasn't going to. Whatever might have happened to my family in this world did not impact me back home.

"You're a cop from another dimension," he said. He almost seemed impressed by my lack of reaction. "I have to admit, you've got a pretty good poker face. But," he tapped his desk twice, "I have ways of finding things out. That's why I'm the Multimedia Detective."

"Is that why Wright didn't ask for my gun?" I asked. "That seems kind of sloppy."

Hero's smile turned a little chillier and a bit more predatory. It was the smile of someone who had several aces in the hole, ready to be sprung on a poor sap--that is, me.

"You could call it professional courtesy," Hero said.

"After all, between you and me, treating a fellow cop like some common criminal is just...repugnant." He grimaced for effect, but I wasn't buying it. "Every time there's a story in the news about a `dirty' cop, it diminishes us all. If that keeps up, the common man, the ones we're sworn to protect, won't know who to trust."

I gave him a very dubious stare. "And the real reason?" I prompted.

He chuckled and steepled his fingers. "Officer Mays, even at point blank range, you'd never be able to make the shot. And even if you did--well, your lifespan would be measured in seconds. My people are extremely loyal to me." He smirked.

"But of course, the thought really didn't occur for you to even try, did it? No, of course you wouldn't."

"Maybe I don't want to risk hitting any of your little souvenirs," I suggested. "That thing on your bookshelf, is that Lupin's belt grapple?"

Hero got out of his chair and plucked the wrecked bit of machinery off the bookshelf. He rotated it in his fingers this way and that, just to ensure that I got the best view.

"Good eye," he complimented me. "He was a tenacious fighter. I had to get through his entire gang before getting to him, even that treacherous wench Fujiko." He smiled fondly at the memories. "I got tired of letting thieves roam around, pretending to be the 'good guys.' So, I decided to do something about it once and for all."

"Can't imagine that Zenigata was happy about that," I remarked. "He'd been chasing Lupin for years."

"He'd been **failing** for years," Hero corrected me. "Zenigata was an embarrassment to law enforcement. All those men and resources were under his command to find one little gang of thieves. He got too involved and made it personal." He grinned. "So, I ended the chase once and for all."

I didn't like the sound of that. I especially didn't like the fact that he referred to Zenigata in the past tense. And the condition of Lupin's belt grapple didn't leave much to the imagination of how Lupin ended up.

"If you want a real conversation piece, look behind you," Hero said. "That trophy is a bit more recent, but it never fails to--well, just take a look."

I slowly turned around and saw a block of purple crystal next to the door. It wasn't the fact that the crystal was maybe

5 1/2 feet tall and three feet wide. It was the person who was trapped within the crystal that got my attention.

A while back, there'd been this magical girl virus that had been going around. Existing magical girls suddenly got depressed while new ones were being created from otherwise ordinary girls. One of the victims of the virus was Sailor Saturn. Thankfully, a guy I know, Gaffney, managed to talk her down from destroying the world in her depression.

This version of Sailor Saturn hadn't been so lucky. She'd been caught in mid-transformation, the ribbons of what would become her sailor suit barely covering the essentials. What was most disturbing was the look of shock and betrayal on her face as she reached out.

I really, really wanted to knock this guy out. If anything, this gave me a better insight into his methods.

"We caught her just in time," Hero said. "Another minute or two and she probably would have destroyed the entire planet. And I don't know about you, but I've got plenty to live for."

"What was her deal?" I asked, already knowing the answer. "And isn't she a little young for you?"

"There was some sort of virus going around. Most of the affected girls have been cured, but...well, it's not like Sailor

Saturn had much of a life before being put into a stasis block," he remarked. "The official word is that she stays in there until we can cure her without getting killed. The reality is, for everyone's sake, she's better off staying there."

"Didn't anybody come for her?" I asked. It wasn't as if the Sailor Senshi were just going to leave one of their own.

"Oh, they tried," he replied. "Sailor Uranus and Neptune were pretty adamant about killing her. I set them straight." He paused. "Yes, they're still alive and they know better now." He finished that off with a little smirk.

I wasn't sure if I wanted the details on how those girls "know better." Given what I remembered about the Andy Hero back in my world, I was probably better off not knowing. I decided to change the subject and look away from poor Sailor Saturn. The kid deserved better than this.

"So, how'd you know that I'm from out of town?" I asked.

"We have a little security net set up," he said vaguely. "Truthfully, you're not the first cop from out of town that I've encountered. There have been others and they've all been very...interesting."

"Did they make it home?" I asked.

He gave me a jaunty grin. "Oh, of course. I sent them on their way. Why? Are you in any hurry to get home?"

"There's someone that I have to find. I'm not leaving them behind," I said. I gave him a description of Haruhi, but left out the fact that she has reality-warping powers. Of course, he probably already figured it out by virtue of me being here.

"I'll get my people on it," he promised. "Now, while we get a return portal back up and running, I'd like to show you around. After all, you probably don't hop dimensions very often, correct?"

"True," I acknowledged. "It's not like we have that kind of stuff where I come from."

Well, okay, that was a blatant lie. Yeah, there are magical and technological portals back home. The only problem is, they're not exactly for the general public. Now, while I know something that's created by, say, Belldandy would probably be safe, I can't really say the same for anything made by Washuu. Call me crazy, but I like having my component molecules in the same order before and after I go through a portal. And it's not like there's an oversight committee to standardize what kind of portal does what.

I've only been in this city less than an hour and I already want to go home. Yeah, okay, it may sound selfish of me, but I don't belong here. And as much as I would like to help, my priorities say otherwise. I had to stay alive, find Haruhi and get both of us back home. And as much as I don't like what I've seen in this world, the odds are really stacked against me.

The smart thing to do was keep a low profile. If I asked the right questions, I might get the answers I'm looking for. For one thing, I still didn't know what Sailor Pluto was talking about when she mentioned a tree and a blight.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts. Hero didn't look fazed at all.

"Come in," he said.

A female cop I didn't recognize poked her head in. She seemed utterly unfazed by her boss's taste in souvenirs. Then again, I suppose that everyone here was just used to him.

"Sir, you're going to be meeting with the mayor in twenty minutes," she said crisply. Sharp brown eyes narrowed in annoyance. Judging by her tight, business-like bun, she didn't take to nonsense very well. Her name tag read "WRIGHT."

Hero snapped his fingers in an "aw shucks" manner. "Oh, right, I almost forgot about that." He turned towards me, his

grin reappearing. "I'm having a little public relations thing with the mayor."

"`Little?'" The Other Officer Wright said. "Sir, this has been planned for weeks. You're only getting the Policeman of the Year award for the third year running."

"Details, Shirley, details," Hero said in an offhanded manner. "Don't worry, I'll be there for the photo op and the whole dog and pony show. I'm not going to give the department a black eye, especially after all the hard work we've done."

Yeah, I knew that voice. It was the voice that someone used when you had to both placate and blow off someone at the same time. The Andy Hero I knew had used it plenty of times in high school and the police academy.

"Looks like I'm not going to be able to give you a tour," Hero sighed. "Shirley, who's free on the roster?"

Shirley sighed and rolled her eyes. "Officer Tai just finished his reports. I don't have anything else for him at the moment."

"Well, he just volunteered to be Officer Mays's driver for now," Hero said cheerfully. "Anywhere that Mays wants to go, Tai is to drive him there. After all, it's professional courtesy, right?" he grinned. Once again, his teeth gleamed.

Shirley sighed heavily once more. "I'll make the arrangements, but I don't think he's going to be happy about it. He wanted to work with some of the sentai groups, talk to them about their property damage."

"That can wait," Hero said. "Besides, it's not like anyone really got hurt during those silly battles of theirs. Now go on and meet up with Officer Tai, you two. I have to prep for my public."

"Yes, sir," Shirley said with a longsuffering sigh. "You're with me, `Officer Mays,'" she said, placing special emphasis on my rank.

"So, what is it that you do, Officer Mays?" Shirley asked as we navigated the desks. "And why has Detective Hero taken an interest in you?"

"Do you want the truth or a lie that makes sense?" I joked.

She shot me a sour look. "I'm still working on my first cup of coffee. Please don't make things harder for me."

Oof. Okay, she was definitely having a bad day.

"Truth is, I ran into the wrong Animate and I found myself here," I told her. "This is my city, but it isn't my city."

Shirley rolled her eyes and sighed in exasperation.

"Great, another dimensional displacement. We don't get people like you often, but the paperwork is a pain in the ass to resolve."

"Things could be worse," I said philosophically. Of course, I didn't include the state of the Animate I saw in the street. While nothing happened to them, it was pretty disheartening to see people just ignoring an Animate instead of maybe helping them out.

"I suppose so," she admitted as we got to someone's desk. "And here we are. Officer Stan Tai, this is Officer Mays. Per Detective Hero's orders, you're to drive him anywhere he wants in the city."

The Stan Tai I knew back home was a generally nice guy. He was skinny as a rail, the better to fit into a spandex ranger suit. Oh, and he could do the sentai contortions without a hitch. He'd once gotten a wannabe sentai group tied up with their own limbs because they couldn't follow his movements.

This Stan Tai looked like the world had decided to just dump everything on him. There were shadows under his eyes and a deep scowl on his face. The way he moved, he was like the dog who had always been kicked.

"Shirley, I'm a cop, not a taxi driver," Stan said roughly. "If Officer Mays here wants to have a tour of the city, I'm sure that he can do it on his own dime instead of the city's. Besides, I've got more important things to take care of instead of being a chaperone."

Once again, Shirley sighed. "That's an order from Detective Hero." She leaned in closer, almost whispering her next words. "Do you remember the last time you gave him lip?"

Stan outright grimaced. It wasn't an expression that I'd ever expected to see on him. Then again, I had to keep reminding myself that this wasn't my world, even though there were similarities. There were enough differences to be disturbing, though.

I'd never seen Stan so miserable. Back home, he'd been pretty happy with his job. Lately, he'd been whistling happy little tunes when he came to work. He admitted to me that he found a nice gymnast girl who liked sentai like he does.

"Fine," he sighed roughly. "Come on, Mays. I'll get a car checked out so that we can get some nice, fresh city air."

Stan's mood seemed to improve as soon as we got into the tank pretending to be a car. He took a lazy circle around the city, pointing out sites that I already knew about.

"Sorry to put you out," I said, hoping that he understood that I was sincere. "I know that you were probably taking care of something important."

"Nah, I probably needed to get away," Stan said behind the wheel. "I get so sick of smelling that guy's cologne, any kind of fresh air is good." He paused. "That's city hall. A couple of years ago, there was this big incident involving an Animate and one of us--a regular person," he corrected himself. "You should have seen the crowds. Traffic was backed up for miles."

"Who was the Animate involved?" I asked.

Stan tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "I think her name was something like Maya--no, it was Miyu. Yeah, it was Miyu, all right."

"Vampire Princess Miyu?" I suggested.

Stan nodded. "That's the one. That little incident showed that we hadn't been as happy with Animates as we'd thought. People thought that they could treat Animates just like any other person, but that proved us wrong."

I didn't like the sound of that. "How's that?"

"The average Animate is practically indestructible and can crush an average human like us. The first plan was to have a

series of specialized offices to serve as a buffer." He snorted. "Andy Hero was picked to be the Anime Detective--at first, anyway. Did a pretty good job, too."

"Did they offer you anything?"

Stan eyed me suspiciously. "I was...the Sentai Detective." He snorted. "It was a nice gig while it lasted. I got to work with a lot of people in and out of the spandex." He gave a ghost of a laugh. "I even got to ride in a few of those robots of theirs."

"Sounds like it was a pretty sweet time," I said.

"It was," Stan agreed, nostalgia in his eyes. "At least, it was nice until all the departments got merged under the Multimedia Detective. You know, I get why it was done, but I still wish that we had those different offices. Everybody rolls over for Andy Hero, though." He stopped short as he realized what he said. "You didn't hear that last part."

"What last part?"

Stan tensed a little, gripping the steering wheel tight. He forced himself to take a deep breath and relax.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Detective Hero gets the job done, but I can't say that I like him personally."

"There's one in every workplace," I told him.

"One what?"

I snorted. "There's always one jerk who gets stuff done. They're always very good at what they do, but they make working with them a pain in the ass."

"Sounds about right," Stan agreed. "Well, where do you want to go?"

"I'm still running on my first cup of coffee. There's a place on the corner of Baker Street and Morgue Road that I visit every once in a while."

I could see Stan furrowing his eyebrow in the rear view mirror. "I know the place you're talking about, but I can't think of the name."

"It's called Dupin's. It's not for everyone."

I hadn't been lying when I said that to Stan. Dupin's really isn't for everyone. It's a bar that caters to a very exclusive, very specific clientele.

Dupin's is, for lack of a better term, an interdimensional detective's bar. You had to be invited in, or failing that, you had to follow clues to find out where it was. When it came down

to it, the most important part about getting to Dupin's is whether or not the owner approved of you. I'm not sure exactly what the qualifications are, but I seem to have made the cut.

There were a lot of perks being a member of Dupin's. For one thing, you could see any detective at this watering hole, whether they were from the past, the relative present or even the future. And somehow, it all works out. Dupin's is every detective fan's dream destination.

Auguste is the owner and bartender of the place. He also makes a mean cup of coffee and can cook well enough to satisfy Nero Wolfe. He's a thin, rangy kind of guy with a large, hook nose, thin moustache and what they might call saturnine features. By that, I guess that they mean that he's showing the years and the miles in a good way.

Of course, rumor had it that Auguste is another version of C. Auguste Dupin. He's what most people call the first detective. It's a little fact that annoys Sherlock to no end. Anyway, another rumor is that Auguste has a cousin somewhere in Rhode Island, where he runs a "neutral" bar between super heroes and villains. I'm not sure if either of those rumors really hold any water--the guy's a bit cagey when it comes to his personal info.

What I do know is that, if you can make it here, you can see some of the great detectives in their downtime. I've seen Sherlock Holmes effortlessly working through piles of Sudoku puzzles with a pen. I've seen Philip Marlowe and Miss Marple playing chess together. I've shared drinks with Harry Dresden, joked with Mike Hammer and reconnected with my "uncle," Eddie Valiant. I've had to calm down Monk from one of his panic attacks. Columbo even tried to tell me about some hints about a happy married life, which I wasn't quite ready for. It's a haven for detectives, police or otherwise, and I'm surprised that I'm part of the roster.

There are a few rules to being part of this club, though. First of all, this **is** a bar. So, nobody who is physically under 21 can enter the bar. Second, "shop talk" is generally discouraged, except for maybe in generic terms. Then again, since you had some of the most brilliant minds around, it probably wouldn't have taken much for them to figure things out. Third, you can only stay here for a little while--maybe a few hours at the most. That's handy if, say, you happen to be hardboiled detective who's been shot and you need a place to hole up. Fourth, you can only go back to where you came from--Auguste isn't too keen on having people cross over. That just causes more trouble than he's prepared to handle.

I needed to get a few things there. If Andy Hero was really taking "Power Trip," there was one thing that I could think of that could counter that stuff. I've used it before, but I need to...convince someone.

Stan looked puzzled as he dropped me off. From the outside, Dupin's didn't look any different than any other storefront. Judging by the menu and the fanciful window dressing, it was probably a bakery in this world.

"You want anything from inside?" I asked.

Stan's lips tightened into a thin line. "No, I think I'm good. Can't imagine why I never noticed this place before."

"Well, it's kind of a hole in the wall place," I said breezily. "I'll be right back."

I knew that I'd crossed some serious boundaries as soon as I went through the door. This wasn't just going through a single doorway, it was going through a security check and multiple layers of doors. If I hadn't been invited, I would have just ended back outside. Until recently, that's what happened to kid detectives like Shinichi Kudo, Encyclopedia Brown and the Scooby Gang.

The inside of Dupin's was comfortable and homey, with lots of wood. The bar itself could accommodate a dozen thirsty

detectives, though there were also tables. At one large, comfortable recliner sat Sherlock Holmes. Hercule Poirot seemed to have taken Marlowe's place as Miss Marple's chess partner. Judging by the wrinkling in his brow and the pieces on his side, he seemed to be losing. Harry Dresden sat at the bar, deep in thought. I knew better than to interrupt.

I wish that I could have stuck around for a bit, but I had things to take care of. I reached inside my trenchcoat pocket and pulled out a bunch of bananas. Moments later, an orangutan ambled amiably towards me.

"Ook?" he asked, pointing at the bananas.

"Yeah, I'm going to need the good stuff," I told the Librarian. "I'm going to need a thermos full of Curly Red Desert, full strength."

"A thermos?" Harry asked from the bar. "They still make those?"

"Don't knock it, Dresden," Uncle Eddie said from his seat at the far end of the bar. "Whatever works." He looked up from his coffee. "Must be something big, kid."

"Indeed," Auguste nodded from behind the bar, cleaning a glass. "That was not your usual door. Were you taken somewhere else?"

I nodded. "I wish that you could bend the rules this once, but..."

Auguste frowned and put down the glass he was cleaning. "If I break the rules, even for a good reason, this place would no longer be what I intended. I wished for this to be a haven for those who seek the truth." He gave the Librarian a significant look. "Though I may turn a blind eye to small things being crossed over, I cannot allow people to be `misplaced.'" He sighed heavily. "You must find your way on your own, Andrew."

"I wouldn't worry, Auguste," Uncle Eddie said from his seat. "The kid's got moxie."

"Thanks, Uncle Eddie," I said. "I wish I could catch up, but I've got to find someone and get back home."

"So, the usual," Uncle Eddie joked. "I don't miss being a cop."

"Neither do I," I joked.

Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, you two are family, all right."

"Not by blood, but--" I began.

"--just where it counts," Uncle Eddie finished. "I'll tell Dolores you said hi." he said as Auguste handed me a large thermos. Next to them were two regular-looking paper cups with ordinary coffee. I could tell because my nose hairs didn't curl at the scent.

I blinked. I didn't even notice him brewing the stuff. I placed it in my trenchcoat pocket, the one that led to Who Knows Where.

"Ook," the Librarian said sternly. Then he grinned. "Eek!"

I nodded. Trying to high-five an orangutan is just begging for pain.

I took one last look around. The place was bigger on the inside and full of comfortable furniture. Part of me wanted to chill and hang out with some of the greatest detectives of all time. The other part of me, the part that made me a detective, said that I had a job to do.

I walked out of Dupin's with a thermos full of extreme wake-up juice and two cups of java to be shared. I wouldn't say that I was feeling invincible or anything, but I felt better prepared for what was coming.

Stan was still waiting at the curb when I got out. He looked puzzled as he checked the dashboard clock.

"That was fast," he remarked. "You weren't even in there for five minutes."

"They've got a good idea what I like," I said vaguely. I handed him a cup of java, along with some cream and sugar. "I thought you could use one."

"Hey, thanks," he said, dumping both in his coffee. He took a long sip and sighed. "Man, that's good stuff. I've gotta come by here again sometime if the coffee's always going to be like this."

I opened the door and sat down, nursing my own cup of java. I liked it dark as midnight with a bit of sugar. I felt the cobwebs clear a bit as I took a sip. There was coffee that you guzzled and there was the stuff that you appreciated with a sip. This was the latter.

"So, where's the next stop on your tour?" Stan asked, taking another sip. "Maybe you want to see how the Animates handle themselves in their own town?"

I waited until he set the cup down. "Maybe a little later. I was just wondering if you've heard of Tarikihongan temple?"

Stan's eyes narrowed. "That's...an unusual destination. They're not usually one to accept visitors. Those three aren't to be messed with."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, you've heard of them."

"Well, yeah," Stan replied. "Everybody in the precinct knows about the god--girls," he corrected himself. "The girls."

Uh huh. So, someone's discouraged them from saying "goddesses," huh? That's interesting.

"We got the order direct from the mayor and everything," Stan said hurriedly. "Nobody goes to that temple to start any trouble."

"Well lucky for us, I don't have any intention of starting trouble. I'm just checking in with some old friends."

Stan sighed heavily. "This is a bad idea," he muttered, putting the car into gear.

The steps to Tarikihongan temple were swept immaculately. I expected nothing less from one of the occupants. Everything about the temple seemed to radiate peace and tranquility.

That didn't stop Stan from practically vibrating in his seat. He forced himself to calm down long enough to take one last slug of coffee before dumping it into a trash bag. He then

went pale as he saw a slender figure walking calmly down the steps.

"Stay here," I told him.

"No problem," he agreed quickly.

I squared my fedora and straightened the lapels of my trenchcoat. It never paid to look anything less than your best when meeting up with a goddess.

"May I help you?" Belldandy asked.

I bowed as deep as I could without folding myself in half. That wouldn't have made a good impression on her.

"I hope so," I said earnestly. "I seem to be a bit lost."

Belldandy gave me a scrutinizing glance with those blue eyes of hers. For a moment, I felt like she was examining the very essence of who I was. I probably wasn't that far off.

"You seem like a good person, if a bit cynical," she pronounced. "But then, seekers of truth often find uncomfortable ones. Please stand up," she urged me.

I straightened up and noticed that the blue mark on her forehead was...different. In the middle of that long mark was a symbol that I didn't recognize. Then again, I'm not exactly an expert in magic runes or their meanings.

"May I ask what your name is?" Belldandy prompted.

Hoo boy. Back home, I would have trusted the Belldandy I knew with just about anything. She already knew my Name and, to be honest, I gave it pretty freely. Back at Dupin's, Harry probably would have smacked his face in disgust. This was because, according to him, your Name with a capital N is really important stuff that you don't just give to anyone mystical.

Still, you can't form trust on lies. Even though Hero said that he'd prep a portal for me, I preferred having another option. Judging by how he handled Animate incidents, I didn't want to count on him for everything.

"I'm Andrew Mays," I introduced myself. "I'm a policeman, but I'm not from around here."

Belldandy frowned slightly as she looked at me again. Then she blinked in surprise.

"You were granted a wish by Yggdrasil?" she asked, her blue eyes wide. "That is extremely rare."

"Yeah, it's a bit of a complicated story," I told her. "Could I come in, please?"

She considered it for a moment. Then she nodded.

"I will help you however I can," she said. Then she held up her index finger. "I should warn you, however, that there are some boundaries that I cannot cross, some rules I cannot break."

"At this point, I'm willing to entertain all options," I admitted. I stole a glance at Stan, who waited nervously in his car. "I won't be too long."

I could tell that something was wrong as soon as I stepped into the temple. It was quiet and peaceful, just as I'd expect from anyplace where Belldandy had chosen to live. But there was this weird undercurrent of tension that I couldn't quite place.

That tension just got ratcheted up as soon as Urd and Skuld joined us. Urd was still wearing her revealing robes, cleavage and all. But instead of that devil-may-care, mischievous attitude, Urd looked downright somber and annoyed.

Skuld couldn't seem to keep her hands still. She was always tinkering with this or that, never really looking anyone in the eye. Every once in a while, her expression would change from distracted tinkering to outright frustration. Next to her, Banpei waited patiently.

All three of them had the same symbol interrupting their goddess marks. I didn't think that it was a coincidence.

I told my story as best as I could over a cup of excellent tea, only to be occasionally interrupted by Urd or Skuld. Belldandy listened intently and gently prompted me when I had to pause.

"So, that's pretty much it," I finished. "I don't trust Andy Hero to go through with his end of the bargain. I still have to find Haruhi Suzumiya and keep her from warping reality again. And, of course, I have to find a way to get both of us home."

"So you have no intention of working against him?" Belldandy asked. That seemed to be a very specific and odd kind of phrasing. I guess she must have had a reason.

"As much as I might like to, that isn't the job that's in front of me," I said. "I can't fix things for an entire world, especially since I don't know how this world ended up like this. I have to concentrate on one person at a time."

Skuld grunted in frustration. Clearly, she wanted me to help out somehow, but I wasn't sure what she wanted.

"I know someone who needs help," Skuld said with a pout. "Someone very close by."

Belldandy shot her little sister a worried look. "Skuld, no."

"Someone has to!" Skuld insisted. "Do you know what it's like, day after day--"

Urd slammed her palm against the tatami mats. I half-expected her to conjure up some lightning to get Skuld to quiet down, but she didn't.

"Of course I know!" Urd fired back. "Do you think that it's any easier for me?!"

"Urd--" Belldandy urged, trying to calm her older sister. It wasn't working--which, in itself was odd because Belldandy could calm a raging storm.

"Well, we wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for that guy!" Skuld shouted. "If he hadn't come around and made that stupid contract--"

"Enough!" Belldandy exclaimed, slamming her teacup on the tatami mats. That was another sign that something was Very Wrong. The Belldandy I knew could stop an argument with a quiet word and a glance that made everyone ashamed for fighting. The fact that she actually had to raise her voice said that something was out of her control.

Okay, there was a lot of tension between three loving sisters. That wasn't anything new or different from the goddesses back home, though there was a lot more showing than usual. The mark that interrupted their forehead marking was something new.

"Sisters, we have a **guest** in our home," Belldandy reminded them sternly. "We are not to burden him with any issues we may have." She softened slightly. "Yes, Detective Mays was granted a wish which he used selflessly. But that does not mean that we can add to his troubles." She turned to me. "I apologize, Detective, but there are matters that we must resolve ourselves."

Okay, Mays. Time to show some cards. I mean, where sacred hospitality was concerned, I was only behaving badly if I did something out of malice. What I was going to do next was out of sincerity.

"So, when did your powers get sealed?" I asked.

All three goddesses immediately touched the broken symbol on their foreheads. For a moment, all three of them looked genuinely shocked. Then Urd cracked a half-hearted grin.

"Not bad," Urd said, perking up slightly. "Not many people would have figured it out."

"Detective, this is..." Belldandy looked down at the floor, clearly ashamed. "This is the result of a contract and my selfishness."

"A contract?" I asked. "What kind of contract--"

A sliding door opened before I could finish. Behind the door was a young man of below-average height and messy black hair. He was dressed in sweats and there were some bandages on his calloused fingers.

Keiichi Morisato blinked. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know that we had a guest."

Urd and Skuld immediately scrambled to their feet. They went to Keiichi's side and began some sort of search, maybe a health check. Judging by Belldandy's worried look, this hadn't been the first time.

"Easy, Kei-boy, easy," Urd said, checking out Keiichi's bandaged fingers. "You didn't hurt yourself again, did you?"

"I don't think so," Keiichi said hesitantly. Then he smiled. "But if I did, I'm going to be all right."

"Keiichi, you've got to be careful!" Skuld said. She dashed out the door for a few seconds, then returned with a

first aid kit. "I know that you don't feel like others do, but that means that you get hurt more easily."

I stole a glance at Belldandy and immediately regretted it. I'm no stranger to seeing women cry. It's just that when I did see a woman I know cry, it made me feel mushy inside and--

Look, I get that chivalry isn't always the answer. I get that capable women generally don't need to be rescued. But if you don't at least feel something looking at Belldandy's obvious heartbreak, then I don't know what to tell you. I wanted to help, but I didn't have enough information to do so.

Not everything is a rescue operation. Sometimes, it's just the desire to help another person.

Belldandy got up and quietly went to Keiichi's side. She examined him for any injuries and seemed relieved that she didn't find any. Then she quieted down her sisters' fussing and gently nudged Keiichi into another room. She followed him and closed the sliding door between us.

A few minutes later, Belldandy returned looking heartbroken. She took a deep ragged breath.

"I'm sorry that you had to see that," Belldandy said heavily. "Keiichi's condition is not something that can be easily explained."

"It has to do with that Andy Hero guy," Urd said sourly.
"I can't believe that smelly policeman got such a contract approved."

My eyes narrowed. So, Andy Hero had been here with a contract. The contract obviously had to do with Keiichi's state of mind in exchange for--well, the most reasonable incentive would be Keiichi's continued good health and happiness. But I couldn't treat that as fact.

"He got a contract approved through Yggdrasil?" I asked.
"How'd that happen?"

Urd looked very uncomfortable. "I don't know."

I took a moment to consider my words. After all, I was talking to a bona fide goddess. Also, her counterpart back home had been the one to grant me a wish. So, I tried to cut her a little slack.

"Was it some kind of glitch?" I suggested. "Maybe some kind of hidden exploit? Or maybe--"

"I don't know!" Urd repeated. "I haven't been able to go to Yggdrasil ever since that guy came! None of us have! And if I can't get to the office, then I can't review the logs!"

Criminately. So, not only were their powers sealed, but all three goddesses were stuck here. Yeah, that was more than enough reason to be tense all the time.

"You know what's the most annoying part?" Skuld asked.
"Keiichi is happy all the time!"

"Well, he did seem a little happy and airheaded--which isn't like him at all," I finished. In fact, Keiichi was one of the most levelheaded people around, considering the company he kept.

"He's never sad! He's never angry! He never gets depressed! He's always happy and it's just not right!" Skuld insisted.

I felt the blood drain out of my face as I realized the ramifications. Having degrees of happiness be the only emotion available to a person was a horrible thing. We needed negative emotions in order to survive and be whole people. It was perfectly normal to be sad or angry every once in a while. Hell, even guilt had its place in someone's emotional makeup. But to feel only happiness? That's a potential psychopath in the making!

In the back of my mind, I heard William Shatner cry out, "I WANT my pain! I NEED my pain!" in his typical, hammy,

overwrought delivery. I laughed when I saw that scene the first time in the movie theater. Now, it doesn't seem nearly as funny.

"How did this happen?" I felt my voice get lower and rougher, even though I was trying to keep my cool. "How could he come up with a contract that did all this?"

"We never thought that Yggdrasil would ever grant his wish," Urd sighed. "He just came in one day and asked Belldandy what her wish was."

Belldandy suddenly couldn't look me in the eye. "I told Detective Hero that my only wish was for Keiichi's happiness. He told me that he would ensure it if my sisters and I would not interfere with police business. I politely informed him that I doubted that he could fulfill that kind of bargain. He seemed to understand and left us."

"But that wasn't the end of it, was it?" I asked.

Urd shook her head. "Keiichi came back late from work that night. He couldn't recall why he was late, but he seemed to be all right. He was happy, anyway." She frowned. "Too happy."

"So the big guy came back to the temple the next day," Skuld said. "He had this smug little smile and a piece of

paper. He got us all together and said that he'd fulfilled his part of the bargain."

I frowned. "And that's when the fireworks started."

All three sisters nodded. Skuld looked very uncomfortable, fidgeting in place. Urd wasn't much better. Belldandy was looking at the floor in shame.

"The system confirmed the wish as a valid contract," Belldandy intoned. "From that moment on, our powers were sealed. To this day, I don't know what Detective Hero did to my Keiichi. If I had my powers, perhaps I could undo what has been done."

"No other goddesses came down to investigate?" I asked. "Seems like a pretty big deal to have you three out of the picture."

"We haven't had any contact from the heavens or the other place since that day," Belldandy said. She was obviously trying to fight the tears. "I never wanted Keiichi like this, but we're...powerless. I wish that we could help you, but we cannot even help ourselves."

Until this moment, I thought that I could just slip on by and get things done. I didn't want to get involved. This

wasn't my world, my fight. I didn't have all the information to make a judgment call.

Suddenly, this became a lot more personal. Back home, Belldandy had a heart big enough for the world. She wasn't a helpless maiden, but she tried to see the good in everyone. With a few gentle words, she could lift anyone's spirits. She never asked for anything except to live her life with the man she loved.

Now, someone had given this version of Belldandy a twisted parody of that life. I could easily imagine Hero's smirking as he presented the contract to the girls' faces. With that reality-altering cologne, he had the advantage--though I never thought that stuff could override Yggdrasil's safeties.

I wasn't sure if I should have said anything. I didn't want to give them any false hope. But, looking into their despondent eyes, the goddesses deserved something to raise their spirits. They needed a reason to look forward to tomorrow instead of wallowing in despair.

"I'm not sure if this will help, but I think I know what might be going on," I offered. "It's going to be a long story."

I told them about my experience with "Power Trip" and how it was made. I told them about how the stuff was harvested and

how addictive it was--and why I hadn't succumbed to it. As I explained things to them, their mood seemed to improve.

"So wait, you're telling me that this stuff is strong enough to even influence Yggdrasil?" Urd asked in disbelief.

"That's--"

"Horrific, yeah," I finished for her. "My experience with the stuff only lasted a day, and that was because I washed it off. Judging by how intense the smell is around him, he's either doused his entire body with Power Trip or he's taken another route." I let that sink in. "The thing is, if this influence were somehow removed or weakened, would Yggdrasil be able to reassert itself?"

Urd and Skuld grabbed some pen and paper. They started writing down diagrams that I wouldn't have understood even if I had a million years of computer experience. They muttered things that I couldn't quite catch, but it sounded promising.

"--and the error-correction protocols should kick in immediately!" Urd exclaimed. She was sounding a lot more confident now than she had for--well, I'm guessing it had been quite a while.

"Then all invalid contracts that are currently being enforced should be rendered null and void!" Skuld added excitedly. "We'd have our powers back!"

Belldandy looked at me with tears in her eyes. "Can you do this?"

I felt my heart sink. I had to tell them the truth.

"I can't offer any guarantees," I told them. "There are way too many variables, things that could go wrong. Even if I could somehow do what needs to be done, I'm not sure what the backlash would be for you ladies." I cleared my throat nervously. "I'm not sure that I'd survive doing that anyway."

Belldandy reached out and gently squeezed my hand. I squeezed back, trying to be reassuring.

"If you can accomplish your task, you will have our aid," Belldandy promised. I wasn't about to argue; she wasn't a very good liar.

"*Andrew. Andrew Mays,*" a feminine voice whispered.

I looked around, confusing the girls in the process. It was pretty obvious they didn't hear the voice.

"I'll try again later. It's important," the voice promised. I had the niggling feeling that this was someone that I knew.

Stan was still waiting in the car when I left the temple. I hadn't intended on getting the goddesses on my side, but it was better that they were behind me. And besides, I really was a sucker for someone who was really in trouble, as opposed to being mildly inconvenienced.

"Oh good, you're still alive," Stan said as he placed the radio back in its holder. "I was about to call for backup; you'd been in there for a while."

"The girls are nice," I told him. "We had a long discussion over tea."

"About?" Stan prompted.

"The nature of happiness," I said vaguely as I slipped into the backseat. "Belldandy makes really great tea."

"If you say so," Stan said uncertainly. "I personally don't want to be anywhere near them--or most Animates, for that matter."

"Any reason why?" I asked.

Stan took off his hat and combed his fingers through his dark shock of hair. At least he hadn't started developing grey hairs, what with the stress that Andy Hero gave him.

"Animates just creep me out," he said at last. "They're practically indestructible and they can do some pretty scary things like--oh, I don't know, maybe punching people through buildings? I'd hate to be the poor sap who runs into one with a temper," he finished.

"What about the ones who are just trying to make ends meet?" I asked. "Not every Animate is capable of mass destruction, you know."

"They still creep me out for the most part," he said as he cringed. "Even the ones who Detective Hero rehabilitated aren't happy with things the way they are now. There's way too much tension."

I blinked. "`Rehabilitated?'"

"Well yeah," Stan said reasonably. "On the Animate side of town, there are a lot of businesses that have been set up for Detective Hero's pet projects." He frowned. "Of course, I really can't say much about the cops in that area. They may be tougher than the average human, but they're sure as hell not better than us."

"So, who's in charge of those cops?"

Stan sighed and gave me a reluctant look. "Chief Ryo Saeba's supposed to be in charge. The one who's really running the show is a guy by the name of John Estes--but he goes by the name of--"

"--Mad Bull," I finished. "Yeah, I know the name. I heard he's into some really nasty stuff."

"He's got an operation or two, that's for sure," Stan agreed. "So, let me guess: You want to go to the Animate side of town and talk to the Chief?"

I considered my options. It probably wouldn't have done me any good to just march into the station and ask what happened to Ryo. But then again, he might have had some info on where Haruhi might have ended up.

Part of me was morbidly curious as to how an Animate was "rehabilitated." If it was anything like what happened to Keiichi, it was probably a horrific process. Or, it might have involved some psychological aspects to it.

"You know, I'm curious about the Chief. Think we can go check out his operation?"

Stan sighed. "Sure, I didn't have any other plans for today. Just make sure that everything's ready in the back. That gun on the left? Make sure that all the seals are tight."

I wondered why someone would keep a gun in plain sight in a car. It didn't seem safe to me, but then again, getting inside this armored tank wannabe was going to take some doing. So, it was probably safe enough.

I tried to be nonchalant as I caught a whiff of something very familiar and extremely dangerous--at least, for Animates. It was the unique combination of acetone, benzene and turpentine. A quick examination of the gun showed that it had hollow-point bullets filled with the stuff.

"Is this Dip?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's standard issue if you get cornered by an Animate. It won't kill them, but it'll burn them long enough for you to get away."

I clenched my jaw. Back home, Dip was considered cruel and unusual punishment. For the most part, it was outlawed except as a last resort. That's because it doesn't quite affect Animates the same way it would affect Toons. Small amounts of Dip will burn a Toon, but if you get them away from the stuff,

the Toon will heal up. Given enough time, there won't even be any mark or tenderness.

While Animates are still basically in the same family as Toons--living animated characters--they can get scars from Dip. It's not a clean "you're here, then you're wiped out." No, it's much messier than that. It's like acid to them, burning through the layers. I've heard some Animates complain about some sort of phantom pain when they should have been fully healed from contact with Dip.

Cops here had Dip as "standard issue" equipment? What the Hell could have caused things to go so far downhill between Animates and regular people? What could possibly justify this kind of cruelty?

You know that old saying, "one bad apple ruins the barrel?" Well, everything that I'd seen so far indicated that Andy Hero was that one bad apple. And what was worse, the rot had spread to the entire police force. I didn't think that everyone shared the same attitude towards Animates, but I didn't think I'd find any sympathetic people in the police. And that scared me.

I remembered that Stan was probably waiting for a confirmation on the equipment check. The Dip gun was, unfortunately, in perfect working order.

"The gun's fine," I reported. "Anything else I should check out?"

"No, that's about it," Stan said. "I'm going to radio ahead and let Chief Saeba know that we'll be visiting. He hates unexpected surprises."

"He's not going to sic a Gundam on us, is he?" I said, trying to lighten things up.

Stan actually smirked, as if he was enjoying some little private joke. "Somehow, I don't think that'll be a problem."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"You'll understand when we get to the checkpoint," he promised.

I didn't have anything to say after that. I just watched the people on the street, noting their body language. I hate to use "malaise" as a description, but it was apt. Every ordinary person I saw seemed weighed down in some kind of fog. I didn't see anybody really smiling as we got closer to--what was it? The checkpoint?

I tried not to gape at the sight of a heavily-reinforced wall right in the middle of the city. It divided the city neatly in half, with people and cars streaming in and out. The

few Animates I saw were constantly looking over their shoulders as they left the checkpoint.

"Yeah, I had the same reaction when I saw it," Stan said. "It's pretty impressive that they built all that in under a year--and without Animate technology, too."

He turned into a "POLICE ONLY" lane and grinned at the lane worker. Flashing his badge, the worker nodded and let us through, just like that. No "state your business" or "what brings you here" or "can I see your form?" No, all Stan had to do was smile and he could bypass the crowds like someone who'd bought an express ticket at the amusement park.

"I love being a cop sometimes," Stan said. "Anyway, like I was saying, the checkpoint has jammers built into the structure. So, if any Animate robot or mobile suit or anything like that comes close enough, the jammers shut them down."

That didn't make any sense. If something was built without Animate technology, then why would the jammers specifically shut down any Animate mecha?

The "Animate side" of the city was an almost haphazard mixture of everything I'd seen back home. You had elements of what might have been Mechatown, Kawaiiville, Teensborough and other suburbs, but squashed into a space that wasn't nearly

enough to accommodate everyone. It was crowded, noisy and I hardly saw any regular people on our way to the station. It was wall to wall Animates in a small space. This was just begging to blow, especially if emotions were to run high.

"I'm surprised that it's not as crazy as I thought it might be," I said aloud. "I thought that you'd have people having rooftop chases, dramatic martial arts challenges in the middle of the street and giant robots blocking traffic."

"Might've been that way once, but not anymore," Stan said as he turned into the station. "Believe me, we're all better off now that Chief Saeba has clamped things down in this part of the city. He's even got Detective Hero's personal approval."

I didn't ask why a humble detective would be able to influence a police chief. I didn't ask how Ryo Saeba became the chief of police in this side of the city. All I knew was that there were a lot of things that were fundamentally wrong with this world.

"You're getting closer," that mysterious, feminine voice told me. *"It's still difficult to reach you. Haruhi Suzumiya did some damage when you two left. I'll talk later."*

"Hey, something wrong?" Stan asked.

"Nah, I'm fine," I said breezily. "This is just a lot to take in."

The main police station didn't look fancy, but it was imposing. Anti-mech cannons were mounted in strategic places, though I was pretty sure that they'd do a number on, say, an armored car. Every door had a checkpoint; nobody could just walk in without first getting verified. Security was tight, but it made sense.

As Stan drove to the parking garage, I noticed the same underlying malaise that I saw on the other side of town. Everyone seemed angry or frustrated at something--or maybe everything. Everywhere I looked, there were little squabbles between people who'd gotten along in my world. I saw Miyuki Kobayakawa and Natsumi Tsujimoto arguing over Natsumi's mini-bike. I saw Deunan Knute frowning at Briareos. Even Motoko Kusanagi was looking put out with Batou. It was like they were barely hanging together, only doing so out of professional necessity instead of being real partners.

"You're not wrong," the mysterious feminine voice said, presumably in my head since Stan didn't hear anything. "Trust is a very precious commodity in this world."

I resisted the urge to reply to that. It would have only made me look crazier than I felt right now.

After Stan parked the car, we were escorted directly to Chief Saeba's office. I half-expected it to be plastered with swimsuit calendars and girlie magazines. Back on my world, Ryo wasn't shy about showing off what he liked. On more than one occasion, I'd had to force him to take down the pinups at his station.

This version of Ryo looked to be utterly professional. There was hardly anything out of place on his desk, though I noticed a distinct lack of pictures. Even his usually elastic, goofy face was set in a stern expression. But what really got to me was the fact that his eyes were dull and hollow.

"I wasn't expecting an inspection," Chief Saeba said. "We've got a lot to take care of here every day--unless your boss thinks that I can't do my job?"

"Just showing the new guy from out of town," Stan said, utterly ignoring the fact that Chief Saeba outranked him. "He's interested in seeing how things get done in this department. And to be honest, so am I."

Chief Saeba scoffed. "I've got better things to do than to be your tour guide." He tapped a few buttons on his phone.

"Joe, can you run a tour for some of our fellow policemen?" he said carefully. "Show them what they need to see."

"Sleepy" Joe Estes, aka the Mad Bull, whipped off a sloppy salute. His thick mustache twitched in annoyance. I guess he didn't want to give a tour. Back home, he was kicked out of the police for running a side business with certain kinds of ladies. Of course, his overly violent attitude was a pretty good factor in getting him canned as well.

When it came to the female policemen, he seemed like a shark cruising for food. Even Stan looked a little appalled at Estes's behavior. The guy had to grab a feel on every female cop within reach and they just grimaced before faking a smile. Once again, I noticed that everyone was so busy at their desks that nobody was really smiling.

"You seem awfully popular with the ladies," I remarked, trying to keep the sarcasm to a minimum. I didn't succeed.

Estes grinned. "Well, you've gotta appreciate what you've got before you."

"I was wondering, though," I began, changing the subject. "Did Chief Saeba have anyone in his life before the police?"

Suddenly, all the police officers stopped short. I noticed that Estes was scowling deeply.

"You know, it's a good thing that you said that to me instead of bringing that up in front of him," Estes rumbled. "We don't talk about her for a very good reason: She's dead."

I blinked. Okay, how the hell could you kill an Animate like Kaori? Even if she weren't nearly indestructible by her very nature, she wasn't one to go down without a fight.

"Careful," the feminine voice in my head warned.

"Being a cop's all that the Chief has nowadays," Estes said with perhaps a little bit of sympathy. "Did you know that all his friends got killed in the Whiteout Purge? Every one of them, gone--and it was worse for the Chief's girl." He paused. "And before you ask, you really don't want to know."

"Almost there," the feminine voice announced. *"Please try to find a quiet place so that we can talk."*

"I'm surprised he's still functioning after something like that," I remarked. Of course, in Ryo's case, "functioning" could be defined very broadly.

Estes grinned. "Oh, I've got ways to keep him up and interested. If you're around much longer, I'll show the both of you around."

"Around what?" Stan asked.

"My little side job." There was a definite leer on his face. "I make sure that certain...disadvantaged women find a purpose in difficult times while learning a trade."

"A trade?" Stan asked. He frowned as he considered the implications.

"The oldest one," Estes supplied. "The one that a woman is most suited to." He grinned at Stan's discomfort. "Hey, you've got to fund an education somehow, right? And some of these girls have to start from the ground up, given their backgrounds."

As soon as I heard those words, I was far away and not long ago. I didn't usually have flashbacks, but what he said hit me hard.

Ryo and I didn't often get along in the early days of our enforced partnership. His libido was the source of most of his problems and I--well, I had to be his keeper. He was great with a gun and an expert in so many weapons that it made my head spin. And I had to be the one to rein him in.

This time, we agreed on something. Internal Affairs was doing some housecleaning and they found some breadcrumbs leading to a possible scofflaw with a badge. That meant that we had to

do an end run around one of our own, someone who was breaking the rules and hiding behind the badge.

I'd never, ever liked "Sleepy" John Estes, also known as "Mad Bull." He was a real piece of work who was prone to solving things with excessive violence. And by "excessive," I meant that he preferred to shoot things until they stopped moving. There was no "freeze" or "stop in the name of the law" in his personal lexicon. Once you were in his sights, you were as good as dead. And the damn thing of it is, a lot of our "brothers" and "sisters" in the police department would have gladly covered for him because he Got Things Done.

Internal Affairs and Accounting had teamed up after there was a question about "Mad Bull's" expenses. He kept a cheap apartment near the border of Ecchiville, the Animate red-light district. That was a bit low for his salary, but there was more to it than that. On some investigations that Estes had been involved with, money had vanished under his watch.

Ryo met up with Estes near Ecchiville and they struck up a conversation, as planned. Ryo then followed Estes to a nearby brothel. Moments later, I heard the "go" phrase:

"MOKKORI!" Ryo shouted in his hidden microphone loud enough to make me wince. I made sure that my backup was ready and I moved in.

I went in, Glock in one hand and my mallet in the other. What I saw after I kicked the door in was a bunch of barely-clad women in various degrees of disorientation--and they barely noticed me. Whatever "incense" that was being used was heavy and cloying.

"Sure, take your time, why don't you?" Ryo grouched. He'd tossed the guy he'd been fighting into a heap near the front door. He'd knocked out about a half dozen of them.

I looked at their faces. All of them were "real" men, partaking in a little Ecchiville hospitality. And all of them were high-rollers in a crime family.

Estes leered at me. "That's one way to ruin a sting operation, Mays. But then, you never had what it takes to really get down and dirty, just like your old man."

That didn't sit with me. Any cop who had his operation busted open would have complained about how long it took, the amount of effort and resources involved, etc. No, Estes was trying to gloss over the situation by using personal attacks.

I spared a glance at Ryo. He frowned. Obviously, he didn't believe the story either.

Some of the girls next to me looked nauseous. They looked too out of it to defend Estes. It was probably due to the "incense."

"John Estes, you are under arrest," I heard myself say.

He didn't ask why. He didn't try to laugh it off. He didn't even threaten to get my badge.

The Mad Bull merely took out a revolver and aimed it at me. He cocked back the hammer and--

--Ryo shot the gun out of his hand. That was when I made my move.

No matter how muscular he was, Estes couldn't stop a one-ton mallet in mid-swing. I caught him right across the jaw and sent him flying. He landed hard against the wall and slumped down.

For a long moment, all that mattered was me, him and the mallet in my hand. I was breathing hard, my knuckles white against the handle of the mallet. I knew he wasn't going anywhere, but part of me didn't want to stop. Part of me wanted

to pound him until he stopped moving, just to make sure that this never happened again.

"He's down," Ryo said. He was still covering Estes with his gun. "What now?"

It was one of the hardest things I'd done at that time, but I shoved the mallet back in my trenchcoat. I pulled out a pair of cuffs and walked over to Estes's prone form.

"We do our job," I said harshly. I barely recognized my own voice. "We enforce the law."

After Estes had been cuffed, Ryo lowered his gun. Then he flashed a cocky grin.

"Let's get these girls to a doctor," he said. "They're not looking so good."

"You okay?" Estes rumbled. "You're not looking so good."

I blinked. I must have spaced out for a moment.

"I'm fine," I lied. "You just reminded me of someone."

Estes frowned for a moment. Then he checked his watch and grinned.

"You know, it's pretty close to lunch time," he said cheerfully. "I know a cafe around here. The food's good and they don't mind having a few cops around. It's called the Bubblegum Cafe and they've got some cute waitresses."

I didn't like the sound of that. Come to think of it, there were a few missing faces when I went through the precinct house. Andy Hero wouldn't have deigned to work with Animates on the "human side" of town. So, it was a safe bet that Nene probably didn't work for him. The question was, where did she end up?

The Bubblegum Cafe was mostly in shades of pink, of course. It looked from the outside like your typical maid cafe, the kind that catered to people who liked that sort of thing. It was cutesy-looking on the outside in a way that made me grind my teeth.

Inside was clean and it was pretty packed. The girls all wore maid outfits with lots of frills and lace. What got me was that some of the "maids" were sporting some familiar hairstyles from the back.

I had to have been really distracted to not notice the waitress who escorted us to our table. As the waitress went on

about the menu specials, drink options and whatnot, I couldn't help but wonder what Nene would have thought about this place.

"And what would the gentleman in the trenchcoat be having?" Nene's voice asked.

I blinked. Then I looked up to see Nene in that ridiculously frilly outfit, her name written on a heart-shaped nametag. She had a sunny smile that didn't match her eyes. She looked tired and worn on the inside and was probably just trying to get through the day.

"Nene?" I got out.

"Yes, that's my name," she said with practiced cheer. "What can I get you, handsome?"

I browsed through the ludicrously pink menu and found what I wanted. "I'll have a turkey club and black coffee on the side, please."

Her smile grew slightly warmer. "Someone has good manners," she noted.

"Well, why wouldn't I?" I asked. "It's only common courtesy."

Nene said nothing. Judging by her silence, she had a lot of strikes against her. She was an Animate in a world that

wasn't too crazy about Animates. She wasn't a cop here, so I figured that something had to have happened. Of course, she was a waitress and they tended to take a lot of guff, even on a good day. I wanted to know why she seemed like she was walking on eggshells, though--the job wouldn't have accounted for that.

"I'll have one of the other girls ring this up," Nene said. "I'll be back with your order."

"You're not ringing it up yourself?" I asked.

Judging by her sudden shudder, that had been the wrong question to ask. She took a deep breath to calm down and forced her fingers to stop typing in mid-air.

"I'm not...allowed at the register," she got out. "There are people who are supposed to be at computers." She took another breath. "I used to be involved with computers, but I got better. Andy Hero saved me from living a life behind a screen. Now I get to live in the real world."

Oh, criminally. This was what this world considered "rehabilitated?" The kid looked like she was just about brainwashed or worse!

"Excuse me," she said with a bow and hurried off. Estes took note of her retreating form.

"Cute, but a little small for me," he muttered. Then he turned his attention to me. "Each and every maid here used to be part of an armored vigilante group, the Knight Sabers. Andy Hero decided to put a stop to that. He...enlightened them on their career options."

"He went against people in powered armor?" I asked, disbelief evident in my tone.

Estes shrugged. "Hey, he's Andy Hero. He's everybody's hero. He's been known to do some pretty amazing things. Anyway, after convincing the ladies, they opened up this cafe where they've been happy ever since. See? The system works," he said blithely.

I turned away and looked around at the crowd. I caught sight of Priss in another of those frilly maid outfits. She plastered on a fake smile and took an order from--yup, it was none other than Leon McNichol. But Leon didn't look cocky this time around. Instead, he had this sad look on his face.

"Leon, stop," Priss said sadly. "This is what I am now."

"This is killing you inside," Leon said. "I miss the motorcycle chases and the action. I miss you in those leathers, giving me an attitude along with that smile."

Priss gave him a sad smile. "I miss that, too," she admitted. She nervously fingered her pen as she pretended to take an order on her notepad.

It was kind of hard to take everything in at the cafe. The place was pretty noisy at times. But I did notice something odd--or, rather, someone odd. A bald man with a mustache and trimmed beard looked at Leon and Priss talking and frowned. He made some notes in a little pad of his and flagged down one of the other waitresses--one whom I recognized as the "other" Nene from Bubblegum Crisis 2040. He whispered something to her and she looked miffed.

"Priss!" Blonde Nene exclaimed, her voice cutting through the crowd noise. "You're supposed to be taking orders, not flirting with your ex!"

"He's not my ex!" Priss protested. For a moment, she looked ready to grab Blonde Nene and sock her one. She had her teeth bared in that way I remembered well. That was a sure sign that someone was going to go down.

The cafe went silent. For a long moment, Priss glared fiery, poisonous daggers at Blonde Nene. Then she realized that everyone was staring at her, waiting for her next move. The

bald guy who sent Blonde Nene in merely wrote something on a notepad and shook his head in disappointment.

Priss took a deep breath and forced herself to relax. She bowed deeply to the crowd, something she would never have done in the past--and certainly not in the frilly outfit she was wearing. She then went to the kitchen without another word, followed by Blonde Nene.

Understandably, Leon was angry. His little heart-to-heart with Priss had been rudely interrupted. His mood didn't improve any when Priss's replacement--the 2040 version of Priss--appeared to take his order.

At his table, the unnamed bald guy tucked his pen neatly in his jacket pocket and folded his notepad closed. He had a distinctly smug look on his face as he called for his check.

"Please meet me in the men's room," the ghostly feminine voice said. *"I think I can get through there."*

Well, sure, why not? I mean, it wasn't as if I had any actual leads on this mysterious yet influential individual. And besides, the more I listened to that voice, the more I recognized who it was.

"Be right back," I told my tablemates. "Have to wash my hands."

"Don't take too long," Estes jeered. "All the cute action's out here."

I tried not to grimace. This version of Mad Bull wasn't much better than the one I'd arrested back home. In fact, he was probably even more annoying when he was being smug or smarmy.

I found the men's room and got in, locking the door behind me. I just hope that this voice was who I thought it was. Then again, given her nature, this was probably going to involve some pretty trippy, non-intuitive reasoning.

I turned on the faucet and started to wash my hands. I counted ten seconds of lathering up before I saw the blurry figure in the mirror. I kept washing for the full 20 seconds and noted the figure becoming a lot clearer, but not entirely solid. I moved to turn off the tap when I noticed that the water flow had slowed down considerably.

I actually smiled as I turned to face Sailor Pluto. Her translucent form looked out of place in the men's room, but then again, this was the best place for privacy. And if she'd used her powers to mess with time around us, so much the better.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," I remarked.

Pluto tilted her head slightly. "You were expecting me."
It wasn't a question.

"You tend to move in complicated circles," I noted. "What did your buddy say about time being non-linear?"

Pluto rolled her translucent red eyes in annoyance. "Oh, him. He's taken to calling it `timey-wimey stuff.' As if that really explains anything." She blinked and cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, I have better things to talk about than a frustratingly mercurial peer."

"Yeah," I agreed. "So, why am I here, Pluto? And don't tell me that I was sent to put right what once went wrong."

Pluto frowned and tapped her Time Staff on the floor. "Unfortunately, as much as I would like that to be true, this truly is an accident--as far as I can tell," she added. "You were caught in the wake of Haruhi's dimensional displacement. It wasn't a very clean transit. I'm still trying to take care of the mess she left. Think of it like a bulldozer going through a highway at a ninety-degree angle and you have some idea of what I have to fix."

I grimaced. "Yeah, if I could have stopped her, I would have. I'm not too crazy about this world."

"I don't blame you," she said reasonably. "In many ways, this is the antithesis of what you stand for. You're a good man and a good policeman in a world that values neither. This is Andy Hero's world, not yours."

"Yeah," I grumbled. "He went from nobody to nightmare in no time flat, boosted by that Power Trip stuff. I just don't get how all this could have happened."

Pluto looked at me with oddly conflicted eyes. That was disturbing enough because Sailor Pluto didn't do "conflicted" very often. In fact, she was big on hope for the future. But her transparent form was a pretty good indicator that she was not in control.

"Someone is blocking me from fully crossing over," she said, indicating her see-through state. "I am, however, able to look through this timeline and I've found a point of divergence."

She waved her staff and a little picture appeared between us. It showed Andy Hero at the mayor's office, looking smug. He didn't look quite as big as he did now. The Chief was there as well and he looked worried.

"This little incident with Vampire Princess Miyu has proven that Animates and humans aren't where we need to be,

relationship-wise," the mayor said. "As such, with the city council's permission, I've decided to create specialized departments within the police to serve as buffers between Animates and humans, as well as the more...quirky facets of our city."

Andy Hero grinned so wide, I wondered whether or not he'd had plastic surgery. "Leave it to me, Mr. Mayor. As the Anime Detective, I'll make sure that we send a clear message to all Animates."

The Chief rubbed his bald pate and frowned. "And what kind of message are you going to send, Hero? You do remember what a cop is supposed to do, right?"

Andy Hero waved him off. "Of course, of course, Chief. Serve and protect, enforce the law, all that jazz. But the Animates have to remember that they have to play by the rules. And I'm going to enforce that--with your permission, of course, Mayor."

The mayor briefly looked dazed. Then he seemed to snap out of it. "Of course, Detective Hero. I leave this in your capable hands. From now on, you have to be everybody's hero."

Andy Hero grinned and his teeth sparkled. "*Everybody's hero,*" he mused. "*I like that. That would make a great slogan.*"

The scene briefly shifted to outside the office. That same bald-headed man with a mustache and beard had been listening in. Despite the fact that a receptionist and guard was there, nobody seemed to notice him. He took notes on his pad, smiled, and left.

"There's that guy again," I muttered. "I just saw him in the cafe. Who is he?"

"I don't know."

I blinked. "You don't know?"

"Do you have any idea how frustrating it is to say those words, Andrew?" Pluto asked. "Some things are hidden even to me. And yes, I do enjoy acting mysterious for a good reason. I have so few pleasures on the job," she lamented.

I frowned and clenched my jaw. The gears upstairs were turning. If Poirot were here, he'd remark that the little grey cells were working--though he'd never actually said that to me since Dupin's frowned on work talk.

"What are you thinking?" Pluto asked.

"Andy Hero isn't the problem," I said. "Well, he's not the root problem. He's only an indicator."

"What makes you say that?"

I rubbed my chin, deep in thought. "The Andy Hero I knew back home was a mentally lazy guy. The path had to be blazed for him, then he'd put his own spin on it. And now you're telling me that somehow, he's single-handedly responsible for everything that's gone wrong with this timeline? That doesn't track," I said.

"He could be smarter than he lets on," Pluto pointed out. "Cunning and intellect aren't necessarily proportional to each other."

"He's a weasel," I said. "He works within boundaries to subvert them for his own goals. He games the system. But I don't think he's enough of a genius to figure out how to bottle his cologne--the one that even Washuu had difficulties synthesizing."

I took a look around the cramped bathroom. Sadly, no dimensional door opened to reveal the redheaded mad scientist.

"Nice try," Pluto said. "Unfortunately, until Haruhi is returned home, transit between dimensions is very tricky right

now." She changed the subject. "So, if Andy Hero isn't the mastermind behind this, what is he?"

"He's a tool. He's a patsy. He's a convenient front man who serves someone else's agenda and he may not even realize it. But someone is providing him with Power Trip, winding him up and letting him loose." I shook my head and sighed. "I just can't figure out why someone would do that."

"I think--" She grimaced as her image started to fade. "I'm running out of time. I can't maintain the link for much longer. I just wanted to show you two more images I saw while scanning this timeline."

She gestured with her staff once again. An image appeared of a police funeral. A picture of my Dad in his late 20's was on stage, with his partner eulogizing him. And in the back row was the bald man with his notepad.

A second image appeared before me. This time, it was Mom's funeral. The man I knew as Chief was eulogizing her as well, noting that she'd lost a child along with herself. And in the back, once again, was the bald man with his notepad, looking smug.

"What--" was all I got out before Pluto's image faded. A second later, time went back to normal.

I stood there for a moment, looking at my reflection in the mirror while the water ran. Why was that guy at both of my alternate parents' funerals? Why did he seem so smug as he wrote on his notepad? Was he just recording what he saw, or was there something more to it?

This couldn't have been a coincidence. If I were a little more paranoid, I'd say that my parents in this dimension had been targeted for something.

Then again, given what I've seen of this world, maybe being a little more paranoid is just par for the course. Of course, getting rid of the family line would make a difference, but I didn't think that it would change the world.

I had a lot to think about, but I couldn't stay in the restroom forever. There were too many things I had to take care of. I had to get Haruhi back. I had to get home. I had to find out what exactly caused this world to go down this path. I had to figure out who the bald guy with a notebook was and where he fit in. I had to knock Andy Hero on his ass for making a mess of things.

Okay, I admit it. That last one wasn't a "must," but that was definitely high on the list. Never mind the fact that he was hopped up on Power Trip and could probably dodge any punch I

threw at him. Different dimension or not, he still annoyed the hell out of me. And a guy like that had to have enemies.

Wait a minute. The Nene in this cafe seemed terrified. She couldn't even go anywhere near a computer, probably because she could work some technical mumbo jumbo on it. I know that my Nene (okay, bad choice of words) could hack into just about anything, given the right opportunity and the equipment. That's why I never thought of her as just a Girl Friday. You couldn't ask for a better person on offense and defense when it came to computers.

I got the sudden feeling that Nene's "rehabilitation" by Andy Hero was for a very personal reason. Given that she could never resist a hacking challenge, she might have decided to go for the biggest fish in the pond, namely, Andy Hero. I had no doubt that he had enough skeletons in his closet to fill a catacomb. Whether or not Nene would be willing to share any of that info with me was another thing.

I sighed and washed my hands. My tablemates were waiting for me.

"That was fast," Estes remarked. "The waitress hasn't even arrived with our food yet."

"I was just washing my hands," I lied. "So, what's the deal with this place?"

Estes gestured expansively with one of those beefy arms of his. "Everyone here used to be on a show called Bubblegum Crisis. After the OVA went down, they made a reboot a few years later with different girls. The two groups merged together and they decided to form a cafe." He shrugged. "I guess you could call them the lucky ones."

"How's that?" I asked.

Estes looked at me in disbelief. "Oh, come on! It's only common knowledge."

"Well, let's just pretend that I could use a refresher course."

Stan looked annoyed. "Seriously? Everyone knows that Animates aren't as tough once their show is over. No matter how big of a following they have, something always comes up about what happened behind the scenes."

Estes nodded. "I mean, yeah, look at me. Back when I had a show going, I felt like I was on top of the world. After that--well, I'm not exactly weak as a kitten, but I can't do what I used to."

That was new. The Animates I knew of back home didn't seem to have any issue with fan goodwill keeping them empowered. That was another reminder that, though this was pretty close to home, I couldn't always assume that the same rules applied.

"What about the fans?" I asked. "Don't they keep the flame going?"

Stan scoffed. "The `fans?'" he asked, scorn souring his tone. "Oh God, don't get me started on that bunch of narrow-minded idiots."

I raised an eyebrow. This was something else that I hadn't anticipated. Back home, the fandom was so big, The Con was the biggest venue in the city. Of course, the hotel got trashed the last time around, but everyone made it out just fine. Back home, fans weren't the ostracized, hidden group that they were a few years back.

"Just a little while ago," Stan said, "we were running security duty on `The Con.'" His lips curled in a sneer. "Can you imagine? About a 1000 people showed up, 90 percent of them male. Of course, I call them `male' because I wouldn't qualify any of them as `men.' And those males are swarming around the females who aren't ogling over yaoi manga."

I shrugged. "People have to have their hobbies. As long as they're not hurting anyone, I don't have a problem with it."

Estes rolled his eyes in disgust. "Have you actually seen some of these fans? You've got the pimply-faced wonders. You have either the scrawny scarecrow or the pudgy losers--well, they're all losers in my book."

"Yeah," Stan chimed in. "About the only thing they're good for is generating some income for the city, what with their buying all that merchandise and everything. It's one thing to buy some videos or maybe a CD or two, but them? They buy models, wall scrolls, stickers--practically anything with a famous name or face on it. You have to wonder where they put it all!"

"And you know who the biggest loser fans of all are?"
Estes. "Go on, take a guess. It starts with `w.'"

"Oh God, the writers," Stan said as he accepted his lunch from Linna, our waitress. This was classic Linna, hairband and all, and she looked understandably nervous being around us.
"Thanks."

"What's wrong with a little creative writing?" I asked.

Both Stan and Estes looked at me and laughed. To them, it was obvious that I wasn't clued in.

"Did you know that it's mostly women who write fanfiction?" Stan asked. "Believe me, 90 percent of it is vicariously living through the characters they've created, just to interact with the ones that they know. And oh, golly, the new characters are all just so much better than the ones on the show."

"It's not so bad," Estes remarked as he accepted his lunch. "The Chief says that your boss, the big Hero man, sponsors a creative writing contest from selected 'authors' on the internet." He took a bite of his sandwich. "Funny thing, though. After they have their little writing contest, they stop writing--something about being burned out. Like it's a big loss with all the trash they put out."

Okay, that was interesting. Why would Andy Hero sponsor a writing contest unless...he knew how Power Trip was created, or he knew someone who could make it. It probably wouldn't have been as efficient as the situation I was investigating, one that involved multiple writers across the city. But then again, if Andy Hero is the only one who is pumping himself up with that stuff, then he probably wouldn't need a whole city's worth of author ego energy.

It wasn't right. Fans had been kept down as social pariahs here. They never had a chance to go out into the mainstream, to open the door to what was once an exclusive club. They couldn't

tell anyone that they liked an anime character or show without being mocked or ridiculed. It drove them further into that exclusive group where they felt some semblance of belonging. And, if what Stan and Estes are saying is correct, writers may have been exploited in order to maintain Andy Hero's power base with Power Trip--or, at least, the raw author ego energy needed for that stuff.

This system was so corrupt, I didn't even know where to start. Even if I could take care of Andy Hero, the infrastructure he put into place would go on. The mean machine would keep on running, spewing hate towards Animates.

I wordlessly nodded to the waitress as she came back with my club sandwich. Nene's eyes were red, as if she'd been crying recently--which, given the circumstances, she probably had been crying.

The conversation I heard next wasn't something I'd intended on listening to. But I heard it all the same.

"Russi," a skinny, redheaded guy at another table began, "You have to understand that anime has a clear habit, and has had for many years, of taking strong female characters and manufacturing weaknesses for them so a strong male character can rescue them. It's a weakness of the medium."

"I don't know, Denny," a somewhat stocky brunette responded. "I've seen plenty of girls with guns who could bust out of just about anything."

Denny snorted. "Yeah, mostly their outfits. When push comes to shove, it's 'oh, help me strong male, help me.'" He snorted. "I mean, even Priss over there has gotten her ass kicked with little to show for it. And now, she's in this cute little frilly number because she can't hack it as a strong female character in the real world. She has to resort to the classic trope of being helpless, weak and submissive, and it's disgusting," he finished.

"I guess," Russi said. "But honestly? With all the laws stacked against them, I don't think that they have much of a choice in what they do."

"Of course, they do!" Denny said. "They're just being lazy and complacent about it!"

I slowly set down my coffee cup. This was not my fight. I could not change the mindset of one stubborn, arrogant redheaded twit who was sitting on their high horse. This was an attitude that had been ingrained in them for years like old leather. And it was easier to hold onto something comfortable that was wrong, rather than to try something new that was correct.

That didn't stop me from wanting to shove that smug guy's face into his plate. But that was more trouble than it was worth.

I didn't have to worry. Someone was intervening for me.

"Excuse me," Sylia Stingray said--the one I remembered, not the one who looked like an Ifurita knockoff. "I would appreciate it if you didn't speak ill of my staff and my friends."

Denny snorted. "Look, I've got a right to my own opinion."

Sylia nodded amiably. "You do. However, that right ends when you deliberately demean someone within earshot." She paused. "I believe that you have a very flawed understanding of what makes a 'strong' woman. Now, I would prefer that you offer a sincere apology to Priss."

"And what if I don't?" Denny asked defiantly. Oh, this guy was stubborn as a bull.

"Then I am within my rights to ask you to leave this cafe and not return," Sylia said calmly. Then she turned to my table. "I'm certain that officers of the law will vouch that I am doing nothing illegal."

Stan and Estes didn't say anything. I lifted the brim of my fedora slightly and smiled.

"Miss Stingray, I can gladly vouch for that," I said pleasantly. "I don't see that you're doing anything wrong. You have the right to refuse service to anyone who might be causing a scene."

Sylia blinked in surprise. Clearly, she hadn't been expecting my reaction. After a moment, she recovered her composure.

"Yes, thank you...?" she prompted.

"Detective Andrew Mays."

"Yes, thank you, Detective Mays." She returned her attention to the offending customer. "So, are you willing to apologize to Priss, or will I have to ask you to leave?"

Denny boy didn't really like his options. The cafe was silent and he was being speared with expectant looks from everyone except maybe the two other cops at my table. He glared at Sylia, then Priss and finally me. All the while, his gal pal Russi grew increasingly more disappointed with his hesitation.

Denny shot up in his seat and grabbed his wallet. He plucked out a few bills and tossed them on the table.

"We're leaving," Denny announced. "I see no reason why I have to be bullied into doing anything." He reached out to Russi, who looked less than enthused to be there. "Come on, let's go."

She jerked her hand back. "No, I don't think so. I'll take a taxi home, thanks."

"Hey, what's the deal?" he demanded. "I've got nothing to apologize for! Just because they can't take a simple difference of opinion--"

"Get off your high horse, Denny!" she exclaimed. "God! You're so convinced that you're always right, that you're not willing to even apologize for anything. You know that's called? Bull-headed arrogance. And you know what? I've had enough."

I tried not to smile as Denny gasped like a fish out of water. He stood there as his former gal pal stalked off, murmuring a word of apology to Sylia on the way out. A moment later, he followed her in some attempt to salvage his dignity and their relationship.

Then the cafe decided to explode with applause. Almost everyone there started clapping, with the notable exception of Stan and Estes. They were hunkering down in their chairs, trying not to get noticed.

I've never been much of a glory hound. I just figured that when things had to get done, I took care of it. I didn't expect a huge reward just for trying to be a decent person. Still, it felt kind of good to be in the spotlight--at least, just this once.

As with all moments, however, it didn't last. It was almost a universal law for me. For every moment when I felt validated, there was almost always going to be a moment when someone was going to take it away. It's like the classic moment from Raiders of the Lost Ark when Indiana Jones goes through all that crap to grab the idol for the museum, then in comes his rival to take it away after all the work's been done.

As if on cue, Andy Hero strutted through the door like he owned the place. His trenchcoat fit him like a glove, the tail end of it billowing dramatically like a superhero's cape. He grinned like a shark anticipating its next meal, his teeth sparkling. I had to fight the urge to just crack him one against that cleft chin of his.

His green eyes scanned the area methodically, narrowing every time his gaze locked with an Animate. They all flinched to various degrees. Sylia's eye twitched while Priss forced herself to unclench her fist. Linna took a step back and Nene--the poor kid started shaking like a leaf. The 2040 girls froze

like deer in the headlights of the biggest monster truck to ravage a road.

"Well, it's not often that I hear someone applauding the police," he drawled. "And in such a fine establishment, too."

"To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit, Detective Hero?" Sylia asked. "As you can see, we've been keeping very busy. We just had a minor incident with a customer which was resolved by--"

"--by Andy Mays," Hero finished. "He's not one of my regular men. He's only on temporary assignment here, you understand."

I clenched my jaw. I hate being called "Andy Mays."

"Detective Mays was merely helping us maintain an appropriate atmosphere--as part of our arrangement," Sylia said. She tried to look unruffled, but the occasional twitch gave her away. I had to wonder exactly what Hero had done to make her so afraid of him.

There was a lot that wasn't said. Hero wasn't saying that he'd shut down the cafe at the slightest provocation because, well, that would just be gauche. Sylia was absolutely not saying that she'd been following the rules, spoken or otherwise, regarding some sort of arrangement that probably involved the

girls and Mackie. The fact that classic Sylia, not her 2040 counterpart, was running the show told me that the new bunch wasn't exactly on the side of the angels. Or, Hero had found their price and they were paying him back.

Look, I'm not inclined to think the worst of people immediately. The fact is, Hero was in some kind of medal ceremony with the mayor on the Human side of town. Now, he was in a random maid cafe which was probably more under Chief Saeba's territory than his. Somebody called in Hero and I'm willing to bet that one of the 2040 crowd did it, since none of them were sticking up for Sylia.

I took a quick glance around. Yup, the 2040 crowd was gathered together, away from everyone else.

"New cops are always enthusiastic and civil-minded," Hero said dismissively. "Then they learn good judgment." He turned a predatory smile towards Nene. "And have we been a good girl, Nene? You know what happens to bad girls who don't follow the rules."

Redheaded Nene went pale as she held up her tray in front of her, as if it were some makeshift shield. The poor kid was shaking like a leaf.

"I'm a good girl," she babbled. "I'm a good girl. I follow the rules. Everyone knows that I follow the rules."

"Good," Hero said, straightening the lapels on his trenchcoat. The crowd parted for him, leaving a clear path between him and Nene. He practically stalked his way to her, a nasty gleam in his eyes. "Because bad girls--"

"Easy, Detective Hero," I said in my blandest voice. I had to pretend that I wasn't getting worked up at all over him looming over Nene. "Was there something else you wanted to talk about? I believe that you were taking care of some of my paperwork?"

For the briefest of moments, Andy Hero gave me an ugly scowl. Then he returned his face to that good-natured social smile he used.

"Of course," he said, backing off of Nene. "The arrangements are almost ready. We just have to find your missing...property."

That was a mixed blessing. I didn't want to inflict this guy on Haruhi, but I also needed her to come back with me. The fact that he was so smooth with his response indicated to me that maybe he and his team weren't all ready.

Before I could response, I felt reality--invert, for lack of a better term. It was that topsy-turvy feeling of going on a roller coaster with a sadistic operator, only to have it turn to a rocket launch. After you thought that you might be used to it, you fell back down to--

--well, it wasn't earth. It was an empty version of the place we were in, only with gray skies. I didn't see any celestial beings, but I wasn't alone.

Nene, Sylia, Priss and Linna had come with me, though nobody else had. They looked confused, which was perfectly normal in an abnormal space.

"Where are we?" Sylia asked.

"Long story short, this is an enclosed alternate dimension generated by someone I'm looking for," I told them. "Usually, there would be a big giant abstract-looking creature just smashing buildings, but I don't see one. So...for lack of anything else, we're going to have to wait it out."

The girls looked at me like I'd grown another head. That was to be expected, given the surreal atmosphere.

"The plus side is, these are great ways to have private conversations without, say, stool pigeons or bugs listening to

you," I said easily. "Stool pigeons like, say, the `revised' versions of you ladies?"

They all shared a look. They must have made some kind of silent consensus.

"So, what's your theory, Detective?" Linna asked. "You're probably wondering why we went from power armor mercenaries to maid cafe waitresses."

"It was a stretch, but I'm guessing it has something to do with Andy Hero. And it's very likely that the whole cafe angle was part of some kind of deal to save someone," I said. "Thing is, I'm from another dimension and I know the four of you back home."

"`Alternate dimension?'" Priss asked.

I didn't say anything. I just spread my arms wide.

"Okay, yeah, you got me," she admitted. "So, go on with your theory."

"All right. Knowing Nene, she just couldn't resist poking around on the computer. It's more than likely that she found Andy Hero's dirty laundry, but got caught in the process."

Nene looked very uncomfortable. "It was the toughest encryption I'd ever cracked, much stronger than the usual police security. I didn't think that they could trace me."

I turned towards Sylia. "So, in order to save Nene from any number of horrible fates, you opted to shut down the mercenary operation and went for something harmless. Because nobody expects the maid inquisition," I joked. "Of course, you don't have to verify my suspicions, since I'm not sure how long this closed space will last. But I don't see you guys as rolling over for Andy Hero."

Sylia exchanged a brief glance with the other girls. They nodded in silent agreement.

"You're not wrong," Sylia said carefully. "That's all I can safely say."

I winced as I felt the space began to quiver. It was like the tension in a soap bubble before it popped. We were out of time.

The next moment, we were back in the cafe. Some time must have passed because Andy Hero, Estes and Stan had pulled out their guns.

"What the hell just happened?" Stan demanded. "Where did you go?"

I was bent over and gasping for breath. I'm not an expert in dimensional dynamics or physics or whatever you might call it. People have called me more cunning than intellectual. Anyway, I'm guessing that being booted out of a closed space doesn't usually involve feeling like your guts have been inverted, then put back roughly into place. I held up my hand to forestall any "friendly" fire.

"Gimme a sec," I panted. "Criminately, that was rough."

Hero leveled his gun at me. "What. Happened?"

"Not entirely sure," I lied. "Maybe the universe decided to blink? Maybe space and time decided to mess itself up just because. We were lucky that this was only temporary." I looked up at the gun he was pointing at me. I tried not to flinch at the slight needle marks that I saw on his wrist. Clearly, Detective Hero was no stranger to injections, something that I've always hated. But that was less important than what was pointed at me. "A Desert Eagle? Really? That's not exactly department issue."

Hero scowled at me and holstered his gun. He probably got that gun because it was large and intimidating. The fact that it was probably illegal to use for police work didn't seem to

faze him much. Of course, there's also the possibility that he thought it looked cool when he was posing for his crowd.

See, here's the thing about nonstandard big guns and police officers: They really don't mix that well. It all has to do with the pesky concepts of serving and protecting the people that Andy Hero and others like him seem to have found inconvenient. A Desert Eagle has a big round and only about 7 shots in the magazine, 1 in the chamber. The bigger round also does a lot more damage, which is a really bad thing if said bullet hits the wrong target. "Overkill" is a very bad word to throw around when you're talking about, oh, collateral damage and hurting innocent people. Those are a few reasons why police departments have weapons standards.

If anything, this made it even more clear that Andy Hero wasn't in the police to serve and protect. In a fairer world, he would have been shaken out during training. But in this world, he's a good representative of the bully that is supposedly on your side. His vanity probably was a factor as well.

"Get up," Hero said tersely. The fact that he wasn't in control of the situation probably made him angrier than it should have. The guy had always been something of a control freak back home. This version of him wasn't any better.

"Working on it," I grunted. I lurched upright and noticed that the girls who'd vanished with me weren't in much better shape. The cafe was also empty. "What happened?"

"After you pulled that vanishing act, everybody panicked," Estes replied. He was holding a double-barreled shotgun that, once again, probably wasn't department issue. "They headed out before we could calm them down."

"Do you blame them?!" Stan asked, brandishing his Beretta. "People don't just vanish in thin air!"

"Speaking of vanishing, did you find the girl I arrived with?" I asked. "And for that matter, do you have our exit ready?"

The big lug's scowl deepened. "Not yet, to both your questions," he grudgingly admitted. "The eggheads say that there's been some kind of damage to the space-time continuum. Then again, this isn't the first time someone's fallen through the cracks."

Well, that confirmed what Sailor Pluto had said. Any direct trip back home without fixing the way first was going to be rough. I guessed that the reason I'd made it to Dupin's without a hitch was because the bar wasn't in my home dimension, but somewhere in between. Shorter road to travel, I guess.

Wait, what did he say about other people falling through the cracks? That got me curious.

Hero grabbed his walkie-talkie. "Saeba!" he bellowed. "Get your worthless ass out of that desk or away from your little playground and--"

"A little busy here, Hero!" Chief Saeba shot back. "Half the city's gone to hell! I've got people vanishing and reappearing, and not always in the same place! I've got the whole department on this!"

That got his attention. "The WHOLE department?" Hero asked. "You'd better not let your people anywhere near the wall!"

"At this point, I'm not really worried about a stupid wall!" Chief Saeba yelled. "Maybe you should reassess your priorities, `Hero!'"

Another guy would have turned off the walkie-talkie and got the job done. Another guy would have let it go and prioritized the safety and well-being of the average citizen before his ego. Another guy would have realized that Chief Saeba's outburst was due to large amounts of stress from an extraordinary and unprecedented event.

Andy Hero was not that guy. His grip tightened on the walkie-talkie and he took a deep breath.

"I MADE you, you ungrateful little doodle!" Hero bellowed into the walkie-talkie. "When I found you, you were friendless, hopeless and drowning yourself in women and booze! And for what? Because you lost your little girlfriend? Because your blind buddy bit the big one? Because suddenly, you realized that without your little support group, you were just a depressed, muscular buffoon who wanted to die?!"

There was a burst of static from the walkie-talkie. Then it went silent.

"Typical," Hero spat as he holstered his walkie-talkie. He whirled on Estes, who looked very uncertain. "Why don't you go make yourself useful and crawl back to your boss? You haven't been much help lately."

Estes glared at Hero and put away the shotgun he'd been holding. Of course, he wasn't wearing a long coat or anything, so I guess he must have just put it in Who Knows Where. Too bad my pocket wasn't working right now. I probably would have taken a mallet to Andy Hero if it was--but then again, given that Power Trip warped reality, it's pretty unlikely that the hit would have landed.

Estes grabbed his walkie-talkie. "Heading back to the precinct," he said tersely, striding towards the door. "Let me know if there's someone I can kill--I mean, any people to assist."

"Detective Hero--" Stan began, but he was cut off by a short "SHH" from Hero. "Sir?"

"Quiet," Hero insisted as he holstered his walkie-talkie. "I have to take a good look to see if there are any clues left behind."

"Clues?" I asked. Seriously, what was this guy's damage? If anything, the priority would have been to coordinate a response with local law enforcement in order to first, quell the panic and second, to see where Haruhi might have been. Given that she's creating random spatial warps, that indicated to me that she must have been extremely upset. I wonder what she might have found in that North High that wasn't hers.

The big lug squinted his eyes. It was like seeing a blond Clint Eastwood, only without the true confidence and air of menace.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm activating my Detective Vision," Hero said seriously.

I blinked. "Your `Detective Vision?'"

"Well, it's a little fringe benefit of using..." He trailed off as he realized that this was something that was best kept secret. "Anyway, if I need a clue, I'll find one. I've solved every case that was assigned to me and I'm not about to fail now. After all, I'm everybody's hero."

Ugh. I could feel his ego radiating off of him like heat off of an engine block. Or, to use a more appropriate metaphor, it wasn't his ego that was coming off him. Rather, it was some poor author whose energy he decided to harvest, just to remain the top dog as a detective.

"I give up," I sighed. "What does `Detective Vision' look like?"

"I'm kind of curious too," Stan admitted. "I've never been around you when you've solved a case."

"Well, let's just say that anything relevant to what I'm investigating seems to stick out like a sore thumb. You know how in video games, some objects glow to indicate that they're a part of the story? Well, it's pretty similar to that--and I don't see ANYTHING," he finished with a grunt. "No glowing objects, no arrows pointing me to the right direction, nothing!"

"Sir?" Stan asked uncertainly. "You've solved all of your cases like that?"

Hero shrugged. "I've got an advantage. Tell me in the police handbook where I shouldn't use things to an advantage."

"Hold on," I began. "So, you're basically waiting for input from your 'Detective Sense' instead of, say, pounding the ground and looking for actual clues."

"I'm not seeing an issue," Hero said with a straight face. "You use whatever advantage you can take, especially in the field. And what does it hurt, anyway? It gets the job done."

"But sir, you're not really solving anything," Stan pointed out. "You're not gathering the clues. You're not following procedure. You're not getting in contact with people in Forensics or digging up old case files. You're just--"

"--getting work done, Tai," Hero interrupted, a dangerous edge in his voice. "Isn't that what a good cop does? I catch the bad guys, I solve the case, I get the rewards. I still don't know why you don't want me to do things my way, but the hard way instead."

Criminately. No wonder he never found his way to Dupin's bar. Auguste was big on people who were truth seekers. And Hero's way of solving crimes was to use the path of least

resistance, bolstered by the Power Trip that he was saturated in. He never needed to really think hard on how to solve a case--it was pretty much done for him. And he'd been getting medals from the mayor for years as the top cop in the city.

I was reminded of a story where the main character was the luckiest man on earth. He'd never known any real sort of hardship. Whenever things went somewhat bad, there was always some near-divine intervention that prevented the worst of the consequences. And, as a result, the guy never learned how to use basic skills like, say, cooking for himself or how to relate to people. Instead, he was just a bumbling idiot who wondered when his luck was going to kick in. He couldn't talk to people to express what he wanted. He couldn't figure out how to work the ATM because money always found its way to his hands. He was just a dysfunctional wreck who used his luck as a crutch.

Andy Hero was a miserable excuse for a cop. Not only was he mentally lazy, but he was a glory hound and a cheat. The big question was how he managed to obtain Power Trip in the first place? The next big question was, what would they have to gain by letting Andy Hero basically run the police? Why would they allow the police to be turned into basically a bully squad with badges and guns? And why were people tolerating this kind of crap when they could ask for better?

Look, I generally try to be a stand-up guy. I keep my nose clean and I follow the rules as best as I can. I've done a few things that probably weren't becoming of an officer of the law. Hell, the first time I met Nene, it had been just after I keyed some jackass's car. But I never thought that the rules didn't apply to me. No one, not even a cop is above the law. And despite the loyalty that cops have for one another as brothers in arms, there comes a time when we have to cut them loose if they fall too far.

I felt a wave of nausea pass over me as, presumably, Haruhi warped reality once again. I wasn't the only one who was feeling it; Andy Hero and Stan were staggered as well. For once, the "perfect cop" looked unsettled and shaken, just like the rest of us mere mortals. He reached into the pocket of his own trenchcoat, only to stop short.

It was only due to the angle that I saw the vials of Power Trip in his jacket. The only thing was, they weren't cologne bottles or anything that had to do with aerosol delivery. No, I made out a syringe top at the top of one of the tubes. And Andy Hero had a few tiny marks on his wrist.

He shot me a glare that clearly said "you saw nothing." He then grabbed at his walkie-talkie and started bellowing orders.

Never mind the fact that he was ordering around cops who outranked him--he was in charge.

Criminately. He wasn't just spraying himself with Power Trip, he was mainlining it. No wonder he'd managed to get away with so much for so long. No wonder the Goddess Relief Office recognized and approved of his shaky contract, sealing off the girls' powers in the process. I only had a few sprays to the face with that stuff and it was disorienting for me. But if he'd been using the stuff for years and in high quantities--there was no telling how much damage he'd done to not only the police department but innocent people and Animates as well.

Then, an absurdly simple idea occurred to me. The first thing that Haruhi probably would have done upon arrival would be to visit her school. With her attitude, she could most likely bluff her way into the class. After all, she was wearing the uniform and people tended to bend her way. But if she was warping reality this badly, then she must have seen something horrible--or, she just got frustrated and bored out of her gourd. Either way was entirely possible.

"Did you try the high schools?" I asked. Hero had been in a brief lull when he hadn't been yelling at someone.

He looked at me sourly. "Now why the hell would I try the high schools? Most of the dangerous kids there have already been deconstructed or dealt with."

I blinked. "Sorry. I didn't quite catch that. What's this about 'deconstructing' the kids?" I didn't like the sound of that.

Hero snorted and shot a glance to Stan. "Tai, get in the car outside. 'Detective Mays' and I are going to have a little talk about the reality of Animates."

Stan looked hesitant. I didn't blame him. In a short time, he'd seen that the best cop he'd ever known wasn't above using dirty tricks and other, less savory tactics to get things done. I guess it might have been like seeing the Easter Bunny strip a carrot field bare, then burn the field. After another moment of hesitating, though, he reluctantly left the mostly-empty cafe. Only me, Hero and the original Knight Sabers were left in the room.

No, he didn't deserve to be called a hero. He was a poster boy--good looking and shiny on the outside, but no depth whatsoever.

The poster boy smiled and his teeth gleamed. Once again, I checked the urge to punch him.

"Andy," he purred. "Can I call you Andy?"

"No," I shot back. "You can call me Detective Mays."

"Well, 'Detective,' you know how dangerous Animates can be." He gestured over to where the girls were still recovering from their trip to closed space. "That cute little redhead over there? I'll admit that she has a brain on her, but she used it the wrong way."

Nene still looked green around the gills. She was slumped over where they kept the cash register--the same register that she was supposed to stay away from. Her hands were suspiciously out of sight.

"What'd she do, include you on a chain e-mail?" I joked. "I'd make comments about enhancements, but you seem to have that covered already."

Poster Boy's green eyes narrowed. I just called him out on his main vice. I could see his big hands flexing, waiting for a chance to do some damage.

"It's dangerous stuff, you know," I warned him. "Sure, it gives you the easy way out of everything. You're not accountable for your actions because people can't believe that you'd do...unfortunate, but necessary things. Life seems so much easier when you don't have to worry about, oh, the laws of

physics, people who could crush you but won't, or even the next big date."

"You've had a taste of the good stuff," he concluded. "So, why did you give it up?"

"I couldn't stand the smell."

Poster Boy rolled his eyes. "That's it? You didn't like the smell? You gave up so much power for a small thing like that?"

Oh boy. He just didn't get it. He was incapable of doing things on his own merits and strengths.

"It's a crutch," I said simply. "Everything you've done while using that stuff really isn't from you. It just twists reality so that things fall in your favor. It's kind of like those fan stories where the main character just has to be better than the characters everyone knows, just because. It's a nice little boost to the ego at first, but when you look closer, it's just damn annoying."

I saw the flash in his eyes. I knew that he was going to make a move. And stupidly, instinctively, I reached for a mallet from a pocket that didn't quite work.

Poster Boy lifted me by the shirtfront and grinned. It was like he was channeling the Joker.

"You know," he said smoothly, "I might have given you professional courtesy. I might have even respected that amusing, straight and narrow viewpoint of yours. But, since you rejected the good stuff, you're weak--"

The sound of mechanical clanking and whirring gears stopped him from finishing that sentence. Poster Boy looked annoyed as rather large guns descended from the ceiling. I didn't care if they were lasers, particle beams, railguns or chain guns. They all looked very lethal. Oh, and the nice touch were the laser dots that all centered on Poster Boy's head.

He shook his head. "Sylia, I believe that this is a violation of our deal," he said calmly. "It's not like these toys could actually do anything to me, but I'm flattered that you made the effort."

"This is for the more unruly clientele," she returned from her station near the cash register. "Generally, people find this to be a very convincing argument. Now, if you could put Detective Mays down, I would greatly appreciate it."

Poster Boy let me down gently and released his mitts from my trenchcoat. I took a step back and straightened the lapels.

"Thanks," I said to Sylia. "Nice security system."

"It was repurposed," she joked. Yes, Sylia Stingray actually made a joke. "Now, I'll have to ask you to leave, Detective Hero. I'm sure that you have more pressing matters to attend to. Reality tearing itself apart tends to be quite high on the priority list, I would think."

"Do you think that he could keep me from taking you down?" Poster Boy asked. There was a nasty, ugly edge in his voice.

"That depends on whether or not your `enhancements' are working in this environment," Sylia countered. "I can always claim self-defense. But by all means, I'm more than willing to test your hypothesis." Sylia's brown eyes turned hard. She wasn't bluffing. "Get out of my cafe."

Poster Boy looked at me and sneered. "You just lost your ticket back home, mister," he said as he stalked off. I waited until I heard the car drive off.

"Thanks," I said to Sylia. "I honestly didn't expect the backup."

"I almost didn't give it," she admitted. She tapped a few buttons near the cash register and the weapons slid back into the roof. "Forgive me, but the police have not been kind to

Animates for quite some time. But I saw an opportunity and took it."

"So, what convinced you?"

Sylia gave me a tired, wan smile. "Nene had a good feeling about you. You also stood up for Priss and myself. Given our...decline...it was unexpected."

"When you lost your fan support," I said. "That's what he was talking about when he said 'deconstruction.' In this place, no Animate is as strong as when their show is still airing, when they're the current talk of the town."

"The power of the collective consciousness, I suppose," Sylia remarked. "Though I should have realized that it was systematic. The pattern was there, but nobody really talked about it. We all just assumed that it was the natural order of things to have our moment of fame, then fade away."

"If I'm right, this probably started happening after the Miyu Incident. That's when the City Council decided to create the different offices in the police department." I paused. "It didn't work out the way it was supposed to."

Sylia frowned. "Obviously. So, Detective Mays...who are you? You're definitely a policeman, but one with integrity and

empathy. You appear to know plenty of Animates but you lack the inherent bigotry of the rest of the police department."

I winced. "Yeah, I understand how you'd feel that way. Things went a little different here than they did back home. I wish that I could fix this, but--"

"--but what?" Sylia asked pointedly. "Are you saying that this world is broken?"

I had to take a deep breath at that. It suddenly hit me that I'd been pretty much running around, seeing things that were inherently wrong to me. I had seen people I knew suffer when they hadn't before. I had been through a police department that had turned more sour and jaded than anything I'd seen back home. There may have been glimmers of basic decency, but it was like a pall had fallen over this world. And the worst part was how easily people seemed to just accept that Animates were second-class, that they were just pseudo-people to be stepped on and treated as an inconvenience.

I'm a cop. I enforce the law and I obey the rules--well, I generally obey the rules. I do my best to make sure that the bad guys go down and that the good guys are helped--and yeah, I know that's a gross simplification. But that's the life I chose. Despite being from a blue line, Mom and Dad never forced

me to be a cop. My older brother Adam was one already. But I couldn't imagine being anything else.

I am a cop. I am not a god. Yeah, I may have moments of insight and cleverness, but I'm not all-knowing.

This world had been under the anti-Animate malaise for years. It was something that had been generally accepted by the common person. It was only a few hardcore fans (a lot fewer here than back home) that kept the flame going for **maybe** treating Animates like regular people. But the state of this world was bigger than me. It would take someone a lot smarter than me to set this right.

"Are you all right?" I heard Nene ask. It wasn't the Nene I knew back home, obviously. Sylia must have released her, Priss and Linna from whatever safe spot they were hiding in. The cute little redhead looked tired, but worried. "You just started leaning against the wall."

Part of me just wanted to go home and forget that this world ever existed. Part of me wanted to fight, to somehow balance the scales in some small, infinitesimal way.

"I'll be all right, kiddo," I murmured, straightening myself up. "It's just been a long day and it's barely past noon. It'll be a hell of a thing to put in my diary when I go

home. `Got up, got shifted to another dimension, felt helpless, made it home, survived my birthday party,'" I babbled. "Of course, the day's still pretty young and I'm not."

"You never did answer my question," Sylia reminded me. "Is this world broken?"

I sighed heavily. "It's...it's worse than home," I admitted. "Of course, home wasn't exactly paradise, but Animates and humans were trying hard to work together." I smiled at Nene, who looked confused. "Back home, you're one of my partners. You run interference on the computer for me and Ryo."

Nene looked doubtful. Then again, she'd obviously be more wary than the Nene I knew. "Chief Saeba's your partner?"

"He's not a chief," I corrected her. "And where I come from, Animates have several suburbs to themselves, though they make great tourist attractions. You've got Mechatown with all the reinforced buildings and the giant parking garages. Are you a high-school age Animate? Well, you could probably be found in Teensborough. Are you big into cuteness? Kawaiiville's your place. The City Council back home was even thinking about zoning off an area for all the sword and sorcery types. The planned name so far is `Dungeon Crawl.'" I paused. "And...the

red light district has its own place on the far south end of the city," I said in a rush. "Ryo likes to keep tabs on some of his lady friends there, but Kaori keeps him from getting **too** involved."

Nene blinked. "But Kaori's dead--right, sorry, you're from another world." She sighed. "So...you called me `kiddo.'"

"Yeah," I agreed. "And?"

"So...there's another version of me back home. Of all of us," she added quickly.

"Obviously," I said. "Which is why it hurts when I see you ladies being treated badly." I held up a hand. "And before you ask what your counterparts are like on my world, I'll just say that all of you were generally happier there."

None of them seemed satisfied with that answer. I don't blame them. I probably sounded like some demented fortune cookie with vague answers. All I needed now were some random lottery numbers.

"So we should just give up?" Priss asked, smacking one fist into her hand. "Is that it?"

"The best I can do is set things in motion," I told her. "I'm not going to make any promises. But if you see an

opportunity, I'd definitely capitalize on it if I were you. You're fighters; you'll know what to do and who to bring with you."

"You're not asking who's with us?" Linna asked.

"I don't need to know. It's better off that way," I sighed.

It was then that I heard someone clapping in the doorway. With a few deft motions, Sylia reactivated her security system and pointed everything at the front door.

"Easy, easy," a vaguely ingratiating voice said from outside. We saw a man's hand waving a white handkerchief. "I come in peace. Don't shoot."

Sylia didn't retract the guns. One slender finger hovered over what I presumed to be the firing controls. If her finger twitched the wrong way, she'd have to do some major remodeling.

The man popped his head into view. He didn't seem to worried about the guns trained on him, not even with the intimidating laser sights. It was the same bald guy that Sailor Pluto had shown me images of, the one who'd been taking notes.

He was dressed in an immaculate white suit, his black tie and shiny black shoes the only contrast. He was stocky, but the

suit minimized his girth. With a flourish, he neatly folded his handkerchief into his pocket.

"Anyway, I wanted to congratulate you all," he said smoothly. "You're all making wonderful progress." He turned towards me. "To be honest, I hadn't expected you to pop in, not quite sure where you're from, but it seems to have worked out quite nicely. Nothing like the unexpected to spur things into action."

I didn't like the guy. He was disturbingly enthusiastic about things in a way that told me that he didn't care. He seemed like the kind of guy who wondered what would happen if you smacked explosive A with compound B, all from a safe distance while others weren't.

"Who are you?"

He grinned behind the beard. "Oh, right. Sorry, got so caught up in everything going on that I just--well, here you are," he said, presenting a business card.

"DDO," I read aloud. There wasn't anything else on the card. "What's this supposed to stand for? And I still don't have a name, mister," I reminded him with a frown. Of course, I already knew what the name stood for, but I didn't want to let him know that.

He held up his hands dramatically. "It's short for Dynamic Disaster Organization," he said enthusiastically. "I'm the local agent provocateur--though I really am on the side of the good guys," he insisted. "You can call me Dan."

"Is that short for `dandy?'" Priss remarked. "All you need is a fancy hat and a cane to go with that outfit."

"No, that would be the man from Del Monte," `Dan' said. "And I like that little joke. `Dan' being short for `dandy,' I like that." He gestured and a panama hat appeared in his hand, which he placed on his head. "Is this fancy enough for you?"

"What do you want, Dan from the DDO?" I asked. I wasn't in any mood for games.

"I'm just doing my job," he said blithely. "Everything I've always done has been for the ultimate goal of good triumphing over evil."

"Then explain why the last few years have been hell?" Priss demanded. "You've got--" she began, but she got cut off.

"--inequality, racism, corruption," he listed off on his fingers. "It's an entirely unfair society and you Animates have gotten the short end of the stick." He shook his head as if he was privy to some cosmic joke. "Oh, if only you could understand."

"Understand what?" Sylia asked. "All I understand is that you've done nothing to help matters."

`Dan' looked offended as he splayed his fingers dramatically across his chest. It was such a practiced gesture that I knew he'd done it many times before.

"`Nothing to help?'" he asked. "My dear Dr. Stingray, I have done everything in my power to help the good guys. Because a hero isn't made in times of peace and tranquility. No, a hero is born from conflict, uncertain times and perseverance against soul-crushing odds!" Now he was grinning.

"You knew about this," I said harshly. "You took advantage of this."

`Dan' waved a finger at me. "No, Detective. I didn't take advantage of anything. In fact, I'm very proud to say that I am entirely responsible for setting the stage. All of this was an exercise of my not-inconsiderable resources." The grin was now maniacal. "I made all this happen."

Sylia fired one of her beam guns straight at his head. The beam merely curved around.

"The suit, while fashionable, is also my protection from those who...misunderstand my intentions," `Dan' said almost mournfully. "The boys back home call it P.L.O.T. armor. I'm

not sure what it stands for, but it's very effective against-- well, pretty much everything this part of town can throw at me. In fact, I'd venture to say that nothing in this world can harm me."

"How convenient," I deadpanned. "This part of town?"
"Nothing in this world?" Did that mean that his suit was strictly proof against Animates and anything related to them? Or did that mean that something outside of this world would--

I mentally clamped down on that line of thought. I didn't want to let it show on my face.

"Isn't it?" he agreed a little too readily. "Of course, it's not perfect, but--well, they do say that a story isn't so much perfected as it is abandoned."

"So, you know everything that's going on?" Priss asked.

"Dan" shook his head, as if he was taking pity on her.
"Priss, as much as I'd love to claim that I'm omnipotent and omniscient, I'm not. I only know certain parts of the story. Others in the DDO will have a more far-reaching viewpoint." He smirked. "But then again, if I knew everything--every possibility and potential possibility--it would be so very **boring**. Part of the thrill is seeing what happens next in spite of all the challenges presented."

Priss tried to punch him. Her fist missed him by inches, and not for lack of trying. `Dan' merely smiled. He hadn't even tried to dodge. Her fist just slipped off of something.

"Feisty, spirited, stubborn," he noted. "I should have known that you four wouldn't have given in so easily to Andy Hero's, um, efforts." He took out a notepad.

"What are you doing?" I asked. `Dan' had started scribbling furiously.

"Just noting down who's who and what's what," he muttered. "Sometimes, it's just so hard to keep track of things without noting them down, don't you think? I mean, until now I'd written you four ladies off as broken, depressed and beaten. But now? Now, this is where it gets **exciting**."

"`Exciting?'" Linna asked in disbelief. "Our lives aren't stories for you to just play around with!"

`Dan' shrugged as he closed his notepad. "People live and die all the time without me lifting a finger, Miss Yamazaki. Just remember that I'm doing this for the greater good: The triumph of heroes over adversity." He paused. "At least I hope that it's going to be a triumph. Diminished as the four of you are now, there's every chance that you'd be, well...slaughtered by the police."

"That's interesting," I said, clapping him on the back.
"Because where I come from, cops don't play that way."

`Dan' laughed. "You're kidding, right? `Cops don't play that way?' Of course they play that way!" he exclaimed giddily. "There have always been cops who've wanted to get away with as much as possible while using the badge as a shield. Becoming a policeman doesn't make you a better person. In fact, I'd be willing to wager that a policeman gets worse over time."

"Yeah, we cops do tend to see a lot," I agreed. "We see all the stupid stuff. We see people hurting others for the dumbest reasons, or because someone was on their last nerve. We see so many examples of people just not willing to think of others before they do things." I sighed. "You can come in shiny and bright, but you'll get a little tarnished after a while. If you're not dead."

`Dan' clapped in approval. "Spoken like a true policeman-- at least, an idealistic one. Andy Hero, for all his many faults, is an interesting person because he's unencumbered by ideals. He's a bully, a clever bully--and thanks to my intervention, the right person that this city needs for something exciting to happen."

"Even if `exciting' means that innocent people die?" I asked.

`Dan' shrugged. "Things happen. Of course, if Andy Hero hadn't assumed the role of Anime Detective, I'm certain that someone more...pedestrian would have filled the role. They probably would have kept the peace, did it by the book, blah blah blah that would just be so boring," he sighed.

"I don't know about that," I said casually. "Yeah, sure, the paperwork can be a pain in the ass. And, sure, sometimes my partner drives me crazy because of his little quirks. I may grumble about the little things, but all in all, I'm pretty satisfied with being the Anime Detective."

`Dan' blinked in surprise. "I'm sorry? You're what?"

"I'm Andrew Mays, second son of Anthony and Anna Mays. You know, the people whose deaths you took notes on?" I pointed to his notepad. "I'm a little curious about what you wrote down when they died."

`Dan' went pale and slack-jawed. "I...should really be going now," he said before reaching for his cufflinks.

He didn't get the chance. I grabbed him by the neck with my left hand and slammed him against the wall. I took out my Glock with my right hand and aimed it straight for his forehead.

"As a rule, I don't like to get rough," I told him. "I'm a good cop. I really am. But thanks to you, I've had one hell of a birthday--and I don't mean that in any good way."

"How--?" he wheezed.

"How is your suit not working?" I finished for him. "Well, I'm not from around here. I'm not a scientist, but I'm willing to bet that I'm probably carrying a little pocket of my own dimension with me. And since you mentioned that your suit was proof against anything Animate-related or even this world, I thought that I'd test that."

"Doesn't look so high and mighty to me now," Priss commented. She moved to flick `Dan' in the nose, only to have her fingers slip away. "I think you may be onto something here."

I allowed a little evil smirk to play across my face. "So, sports fan, what do you think are the odds that this lowly gun from home can punch holes in your fancy suit? I can test that theory or you can answer my questions."

`Dan' nodded. "Anything," he wheezed.

"True or false: You supplied Andy Hero with an illegal substance that alters reality."

`Dan' nodded. "True," he said roughly. "It was...to give him an edge," he rasped.

"What substance are you talking about?" Nene asked.

"It's condensed self-insert author ego," I told her. "It shifts things in the wearer's favor. He's not really stronger, faster or smarter--that stuff just shifts the odds to make it so. It has a very distinct, overpowering smell to it. Where I come from, it was called `Power Trip.'"

"I was wondering why he reeked everywhere he went," Priss remarked.

"I was wondering why I kept having so much trouble trying to hack into his file," Nene added. "Whenever I tried, the connection would cut off or I'd just get corrupted data. What little I managed to get..." The kid shuddered in disgust. "He is one seriously sadistic, dirty cop. And I don't think that I even got a third of how he abuses the system."

"Police brotherhood is kind of a double-edged sword, kiddo," I told her. "You support your own. Unfortunately, that also means that whatever a rotten apple does tends to be covered up for the sake of the department's image."

"What else...do you need?" `Dan' rasped.

I bored straight into those dark eyes of his. "Did you arrange for Anthony and Anna Mays to die?"

`Dan' nodded. He was starting to get purple in the face. I decided to ease up my grip just a tad, but kept my Glock on him.

"Why?"

"Mays was a good cop. Straight as an arrow. Highly moral person. Boring for my purposes." I let him take a ragged breath. "Had to...deconstruct him. He had to die...couldn't die a martyr. Otherwise, good cops...would follow his example."

"How did he die, again?" I asked levelly. Part of me just wanted to choke the man out, but I still needed answers.

"Traffic stop," `Dan' wheezed. "Driver...shot him in the face because...suspended license."

I clenched my jaw. A cop could die any number of ways, but getting shot because some idiot didn't want a ticket was pretty low on the list.

"What about Anna Mays?" I had to stop my finger from twitching on the trigger. I didn't want to shoot him. I really didn't. I just wanted answers.

"Miscarriage. Complications. End the family line so that any kids wouldn't take after Mays." He wheezed and I noted that he was starting to turn purple. I decided that he'd had enough.

I let go of him and he slumped to the floor. I kept the gun trained on him, though. I was stone faced as I let him catch his breath.

"So, let me get this straight: You admit to being an accessory to murder and your attitude is that of a sociopath. You deliberately gave an unstable man an illegal and dangerous reality-altering substance. You've been manipulating people and events for years, giving people reason to be bigoted towards Animates. And as a result, Animates have died or been severely injured from your efforts." I glowered at him. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Good job?" `Dan' ventured. "This is...bigger than you." He gasped like a fish out of water. "We both know...you won't pull that trigger." He managed a grimace that was trying to be a grin. "You're a good man. A good man doesn't murder someone who's helpless."

I fired the Glock. The noise made the girls flinch. The bullet hit its target.

For a long moment, nobody said anything. The ladies just gaped at what I'd done.

I smirked as `Dan' took off his panama hat and looked at it, his face pale with shock. The bullet had punched neatly through the hat--what was supposed to be his invincible armor.

I just proved my hypothesis that `Dan's' armor was probably tuned to everything in this dimension. Since I wasn't from around here, a simple bullet was enough to compromise his otherwise flawless defenses.

"You're right: I am a good man," I agreed. "I try to be the best man I can be. But in the words of my buddy Sam, `a good man will kill you with hardly a word.'" My gaze hardened. "So, do you really want to test that, sports fan? Or do you want to do the smart move and get out?"

`Dan' forced himself to his feet. I could see his bald pate shining with sweat as his eyes widened in fear. For a moment, he looked at me like I was some kind of monster. Then he lurched his way out of the cafe, frantically slapping at the buttons on the wrist of his suit. We all kept an eye on him until he vanished outside the door.

"What the Hell?" Priss muttered.

"It must have been some sort of teleport device," Sylia mused. "I'm guessing that he had to get out of range of whatever is surrounding Detective Mays." She frowned at me. "I can certainly understand your desire for the truth, but wasn't that a bit overkill?"

I holstered my Glock. "Maybe," I admitted. "But to be honest, could you see much else get through to him? He didn't have any qualms about hurting people by manipulation. As far as he was concerned, all of you were just characters in a story to be shaped however he pleased. And as long as it was an 'interesting' story, that was all he wanted."

"Do you think he'll be back?" Nene asked. She was fingering the front of her apron. I recognized that as a nervous tic that my Nene did back home, but it was usually on the side of her skirt or something.

"Probably," I said. "He's the kind of guy who wants to see how the story ends, kiddo."

Nene looked at me oddly. "That's the second time you've called me 'kiddo,'" she noted. "Other than the fact that I'm cute--"

--and modest," Linna interrupted.

Nene pouted at her. She then turned back to me. "So, my question is...do you have a version of me back home?"

I tried not to look into those green eyes. I really tried. But I did and I saw...well, it wasn't the flirty adoration that Nene back home had for me. No, this was just curiosity about how a stranger like me would act.

"Yeah," I said.

"Are you close?" Nene asked.

I sighed. "It's a work in progress."

Nene looked thoughtful. Thankfully, she decided to leave it there. The fact that my Nene and I were dating was--well, I hadn't expected it a few months ago. The idea that she and I could have this "thing" was both comforting and frightening to me.

I decided to change the subject. "Anyway, I should get going. Do any of you happen to know where North High--"

Before I could finish my sentence, everyone was floored by--well, a wave of raw emotion. To be more specific, it was like someone injecting a whole load of frustration and anger directly into your brain, only to have it empty out your ears. And

during those eternal 30 seconds, words and immense frustration flowed in and out of my brain, clawing on the way out:

This sucks all I wanted was to find a different world I found one but it's all horrible with people treating Animates like some kind of second class people and the police look like they want to kill Animates for everything and I don't even know why people are so afraid of me because I'm just ordinary and I just want to see Kyon and Koizumi and Mikuru and Yuki again because they're good people and they go along with me on our little adventures and I've been through all of North Nigh and they don't recognize me at all and I want to go home but I don't know how and I don't even know where that Detective Mays guy is and maybe he found an answer and who in the world actually names their kid Andy Hero because that is probably the dumbest name I've heard and he stinks to high heaven and I wish that he'd just clean off his cologne--

With an effort, I tried to pull myself together. I got off easy with a dull headache. The girls looked they were nauseous for the second time today.

"What...was that?" Sylia gasped. She looked paler than usual.

"I could hear her in my head," Linna added with a grimace.
"Is that the girl you're looking for?"

"Yeah," I grunted. "That's Haruhi for you."

"What...is she?" Priss looked shaken. "And did she just broadcast that to the entire city?"

I managed a weak smile. "Yeah, well--it's pretty easy to read her mood. Though I don't think that even she's aware of what she just did."

"And you're taking her home?" Nene asked.

"That's the plan," I said. My legs felt a little unsteady, but I managed to get up. "Somebody has to."

"But there are going to be police in the way!" Nene pointed out. "And I don't think that Andy Hero is just going to let you walk on over."

"I think that he may have other things to occupy his time," Sylia said with a faint, if pained smile. "When he confessed to using his performance enhancer, I made sure to broadcast that over the police frequency. I imagine that they have many questions for him right about now."

"Nice," I complimented her. "I was wondering what you were doing over by the cash register. That should keep him busy for

a bit, but even the entire department can't do much other than slow him down--not with the stuff he's jacked up on, anyway." I straightened up. "I should get going. If you could just point me in the right direction of North High, I'll do what I can."

"Alone?" Nene asked in disbelief. "Shouldn't you be going in with reinforcements?"

"Unfortunately, I kind of left those back home. And given that a lot of Animates have been weakened, I really can't ask any of them for help." I grimaced at the thought of any of the girls getting hurt. "You can help me by keeping people safe. That'll do a lot more for me than some crazy charge of the light brigade--a last, suicidal dash," I corrected myself.

"And if Andy Hero catches you?" Linna asked.

"Then I do what I've always done--I outthink him. I prick his ego so that he makes a mistake."

None of the ladies looked terribly enthused about the prospect. Truthfully, I wasn't very happy about it either, but going alone was my best shot at maybe fixing some of the damage that Haruhi inflicted.

With a sigh, Sylia retreated to the area near the cash register and tapped some buttons. She then did something a what

looked like a thin pane of glass about the size of a sheet of paper. The gizmo looked like it had some kind of touch screen.

"You'll need this," Sylia said, handing me the gizmo.

"It's an interactive map. I've placed North High's location on there and linked this to any police traffic you might need to hear on the way."

I turned it over this way and that. The gizmo was fairly thin, but a little heavier than it looked. I felt like someone had just handed me a prop from that Star Trek show with all the fancy touch screens.

"Thanks," I told her. "I'll try not to let this get damaged. Good luck to you ladies."

There was so much more I wanted to say to those ladies. I wanted to congratulate them on their fortitude and perseverance. I wanted to tell them that, given time, they might rework the prevailing attitudes that kept them down. But that would have involved me--well, getting more involved than I needed to. They didn't need that.

I turned on one heel and left. I didn't want to look back.

Give Sylia credit--this gizmo was working like a charm. Not only did I have a highlighted route directly to North High, but I also had a pretty good view of where the police was. Judging by the chatter on the radio, a lot of them weren't really happy with Poster Boy's revelations. Some of them had even tried to apprehend him outright, but he'd overpowered them.

I hid a grim little smile when I'd heard the radio. There was now an APB on Andy Hero, though there was also one on me. Given how things have turned out, I wasn't surprised in the least. That meant that Stan and every able-bodied cop in the city was hunting for me and Poster Boy.

I had to fight off some nausea as a couple of dozen people just vanished in thin air, only to be shifted several yards away. I was getting closer to North High, but I couldn't just run straight in. Otherwise, the few police who weren't trying to deal with Poster Boy would have found me.

I had to circle around the building once or twice, just to make sure that, say, a pyramid hadn't suddenly been placed on the front lawn. Given what little I knew about Haruhi's powers, it was probably the safest bet.

I was about to go inside when I heard the sounds of a scuffle behind me. I took a look around the corner and saw none

other than Ranma Saotome taking on an entire attack squad.

Correction, Ranma and his father in panda form were laying waste to a squad. They weren't moving as quickly as I'd seen, but it was enough to keep the troops off balance. In a few moments, it was over.

"Are you Mays?" Ranma asked roughly. "You've got the trenchcoat."

"That's me," I confirmed. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We're covering you," Ranma said. There was something in his eyes that told me that he'd seen a lot more action than his counterpart back home. "Got a call from Old Lady Sylia and asked us to keep you out of trouble."

SHE'S NOT THAT OLD, the panda "said" on his sign. He flipped the sign deftly in his hands and showed me the other side. GET GOING. WE'VE GOT THIS.

"Wait a sec, it's just you guys?" I asked.

"Just the two of us?" Ranma shot back. "Hey, I'm good, but I'm not crazy. I mean, these guys have dip guns and everything. So--"

I flinched as a police car was flung into the air. Then another followed in its path. I could see the dust cloud of someone or something running very quickly towards us.

"I might've called in some favors," Ranma said smugly. "What? Did you think that we were just going to let the police just run us over like nothing?"

"There're more of them than you--wait, is that A-Ko?" I asked. The dust cloud was clearing up as I saw a whole crowd of heavy hitters. I counted Goku, Kenshiro, Vash the Stampede, Ryoko--

Heavy footsteps shook the street and rattled my fillings. A long shadow suddenly darkened the sky and I looked up--and up.

Giant Robo had just entered the field. Somehow, the robot's expression seemed even grimmer than usual. I could see little pockmarks where the police had fired off their dip bullets. Other than that, the big mech didn't seem fazed at all.

"Ranma, you've got to tell them to back off!" I shouted. "They've got anti-Animate weapons and they're not shy about using them. Do you WANT to get dipped or blanked out?"

Ranma's expression turned grim as he dodged the police trying to flank him. Genma whacked them aside with his sign.

"Like they tried to do to Akane?" Ranma's voice was tight with anger. "Only reason that she ain't in this fight is because her arm never felt right after being shot. This has been building up a long time, Mays." He sent a flurry of rapid-fire punches that cleared the path.

"But all of you could die--and by that, I mean Die with a capital D. If you get hit in the wrong place, that's it for you," I reminded him.

"Hey, sometimes it's better to go down swinging than to wait to die. And yeah, if we were just running around randomly, we'd get killed pretty fast. That's why we're coordinating this," Ranma said. "Get down!"

I ducked and Ranma launched himself at another formation of cops. I winced as they tried to overpower him, only to be scattered by 300 pounds of angry panda. Whatever issues Ranma and Genma might have had, it certainly didn't stop them from working as a team.

"Coordinate?" I shouted. "Who could get all of you together on the same page? No offense, but trying to get any kind of consensus among Animates is like herding cats--sorry," I said quickly.

Ranma scowled. "You ain't wrong about that," he agreed. Then he smirked. "It's a good thing that we got someone to negotiate."

As if on cue, I saw a low-slung, heavy black car speeding towards us. The tailfins reminded me of an old Buick and there was just enough chrome up front to be stylish and somewhat intimidating. Oh, and there were also the twin machine guns just behind the front signal lights. That was a pretty good way of clearing traffic.

The Griffon wove its way with a nimbleness that I didn't expect, given its size. It didn't attempt to punch through reinforced police cars; instead, it just nudged them aside.

I gaped as the Griffon made a perfect J turn and stopped right in front of me. The driver's side door opened and out came a man with slicked-back black hair and a suit to match. He doffed his sunglasses and smiled faintly.

"Roger Smith," I remarked. "As I live and breathe."

"That's kind of the point," he replied. "Stingray tells me that you might be able to nudge things in the right direction. She was vague on the details, though. Care to fill me in? And don't worry about the whole alternate dimension thing. I've heard stranger."

"Yeah, you probably have," I agreed. "There's a girl at North High School who's causing all this mess and she doesn't even know it. I just have to convince her to stop."

"If it's a negotiation, I'm better qualified," Roger pointed out.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure you can negotiate your way out of an alternate dimension. That, and I don't think that Andy Hero is going to let this pass once he finds out where I am."

Roger frowned. "I've dealt with him before. A while back, there was a lawyer trying to smooth things over between Animates and regular people. I was part of the negotiations, but they never got anywhere. One moment, things were going well, the next, the lawyer ends up dead. People started blaming each other and things went downhill from there."

"What was his name?" I asked.

"Jake Kinnison. The name rings a bell?" he asked as he noted me clenching a fist.

"Another time and place, he'd be my best friend," I said, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. I didn't succeed.

"You can't do anything for the dead," Roger said. He noted a few cops advancing upon us. "I called in every favor that I had for this. Get going."

I held out my hand. He took it and we shook on it.

"Thanks," I muttered. We broke off and I sprinted to the school. As I ran, I heard a hypersonic whine as Roger brought his watch to his mouth.

"BIG O!" he exclaimed. "SHOWTIME!"

I made it to the school just before the pavement buckled and broke. I went inside. I wasn't sure whether or not I was honored that so many people came to my side, but it had to be some of the most dysfunctional and whacked out people I knew. And yet, they were good people--most of them, anyway.

It wasn't really that hard to find Haruhi. She was the only student in the place who wasn't either blinking or fading in and out of existence. She sat in the little clubroom that was the SOS meeting place.

"Hey," I greeted her, trying to sound nonchalant.

She said nothing. Instead, she scowled at something that I couldn't see.

"Been a crazy day," I continued. "Mind if I have a seat?"

This time, Haruhi registered my voice. She nodded to the nearest chair, which I took gratefully.

"It's all wrong," she said dully, her voice tinged with frustration.

"I kind of noticed," I said. "Not exactly what you were expecting?"

"They're not here--not the way I know them," Haruhi remarked. "None of them recognize me. It's like I was never born."

"Yeah, I kind of got that experience as well," I remarked. "I saw a lot more than just one high school, though."

She continued as if I hadn't even spoken. "Kyon is HAPPY to be ordinary! It's like he doesn't have any ambition except to just go through the motions! And the look in his eyes when I tried to tell him about all the things we shared--he looked at me like I was crazy!"

She didn't even wince at the loud CRUNCH sound I heard from outside. I tried to take a look, but I could only see the other side of the school and nothing else. I clenched my jaw as I heard metal being torn, followed by another CRUNCH.

Someone or something was breaking through the impromptu blockade surrounding the school. I had the image of Andy Hero grinning like a maniac, hopped up on Power Trip as he tore through the makeshift defenses.

I was running out of time. The sooner I could convince Haruhi to get back home, the better.

"So, you want to go home?" I tried to sound casual about it, but the noises started getting closer. "This isn't really your school as you know it, so...might as well head back, right?"

Haruhi pouted. "Kyon's going to yell at me again."

Oh, for--reality is breaking down around us and all Haruhi can think about is Kyon yelling at her. Criminally, I don't have time for this!

"Well, at least it'll be a Kyon that recognizes you," I pointed out. "Every friendship has its rough patches. I'm sure that this can be smoothed out."

"He's not my friend," Haruhi corrected me. "He's the lowest minion in the SOS brigade. He does all the chores and complains about it. We don't have anything in common."

"And yet, he still listens to you," I reminded her. "I seem to recall that there were a few times when you seriously considered his suggestions."

"Occasionally, a good leader can entertain some sensible suggestions," she said with a touch of arrogance. "Sometimes, Kyon says things that make sense--and what's that smell?"

Crap. We were almost out of time. The nasal punch that was Power Trip drifted right into our nostrils and smacked us both. Below, I heard glass shattering.

"Never mind that," I lied. "Just think about Kyon and getting home--"

"We're not like that!" she exclaimed. "Honestly, what is that stink? It's like someone was bathing in cheap men's cologne!"

I briefly entertained the thought of making Haruhi drink the coffee I had in the thermos. If nothing else, it would have certainly given her a clearer perspective of things. Then again, it might have driven her to do something that I wasn't prepared to deal with. Oh, and there's also the fact that my pocket to Who Knows Where isn't working right now.

"MAYS!" Poster Boy shouted. "I know you're in there! My Detective Vision picked you out a block away!"

"`Detective vision?'" Haruhi said doubtfully. "Wait, who is that guy? And why's that stink getting worse!"

"We should really get going," I said hurriedly. "Have you thought about clicking your heels and saying `there's no place like home' three times?"

"Wait, isn't that--" Haruhi never got to finish her sentence. A moment later, a fist punched through the door and then tore it off the hinges. With that came the nauseously intense stink of Power Trip, but to a level I'd never smelled before. It was almost enough to burn out my sense of smell.

Andy Hero looked like he'd been channeling the Hulk on a bad day. His trenchcoat was ripped, but that was only because he gained about his weight in sheer muscle mass. Veins strained wherever there was exposed skin, even his face. His eyes glowed an unearthly yellow, the same shade of yellow that the vials of Power Trip had glowed when I saw them underneath his coat. I couldn't tell whether he was leering, grimacing or grinning at his current situation.

Something tinkled at his feet. Five spent vials of Power Trip clattered to the ground and shattered.

Criminately. The last time I'd dealt with a guy hopped up on this stuff, they'd only doused themselves with a bucketful.

Poster Boy here just went a few steps further, just to make sure.

"I've got to admit," he began, his voice just short of booming, "I NEVER thought that I could feel this powerful! I guess I ought to thank you for this!"

Haruhi actually gaped. "Who are you?!" she demanded.

Poster Boy looked at her like she was some sort of gnat. Then again, he probably thought that he was justified.

"Detective Andy Hero," he sneered. "And I'm guessing that you're the toon girl that caused all this mess?"

Haruhi blinked. "Wait, what did I do? And what was with all that noise in the background?"

Poster Boy eyed her in disbelief. Well, I'm guessing that he was doing it in disbelief. When someone's eyes are pouring out crackling, coruscating yellow energy, it's a little hard to figure out what their mood might be. Then again, the body language was pretty easy to read otherwise.

"You're kidding me," he said to her. Then he turned to me. "She's got to be kidding, right?"

Haruhi looked at him sourly. "Kidding about what?"

"You really don't know?" he asked. "I mean, you really don't know? All this fuss, and you've been doing this without even knowing?"

"Knowing WHAT?!" Haruhi demanded. "It feels like I've been kept out of the loop on something and NOBODY is telling me WHAT!"

"Well, that just makes it easier, doesn't it?" Poster Boy noted. With a blur that I didn't expect given his size, he zipped to Haruhi and flicked his finger on her forehead. She was sent flying back and flattened against the wall. She slid down to the floor, out cold.

Poster Boy dusted his hands theatrically. "That was easy enough. I didn't even have to use a whiteout bomb on her. I can't believe that she was the source of all the troubles we've been having today." He smiled nastily. "Oh, right--she was only the major source of the trouble."

I flexed my fingers. He smirked.

"Now, I know what you're thinking," Poster Boy taunted. "You're thinking, 'why isn't he just offing me right now? What's his game?'" He grinned. "And you're also probably thinking, 'with that much juice running through him, can he even

be hurt with, say, that little pea shooter of a Glock that I have?'"

"Something along those lines did occur to me," I admitted. "So, why are we talking about this?"

"Call it a little professional courtesy," he sneered. "You remember when I said that you weren't the first one from out of town? Well, I was the one who escorted them back home."

"Awfully nice of you," I remarked. I tried not to look at where Haruhi had fallen. I didn't want Poster Boy to get any ideas about actually bombing her while she was down.

"A lot of them just wanted to get home," he remarked. "They were perfectly willing to turn a blind eye and just be on their way."

"I'm sure," I said. "I'm guessing that you only showed them the sunny side of the street with all that wonderful order."

"You might say that," he said pleasantly. "And if you'd only kept your mouth shut about all the so-called 'injustices' you saw, we wouldn't be at odds. It would have been much easier on everyone."

"Easier on you," I retorted. "I can only wonder what you did with the people who weren't so easygoing about your work. I mean, did you decide to toss them down a black hole or something?"

"No, no," he said amiably. "As I said, everyone was returned to their home dimension."

He blurred again and I took it right on the jaw. As I tumbled down, I could hear him stomping on the floor. It was like he was enjoying the slow, inevitable execution.

"Of course, I never guaranteed that they were sent home intact. Or alive." He cracked his knuckles theatrically. "They resisted, of course. They thought that they could take me down and set things right. But the thing is, I am the authority here. The odds will always favor me. And you'll be thinking that as I send your broken carcass home. Well, yours and that troublesome toon girl, anyway."

I felt my jaw click. It wasn't broken, probably because he wanted to take his time and enjoy the moment. But I was going to have a big bruise on my jaw if I survived this.

"You're no cop," I told him, just before he hoisted me by the shirt front and flung me out into the hallway. Like Haruhi,

my back smacked hard against the wall, knocking the wind out of me.

"That's not what this says," Poster Boy said contemptuously, showing off his badge. It was the same number as mine, a fact that made me disgusted. I never considered myself to be that influential. I'm just an average Joe trying to get the job done without getting killed. But him? He schmoozed and did whatever he could to leverage his position into something more influential. And the damage he did to innocent people while keeping crime down--well, he was the jerk who got things done. Only he did it the worst way possible.

"I have to admit," he continued, "no thanks to that stunt that Sylia Stingray pulled, I've been severely inconvenienced. It's going to take a while to rebuild my good name among the police. It'll happen, of course. Things always fall my way."

"I don't get it," I grunted. I tried to get up but my legs weren't cooperating.

"I suppose you don't," he agreed. "You lack vision."

"That's not what I meant." I winced as I felt my back crack. "I can't believe...that people would want a cop like you. That they'd make Animates the scapegoats. That they'd be comfortable with casual, convenient racism."

"Why the surprise?" he asked, towering over me. I wanted to punch that smirk off of his face, but I knew that I'd never get close enough. With that junk going through his veins, reality itself was against me.

"Call me crazy," I grunted, "but this isn't what a cop should be. We protect people."

He sneered. "Like a sheepdog protects the flock, is that it? You think I'm some kind of 'bad cop?'" he asked, doing air quotes. "Cops like me and John Estes are exactly what the sheep asked for."

"They wanted bullies with a badge?" I got out, just before he kicked my side. The trenchcoat took some of the hit, but not much. I don't think that anything was cracked, but it still hurt like hell.

"The big old friendly sheepdog wasn't cutting it anymore," he said. "They wanted something closer to a wolf. Officer Friendly wasn't getting the job done with community outreach. The friendly beat cop on patrol wasn't doing it. The sheep wanted someone to make the bad guys go away." He leered. "They wanted someone stronger, meaner and leaner, ready to do whatever it took."

"The Animates were never really the issue," he continued. "Some of them were actually somewhat useful. Others were just trying to live their lives. But they were different and strange and potentially dangerous. So, people were afraid of them. I just took advantage of that." He chuckled like he heard a private joke. "Come to think of it, I really didn't have to plow through all those Animates outside. I could have just run right past them and they'd never catch me. But it was just so much more fun to show them their place. And it'll be great PR."

I tried not to imagine the broken bodies of the Animates who came to help me out. I just hoped that he didn't kill any of them.

I might have been intimidated if I didn't know his secret. As it stood now, I already knew how to get out of this. I had to prick his ego.

"You had a little help from Dan," I said. "You can't exactly say that you did all of this on your own merits."

I didn't react when I saw Haruhi stirring. It was a safe bet that she wasn't going to be happy when she finally woke up. In fact, if I was going to survive this, I was counting on her being pissed.

Poster Boy's eyes narrowed. "You know about Dan?"

I managed a pained half-grin. "Know about him? He bragged about making you the man you are. Said that you were an interesting person because you were, in his words `unencumbered by ideals.'"

Poster Boy flexed his fingers and scowled. At least he'd stopped short. "Go on..." he prompted me.

"He said you were a bully, a clever one, and just what he needed to make this city exciting," I told him. "The way he talked, he didn't see you so much as a person as a means to an end."

I saw Haruhi's eyes flutter open. I had to act fast before she gave herself away. I had to get Andy Hero's undivided attention.

"You're probably wondering why I kept things close when I saw you. Well, there's a version of you where I'm from."

"Really?" He sounded intrigued. "Am I your co-worker? Your boss? Or am I in politics?" He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Politics. Now there's an idea."

"Honestly, we've known each other since high school. You were always the big guy who got the girls left and right." I grimaced at some of the memories. "I can't say that you were very good at keeping them very long, though. Anyway, you and I

both went to the police academy together. Incidentally, what happened to Stan Tai?"

He looked annoyed that I'd changed the subject. "He decided to be a good cop and tried to arrest me when the order came from headquarters. I'm sure that someday, with proper care and physical therapy, he'll be able to use his arms again." He scowled. "Now, go on. I'm curious as to how the other me ended up."

He didn't hear Haruhi wobble her way up out of unconsciousness. He didn't see the look of pure hatred in her eyes as she glared at him.

"He got kicked out of the police academy. He was going to cheat on his exams and I turned him in." I made a show of grunting and breathing hard. "He had a record of always taking the easy way out. And you know where he is now?"

Poster Boy's eyes narrowed. "Where?" He cracked his knuckles and looked ready to pound me into hash.

"He's a used car salesman," I said with no small amount of relish in my voice. "I guess all that schmoozing came in handy after all."

Before he could pummel me into oblivion, Haruhi created a closed space. The sky went from blue to black, and I could see

the vaguely humanoid form of the celestial. Poster Boy was taken by surprise.

I didn't wait. I whipped out my Glock and emptied the magazine. Most of the shots were center of mass, but there was one that glanced across his temple. Thankfully, none of the shots were anywhere near Haruhi.

It was a risky maneuver. I gambled that being in a closed space was going to mess up his reality-warping abilities. It's a classic case of man vs. nature. In my case, nature's on my side.

Poster Boy grunted. Then he felt his temple and noted the blood that had trickled out.

"That. Actually. Hurt," he said. Then his eyes flared yellow as he prepared to charge me.

He didn't get far. The next thing Poster Boy knew, said celestial grabbed him from the window and threw him to the ground. I hobbled over to the window and looked down. Poster Boy had made quite a nice crater in the courtyard below and the celestial was stomping on him.

As entertaining as it would have been to just watch Andy Hero get pounded, I had more important things to take care of. First things first, I had to check up on Haruhi. Even though

Poster Boy had just flicked her with his finger, I wasn't sure whether or not she'd had a concussion or anything.

I didn't need to worry. The bruise that had formed on her forehead was slowly fading. She didn't seem to notice, though. She was so angry that she was trembling, but she didn't respond to me waving my hand in front of her. To be honest, I was probably better off leaving her the way she was. One misspoken word and I might have wiped myself out of existence.

I winced as I heard heavy crunching sounds. Glancing out the window, I grimaced at the sight of three celestials beating up Poster Boy. It was almost mesmerizing to see him being flung around like a ragdoll.

I knew that this wouldn't last. Knowing him, he probably had at least one vial of Power Trip in reserve for an emergency. All he needed was a break in the action, assuming that his ego-driven near-invulnerability would last that long under that punishment.

I reloaded my gun. Then I slipped my hand in the trenchcoat pocket that led to Who Knows Where and felt my mallet--as well as the thermos of coffee from Dupin's. Now that I was out of normal space, that pocket must have reconnected itself.

I smiled grimly. There was a chance that I might survive this yet.

I backed off as Poster Boy leapt to the window and clung to the shattered edge. His trenchcoat had seen better days and there were actually cuts and bruises on his face. His beefy hands clambered for purchase before a celestial grabbed him by the legs. Surprisingly, he held on tenaciously, his fingers digging deep into the window frame. He strained mightily until he saw me just out of reach. With a snarl, his eyes crackled with yellow energy until he realized that I was aiming my gun.

"You wouldn't--" he began, but didn't get a chance to finish the sentence.

I shot him three times in the trenchcoat. There wasn't any blood, but that wasn't what I was aiming for. Instead, I was rewarded with the sound of shattered glass and yellow liquid dripping down his coat.

"You son of a bitch!" he yelled. "That was--wait, where did you get that mallet?"

"Who knows where?" I grinned evilly. Then I took a stance I remembered from those golf lessons that Jake had taken me to when we were kids. I was awful at the game, but I did appreciate a good swing.

"FORE!" I bellowed, and it felt so good to have the mallet in my hand again. I did a perfect swing, catching Poster Boy right in the jaw. Before he could recover, I brought the mallet down on one hand, then the other. The yelp I heard as his fingers were crunched together was incredibly gratifying. A second later, he was pulled back into his tussle against three celestials.

I knew that this wouldn't last long. It was a given that a hero (even if it's only in his own mind) would find some hidden strength against overwhelming odds. But I didn't look down to see the beatdown. I looked up and saw a faint bit of light in the grey sky.

Well, that certainly verified my theory. Andy Hero could only be influential if he was present. If I was right, all deals were off if he was out of the way.

I flinched at the sound of crunching concrete and shattering glass. That was just before I heard three bone-rattling impacts. I guessed that the celestials had been knocked down, though I wasn't sure if they were out.

I couldn't call Andy Hero "Poster Boy" anymore. He was still massively muscular, but the yellow glow in his eyes had

faded. He looked like five miles of bad road, but he still was more than a match for me in this condition.

"You won't need this," he snarled, knocking the mallet out of my hand. "And you won't need THIS," he continued, ripping my Glock from the holster. He grabbed me by the shirtfront and shoved one bloody, beefy hand down the trenchcoat pocket that led to Who Knows Where. "And whatever surprises you have HERE--"

He stopped as he realized what he'd just pulled out: My thermos. For a moment, he was confused. Then he started to giggle, and not entirely in a sane way.

"Seriously?" he asked, shaking me contemptuously. "SERIOUSLY?! Unlimited space in a dimensional pocket and you use it for a thermos full of--"

"Coffee," I croaked. He'd hefted me a foot off the ground. "So what? It's really good coffee."

Andy Hero snorted. "Not like you're going to need it in a few minutes." With that, he slammed me flat on the floor. It wasn't as hard as I'd expected, but pain still shot from my back and stars filled my vision.

"Aw, come on!" I protested weakly. "That stuff is hard to get!"

Andy Hero smirked. Then he opened the thermos and took a long, appreciative whiff. He poured out a cupful and took a cautious sip. Then, with petty malice in his eyes, he gulped down the cup. The rest of the thermos's contents were guzzled shortly afterwards.

"Oh yeah..." he sighed contentedly as he tossed the thermos aside. "Now that was coffee fit for a real man."

"I can't believe you drank the whole thing." I tried to sound sulky about it, but I was in too much pain.

"Did you think I was going to share?" he asked sarcastically. "As one cop to another?"

"No, it's just that...Klatchian coffee is pretty potent stuff. It packs a wallop to your ego."

For a moment, he looked confused. Then he doubled over and started convulsing. All the comfortable illusions and preconceptions that he held were being brutally stripped away by the coffee. It was like being hyper-sober; he was suddenly aware of every fault and flaw with all the hard edges and none of the comforting soft stuff. He was suddenly force fed the harsh viewpoint that he was not the center of the universe, and certainly nowhere near as powerful or good as he thought he was.

It's a hell of a reality check. Not many people can process it. You had to ride it out or get drunk.

Andy Hero started shrinking as foul steam escaped from his pores. With one shaky hand, he grasped at his last vial of Power Trip.

I kicked the vial out of his hands and it shattered against a nearby wall. Rude reality was the order of the day. It was something that he'd had coming for years. He was given an unbiased accounting of everything he'd ever done wrong.

He looked blankly skyward as he reached for something I couldn't see. Then his green eyes, no longer glowing, rolled up in his head and he collapsed. He made incoherent mumbling sounds as he drooled on the floor.

I squinted as the grey skies lightened. I couldn't move much; my chiropractor was going to be my best friend for a few weeks. Instead, I stared dully as a portal opened in the closed space.

Belldandy, Urd and Skuld floated down to me in their battle regalia. Behind them was none other than `Dan' of the DDO, bound in so many charms that it was hard to see his face. Urd and Skuld looked ready to do some damage to the guy if he tried anything.

I managed a half-drunken smile and waved. "Hello, Belldandy. I'd bow, but my back's kind of messed up right now."

She barely gestured and the floor was cleared of glass. She knelt down and the mark on her forehead--the unsealed mark--glowed slightly. The pain faded and my vision cleared. It was like being healed by a mother's love, warm and forgiving.

She helped me to a sitting position, her expression stern and worried. "That was a very dangerous gamble," she reprimanded me.

"Maybe," I acknowledged. "But you ladies are worth it--in any dimension."

Belldandy blushed. She didn't do that for many people other than family or Keiichi.

"Sorry we couldn't come sooner, but I had to do a massive debugging," Skuld said. Then she looked sourly at the man who used to be Andy Hero. "As soon as he was out of the picture, the contract he had with us was invalidated."

"How's Keiichi?" I asked Belldandy gently.

"He is...recovering," She looked away in shame. "I managed to minimize the worst of the shock when the contract was broken."

"There were a lot of negative emotions that burst out," Urd said, looking solemn. "He's lucky that he didn't have a stroke or anything. And...he remembers it all."

"And it's all this jerk's fault," Skuld said, brandishing her mallet at `Dan.' "I just want to--"

"Please don't," I urged her. "I'm sure that the appropriate authorities will take care of him."

"Which wouldn't be us," Urd said. "Messing with Yggdrasil is a serious crime, so he's getting a trial. We'll just be transporting him there."

A niggling little thought occurred to me. "Hold on. This guy bragged that nothing on this side of town, namely any Animates, could hurt him. How were you able to find him, much less restrain him?" I asked.

"After the debugging," Skuld began, "we found a few odd entries in the Yggdrasil system that didn't belong. You know how you can change the attributes of a file?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, we turned off all the protection he gets from his suit," she said with no small amount of satisfaction. "He

admitted to a lot of things, but we're not law enforcement."
Skuld smiled evilly. "He's going to a very high court."

"I'll bet." I stood up and made my way to where Haruhi was standing, her eyes focused on somewhere far away. "You going to be okay?" I asked her.

"There are really goddesses..." she slurred. "Wait till I tell Mikuru and Yuki about this." She didn't look too steady on her feet.

Belldandy stood up and approached Haruhi. She reached out and Haruhi took her hand, probably by sheer instinct. Then Haruhi decided to faint. Fortunately, Belldandy stepped forward and caught her in a hug.

"You'll be all right," Belldandy whispered.

I forced myself upright and took some cuffs out of my trenchcoat--the regular pockets, this time. I worked my way around Andy Hero, cuffed his hands to his back and read him his rights. I didn't get much of a response--mostly incoherent grunting. But at least I'd did what needed to be done. After that, the closed space vanished, leaving a normal landscape.

Well, okay, it was a normal landscape except for the unconscious Animates and cops that littered the streets. It had been one hell--heck of a day.

Urd looked amused. "We're mostly adults here, Detective," she joked. "I think that we can forgive a minor bit of profanity. Obviously, you remembered that we can read minds."

"It never hurts to be polite," I replied with a shrug. "So, I don't suppose that any of you know how to get me and her home?"

"With Yggdrasil fully restored, we've managed to repair most of the damage between worlds," Belldandy said. "Someone from home should be with you shortly."

A shimmering portal appeared, as if on cue. A moment later, a dimensional door resolved into existence.

Sailor Pluto stepped out of the portal, looking only mildly harried. She took in the scene with remarkable aplomb, all things considered. She took the time to bow in front of the goddesses, something I never expected her to do.

Washuu popped out of her dimensional door. Well, honestly, the first thing I saw was her extravagant, crab-like red hair, but I suppose that counted. "I was first!" she exclaimed. "After all, I AM a genius!"

On cue, her mini-puppets popped out, each one perched on a shoulder. They sang her praises until she noticed that nobody seemed inclined to applaud. In fact, almost everyone looked

very uncomfortable being around her. Something told me that it wasn't her insane tendency to grab random people for experiments.

"Okay..." Washuu began hesitantly. "Is there something on my face? Are the puppets a bit too much?"

The goddesses looked like they were trying to be diplomatic. Even Urd seemed to be considering her words.

"Miss Washuu," Belldandy began gently, "I'm afraid that your counterpart, the Washuu we know, is...dead. She's been gone for years."

That stopped Washuu in her tracks. Her mouth, as well as the mouths of the puppets on her shoulders, fell open.

"Dead?" she squeaked.

Belldandy nodded. "I'm afraid so."

It was a few moments before Washuu could talk again. Her little puppets vanished and she seemed pretty unsteady. There weren't any accusations of lies or anything like that because Belldandy was relaying the news.

"How?" She looked like a lost child.

"Whiteout bomb," Urd supplied. "It wiped out the entire Masaki household. At least it was quick."

"Whiteout--those are outlawed," Washuu protested. "Even I don't experiment with those." One of her hands started shaking. "Excuse me. I'll be back in a few minutes."

With that, she closed the dimensional door. If I were nosy enough to put my ear against the door, I probably would have heard her breathing hard into a paper bag.

Sailor Pluto had this sad look on her face as she looked at Washuu's door. Then again, given how her life had been, Pluto probably had seen more than her share of bad endings.

"You have no idea," Pluto said. She bowed

I closed my eyes and sighed. "Is everybody here reading my mind? If so, could you please pretend that you're not? It's been a heck of a day," I sighed. I turned towards Pluto. "Thanks for coming out here. I'm guessing that I'm going to be leaving soon?"

"There are still some things that we need to address before we have a stable path home," she said. "There was quite a bit of damage on the way here." She noted my confusion. "Think of it as a bad day of road construction, only with all the roadblocks and holes in the highway being randomly shifted. Oh, and crashing into a roadblock won't just wreck your tires, there's a chance that they'll wipe you from existence."

"Good to know!" I said with a cheerfulness that I didn't feel. "So, we've got a little bit of time." I looked down at the catatonic, drooling heap that was Andy Hero. "There's a lot to explain. And I have to turn this guy in."

There was an indignant muffling as I saw `Dan' from the DDO squirming. He didn't look so polished as he had before. I could even see a few bruises forming, though there weren't many. He'd been treated pretty well, all things considered.

"Would he be able to do anything if he could talk?" I asked Belldandy.

She shook her head. "We've locked down everything in his suit. He's no danger to anyone."

I nodded. "If you could, please?"

Urd reluctantly made the gag in `Dan's' mouth vanish. He took a few deep breaths and fixed me with maniacally bright eyes.

"HOW?!" he demanded. "How were you able to do anything to Andy Hero? You shouldn't have been able to lay a hand on him, much less hurt him."

"Yeah, about that...I could tell you, but since you've been such a jerk about everything...nah," I said dismissively. "I'm sure that you'll figure it out in time."

`Dan's' jaw dropped. "You're joking."

"Nope."

"You HAVE to tell me!" he insisted.

I shook my head. "Nope. I'm under no obligation to tell you anything except...I hope that the proper authorities treat you appropriately and that you have a fair trial."

"But wait--MFF!" he protested impotently, just before the gag reappeared on his face. A magic circle appeared beneath him and he vanished.

"You wanted to tell him, didn't you?" Pluto asked.

"I did," I admitted. "I wanted to rub it in his face that he wasn't in control of every possible factor. But...any satisfaction I might have gotten out of that would have probably backfired in the long run. So...he gets to wonder about it for the rest of his life."

"That's unusually petty of you," Pluto noted.

"Like I said, I've had a heck of a day. Not that I really had high expectations for my birthday and all that."

I would have said more, but our little group had increased by four--namely, the Knight Sabers, hardsuits and all. The suits looked a little dented and scuffed, so they'd probably been in a fight.

"Ladies," I greeted them. "Thanks again for the reinforcements. I probably wouldn't have made it to the school if people hadn't been running interference for me."

"Thank you for standing up for us," Sylia said. "Even if it was a small gesture, it shows that there's still hope."

"And we got a chance to break out the suits and do some damage--"

Priss stopped short when she realized that everyone was looking pointedly at her. The last thing that Animates on this world needed was to worsen their reputation for property damage.

"--I mean, we did our best to contain the damage. Yeah, that's it. And Leon's safe."

"So, how did you survive fighting Andy Hero?" Linna asked. "Wasn't he supposed to be invincible or something?"

"Yeah, pretty much," I admitted. "But the way I figured, any reality warping that his cologne might have done should have paled in comparison to what Haruhi can do."

"Okay, what can she do?" Nene asked.

"Depending on who you ask, she might have already rebooted the universe and nobody noticed." I paused when I noticed everyone looking very uncomfortable with the concept. "It's a long story and I'd like to take this guy to the nearest police station. Or, failing that, I'll probably hand him over to the first cop who isn't corrupt or trying to kill me. Fair enough?"

Everyone looked at me like they couldn't believe how nonchalant I was acting. But then again, I'm sure that it would all hit me when I least expected. Right now, I had to stay level-headed so that I could explain everything.

When we got out of the school, I was a little sick at all the damage that had been done. People were lying everywhere and buildings had been trashed.

Back home, the insurance companies would have sorted this out, no problem. But this wasn't back home.

Belldandy looked--well, stricken is the best word for it. She was the kind of person who had nearly unconditional kindness towards just about everyone. Seeing everyone hurt like this--I couldn't imagine the strain she was feeling.

She shared a look with her sisters. They nodded and they linked hands and rose into the air.

When you hear a goddess sing, you don't just hear it, you feel the song. You feel it in your heart and your soul--and if that sounds oddly poetic or prosaic or anything like that, you try not to feel the slightest bit moved.

All three of them were singing. They glowed with a holy light and their angels came out, adding their support and power. I just stood there in awe; I'd never seen the Belldandy I knew demonstrate the smallest percentage of her unsealed power. And right now, she and her sisters were focusing all that power on the area around us.

Rubble floated off the road and gently reattached itself to buildings. Potholes filled themselves in as buckled roads were mended. Shards of glass were reassembled into the windows they once were, then gently seated back where they belonged. Even the cars were repaired and righted where they were.

That was just the property damage. The effect that the song had on the people, Animate or regular person, was even more profound. People found themselves surrounded by that glow and were healed. Almost as one, they looked heavenward in awe at the three of them.

The goddesses didn't just fix things. You looked at them and you felt the deep compassion and kindness that all three of

them had for us puny mortals, faults and all. You felt it deep in your heart and your soul. You knew that she could forgive just about anyone for their sins--just about.

All in all, the mending took maybe thirty seconds. When everything was fixed, the three of them floated back to earth, their angels merging with them. None of them looked even the slightest bit winded from the effort.

It was one of the most beautiful sights in my life. I felt something wet roll down my cheek and I realized that I'd been crying. Judging the sniffles in back of me, I wasn't alone.

"That was..." I trailed off because I didn't have the words. Anything I could say would be the palest representation of how I felt.

Belldandy smiled and took my hand. "It was the least we could do." She turned a disappointed gaze to Andy Hero. "We couldn't reach everyone, though."

"Sometimes you can't," I told her sadly. I then noted a few police officers coming towards us, but they weren't drawing their weapons. "Looks like we've got company."

"Don't tell me that they're still willing to fight?" Priss asked. "After all that?"

Three cops doffed their armored helmets. I recognized all of them.

"Tsujimoto. Kobayakawa. Izumi." I nodded to all of them. They blinked in surprise. "Are you arresting us?"

The three women couldn't seem to meet my gaze. They looked ashamed, which I could understand. Nothing like a little heavenly light and forgiveness to make you realize all of your very human flaws.

The awkward standoff was broken by the most girlish squeal that I'd heard Skuld utter. She'd broken off from her sisters and had made her way to an armored Honda Today. Skuld was poking this and that, childish delight in every movement.

"Whose car is this?!" she demanded. "Who modified this?!"

Miyuki Kobayakawa sheepishly raised one hand. "Um, that's my car. I modified it with--"

Skuld was a blur of red and white as she dashed towards Miyuki. "You added nitrous AND turbo?! On that small frame?!" she asked, her eyes shining. "Is it 600 or 700 cc's? And have you thought about--"

"Oi," Urd called out. "I hate to interrupt your tech bonding moment but they're probably here to arrest us."

Noa Izumi looked very uncomfortable. "Well, maybe not `arrest' you guys as such. I mean...there are extenuating circumstances."

Natsumi Tsujimoto chimed in. "Yeah, I mean, you could have just healed one side. So..." She grunted in frustration. "maybe you're not so much `under arrest' as you are `people of interest?'" she suggested.

"Well, in that case," I slid in, "I don't suppose that you could give us a ride to the station?" I looked back at Andy Hero's catatonic form. "We've got someone to book."

"I get dibs on the cute car!" Skuld exclaimed. This drew a smile from Urd and Belldandy. It was good to see someone's spirits raised.

It was a five minute drive to get to the Animate police station. There were a few guards who moved to intercept us, but they backed off at the sight of Belldandy, Urd and Skuld. Oh, and the fact that I was being flanked by Sailor Pluto and the Knight Sabers probably convinced the guards that I was Somebody Else's Problem. Natsumi, Miyuki and Noa all backed us up, citing the little miracle near North High. Washuu had gone on a little errand, since I figured I'd need some extra backup.

Chief Ryo Saeba looked tired. Then again, given how the day had gone and...other factors...I couldn't blame him. He barely acknowledged my presence, but stood up ramrod straight as soon as he caught sight of the goddesses.

"I'm surprised that you had the guts to come back," Chief Saeba remarked. "I had an APB out on you and Hero--is that actually Andy Hero?"

"That's him," I confirmed. "The reason he was so big and bulky is because he was abusing an illegal substance."

"Steroids?" Chief Saeba asked.

"Worse. Much worse," I said. "Given that he's already confessed to substance use, is there any reason why he shouldn't be under arrest?"

"Because he's everybody's hero?" Chief Saeba asked with dull eyes. "You think that this is the first time that he's gotten in trouble?" He snorted in disgust. "He'll weasel his way out of it and we'll be right back to where we started."

"Not without his juice," I pointed out. "Without that, he's not shifting things to his favor anymore. Right now, you guys have a chance to hold him responsible for everything illegal or even morally questionable that he's done the last few years. And I read him his rights," I finished.

"I witnessed this," Belldandy confirmed. "From what I've seen, Detective Mays is a very fair-minded individual."

Chief Saeba looked at me, then Andy Hero, then to the rest of my crowd. He sighed heavily and for a moment, I thought that he was going to take a drink out of his desk.

"This has been going on for years," he said darkly. "One arrest, no matter how influential the person, isn't going to change the system. This isn't going to magically make people better or change their attitudes towards Animates like me and you."

"Maybe not," I admitted. "People can be very slow to accept change. Don't you think that they should at least be given a chance to try?"

"Don't you think that it might be too late already?" Chief Saeba actually reached into a drawer and pulled out a bottle of--okay, I didn't expect him to pull out a bottle of Mylanta. He took a deep swig and grimaced. "I'm at this desk every day and I have to deal with all the crap that comes my way. And let me tell you something: People are terrible."

I shrugged. "They can be. You can't be a cop and not come to that conclusion sometimes."

"`Sometimes?'" he repeated. "Ha! They're also small-minded, petty and they don't deserve second chances. All it took was for someone like him," he pointed to the catatonic Andy Hero, "to take charge and things went to hell. They should just be wiped off the face of the Earth," he finished sourly.

I suddenly felt the gaze of everyone in my group on me. Clearly, they were expecting me to step up and talk some sense into him. It was the classic case of "you stay put while everyone takes a step back." Story of my life, folks.

Still, I had to admit that I had quite a few things to say to him. There were years of self-loathing and anger that I had to cut through. And as tempting as it was to just grab him by the shirtfront and shake him, that wasn't an option. This version of Ryo might not have known me enough to hold back.

I had to go cheap and cut deep. It helped that I knew what buttons to push if I had to. Of course, it was only a matter of surviving those buttons.

I had three goddesses, four women in powered armor, a time-traveling Sailor Senshi and I'd soon have a genius on my side. The odds of Chief Saeba trying anything were pretty low, especially since the cops in this world seemed to fear Belldandy and her sisters.

"I've known people who've said that before," I told him.

"Most of them were cops, as you might expect. I mean, yeah, you can't have this job and not see some pretty terrible things. You hardly ever see people when they're having a good day." I held out my arms. "It's always, 'no, officer, I wasn't speeding' or 'I didn't know that this parking lot didn't take giant robots' or 'I'm sure that I have documentation for this mallet somewhere.' Am I right?"

Chief Saeba stared levelly at me. "Go on," he prompted.

"You became a cop because you couldn't be a sweeper anymore, right? The City Council had changed the rules for private investigators and bounty hunters, especially Animate ones."

He nodded slowly. "I didn't have much of a choice," he said dully. "And...they assigned me to Andy Hero."

I raised an eyebrow. Some things did remain the same.

"You were partners?"

He snorted and grabbed another bottle from his desk--this one a bottle of whiskey. He took a slug and eyed the heap that was Andy Hero sourly.

"We were never 'partners.'" He made that very clear." He was about to take another slug when he realized the illustrious

company he was in. "I was just the token Animate, a stepping stool for his career. I thought that people would see through him." He shook his head in disgust. "They never did. They started agreeing with him. That ugliness was always there, I guess, even in the best of people."

"But people aren't always like that," Belldandy said gently.

Chief Saeba actually hesitated. "That's what...she said," he got out. I noticed where his voice caught.

"Kaori," I said, just before he grabbed the front of my trenchcoat. Though he looked a lot like the Ryo I knew, there was a deadness in his bloodshot eyes. He wasn't living; he just existed.

"You don't get to say her name," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "Nobody does. Not anymore."

Sailor Pluto leaned in between us and gave Chief Saeba a warning look. Reluctantly, he let me go.

"What would she say if she saw you like this?" I asked.

Chief Saeba's right eye twitched. "It doesn't matter. The dead don't speak." He wiped his face with his hand and seemed to age right before my eyes. "Kaori. Umibozu. Reika. Saeko.

Miki. Doc. They're all dead. They were all killed by a whiteout bomb."

"So you decided to have Estes numb you with booze and women so that you wouldn't have to feel it, right? You were in so much pain that you couldn't think straight." I leaned in closer, noting that Chief Saeba's jaw was clenched, but he couldn't quite look at me. "You wanted to wreck everything in sight because the person most precious to you had been taken and you didn't know who had done it. I'm guessing that all your usual contacts didn't have a clue."

Nene stepped forward. "I thought it was suspicious that so many Animates had been killed with whiteout bombs. Those things are rare and hard to make, so they should have been pretty easy to trace."

Chief Saeba looked at her as if she were a bug. "And?"

"That stuff that this guy was wearing?" I glared at Andy Hero. "It makes him better at the expense of your own abilities. He's smarter than everyone because the people surrounding him suddenly lose a few IQ points. He's more observant than everyone because everyone around him suddenly become more oblivious." I nodded for Nene to continue.

"I couldn't find the link because I literally wasn't smart enough at that time," Nene said, frustration tingeing her voice. "But with Detective Hero down..." She shook her helmeted head and snorted. "I can't believe how easy it was. I'll need your computer, please."

Reluctantly, Chief Saeba backed away from his terminal. Nene shot an interface cable at the computer and information scrolled on the monitor. There were names and dates I didn't recognize, but I did know what parts made a whiteout bomb.

Back in my city, much like dip, the components for a whiteout bomb were strictly controlled. If you had two or more components that went missing, all Animates were immediately taken off the case for their own good.

Andy Hero, as well as a few people on the City Council, had full access to whiteout bombs. Nene had even hacked into his private files and I gritted my teeth at what I saw.

The bastard kept a list of every Animate who had been blanked out. He'd ranked them by how dangerous they could have been to the overall plan.

It had all been there, practically in plain sight. Nobody thought to look at it because he'd made them dumber.

"I barely had to decrypt the files," Nene observed. "If this were anyone else, I'd say that they were almost begging to be caught. But nobody questioned 'everybody's hero,' did they?" she asked sourly, detaching the interface cable.

"So, does this mean that peoples' attitudes towards us was because of that cologne, too?" Skuld asked.

"Unfortunately, that's just part of being human," Urd noted sadly. "They're afraid of what's different."

"He played me," Chief Saeba muttered as he looked over the data. "He played us all. He strutted in front of everyone, daring to see who was behind 'everybody's hero.'" His expression darkened as he flexed his fingers. "Is there a reason why I shouldn't just kill him right now?"

"Several," I said. "But why don't we get the opinion of the greatest genius in the galaxy?" I called out.

Washuu's dimensional door appeared and the mad scientist herself popped out. She looked a little peeved.

"Just the galaxy?" she asked acidly. "Don't you mean the universe? Or are we just used to thinking small?"

"Have you tried to debug Yggdrasil?" Skuld asked pointedly. "Especially after this mess?"

Washuu's eye twitched. I could practically see the gears turning in her head as she ran through some calculations. After a moment, she slumped in defeat.

"Fine. I shall graciously accept the title of greatest genius in the galaxy **for now**," she emphasized the last two words.

"Everyone all right in there?" I asked, indicating the dimensional door. "Not too many bumps, I hope."

"Everyone's fine," Washuu reassured me. She turned around and cupped her hand to her mouth. "Hey! We're here! You can stop looking at the airsickness bags! I only put them there as a joke!"

"Ugh..." I heard Ryo grumble. "Why are we even here?"

"I don't know," Kaori said from within. "Why am I tagging along?"

"Aren't you always complaining that we should do more things together?" Ryo retorted.

Chief Saeba blinked. "Kaori?"

Washuu moved to the side to let Kaori through. She looked distinctly pale, but at least she wasn't about to throw up. She shook her head and saw Chief Saeba.

"Um...Ryo?" she asked.

"Yes?" both Ryo and Chief Saeba replied.

Kaori gently smacked her head. "Okay, who saw that coming?"

Pretty much everyone in the room raised their hand. The only exception was Andy Hero and he was still catatonic. And if Kaori couldn't talk some sense into Chief Saeba, "catatonic" would be a very temporary state of being.

Ryo's head popped up. His nostrils flared briefly as he caught sight of Chief Saeba. "Whoa. I've seen better days." He took a quick whiff. "Mylanta and whiskey? Interesting combination."

"It gets me through the day," Chief Saeba said defensively. "So...you're together."

"We're working on it," Kaori said. She scrutinized Chief Saeba's face and frowned. "What happened to your Kaori?"

Chief Saeba's eyes narrowed. "This son of a bitch took her from me." He pointed at Andy Hero. "You're going to give me a reason why I shouldn't kill him right now, aren't you?"

"Well, I could hit you with a mallet until you stopped moving," Kaori pointed out. She reached back and was puzzled to find that she didn't have her multi-ton mallet in her hand.

"Pocket dimension misalignment," Washuu said. "You can't access anything from hammer space when you're in another dimension. Although," she tapped her chin thoughtfully, "I suppose that a neutral space might allow for temporary realignment."

"I can vouch for that," I said. "It kind of sucks."

"What kind of sucks?" Nene--the Nene I knew--asked from the door. She popped out, her green eyes worried. "Hey, there you are, Andy! I was worried about you!"

I took two long strides towards her and hugged her. She squeaked in surprise.

"Oh, um, hi..." I could imagine her blushing. "I guess you missed me?"

"I've had a he--heck of a day," I said. I had the distinct feeling that Urd was taking an interest in the two of us.

"It's only been a half hour," she pointed out.

I blinked and gently separated from her. "A half hour?"

She nodded. "It's only 9:30 in the morning."

Washuu coughed into her fist. "Well, sometimes that happens. Time doesn't always flow at the same rate between dimensions." She smirked at me. "You're lucky that the differential wasn't that great, maybe a few hours. I'd hate to think what might have happened if, say, you'd spent a year here as opposed to a half hour back home. No, wait, that would be an interesting little experiment--"

"Not interested, thanks," I said curtly. "No offense, but I think you have plenty of guinea pigs back home."

"I believe that there are better ways to repay his kindness," Belldandy said firmly. "He has, after all, solved a problem which has eluded us all for years."

Washuu actually looked intimidated. And that was Belldandy being polite about it. I didn't even want to think about if Belldandy had gotten angry. After all, the old saying is "when Belldandy goes cold, the universe needs a sweater."

I noticed Priss gently nudging her Nene with the elbow of her hardsuit. I couldn't tell what Hardsuit Nene's expression was, but her body language was clearly that of embarrassment. I wondered why.

Of course, all the lighthearted byplay went away as soon as soon as Chief Saeba took out his Colt Python and aimed it

squarely at Andy Hero's head. Only the fact that Ryo had done the same, only aiming at his counterpart's head, stopped the Chief from pulling the trigger.

"Don't," Ryo said, his voice colder than ice. "I know you want to, but don't."

It was a stupid move. Chief Saeba was outnumbered and outgunned by three goddesses and four women in hardsuits. Hell, I was willing to bet that Ryo outclassed Chief Saeba, if only for the fact that Ryo never let himself fall entirely into despair. He kept himself focused, for the most part, on what needed to be done. Chief Saeba...was just going through the motions.

"Why not?" Chief Saeba asked. "I lost everything and everyone I ever cared about. You know what that's like. You remember what you--we--did when Hideyuki--"

"I remember," Ryo said. "But that was when I was just a sweeper. I could do that because nobody looked up to me as any sort of role model." He pointed to Chief Saeba's badge. "This means something bigger than just you."

"Yeah?" Chief Saeba asked. "What's it supposed to mean? That I'm a fool? That I've been a pawn for somebody else since

the day I got the badge? That I should have taken my chances as an outlaw instead of falling in line?"

"It means that you've got people behind you," Ryo said patiently. "I've seen it cut both ways in the department. You've got people who will cover up any little indiscretion so that you can keep on doing your job. Then you've got people who follow you because they figure that you earned the rank by being on the streets." He frowned. "As much as I'd be tempted in your place to just pull the trigger, I can't. Your people won't be able to cover this up and they won't be able to follow you after this."

"I never asked them to follow me. I just got the 'promotion' so that I could stay out of this guy's way," Chief Saeba said, glaring daggers at Andy Hero.

I had to break it up--not by putting myself between them, of course. That would have been stupid and suicidal. No, I just had to stop them before someone pulled the trigger and caused a chain reaction.

"You know, the average Jane and Joe don't know anything about this," I said, trying to be nonchalant about it. "You want revenge? Well let me tell you something: I know a guy just like him."

"And?" Chief Saeba didn't take his eye off Andy Hero, but he wasn't shooting, either. Good. That meant that I had his attention.

"And if Andy Hero dies here and now, Jane and Joe Average are going to see you as a murderous Animate who should have been put down years ago. Because you killed `everybody's hero.' And he'll be laughing from the grave because his reputation is still intact."

Chief Saeba clenched his jaw. "Then what do you suggest I do with him?"

"Treat him like any other perp." I shrugged. "For years, he's been living the easy life, getting away with everything. And he thought he was invincible and untouchable, with a silver tongue and a winning smile. And here's your chance to show people something very important."

"And that is...?"

"That done right, the system does not care who your parents were, how rich you are, or what your reputation was before you committed a crime. The law will judge you on your crime." I took a moment to scowl at Andy Hero. "If you don't give the system a chance--if you decide that you are judge, jury and executioner, then he wins. He'll be dead, yeah, but he'll have

died in the line of duty, a martyr and `everybody's hero.'" I shook my head. "His reputation means everything to him."

I had the sudden image of Andy Hero standing trial in an orange jumpsuit. He was slack-jawed and pale as the judge read the charges and he was convicted on each and every one of them, including murder. I have to admit, I kind of liked that image.

"And we ruin the reputation of the department for keeping this from Jane and Joe Average so long," Chief Saeba pointed out. "They're not going to trust us after that."

"You lance the boil and then you let it heal," Ryo said reasonably. More than a few of the girls didn't seem to appreciate the metaphor. "What? Maybe I should have said something about popping the--"

"Anyway," I interrupted him, "you're better off running him through the system, due process and hopefully justice. And maybe you'll find his buddies and enablers in the city council or elsewhere, prompting people to clean house. Isn't that better than executing a man when he's down?"

"And what if he gets out thanks to his buddies?" Chief Saeba asked. "What if he decides to write a book about this, claiming that he's innocent? What then?"

"It's the chance you have to take. I mean, if you do kill him, every Animate's going to pay." I glared right into his dull eyes. "Every. Single. One. They already have access to whiteout bombs. If you do this, you might give them reason to commit genocide."

Chief Saeba looked at me, then Ryo and finally Kaori. With slow, deliberate movements, he emptied his Colt and placed it gently on his desk. In response, Ryo holstered his own Colt.

"Does he always talk like this?" Chief Saeba asked Ryo.

Ryo shrugged. "He has good days and bad days, like everyone. He's generally a decent guy, though. I could have had worse."

"I did have worse," Chief Saeba reminded him. "So, do we have everything we need to build a case?"

"With all due respect to Nene over there," I gestured to Hardsuit Nene, "All that evidence you now have on your computer isn't going to be enough. It's a start--a good start--but you'll have to do a lot of digging if you want to root out that guy's partners in crime."

"Is there anything else we need to take care of while we're in this dimension?" Washuu asked. She'd been waving around

various gizmos, probably taking readings or something. "The way back is stable enough so that I could take you all--"

"No thanks," Nene said quickly. "I'll go with Sailor Pluto."

"Same here," Ryo agreed. "Probably have a smoother ride."

"Me too," Kaori added.

A drop of sweat rolled down the side of Washuu's face. Then she covered her face with her palm.

"No appreciation for genius," she muttered, closing the dimensional door behind her.

"Is there any place that you have unfinished business, Detective?" Sailor Pluto asked.

I considered my options. There probably was one thing that could be resolved, especially now that Belldandy and her sisters were back. Of course, it meant going into the belly of the beast, so to speak.

"Well, there's another version of Sailor Saturn who could use a little help," I said. "It's a tricky situation."

I explained it as best as I could. Everyone looked suitably disturbed.

"Wait, you're telling me that he just LEFT her like that?!" Skuld exclaimed. "And she's there as some kind of trophy?"

"Well, I don't suppose that you ladies could think of how to get her free without, oh, destroying the world? I'm open to options," I said.

The three of them immediately started bouncing ideas off of each other. They actually seemed pretty happy to have an earnest talk. I guess that they hadn't had much of that in a while. After a little bit, they seemed to agree on something.

"We should free her as soon as possible," Belldandy said. "She's suffered enough."

"Well, you'd have to get past the border wall--" I stopped short as Belldandy gestured for a portal to form. "Right. Goddesses," I muttered. "Shouldn't this be through a mirror or something?"

"If it were for myself, yes," Belldandy said quietly. "However, this is more convenient for everyone."

We stepped through and were surrounded by cops with guns. I recognized a few of them, including Shirley and Joe Wright. They all looked on edge, but they all grew pale as they realized who was in the group. Then again, seeing as how we'd arrived

right outside the department door, that was going to cause a little bit of a fuss.

It took all of five seconds and a meaningful glare from Urd to get them to stand down. They stood there, slack-jawed as most of them exercised the only sane response to three goddesses: Back off, smile and go about your business.

"How's Stan doing?" I asked Joe Wright.

"In the hospital," he said, his voice clipped. "Detective Hero messed up his arms pretty badly. Doctor says that it'll probably take weeks to heal."

"I will visit him after we take care of Miss Tomoe," Belldandy promised. "Then I have to make amends to Keiichi."

Behind her, Urd and Skuld looked like they were trying not to groan. Belldandy didn't have anything to "make amends" for as far as I was concerned.

A thought occurred to me as I noticed Sailor Pluto smiling. I had a suspicion that I knew what she was smiling about.

"You never had a doubt that I could talk Chief Saeba down, did you?" I asked.

"Whatever makes you say that?" she asked in return.

"You, the goddesses, the Knight Sabers--any one of you could have probably immobilized or shot Chief Saeba before he could kill Andy Hero. But nobody did anything. Why's that, I wonder?"

"Perhaps I was quite confident in your ability to reach out to him?" Pluto suggested.

"Was it confidence or foreknowledge?" I asked. "I mean, you were a little cryptic this morning."

"Was I?" Pluto asked.

"Yeah," I insisted. "I mean, you could have played it straight with me and said, 'you're going to an alternate dimension really soon. You'll get out of it by contacting the three goddesses and helping them out.' But no, you had to go all mysterious like 'when the blight is removed from the tree, the trio shall return' and also 'the one who claims to be the happiest is the one who is in the most pain.'" I sighed noisily. "I mean, who thinks of this crazy fortune cookie stuff anyway?"

Now there was an actual hint of mischief in Sailor Pluto's eyes. It was both heartwarming and more than a little unsettling.

"I suppose I could always quote one of my colleagues...`that is a secret.'" Now her red eyes were practically sparkling with humor.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "Please don't. We are not invoking that guy. And if I do say his name, he might actually show up."

She almost chuckled. "Given the day you've had, I'll take it easy on you." She straightened up as if she were about to deliver a lecture to a dense student. "Time is a very complicated thing. There are ripples and eddies with every action we take. I could use any number of metaphors to give a rough approximation of what it is." She sighed. "It's enough to say that everything matters, though not all to the same degree." Now she was turning up the mischief. "And as for the `fortune cookie stuff,' I believe that I was quoting you. Or, at least, I will be."

I groaned and covered my face. "Right. Been there, done that, go back and make sure that you're able to be there to do that. What do they call that?"

"A predestination paradox," Pluto said. "It's an oversimplified term, but quite useful. It's certainly more descriptive than `timey-wimey.'"

"He must have made quite an impression on you," I joked.
"That guy in the blue box, I mean."

"You could say that," she said carefully. "One moment, he's the most frustrating man I've ever met. The next, I just want to grab her and--" She stopped short and tried to hide the blush that warmed her cheeks.

I didn't say a thing. I didn't make a big deal of the mid-sentence gender change because, well, alien physiology. I wasn't going to mess with someone who had power over space and time. I certainly wasn't going to even imply that she might have fantasized about this and that with the Doctor. That would have been borderline suicidal.

"Well, it's good that you two have an understanding," I said diplomatically. "There aren't that many time travelers in this universe--at least, not that many I know of."

Sailor Pluto calmed down. "Yes, an understanding is a good thing for any relationship--like the one you have with Miss Romanova."

Now it was my turn to be uncomfortable. "Yeah, we're working on it. Taking our time, too." I cleared my throat. "I just want to get it right, you know? She's worth it."

I felt two arms encircle me from behind. Judging by where the head was on my back, it was most likely Nene. I shot Pluto a faintly dirty look.

"You sneaky little--"

"I should help poor Hotaru when she comes out of stasis," Pluto said abruptly. "She's been through a difficult time."

I scowled as Pluto beat a hasty retreat. Then I sighed as Nene kept hugging me.

"I talked to the other me," she said quietly. "I'm really glad that I didn't have her life."

"Yeah, she got dealt a pretty bad hand. The odds were stacked against her, the house was winning--all those metaphors. But you know what?"

"What?"

"She might not have been able to crack the code on Andy Hero's files, but she didn't stop fighting. She just pretended to be this broken, helpless person until the time was right."

"I never thought about it that way," she admitted. "I guess I've had a pretty easy life. I've never really been tested."

"You've definitely been under pressure, kiddo," I reassured her. "Here, let me just turn around."

She let go just enough for me to turn around and hug her. She was standing on her tiptoes, which I found oddly charming. I leaned forward slightly so that our foreheads were touching.

"This is nice," she murmured.

"Mm hm," I agreed.

"I didn't get you anything for your birthday," she said.

"It's okay. I wasn't expecting anything."

Nene leaned back slightly. I opened my eyes.

"Isn't that kind of sad?" she asked. "I mean, do you always expect something terrible to happen on your birthday?"

"It's been the trend so far, kiddo," I sighed. "I'm just glad that we're going home. I'll take what I can get."

"Not bad advice," Ryo remarked. "But it doesn't hurt to ask for a little bit more."

Kaori looked at him sourly. "Like you're one to talk."

Reluctantly, Nene and I separated. "So, how'd it go with Chief Saeba? Did you manage to talk any sense into him?"

"He's stubborn," Ryo said, obviously frustrated. "I wish I could say that he wasn't me, but he is. I understand where he's coming from, but it's not just him anymore. I think that he knows what to do, but he doesn't feel like he's worthy of it anymore. The job, I mean." He sighed heavily. "Most of him died when his Kaori died. Estes was just keeping him physically going with all the women and booze. The tough part is getting him to find a reason to live."

Kaori gently squeezed Ryo's hand. He had the decency to blush a little instead of going fully hormonal on her. Then again, given their history, I think that it might have actually taken a bit of time for him to get to that point.

I heard some heavy footsteps coming our way. I'd know that tread anywhere. I turned to face the Chief--at least, the man I knew as Chief back home. He was still short, balding, grey-haired and he had a spare tire that never seemed to go away. He looked more careworn than the Chief I knew.

He scrutinized me for a few moments, his eyebrows furrowing in concentration. Then there was a spark of recognition.

"Well, if you aren't Tony Mays, you've got his eyes," he declared. His voice was a little more gravelly than I

remembered. "Could never tell whether or not they were blue or grey, depending on the light."

"It's a family trait," I said nonchalantly. "Are you still the Chief here?"

He sighed heavily. "Only in name. They shuffled me off to a corner office while Andy Hero became the face of the department, the poster boy."

"How could all this happen?" Nene asked.

The Chief looked ashamed and scratched his head. "You know how to kill a frog by boiling them? You don't just drop them in the hot water because they're going to jump away. So, what you do is raise the temperature up a few degrees at a time, just long enough for the frogs to get acclimated. And then you turn it up again. And you repeat the process until the frogs realize, too late, that the water's boiling and they're dying.

"The people wanted order. They wanted things done now. They wanted the inconvenience of living with Animates dealt with. Most of them wanted a better police force--and for a lot of them, 'better' meant 'meaner' and 'better-armed.' They wanted the 'dangerous Animates' taken down in a pre-emptive strike before their precious property values went down." He snorted.

"And Andy Hero was the linchpin of this little movement," I said gravely. "He was the start of the fall, wasn't he?"

"He was capable, intelligent and charismatic," the Chief admitted. "He ticked off all the checkmarks of being a good cop for most people. He came from a blue line, which the police union loved. But...he had this poisonous effect on people."

"I can imagine," I commented. I remembered every time that the Andy Hero I knew had gathered a crowd. Pretty soon, they'd be parroting what he said. "People saw him as an example, didn't they?"

The Chief nodded. "The recruits we were getting were more suited to a paramilitary organization than a police force. Over time, the police newsletters started peppering their articles with phrases like "warrior's mentality" or "strong will to survive." We were turning a blind eye to the fact that we were getting more wolves who pretended to be sheepdogs, loyal only to each other." He shook his head. "And the worst part is, the people thought they wanted this--until they didn't. And then, suddenly, we were to blame."

"You weren't?" Ryo commented. "This was still on your watch."

"Nobody was willing to listen," the Chief said darkly. "As long as Andy Hero and his buddies got results, I was to leave him alone. That came straight from the city council."

"So, what now?" I asked. "There's got to be some housecleaning now that every cop knows what Andy Hero did."

"Oh, there'll be a purge," the Chief said sardonically. "I'll probably be forced into retirement since this was on my watch. But for the most part, the more aggressive wolves in the department will be quietly taken care of." He snorted. "Nobody on the city council will take responsibility, of course. It was never their fault for giving us heavy weapons, loosening the admission requirements and encouraging the racist narrative against Animates. Oh no, it was just some bad apples in the police department and the city council is innocent of any wrongdoing." He looked like he was going to spit.

"Why don't you look at what my counterpart dug up?" Nene asked. "She found quite a list of people linked to some nasty stuff."

"That stuff's not exactly admissible in court, little lady," he pointed out.

"There are ways," she reassured him. "Just ask her. In fact, it might be a good idea to recruit her so that it's all legal."

I gently patted her on the back. "You know, sometimes I almost forget that you can be this sneaky. Almost."

Nene beamed a sunny smile at me. "I don't know what you're talking about. I just consider alternative methods, that's all."

"Sneaky," I repeated. I was tempted to just kiss her on the top of her head right then and there.

"Anyway," the Chief interrupted, ignoring the byplay, "you're definitely Tony's kid. I can see it in your eyes and the way you stand. I think I could have worked with you a lot better than Hero." He noted Sailor Pluto walking towards us with Hotaru Tomoe in tow, dressed in a black skirt and blouse. He suppressed a shiver--and honestly, I didn't blame him one bit. "Anyway, I get the feeling that you should be going."

"You're going to be all right," Pluto reassured Hotaru. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

Hotaru didn't seem convinced. She hugged herself nervously.

The Chief sighed and snagged a cop that happened to be heading our way. "Gaffney! Take the kid down to the cafeteria and get her something to eat."

Gaffney blinked in confusion. "Sir?"

"Do you have a problem with that?"

Gaffney hesitated and looked at Hotaru. The poor kid didn't look like the angel of death right now. No, she just looked a little scared and vulnerable.

He sighed. "Come on. You must have had a rough time."

"She has," Pluto replied. "Take it easy on her."

Gaffney didn't say anything. Instead, he nodded as he escorted Hotaru to her first meal in years.

"And now, I think it's time to leave. I've sent Haruhi ahead, so it's just you four," Sailor Pluto said, gesturing with her staff.

Nene frowned as she looked back. The kid looked worried.

"I can't believe that things got that bad in this world," she said quietly. "I mean, I always knew that there were people who hated Animates, but I never thought that it would go this far."

"This happened because people gave in to their prejudice," I told her. "I've always assumed that people become more open-minded and less bigoted as the generations pass." I shook my head. "That doesn't seem to be the case."

"Maybe that's the problem," Ryo said. "I've seen way too much to assume that people are going to get better on their own. Hatred tends to hide itself in socially-acceptable ways."

I nodded. "Yeah, I can see that. You change a few phrases, dull the impact of some words and suddenly an atrocity doesn't seem so bad. And it's really easy to blame people who aren't in your group for everything that went wrong." I turned to Sailor Pluto. "Do you happen to have any non-cryptic advice?"

Pluto looked thoughtful. "Some of my friends believe that the ends justify the means. They've done some pretty terrible things in the name of the greater good. Others are so idealistic and hopeful that they bend the world just enough to keep it falling over the edge. To balance vigilance and compassion is a difficult task," she noted. "Vigilance taken to the extreme is paranoia. Compassion taken to an extreme is being naive."

"So...keep our eyes open and our hearts balanced," I said.
"Easier said than done."

"The worthwhile things are rarely easy," Pluto said. "Now I believe that you have a birthday to celebrate back home. I have some matters to attend to after that."

To be honest, the whole trip was pretty noneventful. We just walked into a kind of tunnel and the next thing we knew, we were back home. There wasn't any turbulence, traffic jams or even potholes. It was a smooth transition all around.

I turned to thank Pluto for what she'd done, but she vanished. I wondered if she was a ninja or something. Or maybe she'd been hanging around Batman.

Haruhi Suzumiya was sleeping peacefully on a nearby bench. Yuki Nagato was watching over her. I noticed that her little hands were moving over Haruhi's head with almost computer-like precision.

Yuki looked up. "You have returned," she observed in that soft monotone of hers.

"It wasn't easy," I said. "Is she all right?"

"I am analyzing the data that still exists within Suzumiya's personal space and sending it to the Data Overmind

for future reference. Evidence of this phenomenon would otherwise fade."

"Oh. For a moment, I thought that you were erasing her memories or something like that," I said.

She raised her gaze to meet my eyes. "It is an option I have decided to not exercise. Conspicuous gaps in personal memory continuity raises questions. However, if you wish me to manipulate your data for this desired effect..."

I backed away from her a little. "I'll...pass, thank you. What about her?"

"Past experience would indicate that she remains unaware of the extent of her ability," Yuki reported. "There is a 97.653 percent chance that Suzumiya will consider this a random, but insightful fluke. At best, she will consider it a very odd dream."

"That's good to hear," I heard Kyon say from behind us. I turned around to see him looking sheepish and worried. "Honestly, she's so much trouble." He knelt down in front of her.

A niggling little thought presented itself to me. Haruhi had subconsciously followed Kyon's suggestions, even if neither

of them had fully realized it. I wondered if it was Kyon's will that sent her to that other world.

"Suzumiya did not send both herself and you to that other world because of Kyon's urging," Yuki said calmly. "In a moment of perceptiveness, she unconsciously recognized the dissatisfaction you were feeling, one that mirrored her own." She cocked her head slightly to one side. "In a way, Suzumiya was attempting to unconsciously resolve both of your feelings of dissatisfaction."

"Hold on, hold on..." I held my hands in front of me. "You're telling me that Haruhi did all of this as some kind of unconscious favor?"

"Correct," Yuki said in that soft monotone. "Suzumiya is a person of many contradictions. She is frequently brash, but sometimes more circumspect depending on the situation. She claims not to understand people, yet tries to be kind to them in her own way." She looked at Kyon. "She claims not to be interested in anyone ordinary, yet she frequently interacts with you."

Kyon scratched his head in irritation. "Oh, good grief. What do I do now?"

Yuki tilted her head slightly. "I would not suggest antagonizing her. Analysis of her personal data within the last few subjective hours has shown how much she values us." She looked directly at Kyon. "Especially you."

He sighed heavily. "Well, I guess I have to."

I turned to leave. Everything seemed to be well in hand here and I still had my birthday to live through. Despite the foreboding I'd felt in the morning, anything had to be better than the world that I just saw right now.

"Detective," Yuki said in that soft voice of hers. "If you are interested, I have simulated the most likely result of your actions."

"I'd be glad if Andy Hero doesn't get away scot-free," I mumbled. Then I noticed an odd look in Yuki's eyes. "He doesn't, does he?"

"No," she said quietly.

She moved her hands away from Haruhi and cupped them before her. A scene appeared above her hands, that of a courtroom. Andy Hero was there in an orange prisoner's jumpsuit, still looking a little worse for the wear from drinking Klatchian coffee.

"It is the decision of this court," the judge said, "that due to frequent abuse of reality-altering substances, you are a danger to yourself and everyone around you. Thus, we have decided to confine you to a place where your questionable actions and nature will be key to your survival."

"I did what I had to," Andy Hero insisted. "If I am a monster, it's because society welcomed monsters like me."

"Perhaps," the judge allowed. "And now, we rebuke you and repudiate your despicable actions. You will be exiled to Liefeld Island without any hope of parole or reduction in your sentence." The judge actually smiled darkly. "You may experience some minor physical changes over time."

The scene changed to Andy Hero taking cover against a rock. He'd changed, all right. He had muscles where there weren't supposed to be any. He was wearing a jacket with a gratuitous amount of pockets over a bodysuit. His neck seemed to have shrunk. His feet seemed to have shrunk to a useless state, but somehow he was still walking.

"Thank you, Yuki," I said in a strained voice. "I think I've seen enough."

She nodded and the projection faded. I heard some uncomfortable gulping next to me, as if someone was trying hard not to lose their--well, it would have been breakfast.

"That's just wrong," Nene commented. She looked green around the gills.

"Can we go back to the office where people don't look like that?" Ryo asked.

Kaori said nothing. Instead, she was taking deep breaths.

"Yeah, let's go back," I said. "Everything's settled here."

The rest of the day was, to be honest, kind of quiet. I got calls from my family. Mom and Dad were happily retired, though Mom couldn't resist telling me about how Dad's 30th birthday went. My older brother Adam and little sister Alise called as well. They were doing okay.

I needed the normality. Yeah, there's such a thing as normal even in this city of Animates and humans living together. It's a city that worked by being together, not driving each other apart.

I called up some of my old friends. Jake was doing well, despite his dependence on good luck charms and talismans. Trish

was out hunting another story. They all picked up on the worried tone in my voice. I told them that I'd explain it later.

Lunch came and they had the birthday buffet. I forced myself to eat some cake, given that I'd already had lunch in another dimension. There was a lot of joking around that I was an old man now. I got a six pack of Ensure, a case of Mylanta and a walker with a police lights on the handles. There were banners proclaiming that I was now "over the hill."

I was grumpy about my birthday, and for pretty good reason. But today wasn't so bad. It could have been a lot worse, especially if I didn't have friends celebrating with me.

The day passed quickly and I was tired. But, I'd agreed to have a birthday dinner with Nene. Ryo and Kaori were headed to their couples counseling appointment, so it was just me and her.

"So, congratulations on surviving your 30th birthday," she said cheerfully. She raised a glass of sparkling cider.

"Thanks, kiddo," I said, raising my own glass. "Couldn't have done it without you."

We took a sip and settled in for dinner. It wasn't anything fancy. It was one of those hole-in-the-wall places that served good food.

"Honestly, I sometimes don't think that I show my appreciation for you often enough," I admitted. "I don't want you to think that I take you for granted, okay?"

"Well, I'm glad that you told me," she said, cutting into her veal. "If I can be honest?"

"Sure."

"You're a good guy, but sometimes you're not good at communicating. It's like you keep a running dialogue in your head and only a little comes out for everyone to see."

Well, she wasn't wrong. I guess that being a cop tends to keep communication to a minimum.

"Thanks for letting me know," I said earnestly. "I'll work on that."

She blinked in confusion. "You're not offended?"

I shrugged and cut into my steak. "Why would I be? I know that you're not going to say things just to hurt me." I shrugged again. "I guess that's one of the reasons why I love you." I went back to my steak.

I heard Nene's cutlery drop to the plate with a CLINK. I looked up and her green eyes were starting to water. She gaped at me as if she'd never seen me before.

"What did you say?" Her voice was wispy, almost disbelieving. "Say that again."

"I said, I guess that's one of the reasons why I love you." I put my knife and fork down and reached over. She didn't have a fever or anything, but she was definitely blushing.

"You never told me that before." Now her voice was almost breaking.

"I didn't?" Huh. It never occurred to me that I never said it, not between the kisses and the snuggling.

"No, you didn't," she insisted. "You never said it."

"Huh. Seems that would be something pretty important."

She nodded emphatically. "Yes, it is. And you said it so...nonchalantly. Like it wasn't a big deal or anything."

"It's just a fact to me. The sky is blue, water is wet, I love you."

She let out a choked chuckle. "Always the detective. So, did you figure out my clues?"

"A long time ago, kiddo. But I would like to hear it, if it's okay with--"

"I love you," Nene said urgently. "I think I've loved you ever since before Christmas. You're a good man--solid, steady, pretty good-looking--"

"Yeah, if you like square jaws," I joked.

"I'm on a roll," she reminded me.

"Sorry."

"You're funny, you're kind, you fight for the little guy and you have a sense of honor. You don't flirt and you don't take stupid risks and I can't believe this is happening you love me and I love you and where do we go from here?" she babbled.

"One step at a time, Nene. One step at a time."

"So...you're not ready to check out my system?" she teased.
"It's very user friendly."

I reached out and gently held her hand. I took her hand and kissed it, making her face turn crimson.

"In due time, Nene. In due time."

Gotta admit. This was the best birthday I've ever had.

THE END