

Gravity

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The legend Ryuichi Sakuma is dead, he leaves behind the gift of a daughter which is passed to Shuichi and Yuki to raise. Now that she is 16 can she find the truth in her existence she has been searching for?

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1 - Track One

There are many strange coincidences in our life; some are good, others not so good. I don't know where I can grade the sudden limousine accident sixteen years ago that stole the lives of Ryuichi Sakuma, and his wife Hanako Morita. It was very horrific, and they had everything to live for. Ryuichi was a vocalist genius – a beloved idol in Japan. Hanako was a creative voice actress who had a legion of anime fans worldwide, even the United States fans knew her name. Together they had met at a motel while hiding from their respective agents. Not knowing a thing about the other, it was love at first sight. In fact their love was so great they married within an hour of meeting each other. They even waited for their ceremony to find out who the other was, name and all! Ok, I know what you're thinking...what flaky space cases...that was uh, true. But their relationship survived, that's all you have to know, OK!

Anyway, back to all they had to live for...Well, soon after Hanako fell pregnant and gave birth to a sensationally gorgeous baby girl. Oh how she was lovely, with those pink cheeks, soft skin and cute little tush. That's what I hear anyway, from photos the baby lives up all these words – I feel more could have been said, oh well. She was only six months old when she lost both her father and her mother.

After the sudden death of the famous couple, much mourning from the entertainment industry, as well as the zillions of fans followed. It was hard for so many to face the loss. Japan was practically in a standstill. When reality sunk in everyone wondered what was going to happen to little Ryuko – yeah, it's a bit odd of a name, want to make something of it?! Relatives from both sides demanded the sweet little infant. Even Tohma Seguchi, owner of the NG recording studio made bid to care for the child. However, there was a certain document that stood in the way for these people, it was a fully legal document stating who the parents had chosen as Ryuko's Godparents. They were a lesser known couple, though world famous individually for their chosen fields – Eiri Yuki (actually it's Uesugi, but I never really hear anyone call him that much), author of dozens of novels, and his partner, Shuichi Shindou.

Much outrage and frustration followed...mostly by Eiri. Then again I hear his little brother Tetsuha was much more outraged, destroying a part of his temple in an angst-bidden rage. He is so totally a baby! Hasn't a changed a bit, I swear, him and his Ryuichi fetish is so creepy, I wish he'd stop trying to wrap up my boobs and make me sing...oh, Heh, where was I...? Oh, right, Eiri Yuki was very frustrated by what Ryuichi had done without his consent. He was the last person (he felt) who would be suited as a father figure. Shuichi would have liked to be over the moon, but he didn't think he was worthy of the honour to take care in raising the daughter of his idol and good friend. Besides, would two fathers really be good for the little girl?

The lawyer for Ryuichi and Hanako requested that they take care of sweet, adorable little Ryuko until the courts decided who would be granted custody. It wasn't easy having a baby in the apartment, drove them to the edge of their sanity. Even spunky Shuichi had a tough time keeping a smile. When the time came to hand her over before the hearing was to start, they felt a great sense of relief and knew once and for all Ryuichi had made a huge mistake.

As they listened to hearing, the testimony from the several parties as to why they would be best suited as the parents, many odd things raced through the mind of Shuichi. Such as, were any of them wanting

Ryuko because they loved her? Was it all about the social status of owning the only child of Ryuichi Sakuma? And...what was that cold feeling in his back?! He was about to turn around when the voice of his manager K whispered into his ear, "What are you waiting for? Do you want to make Kumagoro cry?!" With that, Ryuichi's beloved pink bunny toy was whacked over his head. After gathering himself, just as the judge was about to announce his decision, Shuichi ran in front of the judge and yelled into his withered old face that Ryuko was now his baby and he won't let anyone take her away from him – or Yuki. Eiri was stunned, thrust into such a position - again, but as annoyed as he was, there are no reports of him protesting at the time.

After a long hard talk, and much embarrassing weeping and begging by Shuichi, Eiri agreed to allow her to stay on a month trial. That trial eventually turned into an adoption. What can I say; the baby was irresistible! Ha! And did she grow up with any mental disorders? NO!

"Plenty, but I doubt it has anything to do with having two dads, Ryu-chan."

"Hey, I'm talking here Himeka-chan!"

"Yeah, but..." Himeka looks around the diner, embarrassed by the stares of the patrons and waitresses, "do you have to tell your story so loudly? I can hear you just fine without your yelling."

Ryuko pouts, hugging Kumagoro. "Jeez you're such a meanie! I'm telling your dad. And your mum...and the press!"

Himeka sips her vanilla coke, shrugging. "You know, for a sixteen year old bimbo you sure tell a good story. Though I've heard all this before."

"Must you be so cruel?" Demands Ryuko, suddenly slapping an "evil be gone" enchantment scroll on the fourteen year old's face.

Himeka Nakano quietly rips it off and slaps it as hard as she can on Ryuko's nose. "You are such an IDIOT! Where the hell did that thing come from?!"

Ryuko throws on the table a rolled up ball of curse and enchantment scrolls. "I stole these from Uncle Tetsuha last month, been meaning to use them."

Her friend pushes the ball aside and sighed, sipping her coke some more. "Honestly...what would happen if your Papa found out?"

"He's the one who dared me to do it," she sheepishly grins, "Uncle pissed him off once again I gather. I couldn't stop laughing when he dared me, it sounded more like something Daddy would dare me to do!" Ryuko erupts into a fit of laughter, falling off her seat, still laughing.

Finishing her drink, Himeka gets out of her seat and pushes her chair in, still noticing her older, and not so wiser friend was still laughing. Smiling to herself, Himeka clicks her fingers in front of Ryuko's to wake her back to reality. "Come on girl, time to get back to the studio."

Ryuko wipes happy tears from her eyes. "Er...studio?"

Himeka rubs her temples, "You really are unbelievable."

"Thank-you!"

"Ugh...Remember, your Daddy, Mr. Fujisaki and my father have their final rehearsal for their reunion concert in oh..." she checks her watch, "twenty minutes! Do you WANT to miss it?"

Ryuko's eyes bulge like an insect's. She grabs Himeka's wrist and begins to race out of the diner at lighting speed. "NO TIME FOR YOUR MINDLESS CHATTER, TIME TO GO!!!"

"Mindless WHAT - ?!"

A gust of smoky wind can be seen zooming through the streets of Tokyo. Men, women and children huddle together as they avoid this unnatural phenomena. The gust of smoke stops in front of a hall. Himeka falls flat on her face, exhausted. Ryuko jumps on the spot, pumped full of energy.

"I wanna go back to Kyoto," mournfully sighs Himeka, rising to her feet, "Oh well, time to get in. We're thirty minutes late, let's hope our parents don't notice our absence."

As soon as the girls wander through the doors of the hall, they're greeted with the angry, red face of Mr. Sakano, Bad Luck's producer and every now and then, Ryuko's unfortunate babysitter. The girls nervously smile, trying to pretend nothing has happened. "WHERE THE HECK HAVE YOU TWO BEEN?! YOU PROMISED TO BE HERE AN HOUR AGO!"

Himeka grits her teeth, "Well it wasn't my fault I assure you. The storyteller decided to blab to an audience her life story – "

"Hey, Papa says I have a gift for stories!"

"He meant you have a gift for lies, dumbass."

Ryuko shoves Kumagoro into her friend's face. "Call me that again, and Kumagoro will kick your @\$\$!"

"Bite me."

"ENOUGH! HEY, RYUKO, STOP BITING HER AAAAAARM!" Sakano falls into one his standard panic attacks, readying for a faint.

"What's all this noise" Comes a quiet, but stern voice. Ryuko instantly lets go of her hold on Himeka's arm and beams a cute, kitty smile, pouncing onto the owner of the voice.

"Sorry for being late, Papa! Forgive me!" Begs Ryuko, rubbing her head affectionately into Yuki's chest.

Yuki frowns, rubbing her back, "I am not the one to apologize to. You have an entire stage crew to apologize to, as well as cameramen, band members, an orchestra, recording crew..." as he trails off a

list of people she somehow peed off, Ryuko's pupils dilate, trying to comprehend the mass of mad people. "And of course there is Shuichi."

"Ryuko will apologize to everyone!" She boldly exclaims, "But...how did I get them all so mad?"

Yuki's eyebrow slightly twitches, "Shuichi has refused to begin rehearsal with you absent."

"We are so behind schedule!" Pitifully wails Sakano.

Himeka hands Sakano a glass of water, "Calm down Mr. Sakano, think of your blood pressure."

Yuki folds his arms, turning his back on them. "Go and clean up girls, I'll tell everyone you're back, so we can finally get this started."

"Aye-Aye!" Salutes Ryuko as he walks off. Sakano quickly follows him, gulping down the rest of his cold water.

Himeka turns to Ryuko, glaring, "Why is it every time we meet I'm subjected to this sort of stupidity?"

Ryuko blushes, giggling, "Beats me!"

"Must run in the family," she breathes out a sigh.

The two walk to the ladies room, and rinse their faces, which are dusty from their earlier speedy running. They then start to reapply their make-up.

"Say, Ryu-chan, what's it...like?"

Ryuko blinks, "What's what like, Hime-chan?"

Himeka quietly blushes, "Having two dads?"

"Um...but we know lots of people with two dads, what do you mean?"

Himeka nervously laughs, closing her eye shadow case. "They have two dads because their mothers remarried. Your case is very different, if you hadn't noticed, storyteller."

Ryuko carefully applied her lip-gloss, kissing into the mirror cutely. "Hmmm, how should they be different?"

Her friend's blush deepens. "Well...you know...they're both men...and...they...do...er...stuff...together. Don't you ever get weirded if you see them kiss or something?"

Ryuko beamed a smile, "Oh, sure I do."

"Now you understand..."

“Who wants to see their parents kiss, yuck.”

Himeka falls back, exasperated at her friend's naivety. Ryuko watches her squirm on the tiles and winks. “You're a yaoi manga fan girl, aren't you?”

Himeka blinks in confusion, and then hysterically laughs her nerves away; trying to turn from Ryuko's not so innocent, dangerous eyes. “I know exactly what you're talking about, fan girl, I've seen your collection in your cupboard.”

Himeka's nerves shatter. “Er...er...er...”

Ryuko's mood turns cheery again, returns to the mirror to apply some mascara. “As I was saying, it's so nice to know you're such an open-minded person. But your stash seems to all be all R rated – do you actually get off on that?”

“Get off on that?!”

“Anyway, the truth is, my parents are no different to yours,” she quietly says, changing the mood, “I mean, they work, live together, they squabble, make-up, go on vacations, pay taxes, celebrate anniversaries, read, watch TV, and most importantly do everything in their power every single day to make sure I am the happiest I can be. That's the way it should be, right?”

Himeka rises to her feet, nodding solemnly, “You're absolutely right. Well...my yaoi loving days are over now, thank-you SO much for ruining my perfect vision with your wholesome life.”

“Kumagoro is sorry,” says Ryuko, holding up her bunny.

“Yeah, yeah. Time to get to the rehearsal; we don't want Mr. Seguchi too mad.”

Ryuko pushes open the bathroom door; “I'd sure hate to get him mad, really.”

“I've noticed a distinct dislike of him radiating from you,” mentions Himeka, keeping away from the red aura radiating from Ryuko.

Ryuko flips her light brown hair, walking down the corridor. “Oh, him? That guy's been eying my vocal cords before I could even speak. That jerk doesn't even hide it. He's been waiting for the day I'll give in and decide to become a singer, like my father.”

“He wants you to become another Shuichi Shindou?”

Ryuko looks away, closing her eyes lightly, “No, not that father...”

“Oh, I see...”

“MY BABY!” Suddenly come two squeals as they enter the hall. The girls are pummelled to the ground; air tightly squeezed from their lungs.

"I'm so glad you're here!" Weeps Shuichi, hugging Ryuko. "I was so worried! Are you ok? Did a street gang molest you? Were you taken hostage by the Yakuza and forced to give secret government information? Stop by a candy store and buy French chocolates? See a talking giraffe? Meet a ghost???"

Ryuko weeps too as she struggles for air. "Just lost...track of...time! Ryuko is soooooorrrryyyyy!"

Himeka's long thin strands of shiny black hair are messed up as her mother; Ayaka swings her around as she hugs her. "You naughty girl, don't you ever worry me like that again!"

"I won't...ow...promise!"

"Shindou," cuts in Tohma Seguchi, "Are you ready now to begin rehearsal?"

"Oh yes!" Energetically replies Shuichi, "Let's rock the joint, Bad Luck style!"

Hiroshi picks up his guitar and takes his place on stage. "Well, it's about time. Ready to go, Suguru?"

Suguru's already at his keyboard, "I always am, Hiro!"

Suguru's twelve-year-old daughter, Sara, stands by the cameramen, clapping. "Oh, this will be so much fun! Do your best!"

Ryuko and Himeka join her to get a good view. "Long time no see, Sara-chan," greets Himeka, "Where's your mother?"

"She couldn't get away from work today, but she'll be at the concert tomorrow night, she's really looking forward to it!"

Ryuko gives her a thumb up. "And so she should! For Bad Luck are making their triumphant return onto stage!"

Sara sweatdrops. "Well, Senpai, it is only a reunion special..."

"Ha, we'll see about that!"

"We're gonna what now?" Wonders Himeka.

Ryuko covers her mouth, "Shush! Daddy's going to start!" Himeka frowns, her mouth still covered as Bad Luck begin their rehearsal.

'I wonder what she did mean by her comment?' Himeka quietly thinks to herself, forgetting about the sweaty hand over her mouth. 'And now that I think about it...what the hell was SHE doing going through my cupboard?!'

2 - Track Two

Ryuko cheerfully watches, humming along to Bad Luck's song. She's always loved to listen to her daddy sing. Music is the ultimate truth; it is a cry from the heart, and a rapture of the soul. When you write or make music, there is no way to lie. To be one with music is to be true to your heart. 'I can't make music yet, not till I know my truth.'

"Senpai, you look so cheerful," notes Sara, with a kind smile.

Ryuko blinks, and then gives her a thumb up. "How can I not be happy? Bad Luck are in high spirits, so Ryuko is too!" She holds up Kumagoro and makes him wave. "And so is Kumagoro!"

"Idiot," sighs Himeka. "Oh yeah, I was meaning to ask you at the diner, how did your date the other night go?"

Ryuko and Kumagoro droop their heads.

Himeka folds her arms, "No good? You didn't take your toy along to the date, did you?"

Ryuko and Kumagoro shake their heads.

"Did you act like a six year old and order nothing but cake and ice-cream again?"

They shake their heads.

"So what did you do to stuff it up?"

Ryuko holds her head up again, putting Kumagoro away. "I honestly don't know, he avoided me all night. He sat two seats away from me, barely said a word during dinner, and when we walked together he wouldn't hold my hand or anything. He seemed like in a big rush to end the date too. It was so weird. I just don't get it, after along so well with my parents too. It's a mystery..."

@~WHAT RYUKO-CHAN DIDN'T SEE~@

Teijin (Ryuko's date) sat quietly, as he waited for Ryuko to be ready. He sits opposite two men on another couch. One he recognizes as Shuichi Shindou, a famous singer, though Teijin wasn't into pop music, so he didn't find it as exciting as he knew he should have. For his age, he looked very young, almost like a twenty year old. The other he didn't recognize, though he did feel familiar. He appeared to be older than Shuichi, but still young and handsome. Both scarily seemed to be glaring, looking him up and down. While they didn't show any frowns on their faces, Teijin could feel their blazing intensity.

"So..." Teijin gulped, trying to break the tension, "are you Ryuko's...brothers?"

They didn't reply, however he saw Shuichi quickly frown.

“Cousins...perhaps – “

“Parents,” simply replied the older, blonde man.

Teijin’s eyes widened, not expecting such a response. ‘Ryu-chan’s parents are gay guys?!’

Shuichi bent forward, still frowning. “Where are going to take her tonight?”

“Ah...ah...” Teijin gulped again, “to that noodle house on – “

Shuichi bent forward further, deepening a dangerous gaze, “Not acceptable.”

“The ramen shop?”

“Not acceptable.”

“How about the Chinese – “

“Not acceptable.”

“The Italian restaurant?”

Shuichi happily smiled, sitting back. “Acceptable! Right, Yuki?”

‘Oh man...I’ll have to use all my allowance for the month! And it’s too crowded, how can I hit on her there?’

The other crossed his legs. ‘Yuki’, Shuichi had referred to him as. ‘Yuki...Yuki...ah, I see...’ “Are you Eiri Yuki, the writer?”

“Yes,” he sharply replied, “And after dinner?”

“Eh?”

“Where are you taking our daughter after you eat?” His light brown eyes almost screamed at Teijin.

Teijin wanted to say, “Well duh you fruits, to the movies to score!” Teijin nervously smiled, “We’re going to the cinema...sir.”

“What are you going to see?”

Teijin smiled, he knew he couldn’t go wrong with his next reply, “I was thinking of that special screening of Schindler's List.”

“Ryuko doesn’t like that style of movie,” Yuki coldly told him, “she’ll be bored.”

'That's the idea!' "She may find it enlightening, Mr. Yuki."

"It's a date, not a cultural excursion."

Teijin's heart pounded, god he was scary. What the hell was wrong with those guys? Why couldn't they just get off his back?

"You will take her to see the new American action movie," Yuki ordered. Teijin obediently nodded. He could take that; after all, there still was time after the movie to be alone with her. Teijin could just see himself now, taking her into the thick of the park trees, sliding his hand up her dress and –

"What are your plans for afterwards?" enquired Shuichi, now sitting beside him, directing staring into his eyes intently. Teijin pulled back in shock. He suddenly saw that Yuki was sitting on the other side of him, lighting up a cigarette. Yuki took a puff and blew smoke in his face.

Teijin blinked, "A...a...a...park...walk...park...walking...yes? No? Uh."

Shuichi casually placed a hand around one shoulder, "That sounds very nice, what a good date you are!"

Teijin blew out a sigh, relieved. Suddenly, Shuichi's arm was around his neck, choking him slightly. "What a good date you are! And you'll stay in the middle of the path, won't you? Where there's plenty of light, won't you? Because you're such a good date, and respectable man who would never try to take advantage of such a sweet and innocent girl. Isn't that right?"

Yuki took another puff of his cigarette. "Of course he is, Shuichi. He would never think to take advantage of Ryuko, knowing how naive she is."

Teijin's heart raced. These guys weren't normal!

"Because if he did hurt Ryuko," icily began Yuki, "I'd have to kill him."

Teijin blinked, and then nervously giggled.

Shuichi beamed a smile, tightening his grip around his neck. "Oh, Yuki isn't kidding. Did you think he was? Silly date!" He merrily laughed, very childlike.

Teijin's heart stopped beating. "Eh, eh, eh, eh, eh."

"You will return her promptly before 9:30pm," Yuki instructed, putting out his cigarette. "If not – "

"You just don't want to know," Shuichi cheekily whispered into the young man's ear.

"I'm ready!" Declared Ryuko, stepping into the livingroom. To Teijin's disappointment she was dressed in a pair of three quarter pants and a long sleeved top that covered her entire upper torso. "Good thing Papa said it was going to cold tonight, otherwise I would have sillily worn a mini dress."

“Yes,” almost sneered Teijin, “That would have been a shame.”

Ryuko beamed a smile, happy to see her parents sitting with Teijin. “I see you’ve been talking with my parents, is everything OK?”

“OK?” Warily wondered Teijin.

“Sure it is!” Happily replied Shuichi, “We’ve had a great time, sweetie!”

As Ryuko grabbed her fluffy blue backpack, Yuki and Shuichi stood up, forcing Teijin to his feet. They returned to standing by the opposite couch as Ryuko joined Teijin, facing away from her doting parents. “I’m looking forward to tonight, where are going for dinner?”

“Do you...like Italian food?” Teijin nervously asked, eyeing the dangerous smiles of Shuichi and Yuki.

“I love Italian!”

“Great...uh...and then I thought we could see a movie.”

“Cool! Which one?”

“Schindler’s List?” He saw Yuki suddenly raise a sharp meat knife. “Just kidding! I know you don’t like that boring stuff! Hehehehe! How about an action movie? There’s an awesome one playing tonight!”

Ryuko clapped, “It’s like you read my mind, I’m so happy!”

“Me too, Ryu-chan,” Teijin’s eye wondered back to see Shuichi holding up a piece of paper with a rough crayon drawing of a knife through Teijin’s head, heart – and crotch! Shuichi grinned and nodded, scrunching up the paper.

“Have fun on your date,” said Yuki, giving her a hug.

Shuichi then hugged her, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“Gosh, I thought you guys wanted me to behave,” sweetly giggled Ryuko. “See ya later, don’t wait up.”

“Bye,” they both waved to her as she exited the room.

“Ah, what a nice date he’ll be,” beamed Shuichi.

Yuki lit up another cigarette, “Indeed.”

@~RETURN TO NOW~@

“Hey!” Gasps Ryuko, “So that’s why Teijin was so weird.”

Himeka folds her arms, “You’re not supposed to peer into flashbacks like that; you idiot.”

Sara ignores them, enjoying Bad Luck’s performance. “You know, I heard this performance was being dedicated to something or someone. But they’re keeping it hush-hush.”

Ryuko blinks, looking down at Sara with eager wide eyes, “Sara-chan! Please Ryuko! She must know! And so does Kumagoro! Tell! Tell! TELL!!!!”

Sara falls to the ground in fear. “Sensei, I’ve only heard rumours from the crew, my father hasn’t said anything.”

“Mine either, so it must be a rumour,” says Himeka.

“Maybe, maybe not,” comes a voice from beside them. The three turn, to see Tohma Seguchi, his eyes fixed on Bad Luck.

Ryuko coldly folds her arms and looks away. “Hello, Mr. Seguchi.”

Tohma slips off his shades and gives Ryuko Sakuma a kind smile. “There’s no reason to be so formal. You know you can call me Uncle Tohma.”

“Mr. Seguchi is just fine, thank-you,” replies Ryuko.

Tohma continues smiling, seemingly unfazed. “Has Shindou told you my idea for the concert, Ryuko Sakuma?”

“Yes.”

“And, what is your reply?”

Ryuko turns to face him, an unusual serious expression on her soft face. “I am not Ryuichi Sakuma, I will not perform a Nittle Grasper song with you and Mrs. Ukai. You know how I feel on the topic, so you were kidding yourself if you thought I’d agree.”

“That truly is a disappointment,” Tohma sighs, “Ryuichi would be very let down.”

“Them’s the breaks.”

“Especially since the concert will be dedicate to him. It just won’t be the same if his – “

Ryuko’s eyes widen, a cold-hot sweat runs through her body. “What did you just say?!”

Tohma nods, “That’s right. Shuichi Shindou feels he owes his career to Ryuichi Sakuma, so Bad Luck are dedicating their reunion special to his memory. I thought it may have been a nice touch if his only daughter were to perform with Nittle Grasper, I know the fans would appreciate it.”

Sara and Himeka listen in silent horror. Their friend stumbles back, numb from shock. “No...” she

breaths, “I won’t.”

“What was that?”

“NOOOOOO!” Screams Ryuko, “I AM NOT RYUICHI!”

Shuichi stops singing, “Ryuko-chan?”

Ryuko pushes Tohma away and begins to cry into Kumagoro, running from the hall. “I’m Ryuko Sakuma, I’m...!”

Shuichi goes to run after his daughter, when Yuki grabs him by the wrist. “Let her go.”

“But - Yuki!”

“This is a situation that only she can deal with, we cannot assist this time – as much as we may want to.”

Tohma stands to his feet, fixing his rumpled clothes, “Such a boisterous person, she’s just like her father.”

Noriko rests an elbow on Tohma’s shoulder, “Yes, she is a lot like Shuichi.”

Tohma half smiles, “I meant – “

“I know who you meant.”

3 - Track Three

IF YOU ENJOY GRAVITY, PLEASE SEE MY DOUJIN WHICH WAS SPAWNED THANKS TO IT AT:
http://www.geocities.com/gravity_snowflake

Ryuko sits on a park bench, watching children play on the equipment. She recalls how much she used to love the park. Before she began kindergarten her papa used to take her every weekday afternoon. There they would feed the ducks in the pond (she'd even named each one) and make sand castles in the sand pit. But it was most fun when her daddy had days off to join them. Ryuko used to have swing contests with him to see who could go the highest. Each time one of them would end up fall off while at their highest, so her papa ha learnt to bring a first aid kit each time. She treasured the time she could play with them both in the park. When she began school they could only go on the weekend or late afternoon, it just wasn't the same.

"I'm such an idiot," she sighs to herself.

"Sa-ku-ma," comes an eerie voice. Ryuko gasps, she peers up. Atop a tree stands a person dressed in a black ninja costume. His arms are folded, with a chuckle; he leaps off the tree and lands in front of her. Suddenly, he begins to do dramatic poses. Ryuko blinks, as she scratches her cheek.

"Do I know you?" she timidly asks.

The ninja continues to do poses. "Banished from the heavens, I clothe myself in darkness and steal the stars."

"Wha...?"

"My tainted soul is dedicated to the god who stole my heart," he continued, Ryuko has a good idea who she's dealing with now, "My all belongs to you – Ryuichi Sakuma!" He points to Ryuko dramatically. Ryuko folds her arms and casually kicks him into the duck pond.

The ninja rips off his mask, to reveal her uncle Tatsuha. "What was that for?!"

Ryuko gets off the bench and looks down at him, "Ry-u-ko is my name. Ryuichi was my birth father, how many times must we go through this?"

She helps him out of the pond. Tatsuha begins to wring out the smelly water from his costume. "Ah, but you are my sweet Ryuichi reborn."

"I was born before he died, now how is that possible?"

"IT JUST IS!" Tatsuha cries out. "Hey, where's Eiri? He wasn't home."

Ryuko sits back on the bench. "At the hall with Daddy. Bad Luck is having their final rehearsal today before tomorrow's concert. Is that why you're down?"

Tatsuha rolls his eyes, "Who cares about Bad Luck? I'm here to see Nittle Grasper make their triumphant return to stage!" His eyes stream tears. "I've waited so long!"

"How did you know about that?!" She gasps.

"Mika told me over the phone. I can't believe she left it to the last minute to tell me! My dear Ryuichi's going to perform again and she has the nerve to wait till yesterday to say a thing."

"You should have saved your money," she tells him.

"Eh?"

"I'm not performing."

Tatsuha's heart shatters into a million pieces. He races around the park, chucking a hysteric fit while crying. The children in the park all stare in confusion. Ryuko sighs, "And people tell me to act my age."

"He really is a weirdo," she makes Kumagorou say.

"I doubt he'll ever change," she quietly says with a sad smile.

@~RYUKO'S FLASHBACK THEATRE~@

ACT ONE:

Three-year-old Ryuko sat on the floor with Kumagorou, wiggling along and singing to her favourite Bad Luck DVD. She was enjoying herself, till it was suddenly switched off and replaced with a Nittle Grasper DVD. Uncle Tatsuha was now beside her on the floor.

"Bad Luck!" She sniffled, "Ryuko wants Bad Luck!"

Tatsuha beamed a smile, "Nittle Grasper are WAY better! Now shush, my Ryuichi is on stage!"

Little Ryuko took her DVD off the floor and turned the DVD player off. She ignored Tatsuha's protests and replaced his Nittle Grasper DVD. Tatsuha growled, and pushed her aside, replacing it with his.

"You're mean!" She wept, "Kumagorou hates you!"

"Oh boo-hoo," he taunted, blowing a raspberry. "I'm the guest, what I say: GOES!"

Angry, Ryuko threw her stuffed bunny at Tatsuha and made a break for the DVD player. "Don't you dare!" He yelled, racing for it. Ryuko threw herself over the DVD player. Tatsuha picked it and her up. She refused to let go. With his free hand, he tried to rip her off it. Accidentally pushing the eject button, his DVD fell to the floor. "Damn it."

Tatsuha forgot about Ryuko and put her and the machine on the floor. As he went to retrieve his beloved

DVD, he heard a snap. Ryuko wondered where the snap came from. That's when she saw – "BAD LUCK DVD!!! YOU KILLED IT!!!!!!!"

Tatsuha blinked, looking down. He sweated, slowly turning around to face the sobbing little girl. Grimacing, he nervously giggled, rushing to her side. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll get you a new one! Promise! Don't tell Eiri! Please! Please! Please!"

"Don't tell me what?"

Tatsuha noticed Yuki had just returned home. Yuki frowned when he saw Ryuko crying. Ryuko ran to him, crying into his leg. "Uncle Killed Bad Luck DVD! Kumagorou hates him!"

Moments later ~

"But it's an old DVD, where the hell am I supposed to get one?!" Demanded Tatsuha into the apartment intercom from downstairs. "Let me in Eiri, I'll order one tomorrow!"

"You made her cry, you'll fix it now," he simply replied.

"But it's cold, and I'm hungry," he pathetically sniffled.

ACT TWO:

Ten-year-old Ryuko sat at her room's desk doing the draft for her project. Shuichi lay on the couch in the lounge room preparing his speech for his music award. Yuki was in his office working on the ending of his novel. The three were enjoying the quiet of the afternoon.

"What I want to be when I grow up," Ryuko read aloud from her homework sheet. Writing a report on what she wanted to be when she grew up shouldn't have been too hard, though she didn't actually know what she wanted to be. Maybe a professional food tester, she loved food. Or that person who hands out shoes at the bowling alley, being there all day would be fun!

There was a knocking at the door. Shuichi sighed; he'd just had what he was going to write (well, no he didn't, he was just comfy ^^). He stood by the door. "Who's there?"

"Tatsuha! Emergency! Let me in!"

Shuichi opened the door. "What's – ack!" Tatsuha pushed him aside and ran to the couch, turning the TV on with the remote.

"What are you doing?" He asked, bewildered and annoyed to see him in his comfy spot.

"There's a special of Nittle Grasper on!" He frantically yelled, holding up a TV guide he'd found in the street. "Don't you care?! What sort of fan ARE you anyway?!!!"

Shuichi laughed to himself, turning the TV off.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!”

“Check the date of that guide.”

“Huh?” Tatsuha flips to the cover and shrieks in terror. “This is last week’s! I missed my honey! Noooo!”

Shuichi goes to the video cabinet and takes out a taped video. “Here you go Tatsuha, I taped it.”

Tatsuha held onto Shuichi's legs weeping, “Oh, thank-you! Thank-you!”

Ryuko poked her head out the door of her room. “What’s going on? Oh, hi Uncle.”

Tatsuha grabbed the video. “Kawaii!”

Ryuko blinked.

“It’s a little Ryuichi!” Tatsuha tore into her room and hugged her. He hadn’t realized how much like his idol she was growing to look like.

Shuichi sighed, pulling him from his suffocating daughter. “You can do your fanboy routine later, she has homework to do.”

“Homework? What is she doing?”

Ryuko held out her paper. He read it with a grin. “Oooh! You’re writing about how you want to be just like Ryuichi when you grow up?”

Ryuko shook her head, “Ryuko doesn’t want to be a singer. Maybe a – “

“You’ll be just like Ryuichi when you grow up,” he sweetly told her, rubbing her head.

Shuichi folded his arms. “Ryu-chan will be whatever she wants to be when she grows up.”

Ryuko nodded. “Can I even be a toadstool? They’re so pretty!” ^^

“If you’d like,” he cutely replied, beaming a smile.

Tatsuha lovingly rubbed his video. “If you and Eiri had your way, you’d let her grow up to be a fire engine if she wanted.”

“Broom-broom!” Ryuko made a sound like a car and ran around the room. Shuichi followed her, going, “Eeeeeooooorrr! Eeeeeeeoooooor! Time to get to that fire!”

“Idiots,” Tatsuha turned away, giving the video a kiss.

ACT THREE:

A month ago Ryuko and her parents travelled to Kyoto to visit her Grandpa, who was allegedly dying – again. As they entered the temple, Tatsuha greeted them, dressed in his Monk robes. He bowed to them. “It’s great that you made it Eiri, Dad’s really on his deathbed this time.”

“You sound so concerned too,” doley replied Yuki.

Tatsuha shrugged, “No big loss. Come this way.” He led them to a dimly lit room, where the head of the family shrine lay unmoving on a futon.

The four knelt beside the futon. Been through this a thousand times before, Yuki was unmoved. Shuichi and Ryuko couldn’t hold back their tears though.

“Ryu-chan,” he softly whispered. “Come to me.”

“Yes, Grandpa,” she sniffled, kneeling beside him.

“How old are you now?” he quietly asked.

Ryuko rubbed her eyes, “Sixteen. Look, I’m wearing the necklace you sent me for my birthday.” She bent forward to show him, her loose shirt falling forward a little to show some of her E cup bra and cleavage. “Aunty Mika and Aunty Maiko say I’m practically a woman now.”

The old monk’s mouth drooled, “You sure are. My little Ryuko’s all grown up!” He rose to a sit and lunged himself onto her, rubbing his head in her chest. Ryuko wailed for help, trying to push him off.

Eiri Yuki slapped his father over the head, punching him off. “Oh look, you’re cured.”

His father nervously laughed. “I didn’t do anything wrong, I was just congratulating my granddaughter on her coming of age.”

“How would you like to see my coming of fist!” Shuichi warned.

Later ~

Ryuko stepped out of her bath. She’d forgotten about the earlier experience with her lecherous grandfather and was happy to relax in the temple’s bath. She wrapped a towel around her torso and another around her head. Humming to herself, she opened the door that led to the change-room. It was dark. She searched for the light switch, happy to find it from her growing chill. In the far corner of the room was her uncle; his hands were behind his back.

“Sorry for taking so long,” she apologized.

He presented his hands; in them was a roll of white bandages.

“What’s wrong?” She gasped. “Did someone get hurt?”

His eyes just sparkled. "Ryuichi-chan!"

One Minute Later ~

"Help me! Argh!" Came Ryuko's muffled pleas.

Shuichi and Yuki opened the bath's change room door to find her upper torso wrapped in bandages, while Tatsuha wrapped some more. He stopped as they angrily stared at him.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Shuichi demanded.

"My darling Ryuichi shouldn't have breasts," he simply said. "It's an eyesore."

"You're insane!" Growled Ryuko.

"You're such an idiot," sighed Shuichi.

"You're going to die," warned Yuki.

@~END OF RYUKO'S FLASHBACK THEATRE~@

Ryuko laughs to herself. Her uncle sure is a bizarre fanboy, but he does come in handy every now and then. "I feel oddly cheered up, Kumagorou, let's buy him a soda."

Minutes afterwards, Tatsuha and Ryuko sit in an ice-cream shop with a banana split and soda each. Tatsuha isn't in his ninja costume anymore.

"Come on Ryu-chan, why won't you sing?"

"Because."

"Do it for your favourite uncle!" He says, eating some vanilla ice cream.

"But you're my ONLY uncle," she sadly says, her disappointment of that fact clear. "Between you and Aunt Shouka, I don't know which relative is more insane."

Tatsuha scoffs, "Oh, did SHE tell you not to sing?"

Shouka Morita is her mother's protective big sister, and was her agent. She's never forgiven Ryuichi Sakuma for marrying her mentally unstable sister and getting her pregnant. The memory of him sickens her. Her bitterness grew stronger when the courts handed custody of Hanako's only child to two men she didn't know. The very idea of her little niece to be raised by two perverts enraged her to her soul. Shouka's rights are limited, though she is allowed visitation like any normal relative. Whenever she meets Ryuko, she probes her for information to use against her so-called parents. As of yet she hasn't been successful.

"No, I haven't told her, no point. I know what she'll say."

“Want to go home after this and play some video games?” He asks, quickly changing the subject. “I got this cool new two player RPG.”

Ryuko nods, “Sounds like fun! But I really should give my parents a call; they’ll be so worried about me. I shouldn’t have run out like that, it was so selfish of me.”

“Meh, it happens. Right, Kumagorou!”

“That’s right!” Energetically replies Kumagorou.

Evening comes, worn out from hours of hard RPG playing, Tatsuha and Ryuko lay on the floor, snoring. The apartment door opens; Yuki and Shuichi see them and smile in.

Shuichi lays a blanket over them. “Thanks for taking care of her, Tatsuha,” he whispers.

“We were lucky he was in the city,” says Yuki, “Sometimes he can be of use.”

“Was it a mistake to dedicate the concern to Ryuichi?” Wonders Shuichi, rubbing his eyes. “I didn’t think Ryuko would react like this.”

“That isn’t the reason,” assures Yuki, wrapping his arms around him from behind, “She’s just concerned to be forgotten for who she is.”

“I’d never want that to happen. Never.”

“I know, she knows that too.”

4 - Track Four

Morning light hits her eyelids. Warmed by the light, she opens her eyes, and hides under blankets to save herself from the rude awakening. “Morning,” she whispers, “But I’m not on the floor?” She puts her hand out to shield herself from the light and eyes her surrounding. “My room?”

“Good morning!” chirpily greeted Shuichi as he opened the door.

“Morning Daddy,” she sleepily muffles, pulling down her covers. “I’m so sorry about – “

He sits by her bed with a silver tray. She can smell food – tasty food. As Ryuko sits up, he sets the tray on her lap. On it are freshly cooked bacon and eggs, two slices of toast spread with blueberry jam, a cup of grapes and a glass of warm milk, hinted with vanilla essence. It was her favourite breakfast, and usually only made as an apology.

She looks at him cockeyed, “Did you kill another goldfish?”

“Can’t a dad show his love for child without her getting all suspicious?” He defensively demands.

“You’re a really bad liar,” she sleepily laughs, taking a bite of toast. “Yummy, so, Papa made me breakfast?”

Shuichi sweat-drops, he isn’t the greatest cook in the world and usually ends up as the happy little helper to Yuki or Ryuko. “Yeah, he did. But it was my idea!”

Ryuko finishes her toast, and sadly sighs, “But shouldn’t I be making this for you? I’m the brat who ran out on your last rehearsal. I should be grounded for a month! No, three months!”

Shuichi stuffs the other piece of toast in her mouth to silence her. “As long as you’re safe it doesn’t matter. And don’t worry about tonight, we said straight off to Tohma that it was your decision and he just has to accept it. So no worries about that, ‘k?” He playfully beeps her nose with a smile. “Are you ok with me dedicating the special tonight? Because if not, I – “

Ryuko counters by a few grapes in his mouth. She beams a smile and beeps his nose back, “It’s because of him that my favouritest band ever was formed. He inspired you to do your best and I’m happy to see you pay tribute to that fact. Knock ‘em dead!”

Shuichi and Ryuko raise their fists high in agreement.

“Oh hey, speaking of dead, where’s uncle?” She suddenly wonders.

In the lounge room, Tatsuha is just waking up. He sleepily feels around the cold of the floor. His body is a little numb from the awkward position he’d slept on. “The floor?” He shoots up, wearily looking around the apartment.

“You’re finally awake,” says his elder brother, who’s sipping a cup of coffee at the table, as he reads the newspaper.

“Why didn’t you wake me up!” He rudely demands, “Or at least put me on the couch!”

Yuki turns a page of the paper, “You looked so peaceful, almost like you were dead.”

Tatsuha is about to spring into a fit when he smells a lovely scent from the kitchen. “Excellent, food!” Tatsuha runs to the kitchen, to unfortunately find only burnt eggs and toast. “Did that brat try to cook again?”

“I’m not a brat!” Shouts Shuichi from Ryuko’s room.

“Brat! Brat! Brat! Brat! Brat! Brat!” He cheekily yells, “You should learn to cook! You’re supposed to be the mother of the house after all!”

Shuichi bounds out of Ryuko’s room and landed in Tatsuha’s face. “Hey, I’m a grown man, I’m not a woman!”

Tatsuha ignores his protests, turning away to scour the cupboards for edible food. Shuichi follows him trying to get his attention. “Hey, are you listening?! Get back here! Waaaaah!”

Tatsuha opens a box of cereal. “You sure dog like a woman.”

“Be nice to Shuichi, brother,” warns Yuki, turning another page.

Shuichi sticks out his tongue to Tatsuha.

“My wife is very sensitive after all.”

“YUUUUUKIIII!” Shuichi wails, streaming tears.

Ryuko walks out of her room, to see her uncle making funny faces at her daddy, as he makes angry squawking noises at him. She beams a smile, and gives her papa a kiss. “They’re so energetic!”

“Among other things,” he says, pulling her onto his lap. Yuki lays her head on his chest, just as he did when she was a little girl. Ryuko nestles into the warmth of his body, drowning out the chaos surrounding her.

The phone suddenly rings. Shuichi forgets his rage and answers it. “Hello? Oh, hi. Yes, she’s here. Ryu-chan, it’s for you!”

Ryuko pouts, jumping to the phone. “Hi there, Ryuko here!”

“Meet me at pier 10-A in an hour,” says the mysterious voice on the line.

Ryuko blinks. "Who is this?"

"Please, just do it."

"Ok, but you better not be an insane murderer," she sweetly warns, "Kumagoro may get mad if you try to hurt me." Ryuko hangs up and grabs her coat. "See you later, I'm off to meet a mysterious stranger."

"Have fun," the three farewell. Ryuko cheerfully steps out of the apartment.

Tatsuha looks from Shuichi to Yuki. "Aren't you two at all concerned?"

"Not at all," replies Yuki.

Shuichi scratches his chin, "When she gets a call like that it usually means one thing."

~@~

Salt taints the cool sea air, rising from the waves that crash against the wooden palings of the pier. With a hand-made, frail fishing line dangling lifelessly in the current, a lone boy sits cross-legged near the edge of pier. A straw hat covers his eyes, resting on his nose. His clothes are faded red shorts, and a loose white singlet. He can easily be mistaken for a street urchin, or strayed beach bum.

A shadow is cast over the boy; he doesn't react. "So, you finally made it."

Ryuko takes off his straw hat and whacks him over the head with it. "Why do you always have to do that, Slacker?!"

Slacker reels in his fishing line and casts it again. His wild blonde hair is thrust over his eyes, his face once again hidden. "I thought you liked games, cousin."

"I don't like your games, Slacker," she pouts, "and nor does Kumagoro. For once quit being creepy."

The one who is known as Slacker doesn't reply, but gestures for her to join him. Growling to herself, she and her bunny sit beside him, taking in the calm of the ocean.

"This is a plot by Mr. Seguchi, right?" Laughs Ryuko loudly, "He actually thinks you can convince me to perform tonight?"

Slacker reels in a little, seemingly ignoring her.

"Hey, she's talking to you," says Kumagoro, "be nice and answer back."

Slacker stops reeling, but doesn't respond.

"Come on," she cutely urges, "play fair, Setsuna."

He turns to face her; the wind blows half of his long, thick fringe away from his face, to reveal a serene blue eye. An eye that looks everywhere, but is sees nothing. He is blind. Not that Setsuna Seguchi, aged fifteen, has ever seen it as a negative force in his life. If anything he values this so-called disability for heightening his other senses. His intellect is also second to none, and partly why his nickname is "Slacker". To be the best he has to the push himself to a new limit in each step he takes. Nothing he does ever satisfies himself, there is no such thing as "personal best" for Setsuna. He is the eternal slacker. His reputation as an intriguing figure among his school and the media has earned him numerous fans and enemies. He knows it. Whether he cares nobody knows for sure. One has to wonder if he even understands his own mind half the time.

"I hear Uncle Tatsuha is in town," he quietly says, a small smile sweeping his face, "I take it he's staying at your place."

Ryuko grumbles to herself, "Yeah, he is. Why isn't he at yours? Your family has that big mansion after all, it's not like you'd notice him!"

Slacker sits back, resting his rod beside him. "You'd be surprised. Father doesn't appreciate his constant Ryuichi questions, and especially the rummaging of his belongings from the days he was in Nittle Grasper. Then of course there is Mother, who feels she doesn't need to explain her position on her kid brother."

Ryuko scratches her head, "So you called me out here to ask about Uncle?"

Slacker silently rises to his feet, stretching his head out to catch the breeze. "No. I came to tell you I don't want you performing tonight. It will ruin everything."

"What do you mean?"

"The past should be left in the past. A person has to be left a person. But a god cannot be left forgotten. You will taint the memory of Ryuichi Sakuma if you sing. If you do, he will be just another dead singer; he will cease to be a legend. If you perform tonight with Nittle Grasper, you will regret it."

Slacker brushes past her, leaving his straw hat and fishing rod behind. A shiny black limousine drives near the pier. Slacker enters it, leaving Ryuko alone, cold and numb from shock. What did he mean? She wasn't even planning to perform!

"Jerk," she scoffs.

"Meanie," agrees Kumagoro.

"I'm with you," concurs a third party.

Ryuko turns around, dazed from Slacker's speech. Sara stands where the limousine had just been, it seems she'd gotten off as he had got on. She's dressed in her private school uniform, barrette and all. She kisses her index finger and points it at Ryuko, "Bam!"

"Bam?"

“My love gun didn’t work?” She mockingly sighs to herself. “Oh well, you’d better come to Mr. K’s house to get – the treatment.”

“I’m gonna get what now?”

“Bam!” She giggles. “You’re going to love this.”

5 - Track Five

Claude K. Winchester – K for short, ex-chief head executive of the US's Secret Service, Ryuichi Sakuma's former manager and long-time manager of Bad Luck. Wherever Bad Luck is, you can bet he'll be there, guns and all. Considering he was Ryuichi's manager, one would expect him to be another crazy thorn in Ryuko's side, however he's never compared Ryuko to Ryuichi in any serious manner. His cheerful, caring and down-to-earth manner makes her think of him as an uncle, she wishes her real uncle, Tatsuha, could be more like that.

The taxi comes to a stop in front of a standard, middle-class house. Sara pays the fare, and nudges Ryuko to get out.

"For the amount of money he makes, he doesn't look like it," says Sara, putting away her purse.

"He told me once he has a bigger house in America. This house is mostly for long-term business trips," Ryuko explains, as the two make their way up the driveway. "Now Sara-chan, what's going on?"

Sara winks, pressing the doorbell. "It's a secret."

Ryuko sighs. The door slowly opens. The two shriek as a two-barrel gun is aimed at them. They hold each other, shaking. "Like my new gun? It's an antique, I got a great deal on the Internet for it."

Sara lets go of Ryuko and clears her throat. "Mr. K, don't scare us like that."

"God help us!" Wails Ryuko, shivering in fear on the doorstep.

K stands down his gun and laughs, "Sorry, I forget how she gets when a gun is aimed at her."

Sara rubs her head, "Mr. K, that's how everyone reacts when a gun is aimed at them." Sara taps Ryuko on the head, to indicate the danger was over. The two are led into the modest home, which is eerily quiet. They continue walking through the house, until K stops at a door in the polished, wooden floor. He bends down and opens the door, pointing his thumb. "Cool, eh?"

Ryuko claps, "Just like you're a mass murderer or something, who just hid the bodies and now will kill us!"

Sara's eyes bug, she then turns to K and stares at him suspiciously. K cheerfully dismisses her, and pushes them toward the basement stairs. The two make their way down, followed by K who keeps his gun close to him. As they near enter the dimly lit basement, Ryuko gasps, realizing she's joined a gathering.

"Welcome to the party!" Greets Saki Ukai, the grown daughter of Noriko Ukai, the former keyboardist for Nittle Grasper. Saki is a university student, studying to become a historian. She's a fun-loving girl, however she can get a little too fun-loving and over-do it with the alcohol. Most people she knows try to

avoid Saki, who's made it a habit to hit the bottle at the most inopportune times.

"My favourite brat has joined the party, I'm so happy!" Saki throws her arms around Ryuko, who tries to wriggle from her grasp. "My, my, it takes more and more effort to put my arms around you each time we meet, your breasts have become so voluptuous!"

Ryuko blushes furiously, "It's nice to see you two, Saki. Think you could let go? Kumagoro's suffocating."

"Oh, very well," Saki loosens her grip, so Ryuko can spill out.

Nervously smiling, she takes a moment to look around. In the basement, she can also see Michael, K's son, who's been training to become a policeman. The young blonde man sits on an old couch, going over his manual.

"Studying hard?" She calls to him.

Michael looks up, "Yes, I'm going over when I cannot shoot and any loopholes."

Sara and Ryuko gulp. Perhaps he wasn't as gun sensible as they thought. Her eyes then wander to Himeka, who sits on the other side of the couch. Her arms are folded, and legs crossed, she's frowning. Ryuko goes to hug her, when she puts her hand out to stop her. "Not now, Sakuma."

Ryuko draws her hands back, and settles for a confused wave. Lowering her eyes, she sits by her feet on the floor, awaiting an explanation.

"You're probably wondering why we're all here," begins K, walking back and forward, locking and unlocking his gun.

Sara raises her arm, as if she was in class, "To give Sakuma Senpai the treatment? Though I'm not quite sure what that means - "

K points his gun at her, "No."

"No...?" Sara lowers her arm. "But you said before - "

Himeka takes out her nailfile from her handbag, rolling her eyes, "This had better be good. I didn't appreciate being ambushed in front of my grandparents. Damn it, I am so going back to Kyoto tomorrow."

"All will be fully explained, as soon as my special guest arrives," K checks his wristwatch, "and he seems to be late."

From above they can hear a frantic stampeding, like the sound of a herd of elephants. Their eyes turn to the stairs as a ball of dust races down and jumps beside K.

"You are late."

His guest bows, "Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!"

"Mr. Sakano," they gasp.

Sakano falls to his knees, puffing and panting. "I apologize for being behind on schedule, I was delayed by a meeting with the orchestra." Fixing his glasses, he bows to their guests.

Saki sits on the edge of the couch's back, sipping an orange and vodka. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mr. Sakano."

"I am!"

"Good then."

Sakano opens his briefcase and quickly hands each a sheet of paper. Ryuko yawns, looking over it. "Um...I'm a little lost and so is Kumagoro."

Sakano smiles, bowing again, "After many discussions with Mr. Seguchi, we have decided it would be a good idea if the children of Bad Luck did a song together, and then the children of Nittle Grasper."

They stare at him.

Sakano nervously laughs. "You see, since the special is a concert of nostalgia, it was considered to be a good idea if we had a, you know, wave of the future intermission."

They still stare.

"Since Miss Sakuma has declined the proposal to perform with Nittle Grasper, we would be most honoured if the two bands could do a song each, as you each can play an instrument. So...how does this sound? Good? Right?!"

Their eyes don't leave him. Sakano goes red; sweat rains down his head. "Please say something!"

Sara looks over the proposal on paper, "Why did you decide to do this now? A month ago at least would have been more feasible. We can't work on these conditions."

"You're nuts," scoffs Himeka, scrunching the plan into a ball, "I bet you guys came up with this plan this morning."

Sakano's glasses crack.

"Oh, so I was right," she decides. "Well, forget it. I don't play the guitar professionally; there is no way I am going to make a fool of myself in front of the world. Besides, the storyteller princess is definitely not going to sing, so what the hell is the point?"

"You seem mad today?" politely points out Ryuko.

Himeka folds her arms, “Oh, you want to know why I’m mad today? OK then, I’ll tell you why. Ever since I can remember, whenever I’ve come to Tokyo my dad has gotten me to baby-sit your bimbo sorry @\$\$\$. And on this particular occasion, I thought things would be different. I thought I could enjoy myself, and not have to hear your name every ten seconds. But noooo, you decide to chuck a fit because they want to sing ONE stupid little song. Five minutes of your time, and you run away crying. Then for the rest of the day, when the band wasn’t rehearsing, I had to listen to them mope about how bad they felt and ways to cheer you up. And if that wasn’t bad enough, early this morning a sack was thrown over me and I was rushed here to be asked to play guitar just to glorify your image.”

Sakano wipes his sweaty brow, as he trembles, “No, Miss Nakano, that’s not what – “

“Shut up four-eyes!”

Mr. Sakano melts away into a puddle of despair. “I’m too old for this!”

Himeka rises to her feet, looking down at the wide-eyed Ryuko. She narrows her eyes in fury, “I don’t care anymore about your little issues. I’m not gonna put up with this crap anymore.” Without another word, she storms up the stairs, without looking back.

“Wait, Nakano Senpai!” Sara jumps to her feet, chasing after Himeka.

Saki finishes off her drink. “Short party, who’s up for a whiskey?”

Sakano’s puddle raises a hand.

Michael looks up from his reading, “Did something happen?”

“The children are being melodramatic again, I think,” says Saki. “Loud little thing that Hime-chan, ay, Ryu-chan?”

Ryuko sits there quietly.

“Ryu-chan?”

Ryuko stares at the floor. Saki thinks she is crying, until she tilts her head up to show that she is frowning. Ryuko forms a fist and punches the ground, breaking the floorboards. “How dare she talk to me like that,” she icily demands, “I won’t forgive her for this insult.”

Sakano bursts into tears, crawling along the long. “Everything finally goes for Bad Luck; no traumas, no arguments, no romantic crisis, no slumps – everything...perfect! And now...now everything’s going wrong for them! It’s all shot to hell! Wah! I can’t take this pressure! I’M ENDING IT ALL NOW!!!!” Sakano snatches K’s gun and points it at his throat. He presses down on the trigger, closing his eyes. Nothing happens.

K takes it back, “It’s an antique. I haven’t got bullets for it yet.”

“Waaaaah!”

“There, there, I’ll get in some next week,” he cheerfully assures him, patting him on the back. “You can commit suicide then.”

Mr. Sakano wipes the tears from his eyes. “Tell me, Miss Sakuma, what did you think of the proposal.” She’s gone. “Waaaaah! It’s all falling apart!”

Saki waggles a bottle of red wine in front of him. “You need a drink.”

~@~

Draped over by a single white blanket, his body naked beneath, enjoying the sensations from the chilled wind that flows through his large opened window, Slacker Seguchi sits cross-legged in the middle of his king-sized bed. His eyes are closed, as if in meditation. The ringing of the telephone by his bed breaks his world of silence. Slacker falls back, and picks up the phone, pulling it his ear. “Did all go well?”

“Everything went as you predicted.”

“Excellent, K. All is secure. Give my sympathies to Mr. Sakano.”

“Will do.” K hangs up.

Slacker stretches his arm out, putting down the phone. He quietly sits up again, lowering his sheet so his upper torso can feel the full force of the wind’s ice. “The body longs for eternal warmth, without fire man would die. Why does he seek out the cold then? Why does he enjoy its pain? Ice can burn the skin, just like fire. Is it possible that fire and ice are one and the same?” Slacker falls forward, burying his face in his soft blankets.

6 - Track Six

“And then she stormed out, making me look the like the bad guy!” growls Ryuko, kicking the door.

“If you break it, it’s coming out of your allowance,” responds Yuki, typing at his home office’s desk. He’s been listening to her ramblings for half an hour, the same story over and over of Himeka Nakano’s furious vilify. Her story changes each time to make it seem worse and worse, perhaps because it seems worse the more she goes over it.

“Who does she think she is?!” Barks out Ryuko, “Like she’s any better, she’s nothing but a perverted little hussy anyway. Did you know she reads yaoi manga? She has a big collection in her room too! She’d sure make good friends with Uncle Tatsuha. And you know what else? Himeka even wears short clothes in public just to turn on old men for kicks - she is so gross! I don’t know how I’VE put up with HER for so long. And she has a nerve to talk THAT way about ME!”

Ryuko goes to kick the door again, when Yuki turns around to face her. “Why are you really mad?”

“Because she called me a bimbo and made me out to be some sort of pampered princess!” She angrily replies. “That’s really funny coming from a rich snob like her!”

“If you’re going to answer me with lies, I have nothing more to say to you.” Yuki turns around and continues with his typing.

Ryuko rolls her eyes, “Whatever. I’m going out.” Stiffening, she storms out of the apartment, slamming the door.

Yuki looks back, narrowing his eyes.

@~ TEN YEARS AGO ~@

Fluffy white snow blanketed the land as far as you could see. The green of the grass was replaced by the frosty shower of snowflakes that continued to fall from the depth of the grey sky. It had snowed heavily for two days, and then slowed to a light shower.

Ryuko was excited to finally go out and play in the snow. She even dressed her doll Kumagoro in an identical pink parker just like her’s. Her parents took her to the park to play with the other children. Ryuko couldn’t spot any of her friends, so she decided to say hello to the others there. Before she left to make friends, she asked her parents for something to eat. Feeling peckish themselves, they asked some of the other adults to look out for her while they went to get something from a local café.

Dusting off some snow from Kumagoro’s face, Ryuko skipped up to three older boys who were making a snowman. She waved to them and said, “Hi! My name’s Ryuko! That’s a really nice snowman!”

“It’s a snow soldier,” one corrected her, “We’re taking on this brat who said we throw snowballs like

sissies!”

“Hey, maybe we can get this girl’s brothers to help!” Laughed another, “Reinforcements!”

Ryuko and Kumagoro looked at each other, confused. “I don’t have any brothers, and nor does Kumagoro.”

“Who were those guys who left you here then?”

Ryuko beams a smile, nodding, “Oh! They’re my daddy and papa! They’re really nice and – “

“Excuse me?!” Barked out one boy, all of them turning to stare at her, “They’re what, both your dads?”

“Yep-yep!”

The boys all laughed, “Holy crap, her dads are fags!”

Ryuko blinked, scratching her head. “What’s that? Is it bad?”

“That is so gross!” Winced one boy, “Be careful guys, we may get AIDS if we breathe the same air as her!” The boys all mockingly backed away from her.

Ryuko squeezed Kumagoro close to her chest, her heart raced in a mix of anger and confusion. She didn’t understand the words, or the their meaning, but she could tell by their tones it was something horrible about her fathers.

“Don’t be mean!” She yelled, “Or I’ll tell!”

“Oooh!” They laughed, “Gonna tell those pansies? Like they can do anything!”

Ryuko went to hit one, when another slapped her across the face. She fell back. Her white face marked red by the slap. Ryuko felt her face, tears swelling in her deep emerald eyes. Gathering Kumagoro, she hastily ran from them, crying. The boys made noises and threw snow at her as she ran.

Racing away as far as she could from the park, she found herself blinded by cold tears. It wasn’t until she ran into something that she was able to stop. Ryuko, still crying, wiped away her tears to find she had run down a girl a little younger than her.

Dark blue eyes locked onto her’s in confusion. The girl beneath her smiled widely, and poked Ryuko in the nose, “Your nose is blue!”

Ryuko gasped, jumping to her feet. The girl still smiled, rising to her feet. She wore a cosy coat, blue leggings and a pair of black boots. On her head was a fluffy blue beanie, poking out the back was long shiny, reddish-brown hair. Ryuko’s eyes wandered to a pile of snowballs.

The girl noticed her staring at them, and beamed another smile. “I’m in battle! I’m going to kick butt, I am! No one makes fun of my hat! Stupid sissy boys!”

She blinked, realizing she must have been the girl those boys were talking about. Worried that she may be mean to her too, she began to walk away.

“Hey, wait!”

Ryuko turned away, clutching Kumagoro defensively. “Yes?”

“Could you...help me?”

Later~

Ryuko and the girl, who said her name was Himeka, stood behind the slippery dip with a plastic bag each full of snowballs. The boys had finished their snow soldier, and had readied at least six times as many snowballs as they had.

“Can’t we just tell the grown-ups?” Moaned Ryuko, “I don’t want to get hurt again.”

Himeka clutched a snowball. “Tell the grown-ups? What are you, a wimp?”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she whispered, “I’ve got your back, and you got mine too, right?”

Ryuko forced a smile, taking a snowball, “Um...ok...”

Himeka jumped out from behind the slippery dip, “HEY, SISSIES!”

The boys turned around, a snowball whacked the bigger one in the eyes. “Damn shrimp, get her!”

Himeka blew a raspberry, throwing a few more snowballs from her plastic bag as she ran. The two shorter boys ran after her, throwing whatever snowballs they could carry. Ryuko ran in the opposite direction, running to the snowballs the boys had made, stamping them back into the snow. She didn’t notice the taller one coming up behind her. As he went to punch her, Himeka threw a large sludgy ball at his head. Ryuko turned around; gasping from surprise as the boy blindly wiped away the gunk covering his head and face. Clutching Kumagoro tightly, Ryuko headed toward the two boys who were closing in on Himeka. Using Kumagoro, Ryuko jumped up and pushed the head of the snow soldier off its body. The head fell on top of the boys, forcing them to the ground.

“Do you give up?” Demanded Himeka.

The taller boy, who was still dealing with gunk tried to laugh while sneezing, “Give up to some brat pre-schooler, never!”

“Let’s just go,” said one of his friends.

“Fine then, I’ll tell your parents on you,” warned Himeka.

“Do that, and I’ll tell YOUR’S what did to us.”

“So...you’re going to tell them that their four year old daughter BEAT you up?”

The three boys stared at her through the snow and then looked at each other. Without a word they walked away. Himeka leapt in the air, laughing. Ryuko hugged Kumagoro, smiling.

“You’re only four?” Wondered Ryuko, “You’re really smart then!”

Himeka cockily put her hands on her hips, winking, “Yeah, I know, I know.”

“Hime-chan!” Called a man, “We got you lunch!”

“Ryu-chan, we’re back!”

Himeka and Ryuko’s ears expanded when they heard their fathers call them. “Yay, lunchtime!”

The two girls ran to meet them at the benches of the park. They were surprised to see their fathers talking to each other like good friends, until their eyes focused to see who the other was.

“Hi there Mr. Hiro sir!” Greeted Ryuko.

“Mr. Shindou, hello,” greeted Himeka, bowing, “I haven’t seen you in a long time. You too, Mr. Yuki.”

Himeka and Ryuko stared at each other in confusion. “You know my daddy?” They gasped, “Then you’re...oh wow...hi!”

Ayaka knelt down in the snow, rubbing their heads, “How cute, they’ve been playing together! I hope you two have been getting along well.”

“Yep!” Replied Ryuko, “And we beat up some mean boys!”

Himeka slapped her forehead.

Ayaka continued smiling, “We’ll talk about that later.”

@~FIVE YEARS AGO~@

Himeka’s E-mail:

Hey There Girl!

We’re having this festival next week at my school. My kendo club’s set to put a performance. I’m so excited! I think my mother’s more excited though; she’s been calling all the family to come watch. It’s sooo embarrassing! -_- Do you think you could come to watch too? I could show you around my school too!

~Himeka

Ryuko's E-mail:

OMG! THAT IS SO COOL! I WISH I COULD GO, BUT I'M GROUNDED. I DIDN'T STUDY FOR MY MATH TEST YESTERDAY AND ONLY SCORED A 13, SO PAPA SAYS I'M GROUNDED FOR 2 WEEKS. THAT IS SOOOOOOOOOO MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAN!!!! AND MY KEYBOARD IS LIKE STUFFED! IT'LL ONLY DO CAPS, STUPID THING!!! SORRY, I'M REALLY PISSED OFF RIGHT NOW. KUMAGORO'S PISSED TOO. OH, HE SAYS HI BTW.

CATCH YA, I HAVE TO STUDY FOR MY SCIENCE TEST, IF I DON'T STUDY, THEY'LL PROBABLY LOCK ME IN MY ROOM OR SOMETHING. >.<

RYU-CHAN & KUMA-CHAN

Himeka's E-mail:

Whoa,

You are one mad chicky! @_@ Did you get your keyboard fixed? I can't say I've been grounded lately, though my father was disappointed that I only for 95% on my last English test. I was distracted by this cute boy outside; I think he was the son of one of the teachers. It's so cool when boys come to the school; you're so lucky to be in a normal school. Being in an all-girl's school can be so lame.

The club's been working hard to get ready for the school festival. A few have been whining that I've been pushing them too hard. What's wrong with perfection? We're going to be performing in front of our parents and some of the most important people in Kyoto after all! Hey, you SURE you can't come up? Beg your dads!

~Himeka

Ryuko's E-mail:

Hiya,
Papa got my keyboard fixed, he says I'm still grounded and can't go up to Kyoto to see your festival. He says I can next year if I'm a good girl. I think he just doesn't want to go up because of Uncle Tatsuha. I have more to worry about with that mega weirdo - he has it easy!

I passed my science test, but not by much. I don't like science it's boring. I love Japanese, it's easy peasy. I'm coming third in my class. My teacher says I write really nice stories, and should be a writer like Papa when I grow up. What do you think?

Ryu-chan & Kuma-chan

Himeka's E-mail:

Hey there!

We're nearly ready, only three more days until the festival! Everyone's been totally hyped about it, and decorations are already being hung up. THIS IS SO COOL! Oh yeah, and I dyed my hair black like a real Hina doll, I'll send a picture next time!

You a writer? That wouldn't be too bad; writers make a lot of money, right? Would you be a romance writer like him?

I got this cool DVD today, it's a mix of music videos and I found of Bad Luck! Sweet stuff, it had a close

Ryuko presses the doorbell to the Nakano family home. Himeka's family always stay with her father's parents when they're in Tokyo. She could easily guess her so-called best friend would be here, probably doging about Ryuko to her family.

Himeka's grandmother opens the door, "Oh, hello Ryuko. Have you come to see Himeka?"

"That's right, is she here?"

She nods, allowing her to enter. "Hime-chan's in her room watching TV."

Ryuko smiles, "Thank-you ma'am!" She walks through the hall until she reached Himeka's room, without knocking, she opened the door and quickly closed it behind her.

Himeka turns around, and then returns to her TV as if no one was there.

"Very mature Himeka," Ryuko sarcastically says, "And to think, you're supposed to be better than ME."

Himeka folds her arms, "I don't think I'm better than you – I know I'm better than you."

"Is that so?"

"Unlike you, I earned my high status in society. When people look at me, they see an intelligent young woman who works hard for her grades and does everything to perfection. Unlike you, you're just a buffoon who happens to have the DNA of a famous singer, and be raised by two famous guys. You're nothing special. I don't know why I bothered to be your friend."

Ryuko narrows her eyes, gritting her teeth in anger. "Why are you saying these things? Why NOW?"

Himeka still doesn't turn around. "Because after you ran out my dad began to worry about you too. And why? Because of you being a freakin' baby."

Ryuko walked up behind her and got her in a headlock. Himeka's eyes bulge out, as they roll around on the bed.

"Baby am I? I must have learnt it from you then!" Growls Ryuko, "You always have to be the centre of attention, the one in charge! You drive people insane! You're not better than anyone; you just think you are because you don't bother to look at anyone else! You may as well marry your reflection!"

Himeka throws her off, and slaps her across the face. "SHUT UP! That's not true!"

Ryuko slaps her back just as hard, "You know I'm right. You're no better than me, you just hide your stupidity with fancy clothes and big words."

Grimacing in anger, Himeka takes her by the hair, "You brat! You have no right to speak to me like that!"

Ryuko punches her in the cheekbone, Himeka falls onto the bed, taking some of Ryuko's light brown hair with her. Ryuko feels the side of her head, tearing at the eyes. "Damn it!"

"That'll teach you!" Laughs Himeka, feeling her cheek mournfully.

Ryuko and Himeka each out to hurt each other again, when their eyes turn to the TV. On it are a younger Hiroshi and Shuichi, singing and playing guitar at school. They didn't sound very professional, in fact they were a little out of tune, but they were obviously enjoying themselves.

"They look so happy," says Ryuko.

Himeka nods, "Yeah. I found this in the attic yesterday."

Ryuko sits away, and begins to watch the video. Himeka sits at the top of her bed, nursing her pillow. They watch in silence, paying no attention to their bruises and bleeding. Their eyes wander to each other's every so often.

Himeka decides to break the silence. "I'm glad they improved."

Ryuko smiles, "Me too. Papa's right, Daddy does have zero talent at lyrics."

Himeka nods, "Yeah, not his greatest work."

They return to silence. Ryuko turns her head to Himeka; "You're so stuck-up."

Himeka cockily smiles, "You're such a baby."

The door bursts open, Hiro and Shuichi look around in terror and scream when they see their bleeding bruised girls.

"Are you two ok?" Begs Hiro, rushing to see Himeka's bruised cheek.

"What happened?" Demands Shuichi, rubbing the side of Ryuko's head.

Himeka beams a smile, "We're cool Dad, relax. Ryu-chan and I just had some talking to do."

"You beat each other up!" Yells Shuichi.

"That too," cutely adds Ryuko with a giggle. "There was some talking – technically."

"Mum, why didn't you come in and break them up?!" Demands Hiro, as his mother appears at the door, wiping a dish.

She shrugs, "They're best to be left to their own devices to work tiffs out, even if their devices include trying to kill each other."

“What sort of logic is that?” He cries.

Mrs. Nakano closes her eyes, grinning, “I do believe the scientific term is Hiro-Shuichi-ology.”

Hiro calms down and stares at Shuichi, both embarrassed. Himeka and Ryuko beam a smile, doing the V sign to the other.

7 - Track Seven

“Blind Game again, quite an indecisive doll
If it's a dream that can't be reached, well, then -- let's fling it away.
Drastic Game a Game, quite a worn-out, crumpled doll
Shatter the eternally unchanging nights.”

Himeka Nakano and Ryuko Sakuma sit in the livingroom of the Nakano family house watching the first promotional video Bad Luck released. Hiro and Shuichi stand behind them, leaning on the backing as they watch too.

“Remember when we did that scene?” Hiro asks Shuichi, “Must have taken fifty takes for you to finally get that right.”

Shuichi's head droops as his bottom lip quivers. “Don't be mean Hiro! It was a long day and I was tired!”

“It was the first scene for the day and you'd just had breakfast!”

Ryuko and Himeka beam a smile to each other.

“Wasn't this video made before you sold your first million records?” Wonders Himeka. “Do you think it attributed to your success.”

Shuichi triumphantly raises a fist, “It was all part of Shuichi's great plan! Videos; posters; concerts – all for the great goal!”

Ryuko's heart raises, “To sell a million copies?!”

“To go on a date with Yuki!”

Ryuko and Himeka stare at the TV with a deer-in-the-headlights expression fixed on their faces. Shuichi stands like a statue, fist still raised, his eyes water gleefully as he remembers his wonderful date. The girls turn behind them, unable to blink.

“You...” began Ryuko, “You wanted to sell a million...for a DATE?”

“Yes.”

Himeka's jaw slightly drops, “All that hard work, all those sales, all that for...a DATE?”

“Yes.”

They direct their stares to Hiro, who dolefully stares at the TV, unfazed by their disbelief. "Well, this is Shuichi Shindou after all."

Ryuko scratches the side of her head, returning to the TV. "Was it a good date?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"Peppy, isn't he?" Laughs Himeka. "Well we're glad. By the way oh majestic stars of screen and stage, why are you here? Shouldn't you be preparing for tonight?"

Shuichi lowers his fist. "Eh?"

"You know...the concert?"

"Ooooooh, that!"

Himeka frowns, "Yes, THAT. Bad Luck hasn't held a concert on this scale before for four years, aren't you two at all concerned? It's going to be LIVE for goodness sake!"

Hiro beams a smile, rustling her head. "Don't worry honey, Daddy and his band will do what we always do and let Suguru do all the worrying. Besides, if Shuichi stuffs up, he has us to back him up. After all these years we've mastered ad-lib thanks to his routine incompetence."

Shuichi falls to his knees in tears, "How can you say something so mean, Hiro - and so simply too? Waaaaaaah!"

Hiro continues smiling, ignoring his friend. Himeka and Ryuko take a note from him and also ignore Shuichi's wailings.

Shuichi's mobile phone rings, he stops crying and answers it, wiping his nose. "Hello? Oh, hi Fujisaki...eh...I see. Yes, ok, sure. We'll be right over. Bye."

"What did Mr. Fujisaki say?" Asks Kumagoro, as he's waggled behind Ryuko.

Shuichi gulps down hard, trying to keep a cheerful smile. "He says there's a problem with the station that was going to air the concert and we need to get to a meeting with them right away."

"What?" Demands Hiro.

"What he said!" Yells Ryuko, leaning over the couch to stare at her father, "What sort of problem?!"

"I don't know," replies Shuichi. "Come on, we have to get to Mr. Seguchi's office. Girls, want to come along?"

Himeka and Ryuko are already in Hiro's car, honking the horn. "HURRY UP!"

~@~

Rested on the tufts of grass, Slacker draws a hand toward his rose garden, taking a rose between his fingers. He takes in the sweet aroma, sighing to himself. His other hand softly strokes the Labrador Retriever sitting by his side, basking in the warmth of the midday sun.

“Roses are so beautiful, with their velvety petals, vibrant colours, and rich smells; Smells that have inspired poets throughout the ages. But...would a rose cease to be as lovely if it lost its scent? Would it cease to be wondrous and be left as just another flower in the garden? What say you, Katsugan?”

His guide dog, Katsugan yawns in response, swaying his tail back and forward lazily. Slacker serenely smiles to himself. Without warning, his mobile rings. Katsugan barks. Slacker reaches to his belt with the hand that was on Katsugan and unclips his mobile phone, answering it. “This is Setsuna Seguchi, how may I help you?”

“Big news!”

“Hello Mr. K.”

“It has come to my attention there is a legal problem concerning tonight’s broadcast of Bad Luck’s performance. As we speak a meeting is about to take place between representatives from the television station, Mr. Seguchi and Bad Luck.”

Slacker narrows his eyes, “Thank-you Mr. K, but why are you telling me?”

“Because another will also be there, someone of interest to you. I am sure you know who I mean.”

Slacker snaps the rose. “Interesting...once again, thank-you.” Slacker ends the call and lets the phone drop to the grass. “I should have predicted he would try something like this, how careless of me. This will not go without punishment, Father.”

~@~

“And that’s how it is,” says the head representative for Channel DHX, “I’m afraid we can’t get out of our contract with the soccer federation. We agreed to air each match this season live, regardless of any changes on their behalf. It is unfortunate they have moved this week’s match to today. We apologize for any inconveniences.”

Ryuko folds her arms, mumbling obscenities and a few swear words Shuichi didn’t know she knew, to herself.

“Are you sure there is no arrangement we can come to?” Enquires Tohma.

“Sure there is, pay off the soccer federation,” replies a blue haired woman bursting into Tohma Seguchi’s office. “But of course that requires money and these suits would rather lose ratings for one night than the amount it would cost to get out of their contract for the week. Isn’t that right, gentlemen?”

The three representatives nod. “Just as she has said. And who are you?”

Suguru lowers his head in embarrassment. Sara follows the woman, struggling to keep a cheerful smile, "Mama...!"

The woman, who is dressed in a red business dress and is holding a black briefcase, invites herself to take a seat next to Tohma. She grins, crossing her legs. "My name is Umi Fujisaki and I am Tohma Seguchi's lawyer."

Everyone in the office stares at her as if she's a lunatic. Tohma blinks repeatedly and goes wide-eyed, as if to say, "You are?"

Umi opens her briefcase and goes over assorted documents. "I have already contacted the federation and they are willing to move their match to tomorrow, however a fee will have to be paid to cover expenses. I was able to talk them down 40%, I am sure you can afford that."

"We at DHX have no interest in taking on a bill for a situation we did not create."

Umi fiercely glares, causing the men to step back in fear.

"Perhaps if you opted for a more flexible contract, you wouldn't be in this mess, now would you?"

"How hang on – "

"If NG were to flip the bill, would you allow broadcast the Bad Luck concert tonight?" Demands Umi, growing increasingly testy.

"The total of the bill?"

"All of it."

The three reps look at each other. "We will have to consider this."

"Go into the next room and talk then," Umi opens a door in Tohma's office, and frowns dangerously at each rep as they creep out, almost clinging to the wall. Umi slams the door shut. She dusts her hands and flips her hair back. "Ah, I love my job."

Ryuko and Himeka clap and whistle their praise.

"Wow, they nearly wet their pants I bet!" Giggles Ryuko, "That was so awesome!"

Suguru sinks in his seat, "Umi, as much as I appreciate what you just did, what are you doing here?"

"Darling, when I heard from Ayaka that some bastard network was trying to ruin what Bad Luck worked so hard for over these several months, I knew I had to do something."

"Ayaka?" Gasps Hiro.

“Yes, she promptly called me just after you called her,” explains Umi, “So I got to work right away in sorting out this idiotic situation. So here I am, working free of charge I’d like to remind everyone. So, Tohma, satisfied with my work?”

Tohma grins, “Yes, very nice. However, I don’t plan to pay for a situation that I didn’t cause either.”

Umi’s eyes bulge. “WHAT?! It’s not as if you can’t afford it!”

Tohma closes his eyes. “It is a matter of principle, and business. I am terribly sorry.”

Shuichi clunks to the floor in shock.

Unfolding her arms, Ryuko rises from her chair, eyeing out Tohma. “Mr. Seguchi, can I talk to you for a second?”

“Of course.”

“I meant alone.”

~@~

“Why won’t you fund the airing?” Demands Ryuko, taking a seat in the blue couch in Tohma’s other side office. “Like Mrs. Fujisaki said, you can afford it.”

Tohma casually sits on the couch opposite, smiling to himself. “I believe I gave my answer before.”

“What did you mean by business then?”

“Reunion concerts are all well and good, but in the end do you think it would influence Bad Luck album sales? Such events have only momentary effects, nothing to call lasting. Unless...”

Ryuko hugs Kumagoro anxiously. “Unless what?”

“Unless it has something memorable, something that would talked about for years.”

“I see,” she quietly replies, “Something like Ryuichi Sakuma’s daughter singing in tribute of him.”

Tohma grins. “Yes, that would do I believe. But since she isn’t willing to, that is out of the question.”

Ryuko looks up, her deep emerald eyes glinting in knowing. “Maybe she can be persuaded.”

~@~

Slacker sits in the back of his limousine with Katsugan, clinging to his lead restlessly. K sits opposite him, polishing his rifle. “You look tense, like to stop and fire a few rounds? It’s very calming.”

“I appreciate your concern Mr. K, but I’ll be fine,” replies Slacker. “You know, it is odd that you are not

with Bad Luck at such an important meeting. Care to explain your actions?”

K blows on his gun. “Ah, that will fine. This is not a Bad Luck state of affairs; it is for NG to sort out. If worst comes to worst, I’m sure Shuichi’s crying will break them into submission.” K laughs to himself.

Slacker lays his head back on the seat. “Yes, that makes sense. The first part of your statement I mean.”

“What are you planning, if I may ask?”

Slacker doesn’t reply, and instead drifts off to sleep.

~@~

“Yay! The broadcast is saved, and Ryuko says she’ll sing, this is the happiest day of my life! Well, this month...but it’s so awesome!” Yells Shuichi into his phone. “Aren’t you happy too, Yuki?!”

Yuki remains silent on the other end as he takes in what Shuichi has just said. “There was a problem with that station?”

Shuichi rubs the back of his head, “Oh, right, you didn’t know...but there was! And Seguchi’s going to pay that hockey federal...uh...”

“Soccer federation,” Suguru says over his shoulder.

“Yes, that! Seguchi’s going to pay the costs so Bad Luck can still get the airtime tonight! And for more good news, Ryuko said she’d sing with Nittle Grasper tonight!”

Yuki falls silent again. “I see...this doesn’t strike you as odd?”

“Should it?”

“Never mind, congratulations, see you later. Don’t do anything stupid in the meantime.” He disconnects.

Shuichi blinks. “What did he mean by that? Ah, who cares, let’s celebrate and get drunk!”

Hiro knocks him over the head. “Shuichi, you idiot.”

Ryuko stands alone by the door, her eyes covered by her brown hair. She hugs her bunny, Kumagoro. “Kumagoro, did I something good or bad?”

“Kumagoro cannot answer that, only Ryu-chan can,” he replies.

“Oh.”

8 - Track Eight

It seems the easiest thing in the world to do is screw yourself over. Breathing takes more effort than working yourself into a catastrophe. To get yourself out of one, you either have to be Houdini or be really, really creative. Of course there's also the option of covering your ears, closing your eyes, and pretending it never happened. Crying like a baby also helps. I've learnt that from example, though I'm yet to actually see it work.

I can remember when I was seven; I was sitting on the couch watching TV because Bad Luck was to be on a music show. It was exciting, because it was the weekend, so I wasn't at school, so I didn't have to bother with getting Papa to tape it. Watching it was made more enjoyable because Papa took a break from his typing to watch with me. The interview was going really well, they were joking around with the host and seemed totally at ease.

Suddenly the interviewer asked Daddy if he was worried he may run out of lyrics because Bad Luck had been around so long. Daddy just laughed it off and said no, because he's surrounded by inspiration every day. But the interviewer pressed on and began to imply Bad Luck may be losing their edge thanks to their many years on the scene without a break. Well, it just pissed him off, so he stood up and proudly declared Bad Luck would release a double album within the month with 100% new material. Mr. Fujisaki and Mr. Nakano just sat there, silent, with blank expressions on their faces, like their brains had broken. Offset you could actually hear Mr. Sakano scream like a little girl. He was then rushed to the hospital, upon suffering multiple heart attacks.

Papa dropped his coffee mug in shock, while I nervously laughed. You see, it takes my Daddy a long time to write just one song; we're talking like a week minimum. So you can see why everyone was panicking.

"What is Daddy doing?" I finally asked.

Papa picked up his mug, "Screwing himself over in the most uncomfortable fashion."

I blinked. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"In this case, a bad thing."

When Daddy got home, after a cheery hello, he collapsed on the ground and began to cry like, as Uncle Tatsuha would say, "the little dog he is." It took him a while to get over his hang over. As per usual his mind was a blank for lyrics, so he spent a lot of time sitting at the table zoned out, a paler white I've ever seen Mr. Sakano.

Two weeks passed and he had nothing written, not even any drafts. Mr. Fujisaki was planning his demise for putting Bad Luck's national reputation on the line, and Mr. Nakano was refusing to help him because his wife was withholding sex for being associated with an idiot like Shuichi Shindou.

Daddy resembled a comatose patient more and more every day; he even went into the medicine cabinet and took some old pills of his to calm himself. It must have been bad, because Papa became furious with him and slapped him – and not in any humorous manner.

My father's mental breakdown, and effect it was having on everyone around him made me depressed as a daughter and Bad Luck otaku. I knew I had to do something, but wasn't sure what. Another two days passed. In class our teacher read us the Cobbler and the Elves; you know, the one where the shoemaker in a pinch is helped out by some nice elves as he sleeps. It gave me an idea - I needed new shoes. After picking up some new sandals, I had another idea; I figured I'd have a go at writing songs to empathise with Daddy. If I understood the process, hopefully I could find a way to console him.

That evening I took his notepad as he sat zonked out, and wrote whatever came into my head. All up I wrote ten poems, three were just silly haikus though. When he came to the next morning he looked down at his notepad, he was naturally confused to see the pages used. Instinctly he knew he didn't write any of it...the handwriting was way too neat to be his. Yes I find that fact to this day sad too. He first thought Papa had written it, but the grammar wasn't perfect and a lot of the lyrics looked too random – plus as much as Papa loves him, he's not THAT nice. So he confronted me about it at breakfast. I denied it and blamed lyric elves. He didn't pursue it; instead he teared up, ate breakfast at record speed and then locked himself in a spare bedroom. By the end of the day he miraculously had twenty-four songs written and e-mailed to Mr. Fujisaki.

This is what you either call a miracle, or pure insanity. Suffice to say, once again Shuichi Shindou put his talent where his big mouth was...eventually. The album was a hit, and noted by critics as their most heart filled work. Promoting it, Daddy told the same interviewer it was in darkest hour he was reminded that inspiration is everywhere, thanks to the sweetest lyric elf in the world. It made me damn mad, I was the one that kick-started him again, I made the elves up! Papa explained it was a metaphor for me, so I was like, cool!

As I explained earlier, you have to either be Houdini, or be really, really creative to get yourself out of a royal screwing. Regarding Daddy, Papa and I just think he has the devil's own luck and wings everything. Though he's one to talk, I can't think of one manuscript where he's barely beat the deadline.

"Kumagoro, wanna start a magic act?" Asks Ryuko, "We could be the great Houdini Twins and poof away in a puff of pink smoke."

Ryuko Sakuma stands on the grand outside stage that's prepared to be the site for Bad Luck's concert. However, a different band is setting up for a rehearsal. As keyboards are set up and additional backing music is being located, Ryuko playfully zooms around her toy bunny, trying to ignore her surroundings.

Stars in his eyes, Shuichi clasps his hands together, joyful that Ryuko will be singing with his idol band. "Ah, I'm so happy!"

"I wonder what made her change her mind," wonders Hiro, standing by Shuichi, watching the girl play on stage.

Standing on Shuichi's other side, Suguru eyes Tohma as he sets up his keyboard, "Yes, I wonder

also.”

A young woman with golden blonde curly hair pushes past them, knocking Shuichi out of his dream state. She walks onto the stage, CDs in her hands. “OK, Mum I located most of the backing music for Nittle Grasper, what song are you planning to do?”

Ryuko stares at her in blank interest. “Ne...who are you?” She looks over the tall woman; who wears thin glasses, a tight buttoned up green shirt and a thick skirt that went past her knees. “Do you like bunnies?”

The woman rearranges her glasses and cleared her throat, “Very funny, Ryu-chan. You know it’s me, Saki Ukai.”

“Sober Saki,” explains Kumagoro to Ryuko.

Her pupils dilate; making a gasping shriek, she collapsed over, her feet wiggling in the air. Saki shrugs and directs her attention back to her mother, Noriko. “So, what’s up for tonight, Shining Collection, Be There, Predilection...?”

Noriko beams a smile, waving her hand. “How about we let Ryu-chan decide.”

Ryuko looks up at Saki from the polished wooden floor, “I don’t mind.”

“Sleepless Beauty!” Cries out Shuichi, panting like a puppy, suddenly in his dog costume.

Tohma nods to Noriko, “That sounds very appropriate. Do you know the words, Ryuko?”

She sits on the floor, making Kumagoro ice-skate, “Yeah, my Daddy is a Nittle Grasper otaku after all – and don’t get me started on Uncle Tatsuha.”

“Excellent, you had better prepare then. Is there anything you’ll need?”

‘My dignity for starters.’ “No, I’ll be fine, let’s get this over with, ne?”

Ryuko waves to Shuichi and throws to him Kumagoro to hold, Shuichi clumsily catches him. “Do your best, Ryu-chan!”

Confidently, she beams a smile and flashes him the V sign, “Let’s rock’n’roll ~ Na no da!” Ryuko snickers to herself, ‘Na no da...I’m such a dork.’

She takes her place and waits for the music to begin, but it doesn’t. “Hey, what’s up?”

“The power’s been unplugged,” replies Tohma, “And by Setsuna it would seem. How are you, son?”

Slacker quietly stands by the amplifiers, staring downward. Katsugan obediently stands by his master, panting. Silently, Setsuna walks to his father and places his hands on Tohma’s keyboard. “No.”

Tohma smiles, “No, what, Setsu-chan?”

Slacker frowns, “No, this isn’t right.”

‘My hero!’ Ryuko cheers on in her mind.

“Ryuko shouldn’t be performing with this Nittle Grasper, it’s an insult to Ryuichi Sakuma’s memory.”

‘I am gonna get Slacker the coolest Christmas present this year! But wait, what can I get him...?’

“Not to mention I’d hate to see the dishonour it would give NG Records and your personal reputation.”

‘Maybe a unicorn, I can glue a wooden cone to a horse’s head or something...’

“So I will have to insist that Saki Ukai and I take your places and perform with Ryuko Sakuma.”

Ryuko cocks an eyebrow and leaps next to Slacker, “Ne, ne, what was that?!”

Saki considers it, “Oh, that idea was posed the s’morning, you know, it isn’t too bad. Sure, I’ll go along with it.” Saki places a hand on Ryuko’s shoulder, “Let’s do our best Ryu-chan!”

Ryuko pulls a glum face, and returns to the microphone, as Saki and Slacker ready themselves at the keyboards. K lets a bullet shoot into the air, causing them to jump. He hooks the amplifiers back up. “It’s Showtime folks!” Music blares through the speakers, beats that were burned into her mind.

“I’ve been charmed by your eyes from far away
wake up and wait for me.
Call out and break the night’s barricade
the crowd comes out of the reflection.”

This song, this is the song you are known for, Ryuichi Sakuma. Is this your great legacy to me?

“[There is no way out]
if you plan to endure the impact
[until it collapses]
a projected lie”

You’re right, there is no way out, but I can endure, I’ve endured being your damn daughter for sixteen years.

“Smile as you become reborn
and paint your whole body
see the world suddenly burning up miraculously
as we met by chance”

No, I’m not being reborn. I can tell what’s on the minds of everyone here, it’s destiny, I’m just bringing out what was already there.

“[Hold me gently as I break down]”

Who can I say that to now? Have my own parents abandoned me now?

“I see you haven't changed at all
the petals scatter from the flower
polish the gem in your hand everyday
so it will build up and start over”

I wonder if you ever met me you'd know who I was.

“[Your cold hand]
because of thorns shed through weariness
[a doused flame]
the smoke carries on”

Yeah, I'm weary and drained; I hope you're happy. I know that bastard Seguchi must be.

“Now, where the light can't shine through
we'll paint a brilliant dancing dream
guided words will not fail
don't fear the times of change”

I don't need change, OK. I live a nice semi-normal life! I'm happy with my parents, I'm happy with my friends and I'm not happy singing your song!

“[Cry for a way out]
[It crumbles down]”

How am I to find a way out now? I continue screaming and no one bothers to open their ears to me.

“Smile as you become reborn
and paint your whole body
see the world suddenly burning up miraculously
as we met by chance”

Father, you're just like them. Even you mock me in your music!

“Where the light can't shine through
we'll paint a brilliant dancing dream
guided words will not fail
don't fear the times of change”

I have no brilliant dancing dream, I don't even know my dream and now I'll never get to find it because I have to pick up the broken shards of your former dream.

“[Hold me gently]
[Catch me forever]
[Do more until my heart breaks down]”

My heart has already broken down...so now I'll have to borrow yours.
Sigh I have lost my soul ~ Na no da.

Everyone around the young Nittle Graspers breaks out in applause, the most vocal being Shuichi who tosses Kumagoro into the air with glee. There is one who doesn't clap however. Standing away from the talent and crew is Eiri, his arms are folded and he watches in a deep scold. In her despair, Ryuko catches a glimpse of him. His eyes burn into her's, he appears betrayed, but why?

There is no time to ponder, Sara and Himeka interrupts her thoughts by throwing barley sugars at her to grab her attention. Ryuko turns their way and forced a smile.

“How did I do?”

Himeka places her hands on her hips, “You rotten traitor! You call yourself a Bad Luck otaku! What happened to suffering for your LOVE? Were all those nights of camping out in front of music stores, and those violent contests with that dog Rage all for naught, huh?!”

“Hime-chan...I...”

Sara takes Himeka's hand; the two girls walk onto the stage. Sara smiles, “It appears we've become a little...jealous. We can't allow you to get away with this. You can only appease this situation by singing a Bad Luck song with us. Do you accept, Sakuma Senpai?”

Sakano gasps, surprised to see the turn around from their attempts earlier that morning. K grins, trying to contain his laughter.

Ryuko blushes, the very idea of singing one of her Daddy's songs makes her heart race. “Wow...I...I guess that'll be cool! What song should we do?”

“Rage Beat?” Wonders Sara.

“I hate that song,” whines Himeka, “How about Spicy Marmalade?”

Ryuko folds her arms, “No and no. We will do Blind Game Again, I have spoken.”

“dog.”

9 - Track Nine

Eiri Yuki lowers his eyes, lighting a cigarette. He stood by himself watching Shuichi converse with his band members, and Ryuko with her temporary band members. Ever since the move to publicly dedicate the concert to Ryuichi Sakuma, he'd felt a bad omen. No, that would make him superstitious and put him up there with the other Uesugis and that simply cannot be. Yuki knew it would be a burden on Ryuko, one she just didn't need. While Shuichi understood and shared his concerns, he'd never know what it feels like; to be judged by a name alone, to be forced to live up to the expectations of others and be brutalised if those expectations weren't met. He'd spent fifteen and a half years trying to protect her from the sort of pain he'd suffered, and now in one fowl swoop the person who'd apparently been looking out for him throughout his young adult life had decided to undo all his hard work.

Yuki takes the cigarette from his lips and blows out smoke, "He's off my Christmas card list."

"Who is?" asks Shuichi. He's standing by his side, though he didn't know for how long he'd been there. "Hey, shouldn't you be working?"

"Shouldn't you?"

Shuichi laughs, rubbing the back of his head, "Well, Ryu-chan and her friends need the practice more than me, I'm a professional after all."

"A professional with a record of at least five slip-ups per concert on average..."

"Why're you being so mean?" Demands Shuichi.

"Why are you being such an idiot?" scolds Yuki, throwing the cigarette to the ground, stepping on it.

The two stare at the other angrily. Yuki finally sighs, "Come on, I'll get you a coffee."

~@~

"Blech, this coffee's too bitter," gags Shuichi, putting down his cup.

Yuki tosses two sugar packets to him, "These may have something to do with it."

"Oh yeah," laughs Shuichi at his own feebleness. "I'm so used to making you coffee I forgot what I like."

The couple sits in a booth in a quiet café by the site for the concert. The café had seen its fair share of celebrities come through their doors, so their appearance in there wasn't thought of as any special occurrence.

"Oh no, I still have Kumagoro," realises Shuichi as he looks down at his lap, "Perhaps I should run out

and give it to Ryu-chan before she worries.”

Yuki takes a sip of his coffee, “It’ll be fine, she knows you have it. Besides, she’ll be rehearsing for tonight, won’t she?”

The iciness in his voice sends shivers down Shuichi’s spine. He gulps down the rest of his coffee without adding the sugar and slams his cup down. “Why are you acting so pissy, what’d I do?”

“Ryuko was pressured into singing tonight and you’re too ignorant to notice.”

Shuichi folds his arms, “I didn’t pressure her to do anything; this was her decision.”

“I never said you were the one to pressure her. Didn’t you find it suspicious as soon as she agreed to perform that TV station agreed to broadcast your concert?”

“Nope.”

Yuki glares at his grinning partner, “Nope?”

Shuichi gives him the V sign proudly, “I knew Tohma Seguchi had swindled her into doing it, I wasn’t suspicious at all.” Shuichi scratches his head thoughtfully, “You know, after a while these things really get predictable.”

Yuki’s glare turns into dejection at Shuichi’s response. “Are you telling me this doesn’t bother you at all?”

“Well...sure it does,” he replies, opening the sugar packets, pouring the sugar into his mouth to rid the bitter taste of the coffee, “I thought Ryuko would hold out for more; Like getting Bad Luck another record deal, or her own jet. Ah, children, they’re so business innocent.”

Yuki slams his fist to the table, “Shuichi, you’re such an idiot!”

Shuichi frowns, dunking down the other sugar packet, “Calm down, I was kidding. I am mad at Seguchi for his treatment of Ryu-chan, but I’ve realized we can’t hold her hand every time she has to make a decision. In the end it was Ryu-chan’s choice to perform, and she’ll have to live with that consequence, whether it turns out for the better or worse. Now let’s order something to eat, I’m in the mood for cake!”

His sunny disposition makes him sigh, though what bothers him more is how much sense he was making – and when Shuichi starts to make sense, one really has to worry. Though it wasn’t the first time he’d made perfect sense regarding Ryuko in the face of indisputable odds.

@~ A LONG, LONG TIME AGO ~@

“Forget it, a month is up, she’s going back tomorrow,” simply said Yuki, putting their dinner plates into the dishwasher.

Shuichi mopes at the table, “But why? We were all getting along so well!”

“You should have let the courts assign her to a home at the hearing, but NO, you had to make that ridiculous outburst and proclaim her yours. Can’t you ever do anything discretely? And because of you I had to let her stay here out of obligation. Now time is up and she’s out, got it.”

Shuichi scrunched up his nose, “But whyyyyyy?!!!!”

Yuki walked over and belted him over the head, “Stop being a child, this isn’t a game. A child needs a good solid home with real parents.”

Shuichi looked up at him with wide eyes, “But this is a good solid home, in fact it’s a damn big one and needs a third resident. And...we can be real parents; we’re the only ones she’s known since Ryuichi and Hanako died. Do you want to take us away from her too?”

“She needs a mother.”

“I can be her mother! I’ll even get dresses and -!”

Yuki whacked him across the head again, “No more dresses.”

Shuichi crossly rubbed his aching head, “Is this because she accidentally erased that novel you were working on?”

He sat down at the table, grimacing at the memory of what happens when you leave a baby alone with a laptop. “No it is not, though now that you mention it’s a good example of why she doesn’t belong here. I find it very hard to get any work done with a baby crying all day, and unlike with you, she doesn’t have a job to go to every day to give me any peace.”

“So...it is about the novel?”

“No it isn’t. Enough of this Shuichi, I am not adopting her.”

Shuichi’s eyes began to water, “But I wanna be a daddy!”

Yuki got out a cigarette, his cat-like eyes not leaving his lover’s watery wide eyes, “Then go screw a woman and make one.”

Rather than cry, Shuichi got up and quietly made his way to a spare room, before entering he stopped, not turning around to face Yuki, “Be that way if you have to, I wish you the best when you have to tell that little girl you don’t want her.”

Yuki smirked to himself. ‘Such a dramatic brat.’

Before going to bed that night, he went in to check on Ryuko. Her temporary room was across the hall and down two rooms from theirs. It was spacious, and had a big window overlooking the city and a nice view of the stars. They chose that room because it didn’t have anything that could potentially hurt her; it was also close enough for them to hear her cry, but not for her to hear any of their activities.

The baby was laying in her cot, snuggled with her favourite toy, Kumagoro. She wasn't asleep, just laying there quietly, as if waiting for something. When she noticed Yuki standing over her, she looked up at him with interest. He nonchalantly returned her look and lowered his hand to touch her soft pink cheek. Ryuko enjoyed its warmth and rubbed her head into it with a wide smile. Sighing, he lowered his other hand in and picked her, along with her toy, into his arms. Yuki sat down on the rocking chair by the window. Ryuko held Kumagoro, silently watching him, taking time to suck on his soft pink ear.

"We need to talk," he began, as if he was talking to a peer, "You've collectively lived here a month and a half and we both knew it wasn't going to be permanent. We've had our fair share of difficulties, from you throwing up over my editor, and my spilling coffee over your toy, which, as I explained, was an accident."

As if she understood, she frowned at him.

"But we have also had good occasions, thanks to you, Mika's favourite dress will never be the same again, and Shuichi's been ever so giving in the bedroom, I really have to thank you for that. Look, what I'm trying to say is...there comes a time when you have to say good-bye."

Ryuko blinked, suckling her toy's ear.

"It'll be best for everyone, believe me, you don't want me as a parent; I'm moody, I smoke, I drink, I sleep more than you, I'm a workaholic, I'm not exactly family-friendly and I'm so depressed my medicine cabinet could medicate ten mental patients simultaneously for at least two years. So you see, you'll be happier far, far away from me; ask my father, and he'll tell you."

Ryuko stared with wide emerald eyes; she didn't look convinced.

"Don't give me that look, I'm much more resilient than Shuichi."

The baby became disinterested, yawning. She nestled into him with her Kumagoro, resting her head to his heart, falling asleep to the sound of his heartbeat. Yuki rubbed his forehead in frustration.

@~ NEXT MORNING ~@

Shuichi had been crying his loudest all morning; even Ryuko couldn't be bothered crying after realizing she couldn't beat his volume. He continued crying in the car as Yuki drove them to the adoption agency.

"I wanna be a daddy!" He continually cried. Yuki pretended to not hear him, even when they walked in the streets and through the halls of the agency. Everywhere they went people turned to stare at the hysterical pink haired young man, who was leaving puddles of tears everywhere he stepped.

In the office of Ryuko's caseworker, Shuichi held Ryuko, still weeping as loudly as possible, "I WANNA BE A DADDY!"

The caseworker stared at him in confusion.

Yuki folded his arms, "He's very emotional."

"I see...well, sign these papers and then these, and we'll be done!" She yelled over Shuichi booming cries.

Yuki signed the papers, and then Shuichi, still crying. Ryuko suckled her toy, playing with Shuichi's shirt. Afterwards, while in the elevator going down, Shuichi suddenly stopped crying. He looked down, to see baby Ryuko still in his arms. Shuichi nervously laughed, and turned to Yuki, who was looking away. "Yuki...I'm still holding Ryu-chan."

"I noticed."

"But...WHY am I holding Ryu-chan?"

"Because I'm holding her stroller."

Shuichi looked down at her again in confusion, "What just happened in there?"

"Besides your childish crying, we signed adoption papers. In other words, you're a daddy."

"I...see..." Shuichi quietly looked down at the oblivious baby, who was delighting in stretching out his shirt and slobbering over it. "We just...you...ah...but why? I don't -"

Yuki placed an arm around him, drawing the two closer to him, "The more I tried to convince her she didn't need me, the more I struggled to convince myself I didn't need her."

"Yuki..."

"Don't start crying again, we've had to put up with your damn howling all morning."

Ryuko enjoyed being between them; discovering the fine silk of Yuki's black shirt, she bit into with her gums and wiped her nose over it.

@ ~ NOW ~ @

"What happens if this ends up being emotionally scarring?"

Shuichi finishes off his triple chocolate cake and bites into his strawberry cheesecake, "Then Seguchi pays for a REALLY good team of psychiatrists. Hey Yuki, you gotta try this!"

Yuki rolls his eyes, Shuichi really is an idiot; but his optimism is reassuring and maybe a little cute.

"Come on, have a taste!" Urges Shuichi, holding out a spoon of cheesecake.

Yuki turns his head. Shuichi shrugs and tips it into his mouth. Yuki slides across the booth to sit next to him. "You know what, I change my mind." Tipping his head to the side, Yuki plants his lips to Shuichi's; parting them with his tongue he takes a taste of the cheesecake in Shuichi's mouth. Shuichi wraps his arms around Yuki's neck and pushes the cake to Yuki's with his tongue so it melts with their kiss.

~@~

“Oh my god,” gasps Ryuko from the café’s window. “This is so gross, they’re in public for goodness sake!”

Himeka Nakano presses her head against the window to get the best look possible, “Yes...gross...”

Ryuko folds her arms, casting a glare on her friend, “Stop drooling, I’m embarrassed as it is. Let’s go, OK.”

“Five more minutes.”

Ryuko sighs, taking Himeka by the arm, “My eyes so need a shower – and you need hosing down.”

Himeka latches onto the window for dear life, “No, just a few more minutes!”

~@~

I thought I’d take time for a chapter that focuses on Yuki and Shuichi rather than Ryuko. The purpose of this chapter? Filler I guess...plus I realized for a fic about the adopted daughter of Yuki and Shuichi I didn’t have much of them in it. Heh. You know, I’m up to my 54th page in Word...scary. @_@

10 - Track Ten

IF YOU ENJOY GRAVITY, PLEASE SEE MY DOUJIN WHICH WAS SPAWNED THANKS TO IT AT:
http://www.geocities.com/gravity_snowflake

“You are such a pervert,” sighs Ryuko, watching her friend daydream dirty thoughts about her parents, “How would you like it if I started stalking your parents, waiting for them to start making out?” Himeka blinks, looking up from her dream state. “My parents? Don’t be ridiculous, they’re a male and female, that would make you a pervert.”

“Where the hell is the difference?!”

“Your’s are two guys– attractive ones at that; enjoying watching that sort of thing makes you, you know...super straight.” Himeka reaches into her bag and presents a manga, the cover has two young men kissing, “Just look at this manga and tell me you don’t feel anything.”

Giving her a distasteful look, Ryuko takes the book and flips through it. Her cheeks go flush with embarrassment as she looks at the images; screaming at the sight of a naughty scene, she throws it back. “Oh my god!”

“See, doesn’t that make you all gooey inside?” Sighs Himeka, snuggling the manga.

Ryuko pulls at her hair, “I think I’m gonna be sick! If being super straight means having to enjoy looking at that then I think I’d rather track down a drunk Saki and declare myself bi.”

Himeka glares at her, “Oh so if you were going to turn gay you’d rather hit on Saki Ukai than me?”

“Ne?” Ryuko blinks, “Are you saying...?”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” snickers Himeka, “It’s the principle of the matter, as your best friend you’d think you’d want to approach me first!”

Ryuko rubs her forehead. “OK Hime-chan, I’ll keep that in mind. If I ever discover my lesbian side I’ll call you first so you can reject me.”

“As long as we have that clear,” grins Himeka, “Now can I go back and watch your dads make out?”

“No!”

Himeka slips her manga into her bag, “You are such a dog, Ryu-chan. I guess we can get some practice in to kill time, unless you want to sing ANOTHER song with Slacker and Saki?”

Ryuko sweat-drops nervously at her friend’s hostility, “Hey, Bad Luck forever, you know me. We’ll find Sara-chan and show these goons what the Bad Luck gals are made of!”

~@~

Away from the hustle and bustle of the music and camera crews, within a dimly lit trailer, is the stirring of strings as a violin is played. The music is slow, yet vibrant, echoing beyond the metallic walls. A small crowd draws outside, listening to the sombre melody carry them to some distant land. As the violent comes to an end, the listeners break out in a rousing clap.

The door opens, a confused, blushing girl with curved green hair and hazel eyes pokes her head out. She nervously laughs, "I'm sorry, did I bother you?"

"No, not at all!" They urgently reply.

From the small crowd emerges a smiling blonde boy; he's dressed in faded blue jeans and a worn yellow long sleeved shirt. He leisurely claps and bows to her, "An excellent performance as ever, Sara-chan."

Sara steps onto the top metal step of the trailer and returns the bow, "Thank-you Seguchi Senpai. I was practicing for our school's recital next week."

Slacker tilts his head to the side, motioning for the crew to get back to work. Taking the hint they quickly leave. Alone with Sara, he feels the bars of the stairs and sits down. Sara follows by seating on the top stair.

"Will you be confident enough to play keyboard tonight?" He asks.

"What do you mean?"

Slacker smiles, "I love listening to you play violin, I feel your essence with every cord, but whenever I listen to you play piano it feels so...shallow."

Sara lowers her head, "Violin is my main instrument, Seguchi Senpai..."

"Do you think it's in your best interests to perform keyboard live? Aren't you concerned with how your effort or lack thereof will reflect on your father?"

Stunned and breathless, Sara holds her mouth, shaking in fear.

"Music is more than the making of music, it is a divine expression of the soul. If you are not willing to give your soul for one moment of melody, then you would be better off – "

"Yeah, I know what you'd be better off doing," warns Himeka, taking Slacker by the collar, pulling him to his feet, "Shouldn't you be off rigging the stock market or starting a gang war among the Yakuza?"

Slacker cheekily grins, "Oh, Miss Nakano, what a pleasure it is to hear you. I had just finished firing 36% of Father's staff, when I decided to come to give my regards to my dear cousin Sara."

Ryuko stands by the stairs, rubbing Sara's back. "It's OK Sara-chan, don't listen to him."

"Why'd you fire 36% of your dad's staff?" Curiously enquires Himeka.

"They know why." Slacker lifts Himeka's fingers from his collar, clearing his throat. "I had best be off, I have preparations to make and people to hire."

The girls watch the cheerfully snide boy wander into obscurity.

Himeka folds her arms, scowling, "That is one screwed up guy...with way too much power. Don't you think so, Sara-chan? Sara-chan...?"

Sara burries her head into her hands and begins to sob. Ryuko reaches through the bars and hugs her, "Sara-chan, you know what Slacker's like...we believe in you and think you play amazing keyboard."

Himeka rubs Sara's knee, "Yeah, Slacker's a jerk, if you were bad your dad would say something, or at least Ryuko's blonde one would. Mr. Yuki's frightfully blunt. The other day he said I write like a sterile widow...I am not sure what that means but it really pissed me off." Himeka remembers it, frowning to herself.

Ryuko laughs, "He was in a really bad mood. A critic publicly undermined his talent; so he spent all day condemning anything anyone wrote. Daddy cried fifty-two times that day, passed out from dehydration too."

Sara wipes her eyes, giving her a small smile, "Thank-you for trying to cheer me up Sakuma Senpai, but...he was right about me. I'm a violinist; I'm nowhere near my father's talent when it comes to the keyboard."

"No one expects you to be as good as him," assures Himeka, "and you'll have us to look just as much an idiot with. That's what Bad Luck's all about!"

Ryuko scratches her head, "Looking like an idiot or doing it together?"

"Exactly."

"Huh?"

Sara giggles, widening her smile. Himeka and Ryuko help Sara to her feet and lead her down the stairs. Ryuko pats Sara's head, "Let's go practice our song, if we all suck at the same time no one should notice you reeking up the stage."

Sara cringes and goes to race up the stairs; Himeka takes hold her skirt just in time. "Nice one, Sakuma!"

"Sorry, I was only trying to be supportive!"

~@~

Atop a nearby building stand two men wielding rifles. Their blonde hair waves in the wind as they look down on the stage.

The younger man turns to the older one, he lowers his rifle. "Dad, shouldn't you have arranged more security for the performers than you and me?"

"Nonsense Michael," laughs K, "One of us would be more than enough."

"Then why are there two of us?"

K lays a hand on his son's shoulder, "Your mother's always saying we should do more things together, what better way for a father and son to bond than to use their skills to protect pop idols and randomly shoot at people you don't like?!"

Michael loads his gun, "Makes sense. Hey, there's Mr. Sakano!"

"Ooh, going to shoot him first?" Wonders K, "He's good for entertainment, but he really does get irritating."

"Nah; just noticed him panicking and wondered what caused him to flip this time. Think something interesting is happening?"

~@~

"Miss Sakuma, please calm down!" begs Sakano, biting onto his hanky.

Ryuko goes chibi and chucks a fit on the floor of the stage, "I will when Himeka stops being stupid and takes that damn THING off!!!"

Himeka flips her hair back, proudly dressed in her traditional performance robes. "You know very well I always wear this when I perform on stage, I don't know why you're being a baby about it."

Chibi Ryuko jumps up and points accusingly at her, "You wear that when you do your traditional Japanese music! This is pop; you'll make us look like IDIOTS!"

"Oh believe me; you're doing a much better job than I could."

Sara desperately tries to calm them down, "It's not that big of a deal, really, let's do the song and then talk about it."

"I'm not taking this off," warns Himeka, turning away from Ryuko.

Ryuko turns back to normal and turns off the microphone. "I am not performing with a Kyoto bumpkin in denial."

"Bumpkin?!" growls Himeka, raising her guitar to hit Ryuko. "A public school commoner shouldn't

“speak so highly to a private school star student!!!” Himeka swipes her guitar, narrowly missing Ryuko.

Hiro folds his arms, watching the two girls fight, “Shuichi and I went to public school and we turned out great, right Fujisaki?”

Suguru quietly blinks, “Ah...right, Nakano...”

“Hi guys,” greets Shuichi, “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Ryuko’s mad because Himeka wants to wear her traditional kimono tonight,” replies Suguru, “Himeka’s refusing to wear anything else, so they’re both fighting about it. Meanwhile my poor Sara looks ready to cry in her keyboard and Mr. Sakano doused down six bottles of pills to calm his nerves.”

Shuichi looks to the side to see Sakano dizzily spinning around, pale white, “They didn’t seem to work much. Damn and I was in such a good mood too.”

Hiro raises an eyebrow, “Why’s that?”

Shuichi coyly grins, “Oh, no reason particularly...”

“By the way, your fly’s undone,” says Hiro with a smirk.

Shuichi nervously laughs and peers down. “Hey; no it isn’t.”

“Made you look.”

Shuichi goes bright red, “It’s not what you think! We weren’t doing anything in the café’s bathroom, honest!”

Hiro and Suguru stare at him stunned. Shuichi clears his throat, “Oh look Hiro, Hime-chan’s about to bash Ryu-chan with your good guitar!”

“No sweetie!” yells Hiro, “Use the red one, it costs less!”

Backstage, Saki and Slacker watch the girls boisterously bicker. Saki opens a can of beer, sighing to herself, “So this is the next generation of Bad Luck? Rather disappointing, isn’t it?”

Slacker rests his arms behind his head, “They’re not too different to the normal Bad Luck, though Mr. Nakano would have been decent enough to go backstage and deal with the vocalist.”

“I see your point,” Saki takes a sip of her beer; “I heard what you said to Sara-chan earlier.”

“Oh?”

“I found it quite amusing. Like the pot calling the kettle black.”

Slacker lowers his smile, “What is your meaning, Miss Ukai?”

Saki playfully taps two of her fingers on Slacker's nose, "Bam, bam, bam-bam! Stress-less, baby!"

"Huh? Oh no...that is your first beer for the hour, right?"

Saki unbuttons the first four buttons of her shirt, "Call me Sake! Ryu-chaaaaaan!"

Ryuko holds onto Himeka, "Ugh! Save me, Hime-chan!"

Himeka holds out the guitar, warding off 'Sake', "Back off dog! If she discovers her lesbian side I'm gonna be the one to reject her FIRST!"

Shuichi, Hiro and Suguru blink in unison, choosing to just not ask.

11 - Track Eleven

IF YOU ENJOY GRAVITY, PLEASE SEE MY DOUJIN WHICH WAS SPAWNED THANKS TO IT AT:
http://www.geocities.com/gravity_snowflake

"I'm like a snowflake, one of a kind, but doomed to join the endless white of the snow," Ryuko whispers to Kumagorou as she watches the seemingly endless crowds of people pile into the stadium. All of them there to bask in the music and energy of the band she most admires and loves, and all of them destined to be treated to the musical talents of the pathetic daughter of...

"Ryuichi Sakuma!"

Ryuko falls to the ground, tackled by some crazy fan; some crazy fan that turns out to be her delusional Uncle Tatsuha. She kicks back, her foot jamming his groin. Tatsuha falls off her back, clutching it in pain. "My Ryuichi has forsaken me!"

Sighing to herself, she spins Kumagorou around and throws him like a ball, "KUMAGOROU BEAM!" The soft pink bunny strikes his head. Tatsuha releases his pained groin and lies out flat in a dream state.

Beaming a smile, she retrieves her toy and leans over, giving her uncle a kiss on the cheek. "Come to wish me good luck, or curse this stage? Hang on, how did YOU get past security?!"

"I was shot at like twenty times, does that count for security?" He asks, now out of his dream state and sitting back stage with her, watching the audience pile in.

"A lot of people out there...huh?"

"Don't know why, personally," laughs Tatsuha, "Bad Luck isn't all that good. Now Nittle Grasper, that's TRUE talent!"

Ryuko goes chibi and starts to hit his chest, "DON'T MAKE FUN OF MY PRECIOUS BAD LUCK! BAD LUCK ARE GREAT, BAD LUCK RULES, BAD LUCK – "

Tatsuha holds out his palm, pushing her back, "Yeah, yeah. So Bad Luck Baby, I hear you're gonna sing with the other Bad Luck Babies and the Nittle Grasper Kiddies."

"Yeah, why?"

"Just wanted to wish you good luck, Dad too."

Ryuko blinks, "Grandpa Uesugi?"

Tatsuha grins, pointing to the other side of the backstage, where she can see her grandfather in his best robes performing a ritual of luck. "He actually came to Tokyo with me, I didn't say anything, you know, the whole he and Eiri hating each other and all made it awkward."

Suddenly, he feels a tight squeeze around his throat. Two strong arms are around his neck, strangling the dear life from him. Tatsuha looks to the side, his big brother's cheek furiously against his. "Why the hell is the old man here?!"

"Can't...breath...!"

Ryuko nervously giggles, "Papa, I think he's dying."

"I should be so lucky," he scoffs, letting his pale little brother go. "Answer me, Tatsuha, WHY is HE here?"

Regaining his senses, Tatsuha cautiously stands before Yuki. "When Mika called me and said there was a chance Ryu-chan might perform, Dad insisted on coming to watch. Believe me; I'm as shocked as you are."

Yuki folds his arms, peering over his shoulder as his father continues his ritual. "He actually came for...Ryuko?"

Tatsuha beams a smile, "Well, he may wish you and Shuichi severe pain, but you know how he feels about his little Ryu-chan."

@~KYOTO, SIXTEEN YEARS AGO – LONG TIME PPLS!~@

"Yuki, is this really a good idea?" Wondered Shuichi, as they journeyed up the stone stairs that lead to the Uesugi shrine. "We should have at least called first."

"He called us, remember."

Shuichi sighed, "Yes, to debunk Tatsuha's depression. You failed to call back a week later and tell him you happen to now be a father. The shock may kill him!"

"Here's hoping."

"Yuki!" Yelled Shuichi, "He's your father, when are you going to make amends with him?"

"Hmm, can pigs fly yet?"

"I know you two have had your differences, but he's family and I'm sure deep down he wants to work things out. He probably just finds it hard to find the words to –"

"Stop right there!" Demands a voice.

As they approached the end of their journey, they saw Yuki's father standing before the top step, he held a long wooden stick out menacingly. "Before you enter the sacred land of the shrine, you are to agree to the following terms! #1: No use of fowl language. #2: No smoking. #3: Show respect to our ancestors. #4. That...that over there is NOT to wear a dress. #5: You are to stay in separate rooms. #6: If

anyone asks, that is your assistant. #7: ABOVE ALL! Absolutely NO sexual conduct what so ever with that. UNDERSTAND?!"

Yuki raised an eyebrow in solemn thought, "What if I say he's my assistant who assists with sexual conduct?"

The Buddhist monk whacked him across the head with his stick. Yuki growled, rubbing his head in pain.

"That?" Shuichi's eyebrow twitched, at least he'd graduated from 'it', "Yeah Yuki, here's hoping."

~@~

Shuichi and Yuki sat with the monk in the dining room of the temple, they were dressed in traditional kimonos in respect for their surroundings – not to mention it easily got on his good side.

"Where's Tatsuha?" Asked Shuichi.

He frowned, "Locked in his room, either sleeping or listening to his damn Nittle whatever music again."

"How long has he been in there?"

"About two or three months," he gruffly replied, "Ever since that Sakuma singer died. I thought he'd get over it after a week or so, but he's barricaded himself in his room and only emerges to go to the bathroom or slip his hand out to retrieve the food I bring for him."

"We'll see what we can do," assured Shuichi, patting the contents of the basket by his side.

"What have you brought with you?"

Yuki closes his eyes, "You have your business today, and I have mine."

Shuichi reached into the basket, and drew out the sleeping baby, Ryuko. "We...uh...brought with us...Ryuko Sakuma, Ryuichi's daughter."

"Excellent," Mr. Uesugi praised.

"Excuse me?" They both gasped.

He beamed a smile, "If Tatsuha sees her it's bound to lift his spirits!"

Shuichi sweat dropped, "Yes...it sure should! Heh..."

"That isn't why she's here," seriously said Yuki, "Like I said, I'm also here on my own business."

Shuichi wondered what he was talking about, as did Yuki's father.

"Hear me old man, what is between us stays between us and should not involve the child."

“The child?” he demanded, “What are you talking about?”

“This child...is unfortunately a member of this family now, and so I would like you to give her a Buddhist’s blessing into the Uesugi family.”

His father quizzically stared at him, speechless and stunned.

“You see, recently Shuichi and I adopted her, and since you’ve been so eager for me to settle down and have a family, I thought I’d stop by so you can welcome your granddaughter properly. So, what do you say, Grandpa?”

Sweating furiously, Shuichi forced a smile, jumping to his feet. “You know, I think Ryu-chan and I will go see Tatsuha!” Racing from the room, he could hear Yuki’s father breaking one his own rules, shooting out just about swear word in the Japanese and English dictionary.

~@~

Shuichi laid his ear against Tatsuha’s door; Predilection was playing on his stereo by the sounds of it. “Tatsuha! Hi, it’s Shuichi! Can I come in and listen with you?”

No reply.

“Did you see that special on Nittle Grasper’s forming last week?” He cheerfully asked, “I taped it, if you missed it.”

Still nothing.

“How have you been? I just finished recording my new album and Yuki’s finished his latest manuscript, so we’ve got a lot of time spare. We’re thinking of going on a holiday in America, would you like to come too?”

Tatsuha was still quiet, which began to worry and irritate Shuichi.

“So...I guess you heard Mika’s pregnant, you’ll get to be an uncle, won’t that be something? Well, actually it turns out you already are!”

“What?” Came a dreary voice from within.

“You are listening!” He cheered, “Ne, ne, you see Yuki and I adopted Ryu-chan.”

“...Ryuko...Sakuma...?”

“That’s right.”

“Ryuichi’s...Ryuko Sakuma...?”

“Right!”

Silence fell upon him; Shuichi’s listened again at the door and could hear quiet sobbing. “Tatsuha…”

~@~

“Today’s been a real success,” groaned Shuichi, changing Ryuko’s nappy in his assigned room.

“Did you expect any less from them?” Said Yuki, reading a book.

“And you.”

“Me?”

“Y’know, it wouldn’t kill you to be polite to your father, perhaps he’d show you some respect if you showed him some.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Mika.”

Shuichi finished changing the nappy and gave the baby her bottle. “Very mature of you Yuki.”

Yuki closed his book. “I’m going to bed. See you two in the morning.” With that he left.

Shuichi folded his arms, “Sorry Ryu-chan, sometimes Papa can be a jerk.”

Ryuko tilted her head, suckling her bottle.

~@~

Restless by her new environment, Ryuko found it hard to sleep. Sighing, she grabbed her Kumagoro’s hand and crawled out of her basket. She saw that her daddy was peacefully sleeping and wondered why her papa wasn’t there too. Perhaps he was out getting her a shiny toy; she loved shiny things.

Ryuko caught a glimpse of white light. It shone through the space of opened slide door. Smiling, she decided to follow the white light. It looked very pretty and sparkled against the wooden flooring.

Smiling widely, she crawled toward the light and bumped into the door. Shaking her head, she studied the door, annoyed that she couldn’t fit through. Pushing Kumagorou into the open space, she strained, sliding the door to the side enough to slip through.

Ryuko was now on the cool hard dirt of the temple’s grounds. She wondered where the pretty light had gone, and began to sniffle. Before she could cry, Kumagorou spotted the light shining in the distance. Ryuko decided to carry on searching for the end of the light.

~@~

Shuichi stirred, opening his eyes, sighing to himself. He sat up, moping and idly looked over to the

basket by him for comfort. His eyes widened as he saw the baby was missing. When he saw the door had been further slid open he shot up in a panic, "RYU-CHAN!"

Racing around in a panic, he bashed on all the doors, regardless if it was a bedroom or not, howling that Ryuko was missing. Jumping on the spot in a fit, he waited till Yuki and his father joined him that he calmed down.

"What happened?" Yuki demanded, scanning the area.

"I woke up and she...she was gone! Oh my god, what if she was kidnapped?!"

"Nonsense," sneered Mr. Uesugi, "I'd know if someone had sneaked onto the grounds, the kid probably just crawled away. She couldn't have gotten far."

"We'll split up and search," said Yuki.

"Right!" agreed Shuichi.

~@~

Tatsuha yawned, drudging himself out of his room into the night. He was annoyed Shuichi had woken him up, probably that time of the month he'd thought to himself. After going to the toilet, he walked out of the bathroom and found himself gazing at the moon. It was full, and an amazing bright white. It was so lovely it was almost painful. As he went to go back to his room a movement in the cemetery caught his eye. Maybe it was a cat or dog. Either way he wasn't in the mood to have to clean the monuments.

Sighing, Tatsuha walked into the graveyard. He lazily inspected for that cat or dog. Kicking at the ground, unable to find anything, he was ready to retreat back to his room before anyone could see him. That was when he saw the light. A brilliant white shimmering that streamed down from the moon. His eyes followed the light. They came to rest on a monument in the centre of the cemetery. There he saw the little creature. He half smiled, silently walking toward her.

~@~

Shuichi ran across the temple's grounds, calling out Ryuko's name frantically. Not watching his steps, he tripped over his own feet. Dizzily trying to come to his sense, he could blurrily see someone in a darkened area of the grounds.

"Tatsuha?" he wondered. "Tatsuha, is that you?!"

The man slowly turned around. In the light of the moon he caught his features and knew it was him. Tatsuha turned around, and went back to his staring. Shuichi decided to see what was so damn interesting.

"Ah! Ryu - " Tatsuha held his arm out to silence the ecstatic Shuichi. "But..."

"Sssh, they're sleeping."

Shuichi blinked, staring down at the sleeping Ryuko, who lay on the flat of the stone monument. Moonlight beamed down on her where she lay. "They?"

Yuki and his father found their way to them. Before they could say anything, they were choked back in knowing. Ryuko was sleeping on...on...

"Mother's grave," finally said Yuki.

"Incredible," gasped Shuichi.

Mr. Uesugi didn't peep a word, taking in the brilliance of the moonlight bathing the grave in a brilliant silvery white, and highlighting the sleeping babe to give her the air of a heavenly being.

The four stood around her for what felt like hours. Yuki's father broke the mystique by bending down and picking up the sleeping child. "She can't sleep out here all night, she may get a cold. Come on."

The three blinked, watching him walk off with her.

"So..." said Tatsuha, "when're we off to America?"

"WE?" Demanded Yuki, "Who invited you?" He then turned to Shuichi and knocked him over the head.

~@~

A week passed. Tatsuha had found the courage to begin his duties as a monk again, and discovered how to have fun again by singing loud karaoke in the middle of the night with Shuichi. It would take time to make a full recovery from his depression, but at least he had the building blocks to cope.

Shuichi and Yuki had just finished packing to head back to Tokyo when Mr. Uesugi approached them.

"What now, didn't we pack fast enough?" Yuki asked his father.

He cleared his throat, frowning. "Understand Eiri, I am not advocating your...relationship...with that...so do not misinterpret what I am about to do."

"Spit it out old man."

"You love that child, Ryuko, correct?"

"Yes."

"And you'll protect her just like she was your own?"

"You mean do the exact opposite of you for a child that was your own? Of course."

Mr. Uesugi frowned. "Very well, hand the child to me."

“Huh?”

“You also came here on your own business. You two upheld your side, I feel obligated to do likewise for you.”

Yuki and Shuichi stared in cautious surprise. Mr. Uesugi picked up Ryuko, who was playing with Kumagorou on the floor. She giggled as he tickled her chin. “Who’s a good girl? That’s right, Ryu-chan is!” Ryuko loudly giggled, hugging her grandpa.

Shuichi tugged on Yuki’s sweater, “This is really creepy.”

“Yeah...”

@~NOW~@

“Yuki!” Yells Shuichi, “Your father just hit Hiro over the head with a lantern!”

“He got in the way, it wasn’t my doing!” retaliates the monk, throwing the lantern at Shuichi. Shuichi ducks, the lantern whacking Yuki in the face. His face is marked with red, his ears steam with rage.

“Oh, you’re gonna pay for that old man...”

Before the situation can get out of hand, Mika and Tohma enter the backstage area.

“Father...” gasps Mika, “I can’t believe you’re actually here!”

The monk throws his arms around Ryuko, placing her between him and the furious Yuki. Ryuko beams a nervous smile, making Kumagorou pat his bald head. “I’m so happy you made the trip, Grandpa! Slacker...er...Setsuna, will also be happy too.”

Slacker dolefully listens on the sidelines, “Mildly.”

Tohma claps his hands, “Bad Luck, two minutes to start! Are you prepared?”

Shuichi raises a fist, “Let the party begin!”

Hiro dizzily picks himself off the floor with Himeka’s assistance, “Sure...ugh...thing!”

Suguru smiles to himself, “Ah, just like old times. Bad Luck forever!”

Ryuko squeezes her grandfather, taking the breath right out of him. “THIS IS SO AWESOME!”

The band members ready their mic packs and make last minute checks of the amplifiers.

Sakano takes Shuichi by the shoulders and seriously looks into his eyes. “Shindo-kun, at a time like this, as your long time producer, I have one thing to say to you...DON’T SCREW

UUUUUUUUUUUPPPPPP!”

Shuichi proudly grins, patting Sakano’s shoulder, “Relax, I Shuichi Shindo am a professional!” His smile turns to embarrassment. “Ne, by the way...what song are we doing first, again?”

Sakano zooms around in a whacked out frenzy.

Suguru hangs his head in despair. Sara looks up at her father with an encouraging smile, “Do your best!”

He returns her smile, “I will, Sara-chan. You also do your best, OK?”

Sara nods.

Shuichi makes a rousing howl and kicks into the air, “Time to go! Destiny calls! Fate has spun us into its web. The Gravitation pull is – “

“Mush, Shindo,” commands Tohma.

“Right!” Shuichi gives Ryuko a thumb up, and runs onto stage, greeting his adoring public.

Ryuko grasps the curtains, watching the sea of people with one half closed eye, “The endless white...”

12 - Twelve

IF YOU ENJOY GRAVITY, PLEASE SEE MY DOUJIN WHICH WAS SPAWNED THANKS TO IT AT:
http://www.geocities.com/gravity_snowflake

Ever since she could remember, Ryuko Sakuma has been a hardcore Bad Luck fan. She was told that even as a baby, when Ryuichi was still alive, she would go crazy with glee if a Bad Luck song were playing, or if they were on TV. To be the adopted daughter of the lead vocalist didn't mean she wanted special treatment. No...that is not the way of true fandom. For her it means suffering, yes, suffering like any normal fan. She has always willingly slept over night in front of music stores with her fellow otaku; searched endlessly through 2nd hand stores and markets for old memorabilia; and waited in long queues for concert tickets. Sure, her papa may think she's barmy, and her daddy may cry for her sanity while she rejects his front row tickets; some people just can't understand what true course of fandom is. Easy street just ain't it.

Ryuko bites on the curtains, slobbering like a baby, "They're so damn cool! Gwaaaa, Gwaaaa!"

Himeka rolls her eyes, amused, as she checks the strings on her guitar. "Ha, she's such an idiot. Probably forgotten all about her up and coming debut on real stage."

"But Sakuma Senpai has been on real stages many times," says Sara.

"Karaoke competitions are a little different...and the audiences are never this big."

Ryuko turns around, still biting on the curtain; she gives them the V sign, muffling something.

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

She blinks, spitting it out, "I haven't forgotten. You know Hime-chan, you're wrong, what we're going to be doing tonight is really nothing more than karaoke. We won't be performing as us, we'll be...imitators."

Himeka lowers her guitar, sinking in her seat, "Jeez, way to kill the mood."

"Miss Sakuma," interrupts Sakano, bowing before Ryuko, "it is time for you to try on your outfit."

~@~

That image in the mirror, hazy and bright, painful to the eyes; was that image her? Or was it an illusion? She tilts the mirror more up and steps back. Cosplay has always meant fun and the excitement of being someone else for a moment, but this image doesn't appeal as fun or exciting. The jeans, the shoes, the frilly white shirt and piece of brown leather loosely tied around her neck...

"Oh boy," she gulps.

“My, my,” admires Tohma, “if your hair was shorter and your chest flatter, I’d swear Ryuichi was standing among us.”

“Ah, I do wish I could see my cousin Ryu-chan,” loudly sighs Slacker, who walks behind his mother.

Mika claps, “And now I present to you, in the role of Tohma Seguchi, Setsu-chan!”

Slacker smiles at the rousing noises she makes, she steps to the side to show off her son. Ryuko and Sakano cling to each other in despairing shock.

“He l-l-l-l-l-looks just l-l-l-like...” Ryuko stammers.

“...the President!” wails Sakano, thrusting an arm at him almost accusingly.

Tohma beams a cool smile, just like his son, “Almost.” Tohma takes his black bowler hat off and lays it down on the head of Slacker, who is still shorter than his father. “There, much better.”

Slacker nods, his fringe darkening his eyes, Yes, just like you, Father. “So, I really look the part, huh?”

Mr. Sakano frantically scapes the support beams; freaked by the appearance of Setsuna Seguchi. Two bullets are suddenly fired, near-missing his ears, causing him to fall back. Four roadies spring into action, trampling all over him, putting pressure on the damaged beam.

“I’ll go with yes,” agrees Saki, sauntering onto the scene, flipping her hair. Her shiny blonde curls are in two ponytails, and she’s dressed in borrowed clothes from the coveted wardrobe of Noriko Ukai. “Cute little Saki-chan here, hi-hi!”

Ryuko steps back, “You’re...sober...right?”

“Huh?” Saki waves her hand, “Ryu-chan, you’re too strange. And so is that outfit. Someone get this girl a skirt.”

Tohma shakes his head, “For the purposes of tonight, this will do.”

Saki folds her arms, grumbling at her defeat. “I suppose she’s not even going to wear a skirt for her Bad Luck gig?”

“She’s chosen to wear one of Shindo’s costumes, so the answer is no, Miss Ukai.”

Wincing, Saki flips one of her ponytails, “Humph, no wonder Ryu-chan has image crises, if she spends more time promoting OTHER people’s. Damn and I had this little hot pink number picked out too; shows off her legs really nicely.”

“Saki...” Ryuko sighs, her eyes then blaze, “Hang on, you’re sober!”

“And...?”

“Yet you’re talking about me like you have the hots for me!”

Saki wickedly laughs at herself, and pats Ryuko’s back. “Silly little Ryu-chan. Hahahaha! Oh, but I do. Hey, your little friend Himeka isn’t too bad either.”

“Ehhhhhh?!”

~@~

Himeka hugs her guitar, watching Bad Luck perform on a monitor backstage. Her father looks so cool and full of energy. She sighs, “Wow, he’s so awesome.”

“Ha, too bad you’ll never be!” laughs a mocking boy.

With a growl, Himeka elbows the boy behind her. He falls forward, gasping for air. A large blue box slides in front of her. “Akuto, what’s this?”

Her younger brother shrugs, kneeling by her feet. “Mum wanted me to give this to you. She said she sewed you a special kimono to wear for your performance; as if you already don’t look stupid enough.”

She pinches his ear, ignoring his pleas, as she airily stares at the box. “Wow, a new kimono...!” Himeka still holds his ear, dragging him to the box with her; she caresses it lovingly and opens the lid. Her excitement drains as she stares in puzzlement at the garment. “What the...?”

~@~

“Ah, soon my darling Ryuichi will kick that pink haired wannabe off stage and grace it with his loveliness,” Tatsuha dreamily sighs.

“You mean RYUKO,” Yuki sharply reminds his little brother, “Ryuichi’s long dead. This pathetic denial routine really is getting old; much like the stench of this pruned fossil.” His gaze has turned to his father, who is chanting by some burning incense.

Mr. Uesugi opens one eye, eyeing his eldest son coarsely, “When are you going to be a respectful son, Eiri?”

“When are you gonna die?”

The two men glare. Tatsuha ignores them, returning to his dream world.

Mika watches them, rolling her eyes. “Such idiots, I’m so glad we’ve done such a good job raising Setsuna, he’s free of that sort of weird behaviour.”

“Indeed Mika,” Tohma agrees, “If I were to die tomorrow I feel assured NG would be in safe hands. Setsuna is equipped with ruthless business perception, remarkable intelligence and the endless drive that has earned his status as the eternal slacker. However...I still don’t comprehend his fashion sense.”

Slacker sits close by, nursing his father's hat, listening to their conversation in silence. I learnt all I know from you, Father, it's all you've ever bothered to teach me. Did you really expect less?

"Setsu-chan."

Slacker tilts his head up at hearing Tohma's voice.

"I'm entrusting you with my keyboard tonight."

"Which one do you refer?"

Tohma smiles, "My most prized one, you could call it my lucky keyboard. I used it for all of my live performances. It's invaluable, take good care of it."

Wanting to scowl, he rejects the notion and returns the smile, "Of course, Father."

"Setsuna, we have to go and make some calls," says Mika, "You'll be on soon, so good luck."

"You won't stay with me till I go on?"

"Is there something you needed?"

Setsuna sighs, "No, I suppose not. See you later." He listens as they leave, playing with the hat in his hands.

"Now I see why my mother has a low opinion of yours," sadly says Sara, "It must be painful, Seguchi Senpai."

Setsuna quietly gasps, grinning sheepishly, "Sara-chan, you startled me. It's impolite to spy on people like that."

"Forgive me," she begs, "I didn't mean to. I was looking for your father, hoping he could give me some tips with the keyboard. But I saw he was busy."

"Tohma Seguchi is always busy," laughs Slacker, "some say even when he sleeps he's conjuring business deals to execute come morning. He's truly an ideal businessman."

"How is he as a father?"

"You heard him; he's taught me everything he knows."

Sara giggles into her sleeve, "That's not what I meant, Senpai."

"And I meant what I said," he dangerously replies, "he has taught me all he knows, that is all."

Sara nods, stepping back, "Yes, Senpai."

Slacker folds his arms, holding the hat in one hand, “So you still plan to perform keyboard tonight I hear. You know you’ll make a fool of yourself, why’re you continuing with this?”

“Because we’ll be together.”

“Oh?”

“Sakuma Senpai, Nakano Senpai and I will be together. We will...reek up the stage together,” she happily replies, “whatever happens we will do it as one, and that’s all that matters – that’s all that should matter. Don’t you have that same feeling towards playing with Ukai Senpai and Sakuma Senpai?”

Slacker smirks at such sentiments, “With NG Record’s reputation, as well as Bad Luck’s on the line, I don’t know how you can be so optimistic. As long as I make NG look good I don’t care who I play with.”

“But you’ll be playing on your father’s most prized keyboard, doesn’t that make tonight special for you?” implores Sara.

His most valued asset playing on his most irreplaceable possession. “It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Sara lowers her head. “I see.”

~@~

“RYUICHI, MY HONEY!!!” screams Tatsuha, racing in full force towards Ryuko. Ryuko steps to the side, and watches him fall offstage.

“Someone please tie him down,” she demands.

“He sure is a strange one,” comments Kumagorou, Ryuko making him fly around.

“The transformation is complete, eh?” asks Yuki, “Did they give you his underwear too?”

Ryuko laughs, hoping it was a joke, “Eww, don’t be gross, Papa! Thanks to this costume business I’ve missed most of the first half of the concert. I can’t wait to get this over with so I can get back to watching. Have I missed anything?”

“Hmm, the mic wires got entangled around Shuichi’s foot while he was dancing around like an idiot. A song later he fell over and nearly landed in the audience. He’s a true professional.”

Ryuko goes chibi and bangs at the floor, “IT’S NOT FAIR! IT’S JUST NOT FAIR!”

Yuki lights up a cigarette, “You’ll see it when the DVD comes out; that and his skipping an entire verse in one of his lame love songs. By the time he realized his error he had to make a whole new ending to kill time.”

“THE WHOLE WORLD’S OUT TO GET ME, IT’S JUST SO UNFAAAAAAAIIIIIIIRRRR!!!!!!!!!!”

Saki bends down and picks chibi Ryuko up by her hair, “You’ll live Ryu-chan.”

Chibi Ryuko sulks, “But...is life really worth living if I miss these precious Bad Luck moments?!”

Yuki tosses the cigarette to the ground, stepping it out, “You see Shuichi act worse every day, the only difference here is that he has a larger audience.”

Ryuko returns to her normal size. “Shuichi Shindo the vocalist and Shuichi Shindo my daddy are two different subjects. Daddy acting like a moron is embarrassing at best, while the vocalist doing it is totally cool!”

Saki scratches her head, “That made no absolutely no sense. I need a drink.”

“We’ll be on next,” Slacker reminds her, creeping behind her, “I expect you to be in perfect form, so no liquor for you till we’re done.”

“Fine, fine.”

Bad Luck finishes their last song for the first half. Shuichi tells the audience to lend their support to a different band, one surely to evoke memories and brighten their spirits. The audience roars in anticipation. Bad Luck exits the stage, leaving it dark and bare.

Shuichi almost trips, running off-stage. He laughs at his own stupidity, sweating vigorously from his performances, “What a rush! I could do this all night!” Laughing mindlessly, he falls flat on his face. “Oh...I can’t move.”

“Idiot,” scolds Yuki, “you pushed yourself too hard.” Sighing at Shuichi’s feebleness, he bends down and wraps Shuichi’s arm around his shoulder for support, “Such a fool.” He opens his mouth and kisses Shuichi’s pale, sweaty lips.

Shuichi jumps to his feet energetically. “A kiss from my dear Yuki, I can do anything now! Ha!” With that, Shuichi falls flat on his face again.

“You did that on purpose,” accuses Ryuko.

“It never gets old,” Yuki says with a smirk.

Shuichi grabs hold of Ryuko’s ankle, “Tag Ryu-chan; shine for them the way you shine for me every day.”

Ryuko’s eyes water, she nods as if on a mission. Her gaze turns to the darkness of the stage. “Watch us shine.”

13 - Thirteen

IF YOU ENJOY GRAVITY, PLEASE SEE MY DOUJIN WHICH WAS SPAWNED THANKS TO IT AT:
http://www.geocities.com/gravity_snowflake

His head ached, though that wasn't his biggest concern, as he couldn't feel anything below his shoulders. Confused, he tilted his head up slightly, only to have blood trickle down his forehead. Beside his head was the limp, lifeless face of his beloved wife Hanako. Though her shiny auburn hair was matted in blood, with her eyes serenely closed she appeared as angelic as her nature. He couldn't feel her soft warm breath and knew the impact of the crash had killed her instantly. His throat became swollen and dry, he wanted to cry, but couldn't find his voice.

A sudden gurgle under their bodies startled him from the light feeling in his head that he'd been finding difficult to battle. Straining, he pulled back. His heart raced wildly, adrenaline rushed, his body screamed in agony, no longer numb from shock. Ryuichi clenched his teeth, and fists. The pain was so intense he thought he'd pass out then and there. But he couldn't, knowing his baby daughter was beside him. Hanako and he had thrown themselves over her just before the impact. He wanted to smile, seeing her in perfect condition.

"Ryu-chan..." he managed to whisper.

Ryuko hugged her Kumagorou, a toy bunny that Ryuichi had given her at birth to always protect her and play games with. She sat in her baby seat, suckling his pink ear. The small child felt her mother over her, but she wasn't moving to hug her like usual, her father also wasn't moving, just staring at her sadly. Scrunching up her face, she began to weep the tears her father wished he could.

Ryuichi's heart sank, listening to her cry. Though he knew the pain would come, he forced his hand to her face. He softly caressed her pink cheeks, and began to hum. Ryuko sniffled, and eased out of her crying. "My sleepless...beauty." He always loved calling her that. His little one barely slept; always too busy crying, laughing, or getting into mischief. But he guessed it ran in the family. Without realizing, he had been smiling widely. It made Ryuko smile too. She giggled, placing her small hand on his.

"It will be OK," he warmly whispered. Ryuko however looked ready to begin her tears again, so he rested his head against her's, took a deep breath and began to sing softly, "Please don't cryin', imitating loneliness, cutting into space with entwined regret. Make me shining, fragments of my scattered heart, a radiance that surpasses ho..." His last breaths had left his body. He lay still against his silent baby. Tears trickled down her small face, laying her head to his; the tears stained her father's still warm cheeks.

Drifting off to sleep, she could hear the faint blare of sirens.

~@~

Ryuko stands in the centre of the stage, all she can see is the sea of sea of people in front of her and meek glints of the keyboards on either side of the stage, where she knows Saki and Slacker are positioned. Taking an anxious breath, she raises her microphone above her. In a burst of light, the music

fires up. The crowd roars. Ryuko blinks, 'This isn't Sleepless Beauty...it's Shining Collection!'

Saki struggles not to faint from embarrassment, realizing she'd installed the wrong CD. Shrugging the surprise off, she and Slacker go to work playing with the music. Ryuko nods, and walks toward the front of the stage, holding the microphone to her mouth.

"The motion of imprisonment in a bed of glass
that is first broken by the fumbling of a lady
a loose collection of feathers with a tail of soliday
that almost screams the innocence desired at night"

Behind the curtains, Sara mournfully watches Slacker play his father's keyboard. His face is smiling as usual, though she can feel his intense sorrowed rage. She realises it wasn't just Ryuko who stood to lose their individuality through the concert. "Was this a mistake...?"

"Dancing through freedom and lies in the mood of depression
fragile puzzle pieces that break away from this course"

Returning from the dressing room area, Himeka is still in her performance kimono. She holds the box her brother had given her, and her guitar in the other. Listening to her best friend sing to the audience, she sighs, shaking her head, "Man, she can do better, she shouldn't deepen her voice like that it just isn't HER." Himeka wanders to the other side of the curtain to take a peek.

"Kiss shining; we're kissing in my eyes
Melting away even the flower petals in our way
Make me shining, changing into the most exciting colours
That first shone in a vision"

Ryuko moves her arms and body as if she were Ryuichi Sakuma, her mind and soul is now immersed in his spirit. Through the music she almost feels she is Ryuichi. Note after note, bar after bar, the music is pumped out through the speakers, echoing across the night.

"The field of view excels the dimension of panorama
a perfect mimesis that can only tremble
a cheap touch whose reaction is to look for secrets
you want to see them even if they are coldly obscene"

Tatsuha places his fingers against the backstage monitor. "Ryu...ichi..." he breathes, lowering his head. Yuki sighs, laying a hand on his little brother's shoulder. Tatsuha raises his head, grinning like an idiot, starting Yuki. "Not Ryuichi!"

Yuki nods, "Good to see you're back to reality."

Tatsuha points accusingly at the screen, "Hey you! No wannabe aloud! Get your @\$ off stage if you're going to sing like that!!!"

Groaning, his elder brother whacks him into the ground. "Idiot."

"A sea of gushing pleasure that alters the colours of the rainbow
that strikes into this world adding shadows to the fringed game"

Himeka and Sara catch each other's eye. Their gaze then returns to the stage. Though they don't utter a word, they know exactly what the other is thinking, and they agree. Lighting up with snide smirks, readying to shake the past, and change the set future, the girls take their instruments.

"Kiss shining, imitating loneliness
Cutting into space with entwined regret
Make me shining, fragments of my scattered heart
A radiance that surpasses hope"

Saki presses down Noriko's tunes on her keyboard; she gasps as Himeka Nakano, armed with guitar steps in front of her. Himeka slams the keyboard with her fist, "Hey, I'M Ryuko's right-hand girl, get to the other side of the stage."

Saki continues playing, hearing Sakano wail in fright in the background. Himeka steps to the side and lunges at the keyboard, watching it fall offstage. Saki steps back in horror, gasping for air.

Himeka grins, winking, "You look cooler with a hand-held anyway; you'll find one waiting on the other side. And for God's sake, let your hair down."

Saki emulates her smirk, laughing to her self, she runs offstage.

"Red soaked fingertips dye the atmosphere with fluttering butterfly tears"

Sara clutches one of the two keyboards Slacker plays on. "Seguchi Senpai, you don't have to do this."

Slacker frowns, "Get off the stage, what are you doing?!"

"I mean it!" Sara begins to tug at it, pulling it away from him. "You don't have to take his neglect."

Slacker abandons the other keyboard and clutches the other side of the keyboard, playing a game of tug-o-war with his cousin. "This has nothing to do with you, Sara-chan!"

"Stop being a coward!"

"I'm not a coward!" He roars, the keyboard slipping from their grasps, flying into the air. Bullets pelt the keyboard as it soars in the air; it explodes into the lights of the stage, becoming one with the glow.

"And all is turned to sand...Shining, make you cry!"

The music continues to play. The lights switch off after the bridge is over. Ryuko steps back. Two hands pull her back, and begin to undo her belt. She shrieks off-mic and blushes. "What's happening?!"

"Oh relax Ryu-chan," laughs Saki, "this'll only take a minute." Ryuko's jeans slip off, as does her shirt,

some soft leathery outfit is slipped over her and her hair is quickly done up.

"Saki, what is going on?"

"Something that is bigger than Bad Luck and Nittle Grasper combined."

Ryuko half-smiles, not quite sure what she's talking about.

A spotlight beams down to the front right of the stage, Himeka is there. She rips off her traditional kimono, to reveal a black and blue short leather kimono. Thrusting her body out, she slips her guitar over one shoulder and overpowers the guitar in the backing music.

Another spotlight falls to the left, where Saki emerges with a keyboard strapped over her shoulder. She walks along the stage, and waves to Himeka.

Saki laughs into her mic, "Bring on the bam-bam-babee!"

Backstage, Tatsuha does a cheesy karate stance, "Ninja ha!" He spins around and mightily kicks a large drum kit onto the stage. He bows, "Wah!" His father growls, taking him by the ear, "YOU'RE A MONK, NOT A NINJA!!!"

Slacker leaps into the seat of the drums, drowning out the drums of the music. A spotlight falls his way; he smirks, loving the pleased howls of the audience.

Still in the darkness, Ryuko's heart flutters, seeing her friends come together. She wonders where Sara is, until a smaller spotlight plunges off-centre, to reveal Sara Fujisaki, readying her violin. Her eyebrows rise. Sara goes to work on the strings of the violin, following the tune of the song. Ryuko is so amazed she nearly misses her queue.

A final white spotlight falls on her. She lifts the mic to her mouth and follows the spotlight across the stage.

"Kiss shining, we're kissing in my eyes
Melting away even the flower petals in our way
Kill me shining, changing into the most exciting colours
That first shone in a vision"

Ryuko catches a glimpse of her outfit; made of short pink shiny leather, it reaches mid her thighs and zips up to her neck's end, though it's zipped down to show some cleavage. Her hair is all over the place, tied into a ponytail that resembles a palm tree. She looks so different, but so...her. 'Is this my truth? Is this who I am?'

Her eyes widen innocently, she stamps at the stage and brings out her most passionate voice to end the song.

"Please don't cryin', imitating loneliness
Cutting into space with entwined regret"

Make me shining, fragments of my scattered heart
A radiance that surpasses hooooooooooooooooope!"

Ryuko steps back, catching her breath, allowing her band members to end the musical score of the song. Coming together, they finish with the bang - Tohma's other stray keyboard sniper shot several times at the climax.

~@~

"Excellent work, Michael!" Proudly exclaims K, hugging his boy.

Michael blows on the end of his gun, "It's a gentleman's job to come to the aid of the needy. Plus...Tohma Seguchi told my senior officer this afternoon of my misconduct in Osaka and had me fired. Hope you're not too disappointed, Dad."

"Fired? Hmm...need a job in the secret service?"

"Nah, I was thinking...another profession..." Michael directs his attention to the five on stage.

K nods in understanding. "You may need bigger guns...maybe a tank too."

~@~

Ryuko motions for the audience to settle down. She becomes flush, lowering her head. "I now realise I spend more time saying 'I am NOT Ryuichi Sakuma' instead of 'I AM Ryuko Sakuma', so I will work hard to show the world who I am instead of wasting my moments to disprove who I am not." Ryuko quietly tilts her head a little upward. "My name is Ryuko Sakuma, I am pleased to meet you. I am 16 years old and an average high school student who likes nothing more than sleeping through math and counting down the minutes till lunchtime. I live in a high-rise apartment with my two loving fathers, Shuichi Shindo and Eiri Yuki." Ryuko lifts her head high. "I was born from the womb of Hanako Morita and fathered by Ryuichi Sakuma. They're treasured legends and should never be forgotten for their talents or good hearts. I see them every day of my life. I see my father, Ryuichi, when I play with my Kumagorou, and when I make a silly face; and I see my mother, Hanako, when I get complimented for my emerald eyes, and especially whenever I goofily fall over from my own ignorance and laugh. They are always with me, as they are with you. So instead of shedding tears for the past, follow me in rejoicing them for the future, with the many gifts and lessons they have left behind."

The crowd rises in applaud, Ryuko bows, wondering where to go from there.

"Sakuma Senpai," says Sara.

Ryuko looks back to see Sara, who has readied her violin. "Perhaps we should...reek up the stage with another song?"

"Bad Luck or Nittle Grasper?" Wonders Ryuko.

"Neither," yawns Saki, making up a tune on her keyboard.

Himeka strums along to the tune, "So, who are we exactly?"

"Snowflakes," mindless whispers Ryuko.

Saki fiddles around with her keyboard some more, and walks up to her microphone, "Saki-chan here! Hi-hi! Our kawaii vocalist Ryu-chan will now enchant you with our first song! Welcome to SNOWFLAKE!"

Ryuko almost falls back, sweat dropping, "What are you doing?"

Sara and Slacker follow the lead of the two musicians in front. The people in the crowd clap along joyously. Ryuko scratches her head, "What am I supposed to sing?! I don't have any prepared lyrics!"

Himeka scoffs, "You're a writer, so WRITE."

Gulping nervously, Ryuko closes her eyes and lets the night inspire her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"Silken shadows press against my heart
And I shudder in the dust
Awakened by a distant memory
I drift into the deep black sky.

Floating through the void of time
I try to shatter the sky
Break free of the abyss I'm in
And find that certain star.

Could it be? Should it be? Tell me now
Shaken into this bitter feud with space
Make me a dreamer; make me a believer
Drain away my sorrow into the oceans
Could it be? Should it be? I need to know.

Surrounded by chills of yesterday
I try to run toward it courageously
Pushed away and pained by rejection
Carry on to tomorrow

Could it be? Should it be? Tell me now
Shaken into this bitter feud with space
Make me a fighter; make me a pioneer
Give me the light to see the way
Could it be? Should it be? I need to know.

That star is you and I, a place we shine so brightly
Follow me to that day where we held each other

Suguru and Hiroshi enter the stage with their instruments. Slacker takes his microphone and turns up the volume. "We would also like to invite Nittle Grasper's Noriko Ukai and Tohma Seguchi to join us in this song."

Backstage, Tohma is still dealing with the loss of his keyboard. "I...this wasn't part of...my plan...I didn't think Setsuna would..."

Mika folds her arms; "You wanted your son to be happy; to play in a band with his cherished cousin Ryuko. Well he did and is happy, so why don't you try to revel in your success. You have plenty of other keyboards anyway."

Tohma frowns at her lack of empathy. Noriko comes from behind and takes him by the arm, "Come on Tohma, we can't let the kids show us up!"

Tohma casually nods, "I suppose you're right, Noriko."

The two make their way onto stage. Tohma stops by Slacker, and bows his head to him. "Good work, Setsuna Seguchi."

Slacker nods, "Thank-you, I learnt well from my father."

With everyone assembled, Ryuko and Shuichi raise their fists high, "LET'S GO, EVERYONE!"

~@~

And that's how I became a rock star. Today I have a record deal, legions of fans worldwide and my own bowling alley. Yep, it all went according to destiny's plan. I think next I'll become an ice-skater...or a helicopter!

"Swear to God, you are such a moron," yawns Himeka, slurping up a French fry.

The girls sit in their favourite café, sipping soda and eating junk food. A week has passed since Bad Luck's performance.

"Hey, if I want to play pretend rock star I can!" Insists Ryuko.

Himeka laughs, "OK, OK. Y'know, it's weird to know I'll live in Tokyo for a year, even though I am glad Bad Luck have decided to put out a new album."

"I'm more shocked you didn't make a big stink about it. After all, Kumagorou and I know how much you love your precious Kyoto and can't stand this wretched big fake city." Ryuko makes stupid faces mockingly, while wiggling around her toy.

Himeka turns away dryly, sipping her vanilla coke, "You are such a child. I am a mature young woman who wouldn't make a fuss about such things."

Ryuko sips up on the table, knocking their food off. She peers into Himeka's face with a dangerous

gleam in her eye, "It's because you're going to go to a school with boys isn't it."

Himeka gulps.

"Little sexually deprived all-girl private school snob gets her chance to mingle with big city...BOYS! Suddenly public school isn't looking so bad, eh?"

Himeka bites down on her straw angrily.

"But of course you're only FOURTEEN so your daddy would NEVER EVER let his innocent baby girl DATE!"

Himeka pulls the straw from the coke can, puts it to her mouth and blows coke into Ryuko's eye. Ryuko yelps falling off, rubbing her face and aching butt. "Ouchy!" Ryuko springs up, armed with a ball of borrowed scrolls. "Evil cow, I'll kick your @\$@ with the powers of Buddha!"

"Bring it on!"

Just as they go into attack mode, a man dressed in a black suit bursts through the doors, armed with a machine gun. The patrons scream, ducking under their tables. That is, all but Ryuko and Himeka, who return to their fight. The man fires a shot into the air. The girls decide to pay attention, and stand before the man.

"Big news!"

"How original," sarcastically spits Himeka, "It's ok folks, he's harmless...sort of."

Ryuko folds her arms, "Michael, we don't need a manager, remember? We told the press we weren't interested in signing up to be a pro band, we're all busy with school and stuff, plus I'm not sure I even wanna be a pro singer."

Michael holds his gun to the side of the girl's head and smiles courteous, "Snowflake may not be a record producing band, but you're going to be a band nether the less, correct?"

"As a hobby, yeah," explains Himeka, "for extra pocket money. That yaoi manga isn't going to buy itself, you know."

Ryuko glares at her friend. "Pervert."

"The band may be a hobby for you, but Mr. Seguchi is paying me a handsome salary to be your manager and I intend to take my job seriously."

Ryuko snatches his gun and uses it to hook his neck, "Are you telling me Tohma Seguchi is paying you to be our manager?!"

"Ack!" He gags, "No! Setsuna Seguchi is."

~@~

Slacker sips grape juice from a crystal glass, stroking his dog. "It's good to be me."

~@~

Ryuko droops her head, "It's all just one big plot against me, isn't it?"

Himeka eats a few salt'n'vinigar chips, "You're so paranoid; the world does not revolve around you."

Ryuko sighs, she presses play on the DVD player.

"What are we watching? A movie?" Asks Himeka.

"A music video collection."

"Excellent. Bad Luck?"

Ryuko shakes her head, smiling, captivated as the DVD begins. "No, but just as good."

Himeka narrows her eyes and gazes at the screen. She leans over and rubs her friend's hand kindly. "Just as good."