

How To 'Trap' A Mimic



Nick Lorance



A "Her Tv" Novel



Mags, Inc/Reluctant Press TG Publishers

This story is a work of fiction; any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. All situations and events herein presented are fictional, and intended only for the enjoyment of the reader. Neither the author nor the publisher advocate engaging in or attempting to imitate any of the activities or behaviors portrayed.

For more, visit reluctantpress.com or magsinc.com.

Protect Professional Fiction on the Internet

We need *your* help! We spend several hundred dollars to edit, illustrate and typeset *each story*. It is important, therefore, that everyone works to help keep professional fiction alive on the Net.

The civil penalties for copyright infringement can be severe, including substantial monetary damages, injunctive relief, and liability for attorneys' fees incurred in prosecuting a case. In addition, criminal penalties may be imposed if someone willfully infringes a copyrighted work for commercial advantage or private financial gain.

Mostly, though, we just want to be able to keep offering this service to our authors and our readers.

Report stolen books by using the contact form at reluctantpress.com or call us at 800-359-2116

Thank you.

How to ‘Trap’ a Mimic

By Nick Lorange

“Taylor!” I turned, waving at Dana O’Toole. She was one of my best friends; had been since the first grade. Her long blond hair bounced, as did her breasts as she ran toward me. I just enjoyed the view.

She slapped my arm when she finally caught up.
“Perv.”

“Me a perv? With you bouncing acres of creamy goodness when you run, I’m a perv? What kind of red-blooded man isn’t going to enjoy watching that?”

“Chris for one.”

“All right, what red blooded *straight* man?”

"Yeah, but we've been friends forever and you don't treat me like a girl."

"Because we have been friends forever." I told her. "As much as I like your bouncy-bouncy, I don't want to screw that up by treating you like a girl."

"Then stop looking at me like that."

"Hey, you bouncy, I lookie."

She just shook her head. Graduation was only a week away, and we were both kinda sad about that. We had been lucky as hell through school. Except for gym class, we'd been in the same classes together every school year. She had taken choir because I did, and I took home economics because she did. Try three years of being the only guy in an all-female class to make people wonder about your sexuality. Of course we had both gotten into the Martial Arts clubs, so most kept their thoughts about my sexuality to themselves.

"Hey guys!" We looked back, and Chris De Marco caught up with us. He had sandy brown hair, and an irrepressible smile. "Did it come yet, Taylor?"

"I don't even think it's breathing heavy yet."

He slapped my arm. "You are so bad."

"You hit like a girl." I told him, and he gave me a little moue like he was pouting. "That look doesn't work on me, you homo."

"Well it does on Mister Allbright."

"You're not saying he's..."

"Oh no!" He giggled. "He's just so easily flustered. You know what he asked me?" He looked at both of us. "If I have to go fight for my country, how can I serve if I'm gay!"

"He does know 'don't ask don't tell' was rescinded?" I asked.

"He just thinks we gay people can't fight."

"He's never been in a gay bar then, has he?" Dana said.

"Neither have I," Chris said virtuously.

"Because you're underage, you twerp," I shot back.

"No, because we've been too busy with the band," he retorted. "Mike would have taken me to one ages ago if I had but asked.

"You mean if you had knelt and kissed his ass--"

"But with one 't', you bitch." He mock glared at me. "You still haven't answered."

"Not yet." I sighed. We'd been jamming a few months earlier, and Chris had written a song. He was good enough for back-up vocals, but as a lead singer he didn't have the range. Can't really look down on him for that. I can't play guitar, keyboard or the drums worth a damn, but I've got the right kind of voice. But he was a poet at heart, and another name for poet is lyricist, meaning he could write one hell of a song. His song 'Love'll Get You If You Don't Watch Out' sounded good with just a keyboard and voice. When he finished playing, we decided to try it with our band, Cosplay.

We'd been friends a long time, Chris joining our little circle when we reached high school. The band had been his idea. Dana played a mean set of drums, Chris was great on rhythm guitars and keyboard, and Mike played a wicked bass. Mike Goldblum, his 'lover' ("Yeah, right," Mike would always reply laconically) was a college guy studying for a degree in Oriental Languages. We had spent a long time coming up with the band name, and since Cosplay was something we all enjoyed, we chose it;

subject to revision. Honestly, do you know how many band names the average modern band goes through?

Anyway, our Principal (The reason we had not only a Judo Club, but a Karate club, a Kendo Club and a Aikido club. Did you think I misspelled it when I made it plural?) had discovered that our sister city, Kifo, Japan was going to have a Culture festival, and had decreed we'd have one on the same day, which thanks to the International Date Line meant we'd be having it on Friday which for them was Saturday. And since it was a Japanese festival, our suggestion that we turn our class into the Cosplay Cafe was accepted easily.

When the class remembered that the band was named Cosplay, we were dragooned into performing. It was a blast. All of the stalls were selling Japanese snacks (You have to try the fried octopus balls!), and the auditorium was set up for all of the bands that were going to perform. We had gone all out, each of us in the band in a different costume from the Ranma series. So I went as Male Type Ranma, Dana as Girl Type with her hair tinted red, Chris as Ryoga, and Mike with a fake mustache as Soun Tendo.

Well, with that kind of outfitting, we had to do the theme song from the second season, and when they understood that we knew the Japanese lyrics, the crowd was screaming for more. The best music from the show after that was the theme for the last OVA season. We went through that, and they still wanted more. Chris did a riff from his own song, and I wiped sweat away before speaking. "Our last number is something brand new, written by Chris. So for the first time anywhere, 'Love'll Get You If You Don't Watch Out!'"

When you're singing for a crowd, there's a moment when you know you click. They're moving and grooving to your tune, they're dancing, clapping in time, and you're enjoying the performance as much as they are.

Then that hush when the song is done, followed by the roar of the applause.

Everyone said the same thing over and over that day, and it was repeated on Monday when a guy from the Visual Arts department handed me DVD's he'd recorded us on.

You guys should go pro...

It's the dream of every garage band; that your tunes, your vocals will catch the public interest and make you a star. We had three years of our blood, sweat, and tears in hand, and we felt the beckon of destiny. So we took all of our hopes, put them in an envelope with the DVD, and mailed it off.

Six weeks and no reply. I for one was sure we'd been hosed. Face it; hundreds of little garage bands send off their hopeful 'try me' DVDs every month, and in the last decade you can count the ones who get a record deal on the fingers of one hand with some to spare.

I think I was the only one who figured our music would fall into the abyss and never be seen again. But I kept a good front for the others. We sent it off with all of our dreams tied to it.

"Maybe today." I told him.

"Next year in Jerusalem." We turned. It was Mike.

I mock glared at him. "Thanks, Jew-boy."

"I'm not a little Jew-boy." He replied.

"Are you *sure* you're not a little Jew-boy?" I asked mimicking a joke he had told us. He looked at me, and his eyelid dropped slowly.

"I'm a *big* Jew-boy." And he was. He played Defensive tackle on our football team and looked like a six-foot four-inch tall brick wall/statue with a bad attitude.

We laughed together, heading for my home. Everyone else lived with their parents; not surprising since we were all under age except for Mike, but my house was the team clubhouse, and my garage was where the band was set up. I lived in a townhouse with my mother. We'd been without a dad since I was five, and good riddance. My dad gave fatherhood a bad name.

Mom told me once that her relationship with my father reminded her of an old TV show named *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*; especially in how they finally broke up. The climactic episode of the show was when after spending the entire season not even touching her, the lead couple finally made love, only to have the man in the show informed by his squeeze on the side that she had an STD. Of course she hadn't told him earlier because he never touched his wife anyway...

So for my fifth birthday, we received two letters. One from the local health department where someone who has caught an STD is required to report any other possible partners of the couple, and of course the girl on the side had reported Mom's name. The other was from a lawyer slapping Dad with a paternity suit from a third woman.

Great birthday, Dad. Thanks a lot.

The marriage staggered on for four more years until Mom was crying about yet another girl on the side and I just told her to dump his ass. She'd only tried for so long because she didn't want to hurt me. When I said that, she filed for divorce. Like a bull fighter, she got both ears and the tail; alimony, the car and the house. She'd straightened her shoulders, went out, and found work. By the time dad remarried and asked her to let his alimony go, we were doing all right.

He'd tried to get me in his custody, but the judge was a woman, and never even considered him there. He had

visitation rights, but he stopped doing that about two years ago.

We came into the house, and heard Mom on the phone. I knew immediately who she was talking to when I heard the tone in her voice. "It's not my problem, John." She said. She noticed us and covered the mouthpiece. "It's your sperm donor again. Snacks in the fridge." Then she uncovered the mouthpiece again. "So she got fed up with you two-timing her? What? *Another* paternity suit? Why am I not surprised."

We got the tray she had set up; veggies, ranch dressing and glasses of milk, and sat and listened. Having him call was better than watching a live car chase on TV.

"No, you can not move back in for a while... I don't care if you're living in a cardboard box and pushing your worldly goods around in a shopping cart... Fine, ask him if you want." She held up the phone. "Your Dad hopes he can change my mind by talking to you."

"I took the phone. "Hello, sperm donor."

"Come on sport, talk to her for me," he begged.

I held the phone without covering the mouthpiece. "Hey mom, you want to let the sleaze move back in?"

"No way in hell."

"She said no way in hell, and I believe her. Listen, I really hate to break up this pleasant family reunion, but I have to take a dump. Write if you get work, bye." I handed the phone back, and she hung it up. For a couple of seconds, the air was filled with tension.

"You know, if he had actually been just a sperm donor, I think you could sue the sperm bank," Dana suggested. Mom looked at her, then began to giggle. We all laughed at that.

"Mom, did we get anything from the record company?"

She opened her purse, one of those that could double as an overnight case. "I didn't bother to check the mail, just picked it up. Let's see, bank statement, bill, bill, some record company, bill--"

"Mom!" She gave me a sidelong look, then pulled the cream-colored envelope out, passing it over. I looked at it for a long time.

Dana poked me. "Come on, you dork, open it."

"I can't." I handed it to her. "You open it."

"What, so if we're rejected it's my fault? No way, Joe-Say."

"Oh for pity sake." Mom snatched the envelope, nodding thanks to Mike when he popped out his knife. She sliced it open, pulling out the pages inside. She opened them, and read silently.

"Well? Read it, Mom!"

"I *am* reading it."

I growled. "Out loud, so we can hear it."

"Oh, no one told me that part." She looked up with such a bland expression that I wanted to throttle her.

"Dear sir,

"Our acquisitions department received your disc, and they have brought it to my attention. The song you have on it is very well done, so well done in fact that we wish to speak not only to the songwriter, but the lead singer as well. We will have a representative in your city on Friday, and he would like to arrange a meeting with you both to discuss the possibility of signing your band.

"Sincerely, Joseph Westerly, Central States Marking Vice President." She looked up into our stunned faces. "You know, I think he might have liked your stuff."

Then we were shouting in joy. We'd caught the brass ring! We'd done it!

"Well, I for one think this is something to celebrate," Mom said when the furor finally died down. "What say a steak dinner out?"

"Right on!" Chris leaned over, and kissed me on the cheek.

Mom looked at him with a mock glare. "Christopher, if I have told you once, I have told you a thousand times; none of that in my kitchen. Take it upstairs to the bedroom."

"And not with me." I laughed.

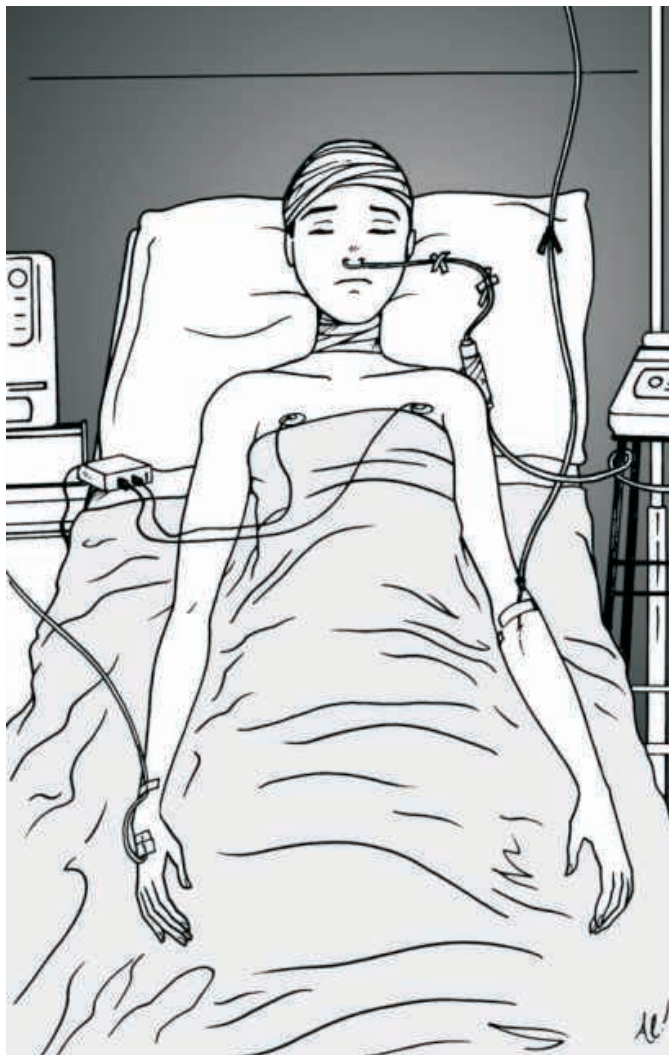
We got ready, and Mom really dressed up for it. In fact she looked like someone from an orphanage dragging some of her problem kids along when we got out to the car. We had a favorite family-style restaurant we always went to, and Mom parked in the lot. It was a busy night, so we had to walk a short way but nothing could ruin this afternoon

The neighborhood had started to decline a few years ago, so we had formed a square to keep Mom in the center and safe. We were coming up to the door when a group of Latinos with red bandanas around their heads came out.

What happened next was a blur that returns in my nightmares even today. First squealing tires, then someone shouting, and the Latinos started drawing weapons. Then, as I turned around, I heard a rapid popping sound. At the same instant, Mom staggered against me, some-

thing sprayed across my face, and something hit me in the throat like a hammer.

I tried to hold Mom up, but I was coughing on blood, and I collapsed to my knees under her dead weight. Mike tackled us both as Chris and Dana dove for the pavement. I remember all of that now, but when it happened it was a blur, and I was holding Mom to my chest. She was limp, and part of me wanted to shake her like she had just



fallen asleep. Mike was staring at me with a horrified expression. That was the last I remembered for a long time.

I came awake, and looked around blearily. It was a hospital room. I had tubes in my nose and an IV stuck in my arm. Beside the bed, Dana had fallen asleep, holding my hand. I tried to call her, and coughed as my throat spasmed. She snapped upright, putting her hand over my mouth. "Don't try to talk, Taylor. You were shot in the throat."

Shot? I remembered the popping sound, the impact. I looked around, and she handed me a pad and pencil without being asked.

HOW BAD?

"The doctors will be here in a while. It's only been about eighteen hours since it happened."

I remembered Mom falling against me. MOM?

She looked away, then back, crying. "Oh, Taylor. She was hit in the head. She's dead, Taylor, oh God, she's dead."

Shattered Dreams

Mom was dead, and I felt dead at the news. She had been my best bud ever since we kicked Dad to the curb. There was never anything more important if I needed attention. We would listen to her collection of old classic rock, and she discovered that I could sing any song I had heard more than three or four times almost exactly as the artist performed it. She'd joked that I could become the next Rich Little, calling me her little mimic.

I'd been in choir every year of school I had done, and in junior high I was one of only three first sopranos. Think of that sweet high-pitched voice that literally weaves the words of the leading female in opera into a story. Then at fourteen, my voice changed and suddenly I was one of

four baritones my last year of junior high; think of the villains in the opera instead.

Most people go through a lot of hell when their voices change, but mine just moved from one to the other like it was preordained. One week able to sing Brunhilde's part in Die Valkure, the next, able to Sing Odin's.

Now she was dead, and we'd never sing duets from those old records again. I picked up the pad. WHAT ABOUT HER BODY?

"The police asked your Dad to identify her-" She gasped as I almost crushed her hand. I scribbled furiously.

GET THE OTHERS, GET TO THE HOUSE!

"Taylor-"

NO TIME! IF HE'S ID'ED THE BODY, HE PROBABLY GRABBED HER EFFECTS. HOUSE KEYS, CAR KEYS, WALLET. EVERYTHING!

She started to protest, then merely grabbed her phone. She gave terse instructions, then was gone running.

I heard about it later. The first thing, the one that whetted my appetite for the full story was an hour after she had run out. A police sergeant came in, asking if I knew a John Stanhope. Of course I did, he was after all the sperm donor, oh, sorry, my father. He then asked if I had sent my friends to the house. I said I had. He then said there had been an altercation and two of my friends, the guys, were in custody awaiting transport to the station for assault, assault and battery, and assault with intent because they had fought with dear old Dad.

He then asked me if I had verbally given my father permission to enter the house. I waved at my throat, and told him via notes that I couldn't have told him that, and since Mom had divorced him, Dad had no right to be in

the house. He used his radio to call dispatch, told me my friends were being released, and that they'd get the moving van away from the house. But he left without telling me what moving van.

Then the doctors showed up. One was a dapper little man in a lab coat with a chart, the other a smaller Asian man, also in a lab coat. They introduced themselves as Cartwright, and Lim. They didn't bother to ask me how I was feeling.

"You were a tough case, son." Cartwright said. "If doctor Lim hadn't been visiting, we'd probably have more problems to deal with than we do. The bullet that killed your mother exited her skull before impacting your throat, and thanks to that, it had lost most of it's energy--"

I waved my hands, writing frantically. THANKS TO MY MOTHER'S DEATH?

"I am sorry, son. I didn't mean to sound callous, but if the killer had used something like a 9mm or a .45, it would have killed you both. But he used a .38 in a snub-nosed revolver, which meant when it passed through your mother, it mushroomed, and when it hit you, it merely ripped across the front of your throat and imbedded itself here." He poked his own throat to the left of his Adam's apple. "In doing so, it shattered your larynx and imbedded cartilage in your voice box on the same side.

"Doctor Lim has a great deal of experience with Chondrolaryngoplasty; working on the larynx and Adam's apple itself, so he was able to remove the shattered cartilage after I got the bullet out. Of course his experience is more with sexual reassignment surgery, but the procedure is the same, and thanks to his skill, you shouldn't even have a scar. However the left vocal cord was nicked by the cartilage, and until you're healed, he

can't work on that. Unfortunately, your guardian refused to even think about that procedure."

GUARDIAN?

"Yes. With your mother dead, your father is claiming guardianship because he's your sole surviving relative..." He ran down because I was writing furiously.

HE MAY BE MY FATHER, BUT MOM DIVORCED HIM WHEN I WAS NINE. HE IS NOT MY GUARDIAN.

He sighed. "Be that as it may, he is your sole surviving relative and has already threatened litigation if we proceed without his permission. In fact, he told us he was going before a court to have himself declared your guardian later today."

Dana came in then, and I asked her to go to the house and get Mom's Rolodex from her desk. She left again.

ALL RIGHT, UNTIL THIS GUARDIANSHIP BULLSHIT IS TAKEN CARE OF, TELL ME STRAIGHT. HOW BAD IS IT?

"Well, without the procedure we were about to discuss, you'll heal, but your voice is damaged. We don't know how bad yet."

TALK TO ME

Lim took over. "What I was going to suggest is that we perform surgery using a technique that has proven to work in my native Thailand. First, using a laser, we trim the damaged cord, then trim the undamaged as well the exact same amount; in this case about eight microns total, eight millionth's of a millimeter."

SO I CAN SING AGAIN. They looked at each other. WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Lim sighed. "The Chondrolaryngoplasty itself has already altered your vocal range. This would alter it even

more. You remember when your voice changed? Going through puberty, the chemical mix of your blood caused the vocal cords to drop and thicken, causing a deeper voice. We don't know how much your vocal range will change when we do this. You may sing again eventually, but nowhere close to your old voice."

HOW DIFFERENT?

"You will have a voice that is higher. How high we don't know yet. Without it, however, you would be able to talk, even sing, but not with your old singing voice, and trying to sing might cause additional damage and eventual loss of voice."

Numbly, I told them I'd get back to them after I dealt with the 'Guardianship bullshit'. But I wasn't thinking about that.

I'd never be able to sing again...

The beginning of the farce

My lunch was warm soup, custard, Jell-o, and warmed-up milk. The nurse told me that they wanted everything as close to lukewarm as possible so it wouldn't chill or burn me when I ate. Dana arrived with the Rolodex, and told me that Chris and Mike had stayed at the house. They had just been leaving when she arrived, and they caught Dad as he got in again. It seems that when he'd gotten Mom's keys, he'd had duplicates made. They relieved him of those, but just in case, they were staying put.

I flipped through to mom's "Lawyer's" section, and found a name. Dana called him, told him what had happened, and what dad was going to try to do. He didn't handle that kind of case, but he was able to transfer us to a partner who did. That woman told me she'd find out who was listening to the case, and have the procedure

halted. But she also warned me that the only way to stop him cold was for me to have myself declared emancipated. Through notes, I told her to do it, and bring any papers that had to be signed, giving her the room number in the hospital.

It was only then that I found out about the 'altercation'. Dana had called Chris, and Chris had called Mike. They were both en-route from their homes, only about four blocks for Mike, less for Chris. Dana had been lucky catching the bus, and arrived about five minutes after dad did.

Dad had hired a moving van, and the movers were already inside as Dad tried to out-yell Chris and Mike. Dana arrived, bypassed him, and stood in the way, refusing to let the movers go in or out. Dad started yelling at her instead, and a neighbor called the police.

Then Dad had done the most stupid thing he could do. He shoved Dana out of the way, and as they commented in Star Wars: Attack of the Clones, the 'adverse negotiations' began.

Mike grabbed his arm, and took a punch in the stomach. Chris punched him in the face, and Dad did the same in return. That was when Dana kicked him in the crotch, and Mike began beating on him like a red-headed step-child until the movers pulled him off.

That was when the police arrived. Dad accused them all of attacking him without provocation, and demanded that at least the guys be charged. Dana told another officer that with his ex-wife dead, he had come over to steal everything not nailed down. There was another screaming match between Dana and Dad until she employed that soccer-trained kick yet again and had to be restrained. Finally the officer called it in, and the sergeant was dispatched to talk to me. The guys sat in handcuffs,

and the cops had threatened to cuff Dana as well when she began blocking the entry again. Finally they told the movers to stop, and they waited until the sergeant reported.

They'd cut Chris and Mike loose; after all, you have the right to protect your property, and my sending them to stop Dad was legally the same. They then stood there and watched the movers put everything back that they had removed before telling Dad to go away, and telling the guys that they needed to get the locks changed 'just in case'.

I told her what the doctors had said, which brought the mood in the room back down big time. We had all dreamed the dream together, and now none of us had one left.

About three in the afternoon, Monica Collins, the lawyer suggested to me, arrived. She asked Dana to leave. "After all, I spent four years in law school; you have to read to be able to pass that!" Then she pulled the chair up so I could look at her comfortably.

"Well, I thought it was just hyperbole when I said it, but it looks like emancipation is what you're going to need to do." I asked her why.

"Your father's lawyer..." She read the note, and she smiled. "All right, the sperm donor's lawyer is arguing that today was caused by the medication you are under; that it was a knee jerk reaction caused by your mother filling your head with lies, and you not being able to comprehend reality. That this is a permanent disability, and that you will need care into the foreseeable future. That even if he is estranged, he is still your father, and has the right to ask for custody until you're eighteenth birthday, which won't be for another..." she looked at her notes. "Four months and seventeen days.

“They also argued that his refusal to sanction the procedure suggested is because the doctors were offering an experimental procedure to try to correct the injuries.” I quirked my eyebrow. “I spoke to Doctors Lim and Cartwright. The procedure is new in Thailand, and has been performed successfully several times *in Thailand*. It has not yet been attempted here; in fact Lim will have to have the necessary apparatus flown from there.

“ Since it has never been done *here*, they are saying it is experimental, and are willing to bring as many expert witnesses as they need to convince the court. But all of that resistance is dependent on whether you are still a minor. The court cannot merely wait until you’re of legal age; the ‘sperm donor’s’ lawyer has already petitioned a higher court in case the seated judge does try to wait them out.”

I wrote a note. What if I showed up in court and told Dad and his lawyer to piss off?

She gave me a considering look. “Actually, that would play into his lawyer’s hands. Picture yourself under the influence of the painkillers you are on right now. You’d come across as a zombie, and they could use it to prove every contention. They’ve already pretty much said you couldn’t get into the court room without help.”

I looked at her, then made a note. She looked at it. “You have a high pain tolerance, and low drug tolerance?” I nodded. “What do you usually take for a tooth extraction?” I wrote the answer. ASPIRIN. “You’re kidding.” I shook my head. “And he doesn’t know this?” I shook my head. She began to give me a feral grin.

Sank him with one shot

The next morning, Dana and Mike arrived to help me get dressed. I didn’t have much in the way of fancy clothes, so they had brought me a sports coat and turtle-neck. I had convinced the doctors that I could do fine with

the medication I mentioned, and I felt more clear than I had been since Mom's death, with only a little discomfort when I swallowed. They drove me down to the courthouse and marched in with me.

We paused at the door to listen to my father's lawyer as he went through his opening argument. Then there was a pause. "Ms Collins, do you have an opening argument?"

"Of course, your honor, I was just wondering where this saintly man is when he isn't feeding the multitudes with a few loaves and fishes."

"Do not try my patience, councilor."

"I am sorry, your honor. It is just that I was raised Catholic, and if we were to take this characterization of my opponent's client as fact, I submit that he would be up for canonization." We watched through the gap in the door as she stood. "If it please, your honor, let us look at the adjectives used by my learned opponent. His client leaves his workplace risking being fired when he hears of what happened to his wife; races to the bedside of his horrible injured son at the hospital; stands firm against the duplicitous doctors; mournfully identifies his dead ex-wife's body, then hurries to their home to save their worldly possessions before ending a busy morning having his lawyer plead to be granted custody.

"Yet this is not how his son sees it."

"Since the boy is still stuck in the hospital-" Dad's lawyer began as Collins motioned. We came in, and they probably thought they had won. I shuffled in, taking the chair beside my lawyer.

"As council demanded, I have brought him here, your honor."

"As I see. Do you understand this proceeding, young man?" The judge spoke slowly, as if to someone who didn't understand English.

I nodded, and Mike set a laptop in front of me. I began typing. "I understand exactly what is being attempted, your honor." The voice synthesizer spoke.

"Your honor, I protest! Look at that boy! I have seen street bums more coherent." The lawyer waved at the computer. "And I submit that if given a few hours, I could create a thousand replies with a voice synthesizer that could be played with the touch of a single key."

"I looked at him then straightened, smiling as I typed. "A suggestion from my friends." I motioned toward Dana and Mike. "We gave them the drugged-out moron they are claiming I am; at least for a moment there. I do apologize to you however.

"I have been sufficiently medicated to keep the pain at a manageable level today, but not to the point of being stupefied." I took out the bottle of pain pills. "I have a high pain threshold, and these are simple over-the-counter ibuprofen. Of course my father would not know this. Frankly, your honor, my friend Dana," I motioned toward her, "has spent more time during summer vacations alone in my company than my father did during the entire time he and my mother were living in the same house. She was sick of his antics before I was six, and stayed with him until I was nine, believing it would hurt me more to divorce him.

"I would prefer to become part of the social welfare system for the next few months rather than have him be declared my guardian for even four *hours*."

"So your client can waste his college fund on a desperate attempt to repair his voice?" Dad's lawyer asked. "Your honor, between the college fund set up for Taylor,

and the money in his mother's bank account, he has less than 30,000 dollars. Yet the doctors have told my client it would cost almost as much for this procedure. So we are supposed to merely stand by and let him waste his money on this futile quest?"

I raised my hand, and at the Judge's nod, began to type. "My voice was destroyed at the same time my mother died. I will never get it back, I know this." I looked at her, then back at the keyboard. "I submit, your honor, allowing my father to steal it for his own use would be worse. I am young, yes. But that doesn't make me stupid. I know how my mother felt about this man, and I ask, no, I plead. Do not merely give him what he cannot possess without your assistance."

"If I may, your honor." Collins opened her briefcase. "I have not yet informed my client of the following. This was not duplicity on my part; it was because I believed that his father knew of facts the boy did not yet know. The originals of the documents I am bringing as evidence were missing from the house after the eviction of the trespasser."

"Objection! Council is casting my client in the worst possible light!"

"Councilor, rephrase, please."

"Your honor, my opponent's client took the keys from the effects of his deceased ex-wife, entered her house without permission and was stopped in the act of attempting to empty it out while the person who now logically did own it was in a hospital bed recovering from surgery. He used a claim that my client, who could not talk, had given him verbal permission to do so. I feel that calling him a trespasser is more polite than calling him a thief."

"Objection!"

"The judge looked at the man. "Did your client enter the house without permission?"

"Well yes-"

"Overruled. Continue, Ms Collins."

She opened a folder. "One of my partners is the executor of his mother's will, which is yet to be probated, and has already been challenged by my opponent's client. Strange, since the only way he could know what was in this will would be to read that vanished original. It leaves all of her worldly possessions to her son, with the request; not demand, that he give up his father's name because, and I am quoting from that document 'All your father did was supply the seed from which you were born'." She handed the file to the bailiff who carried it up to the bench.

She opened another. "She also has seven CDs that are maturing, with a total value of \$42,000 in five years; only about \$15,000 if cashed in early. Such an attempt was made yesterday. However those CDs are held in our office because our firm was handling them for her." She gave that to the bailiff, and picked up another. "She also had a life insurance policy with a face value of \$150,000 with a double-indemnity clause, making it worth \$300,000. Again, your honor, 'someone' called the insurance company claiming to represent Taylor, pushing to have a check cut. This was done right before I arrived in your courtroom yesterday to halt the guardianship request, so it was not someone in my office.

"My partner has made a notarized copy of his conversation with opposing council regarding the attempt to set aside the will. The bank and the insurance company will supply such at the request of this court." She closed the file and it was also given to the judge. "I submit, your honor, that this is a blatant attempt by the boy's father to

feather his own nest at the expense of his own son, and I am prepared to take the evidence before you to the grand jury, requesting an indictment.”

Dad’s lawyer was screaming objections at the last.

“Enough!” The judge slammed down her gavel.
“Court is in recess while I deliberate.”

It didn’t take long; I was allowed to emancipate myself, and a restraining order was filed against my father to stop him from trying to maintain his claims. I returned to the hospital. Three weeks later, with the equipment set-up and tested, Doctor Lim began the operation.

It was an odd device, a heat-absorbent pad behind my vocal cord, and a small fiber optic tube guiding the laser with pinpoint precision. The procedure was done under local anesthetic so I could make the requested sounds, allowing Lim to find the best place to trim for maximum remediation. It took about four hours, and I was put under for the night so that I could heal.

A month to the day from my mother’s death, I walked out of the hospital. The recording company had bought Chris’ song, but without my voice, the band was as good as dead. I had a new voice, but it wasn’t my voice. There was nothing good I could say about it. I was alive, and well-off enough that I could live the rest of my life without working.

But a man without a dream might as well be dead. I did honor Mom’s request by taking her maiden name. I became Taylor Wray

Three Years Later:Final healing

I don’t know if you can watch those you leave behind when you die. If Mom was watching for the next three years, she would have been disappointed. I had become a

recluse; living in that big empty house with my shattered hopes.

The first to move in was Dana about the time of my eighteenth birthday. She had gotten frustrated seeing me moping around the streets when I did come out, watching me get thin because I forgot to eat. My hair growing until I looked like a hippie. All of it just didn't seem to matter to me. She merely showed up one day with her stuff, and pretty much took over my life. She made three meals a day and forced me to eat them, made me sit down and talk. Though I drew the line at a haircut, she did get me to accept a barber shop shave. She took over dealing with the bills and answering the phone because I couldn't be bothered. It wasn't something we agreed to; just her will making me live from day to day. She was getting a degree in costume design and had decided to get a job in Hollywood someday.

On the second Christmas following my injury, Chris came by and never left. He cleaned and took over doing laundry and shopping. He was working on a degree in literature, mainly poetry, but every now and then I heard him on the electronic keyboards he'd brought with him. Still writing songs for a long-dead band. Again, I just let it happen. I think if Dad had been smart, he would have let me go home and become the vegetable I was during those years. He could have had it all with just a bit of patience.

Mike visited, but didn't move in. I think he felt I'd go postal if I had to deal with them all every minute. Whenever it seemed an argument might start, he would be there pouring oil over the troubled waters.

It may sound like they were sponging off me, but that wasn't the case. Dana had a part-time job making costumes and was socking away money every week to give to me for rent of a sort. I never did find out what she was paying. There was money in the bank, food in the fridge,

and the lights didn't get turned off, so I didn't much care. Chris was helping others by tutoring and giving money to Dana every month to maintain the household. At the end of the second year, the bank account had grown by a few thousand dollars.

It was Mike, the peacemaker who finally blew up at me after over three years. He knocked on the door. I motioned him in, and started upstairs. "How long is the mourning going to last, Taylor?"

"Huh?" It was like being suddenly savaged by your bunny slippers.

"When are you going to put it behind you and get over it, man?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about this 'my dream is dead, so pity me' bullshit."

I started to just go upstairs, when he picked me up with one hand, and slapped me with the other. Then he backhanded me. I tried to stop him, but he just kept slapping me forehand, then backhand. Finally I caught his hand, holding it away from me. "Stop it, Mike!"

"Why?" He dropped me, standing over me like a monster over a horror movie victim. "You've been beating yourself up about the band dying for three years! I thought we should do a little beating on you so you can take a break."

"You don't understand--"

"You think so? Don't you think we know why you don't say three words a week to us? Every time you open your mouth. you can hear the difference, and you'd rather just be quiet then remember. Man, they tell me you never sing in the shower, and just sat there like a lump the last two Christmases when they sang carols! Why did you

bother even letting them fix your throat afterward? You could have had a voice like a raven to remind you, or ended up mute and saved thirty grand! Why should you fucking care?

"You might as well have died instead of your mom--"

"Shut up."

"Because she would have been the one bitch-slapping you instead of me if she had lived--"

"Shut up!"

"She never let you get away with whining about things being unfair--"

"SHUT UP!"

"And I'm willing to bet she'd be really fucking proud of you right now--"

I hit him. I punched him right in the mouth; he just stood there looking at me. As big as he was, he could have changed me to mulch. Yet he just stood there. "Feel like a man now, Taylor?"

I raised my fist, wanting to beat him into the floor, but I couldn't see him through my tears. The fist dropped, and I fell to my knees, great sobs ripping through me. I hated the way I sounded, like a girl crying, but then I felt him holding me like my father never had, and I clung to him.

Someone hugged me from behind, then another from the side. I was wrapped in arms that held me because they cared about me. They loved me like a family should, had put their lives on hold to keep me together, and I had betrayed their love by trying to hold it in.

I found myself laying back in their arms, and the worried looks I had not even noticed were leaving their faces. Dana smiled, or tried to. I reached out, and pulled her to

me. I realized that while my mind had recorded every time I saw her in the past three years, I had never seen her smile at me. Chris had been positively grim, and for the first time in too long, I saw him trying to summon up a grin.

"I think I fucked up my life, guys."

"No." Chris gave me that old wide-eyed look. "Ya think?"

"I don't think, I know."

"I don't think you know either." He replied. I groaned. We always had lines from movies that cracked us up, and that one from Dr. Phibes Rises Again had been one of our favorites. I laughed. It felt good to actually enjoy something again after years of depression. Dana giggled; even Mike looked like he might still like me.

"If I do that again, Mike--"

"You do it again, and I'll slap you the first day."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

We just sat there, and looked at each other. No one deserved friends like these, and I felt humbled by all they had done to keep me on my feet until now. I owed them a debt no one could repay, but I felt I had to try.

"What day is it?" I asked.

"Thursday," Chris replied deadpan.

"No you dork." I looked around. "There must be something I can do to repay you guys for all the shit I've put you through for the last few years."

"Well there's a Con coming up next week. You can go with us this time."

There are Cons all the time, maybe six to eight a year. Before my injury, we'd always gone together, and I realized that there had been days when it was totally silent in the house, with only me there. They had tried to keep on with their lives while I had moped through those empty days.

"No." For a moment they all looked worried. "I'm paying to take all of you to this one." They gave me grins at that.

"Cosplay and all?"

"Betcher ass." I said. "I don't even care what I end up dressed as this time."

Dana and Chris dived into that. Dana was an excellent designer for costumes, and Chris could run a sewing machine like a pro. She called a friend she knew I liked, Stacy, and asked her to come with us. Dana also dragooned her younger sister Sally in. She wanted to make a UFO Ultramaiden Valkyrie set. One for the main character, Valkyrie, one of the dark alter ego Valkyrie Ghost, and another for the small version of the heroine, Val Q.

We all ran down to the fabric store, and went crazy buying what Dana wanted. Then back to work on the costumes. It was frantic work, and we barely made it. As it was, I was going to go 'straight' because there's only two human men in the entire series, and both had already been given out, Kozuto to Chris, and the Karaoke King to Mike.

The next Friday was my 21st birthday, and the first day of the Con. I got up, went downstairs, and saw Dana looking depressed. "What's wrong?"

"Stacy has to go out of town." She looked at the rack of costumes, at Stacy's Spandex Valkyrie Ghost costume. "All that work wasted!"

“Too bad.” I said. I had been kinda hoping I’d see Stacy in it. If you don’t know the show, both Valkyrie and her evil twin wear tight jumpsuits, and have a female body that exemplify the Japanese Zochichi; literally ‘big boobs’ genre, where a woman has a bust size beyond even an adolescent’s dream. I estimated the women had size EE or bigger. Of course without a lot of support from medical science, there are few women that big. Dana had made a mold for artificial breasts back in the day, and made money on the cosplay circuit by casting silicone knockers large enough that you could beat a guy to death with them.

She looked at the costume, then at me speculatively. “You feel bad about all the shit you put us through, right?”

“How many times do I have to apologize?” I whined.

“Yes or no?”

“Yes! I’m a shit: I owe you all for being a three-year bout of diarrhea! Please, I’ll do anything!”

“Anything?” I should have been warned by her tone.

“Anything!”

She grinned, and looked at the suit again.

Dreams return

“You said anything.” Dana repeated for the umpteenth time. I wanted to snarl at her, but I had said it, and while I was regretting my words, I was going to live by them. Or die by them, as she tightened the corset. I felt like she was cutting me in half with that damn thing, and all because I had said ‘anything’. If Stacy wasn’t here to be Valkyrie Ghost, and I was...

“Christ, you’re going to split me in half!” I gasped.

“Wuss,” she snorted. “You did say it didn’t matter what you dressed up as; I have witnesses.”

“Don’t... remind... me... Just... kill... me... and... have... done.”

She tied it off after checking my new waist. She and I had to be as close to matching as possible. We were already the same height, and close enough for government work on weight. But her hips were bigger, and my waist was bigger, so she had come up with the corset to fix that. She checked us in the mirror. I looked like a wasp-waisted version of her with black hair. She’s be in her own corset after she finished me.

“I’ll never live this down.” I moaned. Chris came in, looked at me in the corset (before it had been tightened) walked back out, and laughed hysterically in the other room for what seemed like hours.

“Yes you will,” Dana told me. “I promise to fight anyone who bitches about the last three years right alongside you.”

“I’m holding you to that.” I growled.

She looked at me, then got the costume. I’ve always thought Valkyrie Ghost was sexier than the original Valkyrie. Part of it was that Val’s costume was white with blue trim, and Ghost’s was black with gray trim, which just looked better to me. Also when they had a transformation scene, Val was just standing straight, while Ghost stood hip-shot. More authoritative, commanding. Also Val’s costume had an open front with almost hoop skirt while Ghost had a gray-on-gray layered cape that looked like it had been tattered. Both had wings on their large pillbox hats, though Ghost’s were black instead of white.

The costume had a back zipper, and the first thing I noticed was it had those ginormous breasts. Before I could

complain, she had my arms in the sleeves and zipped it up.



I could still breathe, thank God. She took me over to a mirror, so I could see myself. If you didn't know I was a guy, you'd wonder. There was a gaff built into the suit that hid my crotch, and with my hair, which had grown pretty much unrestrained for the last few years, I looked like a girl with bushy eyebrows.

She sat me down and as I protested, she plucked my eyebrows until they matched her own, and lightened them with a rinse so they were blonde. Then she began pinning my hair up since I had vetoed having her dye or even rinse my own honey blonde. A waist-length blond wig completed it, I thought, but she got out her kit, made up my eyes and put lipstick on me. I just sat there and let her do it.

With me done, it was almost simple for her. The corset didn't have to be as tight since her waist was smaller. Once she was suited up, I helped her with hair extensions that became two huge pony tails.

We'd just finished when Sally arrived. She grumbled, getting into a kid's size version of Dana's costume. She looked in the mirror, then at me. "You look like a dork."

"Thanks, spud. So do you."

Finally the costumes were done, and we piled into the car. It was a few miles' drive, and I found myself getting back into the groove we had been in before Mom's death. The Con was at the local university, and we breezed in like we owned the place. We knew immediately we didn't have a lot of competition. We were joined by someone I suddenly recognized as Stacy in a costume of the leader of the Cat Girl Maid Squad, Miss Sonada. I glared at Dana who merely gave me a saccharine smile in return. As an ensemble, Dana, Sally, Stacy and I ended up in more pictures than I wanted to think about. I had known the character was popular, but having some guy put his arm

around my waist to get a picture taken was disturbing. Eventually I got into the role, and one of the last of them left with my lip prints on his cheek.

Even in drag, it was more fun than I'd had in years.

Afterward, they reminded me that it was my birthday. I was now legal for alcohol, so we went to a Karaoke bar named Golden Age. The owner, Stacy's uncle, had been a back-up singer back in the 70s, and he had copies of every song from that era to sing to. I drank my first beer and watched the others get up and make fools of themselves, which happens a lot in karaoke bars. The people who think they can sing far outnumber those who actually can.

I had too much to drink; after all, I had never drunk any alcohol until that night. Part of me wants to blame that for what happened next on that. Or perhaps Mom was watching from heaven and decided to stick a cattle prod up my ass. I stood up, flipping through the song-book and punched in some buttons. I had just sat back down when the song began, and ripped through my heart.

It was an old Carpenter's song, We've Only Just Begun. Back when Mom had been alive, we'd sung it as a duet, and she told me that was our song. I joked with her that it was about a newlywed couple, but she told me it was the attitude. Go out, learn about the world. Together. I found myself crying, then it got worse because someone was singing Karen Carpenter's part.

"Before the risin' sun, we fly

So many roads to choose

We'll start out walkin' and learn to run

And yes, we've just begun

"Sharing horizons that are new to us

Watching the signs along the way

Talkin' it over, just the two of us
Workin' together day to day, together"

I opened my eyes, wanting to see who was ripping my heart out, and noticed that as the voice faltered, everyone was looking at me. Dana was crying, and she leaned forward. "Keep singing."

I looked at her, picking up the song where it was. Chris did back-up as Richard Carpenter for what remained.

"And when the evening comes, we smile
So much of life ahead
We'll find a place where there's room to grow
And yes, we've just begun."

I stopped again, and it was silent. Dana stood, looked at the book, and picked a song. Then she pulled me to the stage, handing me the mike. Then I heard another old song mom had loved.

"Those schoolgirl days of telling tales
And biting nails are gone
But in my mind I know
They still will live on and on
But how do you thank someone
Who has taken you from crayons to perfume?
It isn't easy, but I'll try..."

As 'To Sir With Love' ended, I found myself standing there, tears running down my face as a bell tolled. There is a counter that tells you how close you came to matching the recording, and I had scored 98! A few moments later, a waitress came in with fresh drinks, followed by a bald man in his sixties.

"Uncle Rico!" Stacy leaped into his arms.

He hugged her, then looked around. "The meters tell how close you got to the original. If you score a 95 or better, I buy the room a round of drinks. Now who almost maxed it?"

Stacy led him over. "This is Taylor. He did it."

"He?" Rico looked at my costume. "You're a guy? With a voice and figure like that?"

"I motioned. "My friends dressed me up like this as a joke. But yeah, I'm a guy. I was injured a few years ago. A bullet hit me in the throat, and they had to shave my vocal cords. That's why I can't sing now."

"You max it, and say you can't sing?" He laughed. "Listen to this rasp I have now!" He gave me a one-armed hug, and handed me the beer.

He and I ended up sitting together as the others found other tunes to sing. "You used to do back up vocals?"

"Yeah, but my voice went bad in the mid-80's." He waved his hand as if clearing smoke. "Too much weed, crack, and cigarettes. Couldn't do back-up now if you put a gun to my head. But you," he tapped my chest; well actually the left fake tit. "You could make it with what you got now, kid."

"Yeah, like Gallagher said about Frankie Valli."

"What?"

"Walk like a man, talk like a man, sing like a girl."

He laughed. "If my voice was like yours, I'd still be out there. There isn't much out there where they need my kinda voice."

I stood as Chris sat down. I went to the machine, and picked a sing. When I had punched it in, I grabbed Rico and, against his protests, dragged him up with me. I

grabbed the second microphone and handed it to him, as I began.

“They say we’re young, and we don’t know
we won’t find out until we grow”

He picked it up. As his voice was now, he could do a passable Sonny Bono.

“Well I don’t know, if all that’s true
but you got me and baby I got you.”

We sang together

“Babe, I got you babe

I got you babe!”

He got into it. I snagged Stacy’s wig and as I dropped it on his head, I sang:

“And when I’m sad, you’re a clown
And if I get scared, you’re always around!”

I rubbed the wig, and he realized why it was there.

“So let them say your hair’s too long
‘Cause I don’t care, with you I can’t go wrong.”

He reached out, offering his hand, which I accepted as he sang.

“Then put your little hand in mine
There ain’t no hill or mountain we can’t climb”

We sang together:

“Babe, I got you babe

I got you babe!”

“We finished it off, and the others just stared as the meter flashed 81. “My singing blew a few points,” Rico commented. “But if you had sung it alone, you would have maxed that too.” He set down the mike and

punched in a number from memory. "Don't tell anyone, but I've always liked this song." He grinned. "Primarily Cher prancing around on the Missouri in that sweet black mesh outfit at 43 with all of the sailors ogling her. She's still hot even today."

I started singing the song, and when I got to the chorus. I was getting into it.

"If I could turn back time
If I could find a way
I'd take back those words that hurt you
And you'd stay
If I could reach the stars
I'd give them all to you
Then you'd love me, love me
Like you used to do."

The song ended, and we waited expectantly. Then we gasped as it just flashed and stayed at 00.

Then Rico whispered, "Fuck me running." He looked at me in awe.

"So I failed?"

He laughed. "None of you are old enough to remember, but during the 1976 Olympics. A gymnast named Nadia Comaneci was the first one ever to score a perfect ten. But they had never considered someone could score that well, so the audience was stunned when the score came up as 0.0. As they sat there appalled, the announcer reported what had happened. She won three gold medals that year." He pointed at the counter. "That is a perfect 100." He stood as the waiters delivered yet another round of drinks.

It was the first perfect night in my life.

Second Chance

I looked at the letter, then walked into the kitchen. It was Saturday and we had planned a picnic. I tossed the letter into the center of the basket. "All right, who's the wise guy?"

"Huh?" Dana snagged the envelope and replaced it with a tub of homemade potato salad. She looked at it. "So some business sent you a letter."

"Yeah." I said sarcastically. "Sent to Ms Taylor Wray."

"Ms?" She looked at it again. "Who is this Blaine Enterprises?"

"You're asking me?"

"Well open it, you putz."

I shrugged, ripping it open. I opened the letter, and began to read. "All right, now I'm pissed."

Dana sighed, snatching the letter from my hand.

"Dear Ms Wray,

"We thank you for your application to next quarter's 'So you think you can sing' contest. A slot as one of our female singers has been set aside for you. As soon as you have replied to this letter, we will begin the background filming." She looked at me with wide eyes. "Who entered you in that?"

"If you didn't, and I didn't..."

"We turned and yelled in unison, "CHRIS!"

He came galumphing down the stairs. "What?" Dana handed him the letter, and he read it. "Who entered you in this contest? And as a girl?"

"I thought it was your kind of joke." I admitted. "But who?"

It took three days to find out, and when we did, we all went to Golden Age. We found Rico in his office. He admitted that he'd sent it in. Blaine Industries was a company starting a new record label; Dark Star, and they wanted to start off strong. So they were having a televised contest where sixteen hopefuls performed and were voted on by a live audience every week for four weeks. It would end with one of them being given a contract for an album as the lead singer of the new label. The contest had sent fliers to every karaoke bar in the state. There were only sixteen slots. Eight for guys, and eight for girls.

"Thanks for trying for me Rico, honestly. But there's a problem." I handed him the letter.

He read it, then took the second page, which was the contract for admission. "I think it was because I sent in a video of your perfect score."

"The perfect score?" I repeated. He brought me into a room full of monitors.

"This is actually for insurance purposes. Sometimes people get irate when they score badly, so if they trash the room or equipment, I can get it replaced." He took down a disc sleeve, and popped out the disc, feeding it into a player. He fast forwarded to me in the Valkyrie Ghost costume when I sang If I can Turn Back Time. I hadn't known how I had gotten into it; I was kicking out in time with Cher, shaking my butt like she had. All I would have needed was that big turret with the 16-inch guns and outfit to have been her twin.

"So let me get this straight. You sent in a copy of this video with me in drag? No wonder they think I'm a woman!"

Rico had been reading the contract as I was venting. "I think you might need a lawyer." He tapped the contract. "I was in the business for almost twenty years. I've seen a

lot of record contracts, and this one is pretty much boilerplate. There is no mention of gender in it." He tapped where my name had been inserted. "It says they're offering Taylor Wray a shot at this. No Ms, Miss, Mrs. or Mr.; just Taylor Wray. If you signed this and showed up dressed as a guy, they'd have to give a reason for dumping you.

"But it's limited to eight of each, and I'm willing to bet they had the roster filled before they sent these out. So if I tell them I'm a guy, this contract is no good."

"That's where you need a lawyer. Have you ever heard of a Trap?"

"Of course." I snorted. "We have them around the house for mice and roaches."

He laughed. "No, it's a slang term borrowed from the Japanese. Back in the 90's they had a type of Music called Visual K, where the singers would wear makeup and sometimes even cross-dressed. Think of Boy George and Kiss from the previous decades here. It grew into the more modern Trap music, where you have transvestites or transsexual doing the singing. Back in 2005, two bands started where all of them were transsexuals; Lady which was from Korea, and Venus Flytrap, from Thailand. Lady broke up in 2007, but Venus Flytrap is still going strong."

"But I'm neither." I protested. "I'm a guy who happens to have a female voice now."

"So don't tell them you're a guy yourself. It's too easy for them to decide if it's just a letter from you. Have your lawyer do it, and insist that since you've already won a spot, you should be allowed to compete. But no pressure on them to allow you. Let them decide." He looked at me long and hard.

"From what Stacy told me, your injury lost you your chance to be a star. This is another chance."

We went back home, called Mike, and talked about it. They were all happy for me, but I wasn't. "Sure it gives me another chance." But I looked at them all. "But we went through hell creating the band, and went through hell again when we lost our collective shot. You guys could have found another lead singer and gone on, or joined other bands. Hell, look at Van Halen; still going after forty years and revolving door leads!"

I looked at the three people in the world that I loved. "You guys put your lives on hold to bring me out of my funk. I just wish Mike had bitch-slapped me three years ago."

"Had to get my dander up."

I laughed at him. "Next time, get angry sooner. No, if I'm going to blind-side these people, let's blind-side them together. Get permission to have my own back-up band. If I'm allowed to compete, make it all or nothing."

"Taylor, we don't have to-" Dana began.

"You leaving the band, Dana?"

She looked at the others. "Taylor, Cosplay is dead."

"I almost let it die, Dana, having my head so far up my ass. Are you going to kill it now that I have my head straight?" She shook her head wordlessly. I grabbed her hand. "You kept me alive. All of you did. Now it's my turn to return the favor. I won't compete if I have to leave you guys behind." I looked at Mike, at Chris. "Together."

She looked up, then nodded with a sigh. Chris slapped his hand on top, then Mike wrapped that huge paw around them all.

Agreement

I called Ms Collins for an appointment. She greeted me with a wide smile. "You look better than you did, Taylor. I hope you're finally over the depression."

"With a little help from my friends." She chuckled.

"Quoting the Beatles now?"

"Just truth. I don't know if you can help me, or if there is someone in your firm that can, but I need some legal advice."

"Well, you can retain me if you want. Got a dollar bill?" I nodded, confused. "Give it to me." I took it out, and passed it over. "There, you have retained me. Now, what's the problem?"

I handed her the letter and explained. She nodded at what Rico had told me, then leaned back, reading the contract. She made some notes, then picked up the phone and spoke with someone. A few moments later, a young attractive woman came in, and they talked. The woman read the contract, then the letter. Finally she came over to me. "Lindsey Sayer. I work in our performer's contract section here at the firm." We shook hands. "I am better versed in this kind of contract than Ms Collins. If you are willing to accept me as your lawyer, I will help as I can."

"She's good, Taylor." Collins told me. You know how Vegas is; half of our work is for performers, and she's already an associate, which means if she keeps turning out good work, she'll be a partner in no time." Lindsey blushed. "So you two run along, I'm busy."

We went down the hall and down two floors. Lindsey's office was more like a closet than an office, but she had it organized to a fare-thee-well. She motioned for me to sit, then called for tea. It arrived in a silver service, and she poured. "It's my own tea service; my mother

gave it to me when I entered law school. She always loved tea more than coffee because people tend to gulp coffee, but they tend to sip tea. They relax instead of hurry."

We sat back and drank. I understood what she meant. The British had turned tea time into the quiet discussion time, and we allowed the relaxation to flow over us. "Now, let's cover this point by point. You friend Rico is partially correct; you could sign the contract, show up with your hair cut short in a suit and challenge them to fight you over the fact that you're a man and not a woman. They'd win, but it would be a pain in the butt for both sides. Frankly, Blaine has some good lawyers on staff, and it would probably take years and a lot of money from both sides. Easier to settle out of court really.

"However he is also correct that if you let them decide, with little or no pressure, you might get to perform. Here in Vegas, we have so many drag shows that saying they won't let you perform because they offered it to a woman who happens to have the same name would make them look foolish; especially since you are the 'woman' they offered it to." She made quotes with her fingers. She leaned back, rocking her chair back and forth. "As for your wanting a back-up band of your own, that isn't a problem. Blaine notified all of the local law firms that represent entertainers of the specifics of the contest. They no doubt thought you had read the flyer." She picked up a file, dragged a single sheet from beneath it, and handed it to me.

The contest was open to amateurs only. It would consist of three semi-finals where it was one-on-one, paired women and paired men until the last, where a male singer would face off against the leading woman. The winner would receive a one-record deal, with options for more depending on popularity.

Second would be 500 dollars; for third fourth places there would be a prize of \$250, down to \$100 for seventh and eighth place, which would be at the end of the second round of semi-finals. But every performer would get a cut of the 'house' for the live audience portions. A dollar a head with the audience being about 200 to four hundred people, so even the first two to lose would get around a thousand for their one performance.

Back-up bands were allowed as were back-up singers from outside, but they were paid by the performer. For the first two to lose, it would be less than they would have made playing a paying gig. Bands with a gimmick, which covered Cosplay, would have to do their own costuming, makeup, etc. Since we were cosplayers, we were allowed songs that were linked to Anime.

The stages would be different types of songs to force the performers to extend themselves. Stage one was a fast song, Stage two, a slow one, the third, probably the trickiest for most, would be a song in a language foreign to the performer. The last, and hardest for any of us, would be an original song. The only limitation on it was that it had to have never been performed anywhere before. If this had happened before my injury, for example, Chris' song would have been disqualified because we sang it already.

"You can keep that flyer to show to your band. Now." She ticked it off. "Allow you to perform. Do you demand to be added to the male roster?"

"No. That I think would kill the deal. They offered it to me as a woman. It would be rude."

"But maybe the women you would perform against would consider *you* rude to compete against them?"

I sighed. "If they don't want to compete against me, I understand that. But it wouldn't be fair to put me in as a woman if somewhere along the line I have to admit I'm a

man. If that is why Blaine refuses my request, I'll understand."

She looked at me for a long time. "Most people with a second chance like this would be grabbing so hard Blaine would be choking. Why are you so laid back about it?"

"When my mother died, she left me the house, car, seven CDs that still haven't fully matured, and around 300,000 dollars. I have more than that left after three years without touching the CD because my roommates have been paying rent to me. If it was just me, I could hug the offer to my chest in thanks.

"But I spent the last three years in a pity party of my own, and the only reason I was even there for Rico to record is because my three best friends in the world put their lives pretty much on hold to drag me out of it. If I gave them the money I have, they'd spit on it. They did it out of love.

"That is why I was worried about the band. They gave me back my life, I want to do the same for them."

She smiled. "Then all you need to do is convince Blaine."

Three days later, we had a big laugh. Other 'women' performing were drag performers chosen as I was from the discs they had sent in, and Blaine had already dealt with the problem. In fact what cracked me up was a revised copy of the contract that had been sent to all of the women. Paragraph seven of that letter (Paragraph four of the revised contract) was entitled 'Drag performers/traps'.

"In our selection process we had accidentally chosen some 'men' who performed their music in female garb. Unless at least half of the women (four; we are not going to tell you how many men are performing as women) accept that they will be facing these people, we will purge the present female entry list, and start over, verifying in

the next selection that all of the performers are female. That means, ladies, if enough of you fail to accept it, all will lose their places. We have sufficient other entries to replace up to three women if they do not agree.

“Since there is a homophobic element in the country; the revised contract has a codicil where all women who agree to compete against them will be legally enjoined from comments about their counterparts until the contest has been completed. Any statement by a competitor suggesting that another is a man is grounds for disqualification. The cross-dressed/transsexual competitors are also not allowed to admit their gender until they had been defeated. It will add an element of mystery not usually seen in such events.

“Please use the prepaid express mail envelopes to return the signed contract as soon as possible.”

I called Ms Sayer. She told me that Blaine had again informed all of the law firms as before. I thanked her by taking her to dinner.

Run up to the contest

We didn't have a lot of time; Dana took me to where Stacy worked as a hairdresser, and I got a makeover. Hair, nails, the works. Stacy used an inhibiting cream on my body so that my beard would not come out for the next few months as well. Then we went to a couple of boutiques and picked out clothes. I had delicate features, so no one would be able to 'out' me from that. I already knew some about makeup from helping Dana, so I learned enough to do my own make-up before too long.

We had to consider giving up the actual Cons for the next few months; unless I was willing to go in drag to them. Actually, I had missed it so much that I just agreed to go as a woman. After all, we usually showed up in costume, and rarely prepaid for the full weekend so there

weren't that many who would remember me. Plus, since my name change, any classmates other than Stacy would not be sure it was me.

We barely finished in time. We got a letter telling us when the film crew would be there, and two weeks later after we had sent in the signed contract, they arrived. It was a small crew; just a camera man, driver and on-screen personality. She was a petite woman named Clarissa, and she introduced her crew. They would be filming us for about two weeks; street scenes, meals, band practice, nightlife if we indulged, and of course when we told her we were cosplayers, they had to hit the next Con that would be running during that time.

She would also do personal interviews. Since only three of the performers had their own back-up bands, they would have one segment with the band itself, then with the singer; two with the singer if there was no band. She informed me that background information, such as my mother's death and what school we went to was recorded, but would be edited out before airing because once the contest began, they knew the local media would be working to 'out' the Traps. If one happened to be outed by chance, the interviews with other information could be released later. In fact, if one was outed, they could request that it be released during the contest if they had not been defeated yet. She also told us she was enjoined from knowing which of us were traps, though she was allowed to do background comments after the fact. If a trap won the top slot, the company wanted it to be a surprise.

That was my problem more than the others there might be; all of them would be performing under their real names unless that name was obviously male. Taylor is one of those that has become androgynous over the last few decades. Clarissa laughed that there are five hermaphrodite porn stars named Taylor; God alone knew

how many male, female and even transsexual ones before the interview started.

We set that issue aside, and began the first interview with Mike, Chris, and Dana there.

“So the band is named Anime?”

“Yes.” I replied. We had changed the name so that no one would try to look up our band name and out me immediately. “It was a tough choice, but all of us love anime and we cosplay often.”

“Cosplay. Some of our viewers might not know the term, could you explain it?”

“Sure.” Dana laughed. “Some Otaku, that’s people into anime, like to dress up like characters in the videos they watch. That is called Cosplay, for costume play. You pick a character, research them down to how they talk, and make a costume usually from a series, though you can get some who even get down to outfits worn in a single episode.”

Clarissa looked at Dana sidelong. “I think from the complete explanation, that you must be one of the ones heavily into it.”

We all laughed. “We have a lot of outfits.” Chris commented. “Wanna see them?”

We led her to the garage. There were boxes and racks filled with various costumes and the band instruments set up in what was pretty much their permanent places. At her request, we chose outfits to be shot in. I grabbed an outfit from the 20th episode of Fruits Basket where Torhu Honda modeled a dress made by Ayame Sohma for his brother Yuki. Dana chose the sailor uniform Torhu would have worn for herself.

We all ran upstairs, and Dana went in to help me dress. It was embarrassing getting dressed in front of her,

but I was getting used to it. She had made a body prosthesis that gave me average sized (C-cup) tits and no bulge; that, with makeup, was invisible. The film crew had stayed downstairs, and the camera came up like a rifle as we came down. Once we were downstairs, we all posed.

Dana took over as our costume director. "Now this isn't the full effect you would see at the Convention. I would, for example, put on a wig to become one of Torhu's classmates, or just a surgeon's mask to play Hana, one of Torhu's best friends. I would pin up Taylor's hair and put a brown wig on her for this outfit." She explained the outfits worn by the guys. Mike was in his Captain Herlock uniform, Chris dressed again as Kozuto Tokino in his uniform from UFO Ultramaiden Valkyrie. "For Mike, I would put fake scars on his face. But Chris is just about perfect."

We talked about how it felt to be roommates, how we would practice, every detail of life.

"Would you mind singing something for us for the personal interview?"

I looked at the others, then at what I was wearing. "Considering how I'm dressed, how about the theme song of Fruits Basket?" The others nodded. Back we went to the garage, moving screens to conceal the costuming behind us. Then we all arrayed ourselves at the instrument and began.

"I was so happy when you smiled
Your smile breaks through the clouds of grey
"Far from the sunny days that lie in sleep
Waiting with patience for the spring
When the flowers will bloom renewed again
Knowing there's more beyond the pain of today

“Although the scars of yesterday remain
You can keep on living as much as your heart believes
“You can’t be born again
All though you can change
Let’s stay together always.”

We broke for lunch; Dana had made homemade chili, and Chris had baked homemade bread. We invited Clarissa and the cameraman to eat, sending Mike out to bring in the driver. The camera had been set on a tripod that focused primarily on me; occasionally the man would stand up and move it to show another angle. Then replete, I sat on the couch with Clarissa, and I went through my private interview.

She was good, drawing out how I had felt about Mom dying in my arms and being injured at the same time. “So, you’re competing against some tough people from what I have been told. Are you up for it?”

“I have the best band in the world playing for me, friends that have gone through hell for me. And Chris will write me the song I use if I reach the finals.”

“But haven’t you heard? Blaine decided to have all of you record your original songs for release in a two-album set.”

“That surprises me. But I’m glad people will hear our music, win or lose; that is most important thing.” I found out later that all of the interviewers were people at the UNLV Campus studying television journalism. It seemed to take only minutes, but it was almost an hour long.

Meeting the Competition

Two weeks before the contest would begin, we headed down to the hotel where they were having it. There I got to meet my competition. Seven women and I, along with

eight men, were in a large room separated by sexes in seats that angled up in tiers so that everyone could be seen. One man, who I later found had interviewed two of the others (And the associate professor who had agreed to his students interviewing us), stood at a podium. "In three, two, one..." The director counted down.

The interviewer introduced each of us, women first (I was Number Four), then the men. As he did, we each stood up or waved. Then he began asking each of us questions. There were only four of them. 'How long have you been dreaming of something like this?' 'How does it feel to be in the spotlight for the first time?' 'How do you feel about competing?' And last, 'Any words for others who might try in future contests?'

A lot of the answers we gave were florid, but a girl named Morgan in the row beside me simply said. "All my life" when asked how long.

We each ended up fielding two of those questions. My first was about the spotlight, "After hoping for so long, it is exciting to finally be in the spotlight." The second; advice to those that followed and there I had to say more. "Don't give up your dreams. I went through three years of self-imposed hell because I believed I would never make it, so I never tried. If my friends had not literally forced me to try to live again, I would not be sitting here now.

"The greatest president of the modern Era; Theodore Roosevelt, was asked to address the students of the Sorbonne in Paris in 1910. He gave them a 35-page speech on Citizenship in a Republic, and on page seven, he said, 'It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena'.

“He was telling them what I am saying now; there are many who will tell you before you even begin that you will fail, that it is better to accept mediocrity than to strive for success, and will be willing to point out every mistake as you push on to your goal. But they will never feel the pain, the terror, and the joy we will be going through in the next weeks.”

There was a sarcastic clapping from the front row. I looked down at Hannah Johansson. She gave me a look of challenge. “If you believe that, get ready for some real pain, baby.”

The interview ended, and the contest spokesman Lyle Conrad came to the podium. “We’re not done yet. There’s been some changes. The cable network that is hosting us has gotten interested since we included the Traps.” He smiled wryly. “But since they gave us the ‘L’ Word, that should be no surprise.” We laughed at that.

“So the contest is not going to be four weeks as we had planned. It’s going to be two months long. For those of you who are from out of town, we’ve booked rooms for you here, and we’re paying for them. However,” he gave us that smile again, “food, drink and gaming is on you. So don’t decide to bet a fortune and expect us to cover your marker.” Again we laughed. “The next two weeks are going to be nothing but rehearsals and interviews about why you chose the songs you did. I know that Ms Wray, for example, used a theme song from an Anime in her band’s interview so she is already up to explain the provenance of the song.

“Now we know some of you will have financial problems because of this change. Therefore, I was instructed to read this from the management.” He put on a pair of glasses. “We will notify your employers that you might be away an additional month, assuming you reach the semi-final and final stage. We are asking them to allow you that

additional time off, if necessary. If this means you lose that job, Blaine Industries and Dark Star Records will find you jobs in our organizations. After all, by the time this contest is done, you'll know a lot more about record production than most interns.

"Also, we are going to pay you for the rehearsal days both before and during the competition, as they will all be filmed, and portions will be used throughout the contest. If you have been defeated at an earlier stage, this will not affect any scenes used later, so if you happen to be in a scene, even in the background later on in the contest, you will be paid for those days as well.

"This will be at one hundred dollars a day." Someone gasped. "The schedule for the actual contest, when it starts, will be three-day cycles. The first two will be polishing rehearsals, the last elimination round one, which will be just two pairs. When I am done here, you will all come down and pick a lot from these boxes to see at what point you will be performing. Then there'll be another cycle, including the second elimination. The seventh day, like God, we'll be resting." Everyone laughed.

"On performance days, those who are not in the elimination itself will be paid as for any rehearsal day. But those who do compete will be paid an additional one hundred dollars, along with the money you get for the audience. Since we are also using a different venue with a larger seating area, and we expect a full house every time, the first eliminated will be getting a minimum of 2500 dollars. You may draw against your funds if necessary for your needs. If you have bills that must be paid, please notify the bursar who will arrange for paying them for you. Any questions, thoughts, concerns?" Someone asked when we could start to draw, and how much. "You can draw against 1400 dollars starting today, but we ask you

to limit the amount until the contest actually begins." The person who had asked gave a sigh of relief.

One by one, the women filtered down first, and took their tokens. I had just gotten mine when Hannah asked, "Who else got number one?"

"Uh... I did." The smallest woman of the group raised her hand.

Hannah looked her up and down, then snorted, "Say goodbye, baby, cause you're facing me."

"Come on, Hannah, lighten up." I said. "Remember, it's not whether you win or lose."

"As Vince Lombardi said, 'Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing'."

I stepped over, getting between her and the other girl. "Actually, Lombardi cribbed the line from Harold 'Red' Saunders. He also admitted later that he hadn't meant it the way people take it. He meant your attitude going into a contest, not brutalizing your opponent afterward. If we end up competing in an elimination round, I would be proud to face you, even if I lost."

She gave me a look as if I were insane. "Do you really believe that happy horse shit?"

"Yes I do."

"Then you deserve to be left in the dust, since we don't have a Congeniality award," she sneered. "There can be only one."

"Christopher Lambert, from Highlander."

"And the epitaph on your tombstone; if you add 'and I ain't it'." She stormed out.

"Is it just me, or is she a real bitch?" Morgan had stepped up beside our little wallflower.

"Oh she's a bitch. You know the old saying, 'Life's a bitch'? Well, until you met her, you've been using the word in vain." I looked at the girl. "What's your name, kid?"

She almost flushed. "Tina, Tina Christobal."

"I'm the Taylor Wray Conrad was talking about, and this is Morgan Delaney."

"Oh."

"I assume you can sing, or they wouldn't have chosen you. But you always this meek?"

"I'm just shy," she said almost whispering.

"We need to get her drunk," I said.

"Yep, wasted," Morgan chipped in.

"Please." Tina blushed even deeper. "That's how I ended up in this contest. I went to a karaoke bar with some friends-" I snorted, and she gave me a suspicious look. "Is that funny?"

"No, my friends took me to one to celebrate my 21st birthday and I got drunk for the first time. That's how the manager got my performance on his security camera and sent it in. Let me guess, Morgan; you too?"

She nodded ruefully. Tina giggled, and just like that we were friends.

Media Shitstorm

The next morning, my friends and I arrived at the hotel. It was the brand-new Millennium Hotel and Casino. The designer had made it a twenty-floor four-armed starfish with gently curving arms over a flat two-story base. The practice rooms were set up so we could sing, dance, play, and be divided into different soundproofed compartments so half of the participants could practice at the same time without interfering with each other. We

dropped our gear, went up to the buffet, got some breakfast and coffee. Morgan waved at us, and the four of us joined her and Tina at a table. I introduced my motley crew, and introduced the two girls to them.

"You're going to be explaining some anime references to an interviewer?" Tina asked.

"Yeah. All of my songs except for the one Chris is supposed to write for me are from different Anime."

"But that's just kid stuff, cartoons," Morgan sniffed.

"Anime and Manga are as big in Japan as paperback novels and any TV series you can name are here, and they run from real kid stuff with cute animals like Hamtaro to some really raunchy stuff right up there with any porn you can name," I disagreed. "Plus the advantage with watching anime, you pick up some excellent songs. The Japanese treat someone with an Anime song to their credit the way we do a rock star.

"The problem is, Anime is a niche market here. Those who are into it are loyal, and sometimes fanatical. But by using the genre to give me songs, means that songs decades old that we know will finally get heard by however many watch this contest."

They looked at each other. "We were wondering if you could help us there. Neither of us has a foreign song picked, and we thought you might help."

Chris put down his fork, pulled up the outside of his eyes, putting on a smarmy fake 'Japanese man speaking English' accent. "Oh. Illustrious sirs, our spy has done it; wormed her way into the contest to assure that all of the foreign songs are Japanese!"

I fake moaned. "He got started, I was hoping we'd go through one day without Chris and his bad gags." This was a daily thing at home.

"We could shoot him," Mike said.

"Too noisy," Dana said. "Wait, misdirect him!" She turned to Chris. "The kamikaze speech!"

Chris grinned and jumped to his feet. "Greetings, Kamikaze pilots of rising sun! Today you go on your great mission. Get in your planes, fly very high, looking for American aircraft carrier. Dive down, very fast, crashing into it, killing yourself, and all aboard! Any questions?" He looked then pointed at me, "Yes, Yamaguchi!"

I stood, putting on the same accent. "Admiral, are you out of your fucking mind?"

Everyone laughed, including a couple of the nearby tables with tourists. "How did you come up with that?" Tina asked when she caught her breath.

"I didn't. Thank Cheech and Chong when they were still doing stand-up. My mom loved those guys!"

"So you want to have me suggest something?"

"Yeah," Morgan said. "If I knew the Japanese words to Sukiyaki-" She looked at Mike, who was snorting. "Something funny there?"

"Mike has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Oriental languages, working on his Masters. He can tell you some real stories about mistranslations."

"That song is a perfect example." Mike said. "Ue o Muite Arukô, literal translation, I Will Walk Looking Up. It's a nice generic sad song; he's looking up so his tears won't fall. Like a Japanese version of I wish it Would Rain by the Temptations. But when the British Pye Records bought the right to sell it in the West, they felt Europeans and Americans would have trouble with the name. So they named it Sukiyaki. A Newsweek columnist later said it was like buying the rights to Moon River, and marketing it in Japan titled Beef Stew."

"Then Taste of Honey did it, right?" Tina asked.

"Nope. They got permission to use the music, slowed it down so Americans would understand that it was supposed to be an unrequited love song, and wrote their own lyrics. The Oriental mind has different ways of looking at things; you have some upbeat tune like that one about not wanting to let people see you cry, or a slow song about love, like Princess of December that Taylor is going to use for the foreign language segment."

"I'm sure we can find something. Between us," I motioned to Chris and Dana, "we have a big Anime collection."

"Did I hear someone expounding on foreign languages?" We looked up. It was one of the guys, followed by another one of the girls, both with trays. "Can we get in on it?"

"Sure, pull up a rock. "You are?"

"I am Ryan Prince. This is Tammy Carter. All of you can try to be friends because you three are in eliminations 1, 3, and 4, while she is in 2."

"How do you know that?" Dana challenged.

"I did the unthinkable; I asked." He stuffed a sausage link in his mouth. "So they end up with almost all Japanese music?"

"Zip it, Chris," I snapped before he could start again. "Maybe not. We have some Russian and Korean songs too."

"Russian?" Tammy asked. She was a small blond with almost nothing on her plate.

"Yeah, when they made the Ghost In the Shell TV series there, they hired a lady named Origami."

"Origa is her stage name; Olga Vitalevna Yakovleva, from Novosibirsk. She immigrated to Japan and does most of her work there," Mike said pedantically.

"But they might not want to use it. Both of her works For Ghost in the Shell have English verses," Dana mentioned.

"We can ask," I replied. "But it depends on what would fit the people." I looked at them. "Your singing styles."

I spoke to Conrad, and noticed the camera nearby filming and recording. He said we'd have to talk to the other women since the songs by Origa were sung by a woman. Everyone else was too busy concentrating on what they were practicing, but pretty much said yes. Hannah snorted, pointed out that Tina could learn Martian for all she cared since she'd be gone after the first competition.

So we ran out, stuffed everyone into my car, and drove to the house. Dana ran in, with us following.

"What do you think?"

"Depends." I pointed at Ryan. "Sing for us."

He sang Love on the Rocks by Neil Diamond. I tapped the Jumong set we had just gotten.

"Tammy?" She sang a few bars of I'm Coming Out by Diana Ross.

"Get a disc of both Ghost series. We'll see which she likes better. Morgan?"

She sang Somewhere Over The Rainbow.

"Before I pick, I think we had best have Tina sing."

She took a breath and began singing Everything by Barbra Streisand. We just stood there in amazement.

Where did she pack such a strong voice into that small frame?

"I'd like to plan a city, play the cello

Play at Monte Carlo, play Othello

Move into the white house, paint it yellow

Speak Portuguese and Dutch

And if it's not too much

I'd like to have the perfect twin

One who'd go out as I came in

I've got to grab the big brass ring

So I'll have everything (everything)."

We looked at her for a long time. "We'd better get both series of Ah My Goddess. And Story of Saiunkoku." I looked at Tina and grinned. "Because you're gonna need it, Tina. The only way Hannah is going to beat you is if she uses a baseball bat."

We grabbed whole series to watch as well. We'd filled a box when my cell phone rang. I didn't know the caller.

"Wray, this is Conrad. Are the others with you?"

"Tina, Morgan, Ryan and Tammy are here."

"Thank God. Now listen. Do not leave your house. We have security en route. They will help you pack some stuff to bring. We're moving the four locals into the hotel."

"But--"

"Christ, haven't you guys seen the news? We have a media firestorm going on and everyone in the contest is caught in it. The press is going wild! Just stay in there. The lead man from the security firm is Todd. He'll ID himself."

He hung up and I told the others. Mike merely cracked his knuckles, grinning. A stretch limo pulled up outside, and a half-dozen people piled out. They trotted up to our door and someone knocked gently. When asked, he said his name was Todd. I looked through the peephole, and he was holding up his ID card. I opened the door and they came in.



Todd Freisner was huge, four inches taller than Mike, making him six eight and built heavier. If he weighed less than 300 pounds, it was because the scale was bad. Chris looked up and up until finally he was standing there like those stereotypical turkeys that drown standing up. "You were in the Army?"

Todd looked down at him. "All of us are ex-service."

"What were you in the army, a tank?"

He didn't even blink. "No, I was too small. They made me an APC instead." He looked up at me. "You're Taylor, Ma'am?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Conrad sent us to bring you all in. If your friends can pack some bags, we'll throw them in the trunk of the limo and get out of here. Two of ours will be staying here to watch it for you."

"Tell me what's happened, Todd."

He looked to Dana. "Ma'am, if you and the other band members will pack some clothes, I can explain to her, and she'll let you know on the way." They scattered, and he looked back at me.

"You remember the full interview you all had yesterday?" I nodded. "It was released to the press this morning. About three hours ago, a tabloid offered a half-million dollars for proof of which of you might be a guy. There have already been two incidents in town and one in Elko." He looked past me. "Miss Delaney, someone tried to break into your house there. We'd notified your father and he arrived before they finished trashing the door. Your father wasn't too happy with them."

"Dad's a County Deputy sheriff," Morgan explained. "Anybody hurt?"

"They say the man he threw through the wall will live. But he won't enjoy it for the next couple of months." Dana got back with a stuffed case, Chris following with his duffel bag filled. Mike had two more cases.

"I can run by home and get my stuff later," Mike commented.

"Could one of your people stay with him?" I asked.

"Yeah. Connie and I will be on your team." He motioned to the only woman in the group. All of them were wearing shirt and blazers over slacks, so it was surprising to see her dressed like that. But when she stood upright, she was only an inch shorter than Todd. "Rocky, you and Dane go with short stuff there. Get him home, packed and to the hotel."

"Right."

"Now if you'll come with me. Oh, while I am talking to the sharks, put this on your door." He handed me a flat placard. I looked at it.

Protected by Barricade Security Trespassers will be shot

Survivors will be shot again

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"We never joke about deadly force, Ma'am," he replied. He opened the door.

While we had been inside, a half-dozen news trucks had driven up and when our door opened, the vans doors were flung open and news crews charged us. Todd walked down three steps and stopped. He easily blocked it by himself. They began shouting questions at us but he just stood there. I wondered what look he had on his face

because after a few moments, the people began to stop shouting. Finally there was silence.

"I am Todd Friesner, Barricade Security. Our orders are to protect these people from any harassment. If someone shoves a mike at them, you had best be ready to eat it. There will be no questions asked at this time."

"The people have a right to know!" someone shouted, from the back I noticed.

"Oliver Wendell Holmes said, 'Freedom of speech does not give you the right to shout fire in a crowded theater'. Now, you *will* move aside or I *will* step on you. There will be no further warning."

"You wouldn't dare!" some woman in the front shouted. Todd looked at her, and she backed up a step.

"Try me, Ma'am." He went down the steps and whatever they saw in his face made them believers. It was like Moses parting the Red Sea. Two men moved down after him and took stations to either side as we filed between them with Connie bringing up the rear. We marched to the limo where the bags were thrown in the trunk. We climbed in. Mike and his guards broke off to go to my car, and they drove off.

It wasn't any better at the hotel. We had to drive into the parking structure to unload and there were more men in the same uniforms there. The press was hanging back, but they shouted questions at us. All of the women were barraged with them. Even Dana, who they weren't sure was in the contest or not.

Cops in Reno and here in Vegas had reported incidents. When Conrad had heard about the tabloid offer, he had immediately hired Barricade, a new but fiercely competitive security agency. They supplied primarily armed security, and were rumored to have a vault full of fully automatic weapons. Their team were all prior service,

most fresh out; Army or Marine usually. People having private meetings hired them and just picturing someone like Todd or even Connie pacing a hallway with enough weapons to start their own war, and the authorization to use them, stopped most people from messing with them.

Teams of four had been sent to the home of the three contestants here in the city, with other teams flying out across the state to the homes of the other contestants. At the same time, Blaine Industries had spoken with not only the mayors of those cities, but the Governor and Feds as well. Every government office that might have information to hack had agreed to literally delete the contestants from their computer files to stop anyone from getting into them. Blaine had also spoken with the local court, and an injunction was filed ordering the tabloid to withdraw the bounty. Lawsuits had already been filed by the landlords of two properties damaged by attempts to break into apartments against the tabloid.

We all breathed a sigh of relief when the bounty was finally removed. But that was only the start.

Working together

The hotel had put the band up in a three-bedroom suite; we were living together again. Chris was stunned; after all the smallest rooms occupied by one of the competitors was about \$100 a night, and the one we were in was almost \$350. But Mike explained patiently how 'comping' someone works. With the present economy, most of the hotels were running half to two-thirds full, but that was only from, say, Friday to Monday over the weekends. Every empty room still had water running to it, and air conditioning or heating, so they were still costing the hotel money. But a comped room was a tax deduction the Hotel could declare as a loss, even as they could have used an empty room as a smaller loss.

Also, the hotel was shown on the news every day, and I'm not talking about just local. And when the series hit the air, you'd have 'From the Millennium Hotel and Casino on the Las Vegas Strip...' Face it, they couldn't *buy* that much good press. Room bookings took a steep climb during that first two weeks; three percent above what they had anticipated, and 10% above the previous year. By the time the contest started, they were running 10 to 15% higher, depending on weekend or weekday, with even midweek performance days higher.

They had comped our meals regardless of what Conrad had said because, thanks to the press, they knew we were all in the hotel. We would be eating there unless we wanted to march around surrounded by more Barricade troops. Suddenly every on-site restaurant and buffet service was packed with waiting lines. In all of them there was a 'contest' section that was set aside for us, and the tables near that area were the most popular. When we went to meals, we had people watching us and talking to us.

Two Barricade agents were there 24/7 to watch over us, and we got to see one man ejected. He had rigged a camera in his shoe, and if one of the contestants went to the buffet to get something, he would try to get close enough to get an up-the-skirt shot. After he was bounced, the regular casino security cuffed him and turned him over to Metro; not as someone trying to prove who was a girl, but as a sex offender.

It was the second day of our rehearsals that Tina came over to Dana and tentatively asked that she make a costume. She was going to do Donna Summer's Unconditional Love, and wanted a copy of the dress the singer wore in the music video. Dana made a trip to the house with Chris, picked up their sewing gear and the costuming she hadn't finished from previous orders, and were

soon set up in their own room. If I remember correctly, she is credited with twenty-seven costumes during the run of the show, and while the Hotel's staff got credit for most of it, she was listed as an assistant costume director.

The hotel was going all-out to help us. The back wall of what was going to be our arena was equipped with flat screen TVs side-by-side so they could create a background thirty feet square. Ryan had requested a giant yellow cassette player after seeing *Ferngully* during one of our animation marathons; and watching Hannah dance around in front of a screen large enough to project the forward turrets of the *Missouri* at half-scale was a daily thing.

Clarissa arrived, and we added to my original interview regarding the song I had done.

"The Song is literally entitled 'For Fruits Basket'. The English track is sung by Laura Bailey who also does the voice of the female Lead, Tohru Honda. First-person shooters might remember her better as the voice of the main character of the game series *Bloodrayne*.

"It's basically a comedy sitcom, but has the magical element the Japanese seem to enjoy so much. In this case, a family with a unique curse; twelve members of the Souma family, turn into the animals of the Chinese Zodiac. One turns into the cat, which is cursed worse than the others by being a cat sometimes, but a horrific monster when the weather is bad. There is one more, named Akito, the leader of the family, who bears the brunt of the unexplained curse, and is doomed to die young. If embraced by a member of the opposite sex, the cursed people change into their animal, unless that person is also cursed. As an example, Kisa, a young girl cursed to be the Tiger, is hugged by Hatori, who is cursed to be the Cow, and they do not change. But when Torhu hugs Kyo acciden-

tally in the first episode, he changes, which causes her to also fall into both Yuki and Shigure.

“Torhu is an outsider, recently orphaned. Trying to be self-sufficient, she is living in a tent at the start of the show. But she is unknowingly living on Souma land. She meets Shigure, who becomes a dog as she examines the stereotypical stones used by the Japanese they paint the Zodiac figures on. She is disappointed that the cat is not represented; there is an old Chinese fairy tale of a great banquet with all of the animals invited. The rat told his friend the cat it was a day later, so when the animals arrive for the banquet, the rat riding the cow. The cat is home sleeping.

“While Torhu comes across as not too bright, she does understand relationships; She is able to take Yuki’s wish that he were more independent, which he envies in his enemy Kyo, along with Kyo’s frustration that others accept Yuki’s suggestions easily, She uses the analogy of a rice ball with something extra, in this case, a pickled plum imbedded in the back where it can only be seen by others; a good quality you don’t know you have, that others envy. Like a gentle teacher, she helps everyone she meets to learn to grow.”

“And the costume?”

I laughed. “Yuki’s older brother Ayame, who is the snake, owns what he calls a fabric store. Actually he makes, models, and sells fetish wear. The dress is something for a person who craves some sweet innocent on their arm. Ayame’s assistant Mae gets Torhu to wear it. They spend time pointing out that to be perfect, she needs a parasol and a small puppy.”

Tina’s costume was finished and fitted. We, those of us who thought of her as a friend, watched her rehearse. She had a great voice, the song hit just right, but she was just

standing there. We tried to get her to dance, but she was hesitant. We asked what she did for a living, and she told us that she worked at a call center, but had been an aide to a third-grade teacher in high school.

"Didn't you get out and play with the kids?" Chris asked her.

"Oh, no." She flushed. "I was too busy."

Chris grinned, sidling up. "But I know your secret." She looked up, face going pale. "I knew it when we watched the video. You really wanted to get out there and dance with the kids. That's what that video is all about visually." She looked away, color returned to her face, then came on in a rush into another blush.

Dana called her parents; they talked to Sally, her sister, and the teacher called Dana back.

The next day fourteen students from Parker Grade School were installed in desks, mimicking the kids in the original video of the song.

First elimination Round One

We reached the start of the real competition jazzed.

Finally it was the night. Those of us who weren't competing were backstage watching on monitors, and being watched by the people filming us. The men went first; they actually tossed a coin on stage for it, which started Chris off on Bill Cosby's skit. 'Captain Sitting Bull, this is Captain Custer. Captain Custer, this is Captain Sitting Bull. Call the toss, Cus. He calls heads, it's tails. You lost the toss (Snickers).

'All right Cus, you get to stand here at the bottom of this hill while all the Indians in the world ride right down on top of you'.

I know you've probably seen the show, the helicopter shot of the hotel by night that appears to crash through to enter the Arena where all sixteen of us are standing in lines. Then the booming as each of us flashed in a montage. 'These sixteen people, eight men and eight women, will be showing you their best for the very first time in public.'

Then the screen where each of the girls is standing there smiling. "But some of these women, are *men*.'

The first twenty-five minutes or so of each show was watching us rehearse, seeing everything backstage with the exceptions of bathroom and bedrooms. We had little or no privacy during those months. They did make an exception for the Anime marathon we did when I showed Ryan, Tammy, Tina and Morgan the songs they would do, and also when just about anyone would drop in. Mike took the lyrics, all of them, Russian, Korean and Japanese, broke them down phonetically so they would pronounce them correctly. With my help (he sang the male version of the Love Theme from Jumong, while I did the others), we sang them for our fellow competitors, and began to teach them. While it may be difficult to learn a foreign language, learning one song is child's play.

Mike got his own name in the credits as Foreign Language Adviser.

Before the performances, each singer told the audience why they had chosen that specific song from the taped interviews. Toby told everyone that he hadn't been willing to try it until Dana made his costume. When Ryan's spot came up, he mentioned that he had been torn about what to sing, and had always liked his selection. Having the hotel foot the bill for some minor special effects had cinched the deal. Part of that monologue shows all of us friends in our suite watching that scene from Ferngully where Ryan's song was done.

Toby Quinn came out in a fire engine red derby, with a suit to match (made by Dana) and sang 'It Ain't Necessarily So' from Porgy and Bess. He was good and he danced really well. Then they rolled out that giant tape deck. The lights came down, then the screen lit up with the background from the movie. Two dozen background dancers from one of the nearby Circ De Soleil shows were dressed in brightly-colored loincloths and 'Me Tarzan, you Jane' dresses.

A big broad-shouldered hunk ('Oh baby, do me!' Chris moaned. It actually made it into the show) was trying to explain what the 'box' was (lip-syncing Christian Slater's part) when Ryan, in a white wife beater shirt and loose pants, walks over and stomps the On switch. The song in the movie and by Ryan was 'The Land Of A Thousand Dances' and he got into it.

One girl came down from the sky on wires as Crysta, doing a little stroll-like dance as she lowered, then dropped to the box. Her wires had been rigged to quick release, and it was good that they were because Ryan was matching the scene in the movie to spin her. As he extended the stick he was using as a 'mike' the second time, the dancers swayed and sang with him.

Voting had been explained; there were 570 seats (all full) and on the right arm of each chair was a metal box. There were two glowing buttons, one marked for each of the performers. The labeling was electronic so they could change them with the flick of a switch.

Ryan, still sweating from his performance, and Toby met as they took the box away. They shook hands, then faced the audience. "Please, vote now." There were two boxes that appeared on the huge flat screen and numbers ran up in them. Ryan won, 350 to 220. The cameras caught Toby's look of pain when he lost, yet he put on a big

smile, and shook hands again before taking a final bow and leaving.

On the show, you get to see what the audience didn't. Toby broke down once he was offstage, and some of the girls comforted him. We all knew that it might be us next, and that made us almost like family. Hannah stood aloof. She just sneered, giving Tina savage grins to shake her up. Ryan came back, threw his arms around Toby and said, "I thought I'd lost there. You were fucking awesome!"

Toby would be staying another week; he played a mean guitar. I had asked him before the elimination to be one of the back-ups for my own first elimination. He stayed until the end because half of the remaining acts wanted him to do either back-up music or back-up vocals.

Hannah went out dressed in a copy of Cher's outfit from "If I Could Turn Back Time", though she kept her hair ash blonde. The screen came up with the video of the song with Cher edited out. Hannah had wanted to have them actually send a crew out and shoot it again for her, but the uniforms have changed since the 80's. The white sailor suits have become something not much different from what a chief petty officer or officer would wear, with the stripes the only difference, and a bill cap instead of the old 'Dixie cups'.

"I want to make it to the top," she said in her interview. "Cher was twice the age of the men there, but everyone wanted to get in her pants."

She belted it out and for a moment, I despaired for Tina. They both had excellent voices, but the close-ups of Hannah convinced me; She looked like this was her office job, so what?

She took her bows as if they were her due, and marched offstage.

Tina's interview was softer than Hannah's "I got into this contest because a friend got me drunk at a karaoke bar, so I think I'll be out pretty soon. But even if this is my last time in the spotlight, I have to say those who became my friends here have made it all worthwhile." There had been a montage; her with us at the marathon; her in work-out togs, dancing along with the kids skipping behind; us at a meal. the camaraderie almost palpable.

Then it began. On the huge screen, we saw the intro to the original video with the street kids rapping. When they leaped into the windows, it segued. There was a small room that had been turned into an impromptu classroom about twenty yards down a wide hall, and all of the kids and Tina were there. Three cameras gave different shots of the room as the kids did the intro chorus.

Tina was in an overcoat tied over her dress, and sang it exactly as Donna Summer had. Then you reach the second verse, and she spun, pulling the coat away to reveal that charcoal gray dress. In the hall, two cameras, one on the door, another backing ahead, kept them in shot as they skipped down that hall with Tina singing. Another cameraman was set up with a mobile cam aimed at the door inside the arena, and Tina, followed by the kids came through it.

There's a scene in the original video where you had a few dozen kids in lines all dancing a choreographed number, but we didn't have time to pick out a few dozen kids from the school and teach them that. Instead of that scene, we had taught them that at that point in the music, they should do what Tina was doing. Up to that point, she had been getting into the dance, but when they reached it, she put her arms over her head. As she danced lightly back, she swayed from side to side a few times, then did a spin and repeated. The kids followed along. It didn't look choreographed because it hadn't been. But it looked good.

The song ended and as the audience applauded, Tina was kneeling, hugging some of the kids. Only then did she chivvy them into two lines, and they all bowed together. Once the kids had left the stage, Tina stood there as Hannah marched up. She ignored Tina's outstretched hand, and the camera caught her hurt look. As much of a bitch as Hannah had been, we'd expected her to mellow out once the competition started, if only for the cameras. Again the boxes, and the call to vote.

400 to 170, with Tina winning. Both faces looked shocked, but Hannah's went to fury. She stormed off without congratulating Tina, who was crying with joy. Backstage, Hannah simply stormed past us. She turned before leaving the room, and screamed, "If they hadn't let you faggots perform, I would have won!"

Unlike Toby, she left that night.

End Part I