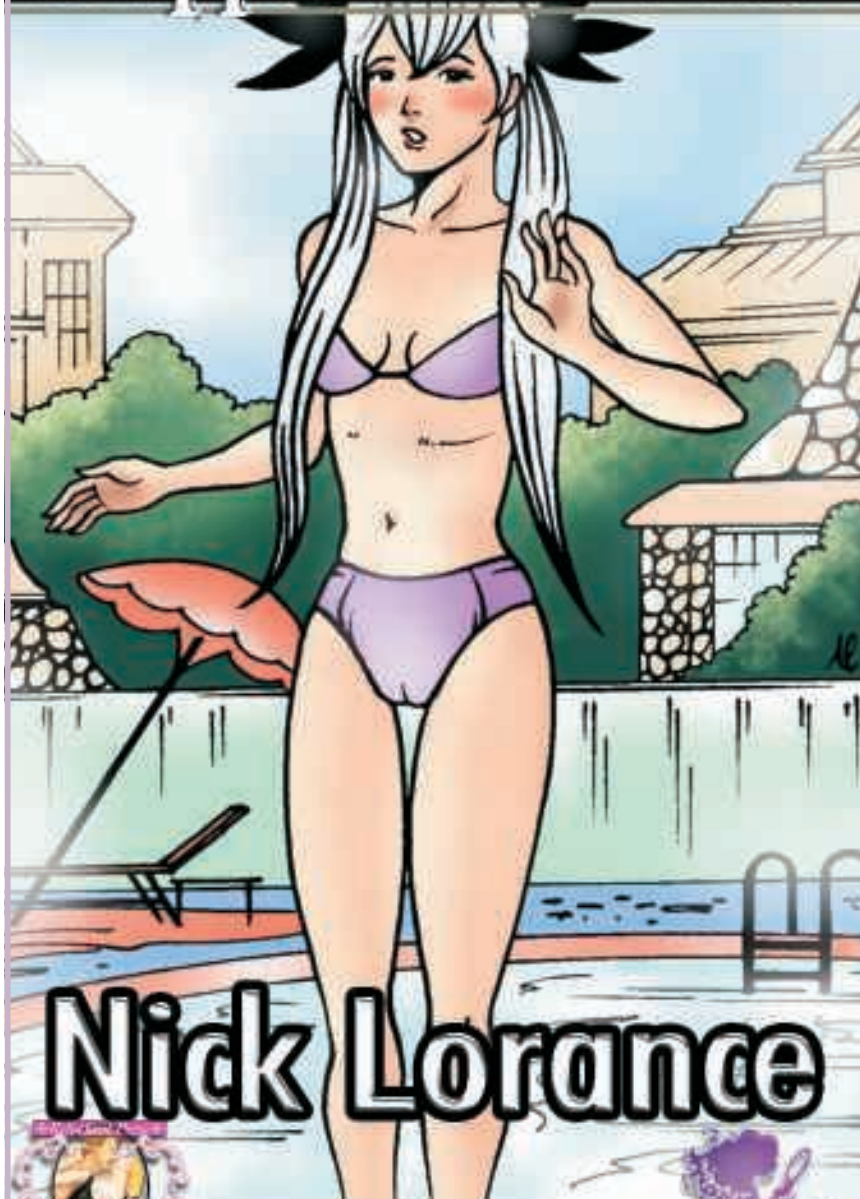


# Trapped Into Anime



# Nick Lorance



A "Young Adult Tv" Novel



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# Trapped into Anime

By Nick Lorance

## Prologue

My makeup was perfect. I tilted my head side to side, giving a winsome smile, and the girl in the mirror returned it. In a few minutes, I have to be on the set. My life was a dream, all because of one decision .

..

## Just for a little pocket money

My biggest problem in the job market was my size. My grades were good but my family was lower middle class; without a scholarship, I wasn't going to go to college. Sure I could go to a community college. That meant living at home, and only hoping I could get enough credits. The service was out; as a guy with few mechanical or electronic skills, I would end up swabbing decks. Remember the way Steve Rogers was in Captain America at the start? That was me except no asthma.

In school I swam, was in choir and danced. My voice didn't change that much, I went from a first soprano to a mezzo-soprano though by definition I was a countertenor. It would have been embarrassing for most guys if they were chosen for what would be a woman's solo, but I did it well. But it wasn't getting me a job in this market.

It all started with an e-mail I got. It ended up in my Spam folder, but after getting a nasty note from one of the job websites I visit about how I had dumped them into my spam folder, I checked it religiously every day. I stopped when I came to it, because it was an odd tag.

### **Carl Waller, Cosplay for cash.**

One thing I have enjoyed since my last year of middle school was cosplay. I have been in so many costume contests, from Sci-Fi conventions to anime ones, I don't even know how many there have been since then. I enjoy the entire Japanese Anime scene; making the exact duplicate of a costume from a show is hard work, but fun. Part of it is the guessing which character you are portraying, because the announcer will ask the audience to guess, and the one who gets it wins a prize too. I didn't win often at the start but since my Junior Year in High School I won about as many as I lost.

So someone is going to pay me to dress up? Coolness! I moved it to my inbox, then clicked the link there. The site came up; Land of Cosplay Fantasy. There were a series of cute girls in assorted costumes. The header buttons offered a MODELS area, and on the far right EMPLOYMENT. I clicked it.

The button led to an employment application.

I went on. After the usual you would anticipate, location, education, job history, it got into a physical report. Weight, height, build, that kind of thing. Of course that made sense. As much as the parody of Paris Hilton's burger commercial had been funny, it was only because people had seen the original. There are people who will dress up as, say, Batman who look like they should have tried for Pillsbury Doughboy. I filled it in; Height, 5'1", weight 100 pounds, build— I looked at my options, and put down swimmer.

At the end of the physical report was 'do you have a picture of yourself in a swim suit?'. I figured, what the hell? I didn't have a picture but I did have a camera, so I went into the master bathroom where there was a full-length mirror, and took one. I connected the camera to my laptop and sent it. The last question was 'are you willing to relocate for this job?'. That was a no-brainer; if it paid enough, why not? Better than living at home with my parents.

Then there was a list of animes. I didn't know them all, but I knew quite a few. At the bottom of that page was a button marked 'Do you watch one not on this list?'. There were, so I clicked it. Five pages later, I finally finished. Now a page popped up to assure that I was done. I clicked the submit button and there was that little ball showing it was being accepted. Then instead of saying 'we'll get back to you', another page popped up with only two questions.

HAVE YOU EVER CROSSPLAYED?

IF NOT, HAVE YOU CONSIDERED IT?

That was a What the Fuck moment. Cosplay is dressing in costume. Crossplay is when you dress in the other sex's

clothes. I had often been referred to as Bishônen, which roughly translates as 'beautiful youth', but is applied to boys rather than girls. At the last Anime convention I had dressed as Takashi Komuro from High School of the Dead, and someone shouted 'Hideyoshi Kinoshita!', which referred to a character in an Anime entitled Baka and Test. That is someone so androgynous that not only do the other characters think he is a girl, they even refer to him as a separate gender with his own changing room and bath in one episode.

So I answered the first question as no. For the second I entered WHY? since it gave me that option.

As I began filling it out, I noticed what might be a chat window in the bottom right corner. Curious, I clicked on it. 'Is anyone there?', I typed.

There was an immediate reply. "Hello, my name is Hannah. I am one of the Human Relations people here. We monitor when there is a new application when possible. When I noticed this application, I was checking it out. I am sorry to bother you."

"No bother. Just surprised."

"Since I am monitoring, I can take over filling it out from here."

I was a bit disturbed. "Why are you monitoring?"

"The company hires young people for photo ops at Conventions, photo shoots and some films. When an application passes the proper filter, one of us monitors."

"So you sent the e-mail?"

“No, that is another department. Remember when you were in the costume contest at JapAnimeCon? You were in the costume contest?” I agreed that yeah, I had been there, and had been in costume. “Remember you had to fill out the Registration card? With your e-mail address?” Again I had to say yeah. These days every job usually asks that you give an e-mail if possible .

“The pictures taken at all public costume events are online, the Recruiting department selects pictures, and sends e-mails offering jobs. Our pay scale is based on the answers given by the applicant.”

All right, that made sense. “So I am accepted?”

“Provisionally, yes. Your last answer was why when asked if you considered Crossplay. One of our options for employees is Otokonoko, or Trap. Do you know what it is?” I wasn’t sure, and said so. “The term is applied to boys who dress as girls. In Japan they have dedicated cafes and fashion shops where the service personnel are all boys dressed in attractive female clothing. The pay for a Trap character is higher than it would be for you to dress as a male character.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” She replied. “Take that last costume contest for an example using the High School of the Dead Characters.” Give me a while here with my Photoshop.”

A few minutes later she sent a picture inside the chat box. It was the same one I had sent, but costuming had been added. Instead of me in my bathing suit, I was Rika wearing a SWAT team outfit with

shaded glasses, purple hair, and a stunning set of breasts. Then another, Rei with long orange pony tail, a sailor outfit, and an M14. This was followed by Saya with long orange twin tails, sailor suit and glasses. Then Yuriko, Saya's mother, waist-length red hair with a red dress split up to her hip with a Skorpion submachine gun in one hand and a thigh holster with an automatic. Finally Saeko in a sailor suit, the skirt slit on both sides, waist-length blue-black hair coming to a point between the eyes, a katana, and a pair of serious breastworks.

"If you will notice," she went on, "all I did was use that one picture you sent and photoshopped it. With proper makeup and prostheses, you could be standing inches from a person, and they would not be able to tell you were a boy."

"And if I had been working for you?"

"Standard pay for a convention photo-op is ten dollars per hour if you were dressed as Takashi."

Ten an hour. Not too bad just to cosplay as a guy. "And if I were to go for one of the options you sent me?"

"It depends on how much effort we together can put into the costuming, makeup and roleplaying ability. It starts at twenty to forty dollars an hour on average. Obviously if you went for the far end; Saeko, and you could play the part well, as much as fifty an hour. For a film, which can be a fan film where you are hired, it can start at one hundred an hour and even a contract if a major production as an extra."

Wow. "How is it verified?"

“You know how conventions are. Everyone wants a picture with their favorite character, and we give our employees business cards with their names to pass out whenever a convention attendee gets a picture. Again, let’s take that JapAnimeCon as an example. According to the convention records and the hotel security cameras, you spent twenty hours in attendance, only five in costume. If you had shown up on the first day dressed as Saeko, stayed in character that entire time, and could play the role well, you would have taken home a thousand dollars just for walking the walk and talking the talk. If someone had taken you for a meal in costume, that time would have counted as well.”

I leaned back, looking around. I was still living in my old room with my parents. With a thousand dollars in hand, I could get my own place.

“So I am accepted provisionally. How do I prove myself?”

There was a longer pause. “I am checking conventions within fifty miles of your address. Only two, about a month apart. That is one reason we ask if you are willing to relocate. There are more conventions in major cities than there are where you live. If you were living in the Northeast, and are also willing to travel, there are fourteen between Boston and Miami in that same month period.”

Mentally I looked at four *thousand* dollars for twelve *day’s* work. “So I pay to go to the conventions, travel room and board?”

“No. First, we have housing units in every major convention city, so when you go from say Philadelphia to Miami, we would fly you there, and you have a

place to stay with a chauffeured vehicle from the rooms to the convention. We get dedicated passes at the conventions via a corporate discount, which we give to you. Costumes are delivered or already on site for you to wear including the necessary prostheses. All you are paying for is the time of the person doing the makeup, unless you can do it yourself.

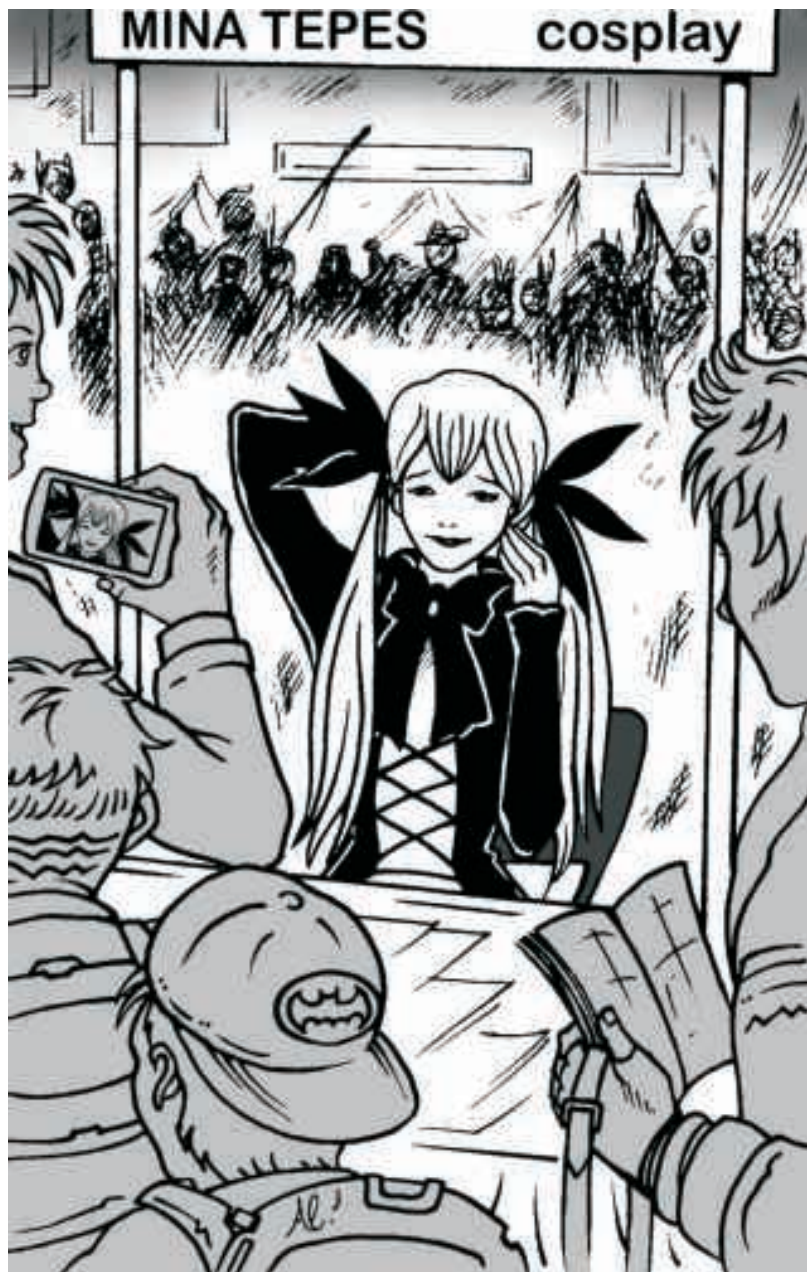
“We offer ensembles of their request to the conventions. The promoters choose the show or game they wish to have present, and we supply the main characters of that work. As an example, you could go as any of the women mentioned if that had been chosen.” I could learn more about makeup. I had some skill for portraying say Captain Harlock with his scar. I said so.

“When can you start?” Hannah typed.

“How soon do you need someone?”

“We always need people. Give me a moment.” There was a long pause. “This next weekend there is a convention in Denver. They have asked for an ensemble from the Anime Dancing in the Vampire Bund. Considering your build, do you think you could portray Mina Tepes?”

I thought furiously. The character was what is called Gothic Loli, which usually means an underage girl or an older girl who just looks underage who tends to dress in Goth style. During the series she dressed in either very strict or very provocative attire. But since she was a vampire and four hundred years old, she had the attitude of someone who was ageless. “How soon do I have to be there?”



“Considering we need to assure you are properly costumed, I would suggest you leave immediately. I can have a ticket waiting for you at the local airport tomorrow morning, the airline will call to verify it. Merely pack your things and notify us of what to pick up by calling this number. We will move it to the main dwelling in New York where you will go afterward. Your parents will be given contact information so they can keep in touch.

“I hope you enjoy working with us. Good day.”

Pack to leave tomorrow morning? I didn't have a lot, mainly books and DVDs. I went down the hall to the living room to where Mom and Dad were sitting, watching television.

“The Changeling is out of his cave,” Dad commented. I grinned at him.

“Well, why are you gracing us with your presence now?” Mom looked up from her knitting. Dad was just under six-foot and built like a linebacker. Mom was an inch shorter than I am and fine boned. Except for my eyes and hair color, I looked like Mom would have if she had been a boy.

“I just got offline with a company. I've got a job!”

“About time,” Dad said.

“Doing what?”

“Working at conventions. Helping with the costumed events,” I said. I didn't want to admit doing *what* at them. My parents would intervene like Mr. Incredible if I told them.

“So when do you start?”

“They are buying me a plane ticket to go to Denver.”

Dad harrumphed, something he does exceedingly well. “Sure. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

The phone rang, Mom picked it up. After a moment, she hung up. “That was the Delta ticket counter. Carl has a seat on the ten AM flight tomorrow morning.” They both looked at me.

I packed a couple of suitcases, then went to the local storage place for boxes. By eleven PM, I was all packed. Mom fluttered in a few times to make sure I hadn’t left anything, her expression woebegone. “I knew you would get a job, but I didn’t expect you to leave so quickly.”

“Mom, it’s not like I am falling off the planet,” I assured her.

Dad woke me up bright and early Monday morning. Mom hugged me with tears in her eyes. Dad was more stoic but when we got to the airport early enough to deal with the hours of going through the check in, he handed me a box. He knew how I liked Godiva chocolates, and had bought me a one pound box. We picked up my ticket, and before I walked through to begin the process, he gave me a hug that almost cracked my ribs. “Be safe.”

## **Getting ready to Dance**

I’d love to tell you all about Denver, but from the moment I arrived, I was running. A guy was standing there with a sign with my name on it, and after get-

ting my two bags, I was in a sedan with him driving. The 'housing unit' was one of those old residential hotels where a traveling salesman might stay you still see downtown in every major city, the kind like a European hotel that starts on the second floor with the first floor taken up by a dry cleaners and a small mom and pop restaurant. From the outside it was a dump. But inside it had been refurbished and painted and was very bright and cheery.

It was like checking into a hotel, except I didn't have to flash ID, fill out a card or pay for it. I went to the front desk, where a young woman checked me in, handed me a key, and a man took my bags up to the room. There was a welcome packet which explained that both businesses were owned by the company. We ate there and had our clothes and costumes cleaned for free, while they were also open to the public.

I was in 216, a room they had made by taking the tiny cubicles that used to be there and cutting an opening to make something large enough for a kitchenette dining table and private bath. There was already a microwave refrigerator and coffee maker, though the packet told me I had to buy anything I wanted to make in my room. It was about three times the space I had in my old room at home, so it was heaven.

Someone knocked, I answered. A young man about five inches taller than I was with long brown hair was standing there. One thing that struck me as odd was he wore what looked like a woman's dance leotard. "Carl? I'm Sonya."

I looked at him confused. “Sonya?” I pointedly looked him up and down. Slender built, androgynous, yes. But a girl’s name?

He grimaced. “Once the photos begin hitting the net, you will want to put a woman’s name down instead of your own,” he replied in a husky voice. “Or did you really tell your parents ‘oh, I’m being paid to dress in drag and let the Otaku play with my ass while taking pictures?’”

I hadn’t considered that. Like I said, picture Mr Incredible intervening. Which is exactly what Dad would do if he saw me dressed as Mina Tepes for example. “Point taken.”

“No worries just yet, kiddo.” He said with a laugh. “But from what I was told by placement, you have dance experience. You remember the opening for Dancing in the Vampire Bund, right?”

I flashed to the scene. Mina, at first wearing a white cape with a fur collar and white opera gloves with gold bands at the top, but beneath it a skirt that was mainly a loincloth hanging to the floor, and as a top pretty much nothing but ribbons attached only at the collar. If I danced in something like that, the only reason I wouldn’t be arrested for indecent exposure is that I could prove I was a guy, I hoped.

“I hope you’re kidding,” At his bland face with a slight grin, I moaned, “oh yeah, I definitely need a girl’s name then.”

“First we see if we can put together a good enough dance for the convention, then you can worry about what to call yourself.” Sonya handed me a package,

“tights and a leotard. The gym is upstairs on the fifth floor. I’ll meet you there.”

The tights were a pale green, with a darker green top and soft slip-on dance shoes. I put them on, but just wearing them was a bit uncomfortable. Not because they didn’t fit, but because they fit too well. If my hair had been like Sonya’s, I would have looked just as girly. Well, I was being paid to perform, so I had best do it.

The gym was more like a dance studio with bars to hold or use to stretch your legs. Large windows for plenty of light, and one wall completely covered in mirrors to watch yourself. Sonya was there in front of a wide flat screen TV above the bars. “I have it queued up.” He looked askance at me. “While we practice for the next couple of days, I will take Akira’s part, watching and catching you when you overextend for that last dip. By then we will have figured out if we can use it at the con.”

“You mean it isn’t set in stone?”

He shook his head, chuckling. “You’ve seen movies with live action fight scenes, like say Electra in the Daredevil movie. What do you think they would have done if Jennifer Garner couldn’t do that practice scene? Unlike a lot of the other fight scenes, she had to do it herself from start to finish, so no stunt doubles, just her,” he made a motion with his finger as if saying ‘no’. “Survey says; you don’t use the scene. So we try to see if we can come up with a dance that fits not the actual actions, but the spirit of the dance. After all, matching the dance to the anime would be difficult if not impossible. So, we watch it together, mark down the obvious moves used and where possi-

ble, workarounds. Especially since we can't have these guys build a three-story dance space, can we?"

I shook my head, and he grinned. "Then when we have what we think will work, we hand it off to corporate. They will watch it side-by-side to see how close we came, and if they say yes, we replace me with the guy who is going to play Akira. But first, we need you to get used to these first."

He handed me a normal looking holder for contacts. I opened the holder to see contacts that were a dark red. I looked at him curious. "Mina has eyes that are red when she is playing human, but her eyes glow when she gets her vamp on. So put them in." I carefully put the contacts in. They were set for normal, like a pair of glasses worn by a character with simple glass without adjustment. He motioned toward the mirror, using a little control box. Suddenly my eyes glowed red. There was a bit of distortion, as if looking through red lenses, but I could still see perfectly.

"Cool."

After he set the lenses back to normal, we watched the one and a half-minute intro several times. After the first time I ran it back, and made a note. Of the ninety seconds of the intro, only about fifty were part of the dance. Each of us took notes of the dance steps. Most were something we both agreed on, but we were able to compromise. By expanding the dance time we were able to use a lot of extra moves. So half an hour after we got there, I began to try to dance it. The biggest problem was the tempo, faster than I was used to. So I had to work myself up to it. Two hours later I was drenched in sweat; and as much as dancers say it, I don't 'glow', I sweat.

“Come on, kiddo. Dinner is on me.”

I looked up at him, gasping, then used an imitation of Stallone from Oscar, “Correct me if I am wrong, but we can eat free at the diner.”

“Well, you caught me. So, quick shower and meet downstairs.” He gave me a finger wave and was gone.

Except for when we started, that set my next two days. Sonya was a harsh taskmaster, but no harsher than I was to myself. We were pushing harder and closer. Each time I danced it, I ended up back arched over Sonya’s arm, gasping as I looked up. Finally, Wednesday around eight in the evening, Sonya grinned. “I think it’s good enough. So let’s send it off.”

“Not yet. Is there a costume made up for this?”

“Of course. Good for walking around, or dancing the scene.”

“Get it, and the wig. Might as well go whole hog on it.”

Fifteen minutes later, camera set up, I danced in the Vampire Bund. Half an hour later, we had a reply. The only complaint was my arms and legs were a bit hairy. So I was introduced to depilatory cream in the giant economy size.

Thursday morning as I prepared to practice dancing again, Sonya brought in a guy a foot taller and about a hundred pounds heavier. “Carl Waller, this is Henry Van Dyke. He is the direct corporate contact and fellow cosplayer. Henry, this is Carl, our new Trap performer. He hasn’t chosen a stage name yet. Henry is going to play Akira to your Mina.”

The guy loomed over me, and I felt a thrill of fear. He didn't look horrible or vicious, but had the quiet competent air of someone who had done violence in the past, and could do it again at need. I blurted out quoting *The Princess Bride*, "My god, you *are* the Brute Squad!"

For a long moment, no reaction. Then he gave me a smile that made me think of a Caucasian Dog; the breed averages between two and four feet tall at the shoulder and are known both for their loving protective nature and ferocity. "You're a cutie, Carl."

"Cutie," Sonya mused. "The name Kawaii hasn't been taken yet, has it?"

Henry cocked his head, reminding me of the dog even more. "Not sure. Give me a moment." He stepped off, pulling out a phone. Sonya handed me a paper cup of coffee, and we watched. He snapped it closed. "Now you're registered as Kawaii. It's Japanese for 'cute'."

"Good. So why is Henry here?"

Sonya chuckled. "Because when you do it for the convention, he's going to be catching you."

There were several hours of more practice, both of us in our costumes. We didn't have a raised platform, but Sonya had already checked and they had a platform already. So we blocked out his portion of the dance by having him standing down just in front of the audience, then he would be on the platform with me so when I went into that last extension, he could catch me.

Thursday was a bit frantic. They had four different costumes for me to wear, and each had to be adjusted for me. I would be a Goth Lolita in a floor-length white formfitting dress with the body exposed from the neck in an almost fingered pattern at my nonexistent breasts down to the bikini line, a midi-length maroon overskirt-bodice combination with a white underskirt, a maroon blazer with a black miniskirt school uniform, and the ribbons without a whole lot more for the dance. There was also the blond wig with the hair in twin tails tied with black ribbons.

Tatiana, another Trap and a talented seamstress who would be playing Veratos, my devoted servant and assistant, told me that I could have these costumes set aside for purchase. After all, as he said, if another con asked for that show, you would already have the clothes to wear.

By ten that night, I had been fitted out And finally fell into bed.

## **My first con as an Otokonoko**

I only picked at my breakfast Friday morning. I had spent an hour with Dita, another Trap who was playing Nero, one of Mina's maids, for makeup. I thought I knew makeup, but it was like a kid in grade school thinking they are as good as Rembrandt.

I looked at the team I'd be working with. Sonya was playing Nanami the Student Body President who becomes a vampire halfway through the first season, Henry as Akira, Tatiana and Dita, and Robert Kyle, playing Rozenmann, one of the Lords of the True Blood vampires.

I finally ate some of the hash browns, hoping they wouldn't come back up. "Am I the only one who noticed that everyone at this table is a guy?" I asked.

All the other Traps laughed. "It's what the company is known for. The only way to find out if we are not is to ID us, or do the Crocodile Dundee test," Dita commented.

"At which point I put him through a wall," Henry commented blandly, giving a small smile.

I chuckled. "I knew there was a reason I liked you." Suddenly I was ravenous.

Half an hour later a van arrived, and we piled in. Costumes were loaded, and we were off. Less than an hour later we were at the hotel. Our gear was unloaded and we were ushered into a green room. We chose our more sedate costumes, so I was in the school girl outfit. Attendance packets were passed out, along with name tags. The usual 'Hi! My name is:' ones. Mine was already marked: KAWAII AS MINA TEPES. Along with that came a stack of business cards already marked as Kawaii from the Land of Cosplay Fantasy. By the time I was dressed I had butterflies mating in my stomach. Then we were on the floor, walking around.

## **Walking the Walk**

We were hip deep in fans but you have to remember the term fan is short for *fanatic*. The Otaku are both the source of our income, and the bane of our existence. The English definition would be 'Geek' with all of negatives it implies. But the meaning to the Japanese is wider. An Otaku is a person who has obsessive interests and can apply to a wide variety of

topics, including anime, manga, cosplay, collectibles and more. They are the most loyal and fickle of fans.

Put it this way; remember the movie *Galaxy Quest*? The alien race that built a spaceship from an old TV show that worked using just the blueprints and design specs from the tech manuals written after the fact? *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* have put out the same sort of manuals. Try building a working TIE Fighter. Get back to me about how well it works.

That is what Otaku do. They come to conventions and ask the actors who play the roles why they did something a certain way. Never mind that it is just some guy hired to play a role, who sits there and punches the buttons as he is supposed to, and knows nothing about the universe created beyond his lines. But to an Otaku it is *real*. So I had people wondering if Akira and I 'do it' like a normal human couple.

Never mind the minor invisible portion, I.E. we were both guys. Does a vampire who appears prepubescent get it on with a werewolf the same way as a human couple? But some of those were about the inner spirit form of Mina. In the Anime all Vampires have two forms; a normal walking down the street one and a true form which is what they are really like as a person. Most are grotesque monsters since except for Mina, only the bad guys seemed to transform. In hers she is a statuesque blond with the naughty bits fig-leaved by mist, and large black bat wings. So the question now was, did I as the normal Mina transform into my true form to get Akira into my bed? Considering Mina as the Loli tends to dress in lingerie and curl up in bed with him a lot, it might actually be a valid question if I were really Mina.

Some were fawning, others just enjoying the idea that their favorite character is right there to touch and talk to. But there was the occasionally dangerous geek. Think of the guy who tried to assassinate President Reagan because he wanted the attention of Jody Foster. I had one man slip me a note offering a thousand dollar for one night of sex. I read it, then handed it off to Henry. He made a call. The man would be blacklisted from any convention the company worked with.

I had been doing cosplay for years. But I had never had as much attention. Here I was, Mina Tepes with her loyal guard and love of her life, Akira. If I had been the real Mina I could not have had more attention. When some Otaku got snippy (He claimed my costume wasn't accurate) I flicked on my contacts and said in a cold voice, "You dare to judge my attire?" Picture walking on the street, seeing someone you think you know, tapping them on the shoulder to comment on what they are wearing, but when they turn it is really some famous person, like maybe Prince Charles of England. He flinched as if he had told the Prince his socks didn't match. I had never heard a more abject apology.

By noon I was both jazzed and tired. People don't understand that a public performance is as demanding as a foot race, and walking around as the focus of the attention of the audience is a performance. There is a synergy; the audience feeds your desire to portray the character which makes you want to do better. Your poise, grace, and dedication feed their enjoyment. We were just lucky that we weren't doing characters that had catchphrases. My appearance as Mina was my product, and they were buying.

I changed after lunch and was the Evening Dress Goth, slinking around with my ever-present body-guard, assistant and maids dancing attendance. Akira held my cards this time. Of course in that dress, I barely had enough room for me! By dinner I was dog tired. Ten hours of being on display, having customer after customer getting a picture. I had started merely standing by myself or surrounded by my entourage, or maybe draped over Akira because Mina loves Akira, and he both loves and is devoted to her as her champion.

It was requested of everyone taking pictures that they send a copy to the company for their archives. Looking back at them now, I can see how I progressed from standing alone and 'oh shit I'm in drag and this guy thinks I am a cute girl' to before long standing beside them with that haughty 'I'm four hundred years old and this is dreadfully boring, but you have asked politely for a picture', to one arm around the other person's waist. By the time the convention began shutting down that first day I was draped against men, hugging them, looking into their eyes, even kissing their cheeks. Considering how many people asked me for pictures where I would flash my fangs or pretend to bite someone, I was just glad I wasn't a vampire. I don't know if vampires could gain weight, but picture going to a cooking competition and every booth expecting you to take a bite of whatever they're making.

If they could get fat, by the end of the day I would have been imitating the Goodyear blimp.

We got back to the housing unit and I undressed only so the gown could be cleaned. I collapsed and the last thought was that it had been wonderful day.

The second day was more of the same. I started in the public Goth Dress, then heard we had a minor bobble. We had started with five hundred cards each. Basically my card had my stage name and the corporate name, with a web site where you could go to see photos that had been taken. But I hadn't been paying attention. When someone asked for a picture, I'd pose for it, then hand them a card so they knew I wasn't some underage local girl who worked her fingers to the bone on the outfit. But Henry had been keeping track, because he was in a lot of those photos with me. Mine and his had begun to run out by the time the first day ended. They had to send someone out to have more printed. Hopefully we'd have enough for the rest of the convention.

The second day had a dance, and I attended in that same formfitting evening dress. I don't ballroom dance well and fast dances were right out, so I was restricted to slow dances. But remember that in a dance, the man *leads*. So there I was, being moved around the floor by guy after guy with barely enough time to eat and drink. Because I was supposed to be a vampire, all my drinks were red. To make it easier on me they were all fruit juices since I loath tomato juice. I got to the point where I could almost identify the brand of the juice. As a change of pace, Henry told me later that when they make vampire movies, they usually use cherry syrup so he got me that with Grenadine added. I decided I'd drink that from then on.

## **Dancing the dance**

The third day was more of the same, except for two things; first I split the first part of the day between the school girl and the public dress, with the formal for the evening. Second was when they held their cos-

tume contest right after lunch. As professionals, we were only there for color and to award prizes; after all I had my costumes made for me by professionals, so it really wouldn't be fair. Instead, Tatiana and I were dragooned into being judges.

However at the start before they came out, I was going to do that dance. Remember what I said about butterflies mating in my stomach? As my colleagues got me into that outfit, they had become male and female Mothra. I stood there in the back with a look like a deer in the headlights as I heard, "And now, here from the Land of Cosplay Fantasy, Henry Van Dyke as Akira and Kawaii as Mina Tepes do the intro to Dance in the Vampire Bund!" I came around the screen, and Henry was there in a fleece jacket, looking away from the stage.

It made Youtube the same day. That was another thing I have seen and watched over and over. I strode out, and stood, my back was to him and at the second bar, he turned, so what he saw was me in that ribbon outfit with the short cape. Then I turned my head and our eyes met. I turned to face him. I gave a little coquette look, and extended my arm with the hand down as if asking him to kiss it. Five seconds later my arm came up, the cape fell away, and I began to dance. Just under a minute into it I froze, arms spread, the fan giving us a wind effect, blowing the ribbons to hide and reveal my chest.

During my portion he was stalking toward me and at about a minute and seven seconds, I did that dip, back arching, and seconds later he was there, arm beneath my back. I held position for only a couple more seconds, then leaned up, eyes locked on his. As

the music went on, he lifted me back to my feet, then as it finished I clutched his jacket and buried my face against his chest as he held me.

I stood there, hearing the applause, heart pounding, gasping, and looked up. Henry reached down, hand between us and the audience and pretended to kiss me. If anything the applause redoubled. Then he stepped back, took my hand, and we bowed.

We had just stepped back behind the screen when a security guard arrived. Before he could say anything, Henry had my ID in hand, and passed it across. The guy was beefy, and his tag read Hi! My Name is: with the name; 'The guy who will bounce your ass out if you misbehave'.

"Son of a bitch!" He handed it back, and gave me a grin. "Some idiot came out in the middle of your dance and said some half-naked girl was on stage."

"We expected it." I replied with a smile of my own. "As long as he doesn't attempt to grope me or get in my face, we let them have their fantasies. Any problem, sir?"

"He laughed. "Last month we had a convention of swimsuit models, both male and female. I didn't detain any of the guys in Speedos, so no." He looked away shyly. "Could I get a picture of you in that outfit without the cape?"

I posed hugging him, eyes bright red, and with a wide fanged smile.

Then came over two hours with me sitting in my chair, looking at the patrons being brought out. Like all such contests, you have some that are pretty

much indifferent. There's an old yarn about one of the costume contests from a Star Trek convention where a guy came out just in a suit, and after a lot of the audience had given their opinions of who he was supposed to be, he finally said, "I am a representative of NBC, announcing that Star Trek has been canceled."

You have good ones, bad ones, but sometimes you get someone who worked at it. One had literally gone home and overnight made her own Vampire Bund costume as Yuki Saegusa who is classmate of Mina, member of the student council, and a love interest of Akira. And she looked perfect.

I was one of the two from our troupe who gave out prizes. Tatiana with a prosthesis that gave him size triple D breasts was the other. When that girl, Daphne Sellers, was picked as the female costume winner, I walked up to hand her the prize. Her grin was as big as mine, and she hugged me. For the rest of the day until I changed back into the formal evening wear, she became part of our troupe. Our day ended, and we piled back into the van to go back to the housing unit.

As we drove I leaned over to where Henry sat. "So, am I hired?"

He chuckled. "Carl, it would only have taken hours to get someone here to replace you. You were hired as of Friday."

When we arrived back at the housing unit, we stopped to have dinner. Everyone was praising my work and I thought *I could really get into this*. We would sleep, then pack to go to the main one in New

York, or perhaps to another convention. That has been my life since.

## **Land of Cosplay Fantasy**

We landed in New York at about four, and went to the New York main housing unit. It had once been a YMCA and could house all of the over one hundred working employees of the company. Our company president had come up with the idea from his time in the service back during Vietnam when he was stationed in Japan in the Air Force. While we in America might think Otokonko is a new phenomenon, the attitude has been there in Asian societies for centuries. Some of the clubs and bars in the old Ginza, or red light district, hired cute boys as waitresses who were dressed as proper Japanese serving women. Part of the advantage they had is a Kimono which is by its nature basically unisexual. Whorehouses for that matter had crossdressed boys on staff, and homosexuality, while not completely accepted, was at least left alone.

He had gotten into it in a fluke. After returning home after his deployment, he was working in Chicago during the first ever Miss Continental as one of the security staff back in 1980. If you think I mean bouncer, you're right. But he had been astonished by the looks of these guys. There's a saying in Japan 'if she looks to good to be true, she is probably a he'.

Then his grandfather died and left him several million dollars. When he received it, one thing he was told by a lawyer was to invest in companies that lost money, because that is a legal tax deduction. He put two and two together and Land of Cosplay Fantasy LLC was born in 2013. The idea was that cosplay is a niche market; you only have X number of conven-

tions that might hire you. He had never expected it to take off.

But then Halloween week of 2014 a Convention had asked for Elvira, Mistress of the Dark. He didn't have a girl who could play the role because of booking. One of the men who worked for him offered to do it, and his portrayal, in a slinky dress and a prosthesis like Tatiana had worn in Denver was a showstopper; especially when 'Elvira' at the end of the first day was asked out on a date, and told the patron that he was a guy.

He had more pictures taken in the next two days by an order of magnitude. Try fifty the first day and over five *hundred* in just two days.

A month or so later, a big name Department Store chain had asked for the basic Santa Tableau, but in their requirement, 'since the women we hire as 'elves' tend to get asked for dates a lot, could you send us all boys? Straight ones?'

So the Trap section was born. When I joined them, there were fifty of us. But we were the fastest growing portion of our cosplayers.

Like the housing unit in Denver, they had given us a lot of space. One thing that surprised me was the closet space I had. It was larger than the walk-in my parents had with the dresser inside it to save floor space. All of my clothes took up only about three feet of that space. After Denver I had bought the costumes from that show at cost; there were a number of animes that feature prepubescent vampires, so while only the Goth Lolita might be used any time soon, I was ready to step in and play Mina in a heartbeat.

I went down to the cafeteria. The lunch and dinner menus were set, but breakfast was pretty much to order. They had meatloaf as an option, so I loaded my tray. Another guy came up beside me, and I looked up. “Hi.”

“Hi yourself.” His head cocked, then he grinned. “You’re the newbie, Kawaii?”

“Guilty.” I finished off with a chocolate pudding.

“I’m Michael, my stage name is Miyu,” We shook hands, “you beat me out for the Denver con.”

“Excuse me?”

He followed me over to a table, and we sat together. “The promoters wanted to see if one of our people could dance well enough to at least try to do the intro. I can dance, but not that well. So you got the role instead of me,” He bowed his head and said grace, then opened his silverware packet. “No big, but it’s a surprise when a newbie takes a good one like that right out of the starting gate.”

“I was surprised.” I commented. The meatloaf was choice, moist, with a mixed sauce that was tart and tangy, and the mashed potatoes were creamy. Heaven. “So, what did you do this last weekend?”

“Retrocon in Boston. I play C-Ko from the old anime Project A-Ko. You would have loved it because of the ones who played Agent D and Mari in bikinis.” He turned. “Jake! Sonny! Stand up and take a bow!”

I turned around, and my eyes widened. Jake was about six-two, and built like a weightlifter. Sonny

was bigger; at least six-four and even heavier built. “Those two guys were dressed as *girls*?”

“Don’t know the anime, eh? Agent D is a spy sent ahead to Earth to find their princess,” he motioned to his own chest, “but until halfway through the first movie D is dressed as a guy in a trench-coat, at which point suddenly ‘she’ is dressed in a bikini fighting the hero. Mari is a classmate who complains in a high-pitched girl’s voice that she has to shave twice a day, even though you see her from the start in a girl’s uniform.”

I pictured Jake dressed in a Japanese schoolgirl’s uniform, and began to laugh. Across the room Jake shouted ‘Laugh it up, mon-key boy!’ The room dissolved into laughter. I later found that Jake’s favorite movie was Buckaroo Banzai.

“So, what happens next?” I asked, sipping my tea.

“They will go through your anime list to find characters you can play. That should take maybe a couple of days, depending on your anime list. They will also look at special skills, like the fact you took dance in high school. We have costumes from major studios and made by our people here covering just about anything.”

“But why go to all that trouble? I mean the photo shoot?”

“Think of it as a modeling portfolio, because specific people can be requested by promoters if you have a photo they like. You done eating? Come on.” We bussed our dishes, and went up to the rooms. He opened a door, and I walked in with him.

His closet was packed! “Crap! How long have you done this?”

“I was hired early last year. Every time I do a gig, I buy some of the costumes in case I need them for a later one.” He brought up the corporate website, and clicked the model link. There were three buttons on the left side: FEMALE, MALE and OTOKONOKO. He clicked the last. “A lot of the guys are also listed in the male section, so am I. You probably will be too.”

The first page was arranged by Stage name, and there I was in all my Mina regalia with NEW right above them. Beneath the pictures was “FULL PORTFOLIO BEING PROCESSED”.

He scrolled back up to MIYU, and I got a chance to see what mine would be like. One of his first was Perfect Tommy from Buckaroo Banzai but there were three pages of pictures of later gigs. When they had done Tenchicon, a Tenchi Muyo convention he had been both Neju from Galaxy Police, and Washu from the main series.

Michael grinned, then in a heavy Scots accent said, ‘One day lad, all this will be yours!’

I recognized the line and replied in a querulous voice, ‘What, the curtains?’ We laughed together.

The next two days was almost as frantic as learning the dance had been. I met with the costuming staff, and they used my anime choices to create a new me. When they found the best costumes, they took pictures. But it wasn’t going to end there; because one of the first they posted was a hâremumono or ‘harem’ show named Baka and Test. Those were posted on Tuesday evening and there was a frantic ‘add him to the roster!’, so the

week they usually took would have to be spread over the next month.

Thursday morning we were off to Miami for AnimeCon.

## **Playing Minami**

I had thought when I was told about this gig that I would be playing Hideyoshi; after all, at the last convention I went to on my own, it was what someone had shouted.

But when I got into the van, one of eleven, I met the Barnard twins. Ray and Ron played a lot of parts; Chii and Freya from Chobits, Hikaru and Kaoru Hitachiin from Ouran High School Host Club, and Yuuko and Hideyoshi who they were playing for this gig. They had taken the name of the brothers from Host club, and joked about how they would trade off being Yuuko just as the brothers would play the ‘which one is Hikaru’ game for Host club. Each of the main characters were represented, and I was chosen to play Minami Shimada.

Once we were in the rooming house, we started working. The series has some scenes that are basically violent, so we had to practice stage fighting so we could hit each other without actually hurting someone. Henry could fall and pretend to be blinded by Darcy, who was playing Shôko his love interest. One thing I was supposed to do is learn a diatribe in German. In episode six of the series, there is a scene when Minami, who is as flat-chested as can be, sees Mizuki Himeji (D-cup) in her bikini and screams about how unfair God was in German. Dita was playing Himeji with a full body suit so he looked voluptuous. The costume department had supplied two body suits, one for him

and another for Tatiana, who was playing Aki's older sister Akira.

Our costumes were simple. All of us, except for Jake who was playing Sôichi Nishimura, better known as 'Ironman' and Tatiana, had a school uniform with blazers and ties; blue for the men and red for the girls. We also had costumes matching the avatars of the main characters.

Our other costumes were oriented toward the anime itself. In the sixth episode they had a pool scene where everyone (Except for Hideyoshi's sister Yuuko and Ironman) were in bathing suits. In Episode 14 they also had a Miss Yukata contest where all of the male characters; again with the exception of Ironman, were forced to dress as women for a contest.

## **A little Extra Spice**

Friday morning we arrived in our school uniforms. Again, my tag read "Kawaii as Minami Shimada". Again we traveled in a pack. I was speaking to Henry who was playing Yujii Sakamoto when suddenly someone shouted 'Honey Muffin!' I turned as a girl tackled me. I noticed her hair was red in high pigtails, and she was wearing a very good copy of our uniforms. Her tag read "Mindy Patrick as Miharuru Shimizu".

"Will someone get her off of me!" I squealed in a girl's voice just staying in character, since I knew Shimizu's relationship with Minami. There were a flurry of flashes, and a lot of good natured laughter. Then finally she stood, helping me to my feet. She took my arm like a girl holding her boyfriend. I smiled as I whispered, "Who the hell are you?"

She turned, giving me a brilliant smile. “My father is one of the convention promoters. I’m Mindy.” She hugged my arm and as the entourage walked on, she walked with us. “He told me about hiring you guys,” her eyes twinkled, “guys as in gender that is, and he showed me the photos.”

“All right,” I kept the frustrated look on my face. In the anime Miharuru was a lesbian who had a serious crush on Shimada, so I couldn’t be happy and smile if she was on my arm; not and stay in character, “so what is this about?”

She grinned, looking down. “I thought you were cute and since I had a costume, I dressed up to spend time with you.”

I snorted. “As a lesbian lover?”

“Well you do have an Aki, so I couldn’t crossplay as him, now could I?”

“There is that.”

We went through the day doing little bits of acting as we did. If Akihisa who was supposed to be my love interest paid attention to another girl, or if he commented on my lack of feminine form and grace, I would have to either acted infuriated, or hit him. David Kyle, also known as Gwen, who was playing the character, made sure to piss off either me or Himeji at least every few minutes. By the same token, whenever he commented on my form Mindy took up her role as it were. Tatiana as Akira, Akihisa’s older sister constant made comments suggesting a love interest, but got irate when he paid attention to either of us ‘girls’ beyond answering questions.

There is a five-minute Youtube film of us where he succeeded in pissing all of us off. At the end of it, Mindy and I reenacted one of the scenes from the first season where both Minami and Miharuru had attacked him for the same comment, but for different reasons. So picture a slim guy with one arm in a lock with Miharuru's feet against his chest and neck, me with his leg in a figure four leg lock. As I was pretending to pull his leg off, I shouted "Say you love me or lose the leg!" As it happened in the scene, he repeated the exact same thing, which caused my character and me to let go of his leg in disgust. But the audience loved it.

Since we had a lot of people assigned to this gig, we split lunch. Mindy took the first one to talk to the others, leaving me alone for a while. I talked with Gwen about how long he had been with the company when someone shouted, "Hey there, stupid head!"

A cute little fifth grader in a costume from the series ran up and almost leapt into Gwen's arms. As I stood there she winked, then leaned out so I could see her Badge. "Danielle Patrick as Hazuki Shimada".

The first rule about street theater is always go with the gig if someone offers something new. This was supposed to be my younger sister! "Hazuki! What are you doing here?"

She knew the part. In the first season she arrived, claiming she was going to marry Akihisa, then going on about how they had been dating for a while and such. A few seconds later four guys wearing hooded robes marked FFF for the guys who didn't have girlfriends arrived to drag Akihisa to off stage where you heard begging and pleading.

“Don’t worry.” Danielle whispered. “My sister knows four guys from the football team who wanted to come to the convention.” A few moments later, Gwen was back with four guys in street clothes with their robes over their arms. They shook hands with me and left.

At dinner the entire crew along with Mindy and Danielle went to a local chain restaurant. I found myself pushed up beside her. “So tell me about yourself,” she said as her salad was delivered.

“My name is Carl,” I began.

“How did you end up with Kawaii?”

“Henry over there.” I motioned to where he sat between Jake and one of the twins. “Last week I was playing Mina from Dance in the Vampire Bund, and he said I looked cute.”

“Is he, like, gay?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like you can walk up to someone and ask.”

She chuckled. “Well you could. But you would spend a lot on medical expenses. Sort of like walking into a biker bar and demanding to know which pussy took up two parking spaces.” We laughed together. After dinner we headed back to the rooming house.

“Does that happen often?” I asked Dita in the gym as we worked on our gig. There is a scene in episode one of Season Two where Minami, Shôko, and Hijemi see Akira for the first time in a bikini. Each reacts differently and we were working on what to do. Tatiana walked in with Darcy in tow and heard my question.

“Fan girls? Yeah it does sometimes. The worst are the fan boys.”

“Yeah, I had a fan boy go from fan to stalker about six months ago.” Darcy was between me and Tatiana in height, and with makeup he looked really good as Shôko. “I was playing Kurumu from Rosario + Vampire, and he decided a succubus must want a little action.” He looked upset. “I was trapped in a stalled elevator with him for eight minutes. A good thing Stan was there.”

“Haven’t met Stan.”

“You won’t. He ended up having to fight the son of a bitch when he made his move.” Darcy ran a long thin finger down his cheek. “He got clawed right here; pretty bad infection and scarred badly because the bastard was about as conscious of his cleanliness as he was of people around him.”

“Shit,” I breathed. I pictured myself with scars from some guy who fit the word “unclean” just from his bathing habits, “What did Stan do?”

“The corporation has insurance policies for all of us in case of injury,” Dita commented. “You have to remember they make their money by having us look and perform well. Don’t you remember the forms?”

“I didn’t fill any out.” I said. “It’s only my second gig.”

Tatiana took out his phone, dialing, his finger in the air for quiet. “Henry? Call corporate; we need to have the insurance forms faxed down. I know there’s a notary down the street inland from the hotel, so we can get them notarized first thing in the morning.”

## Poolside

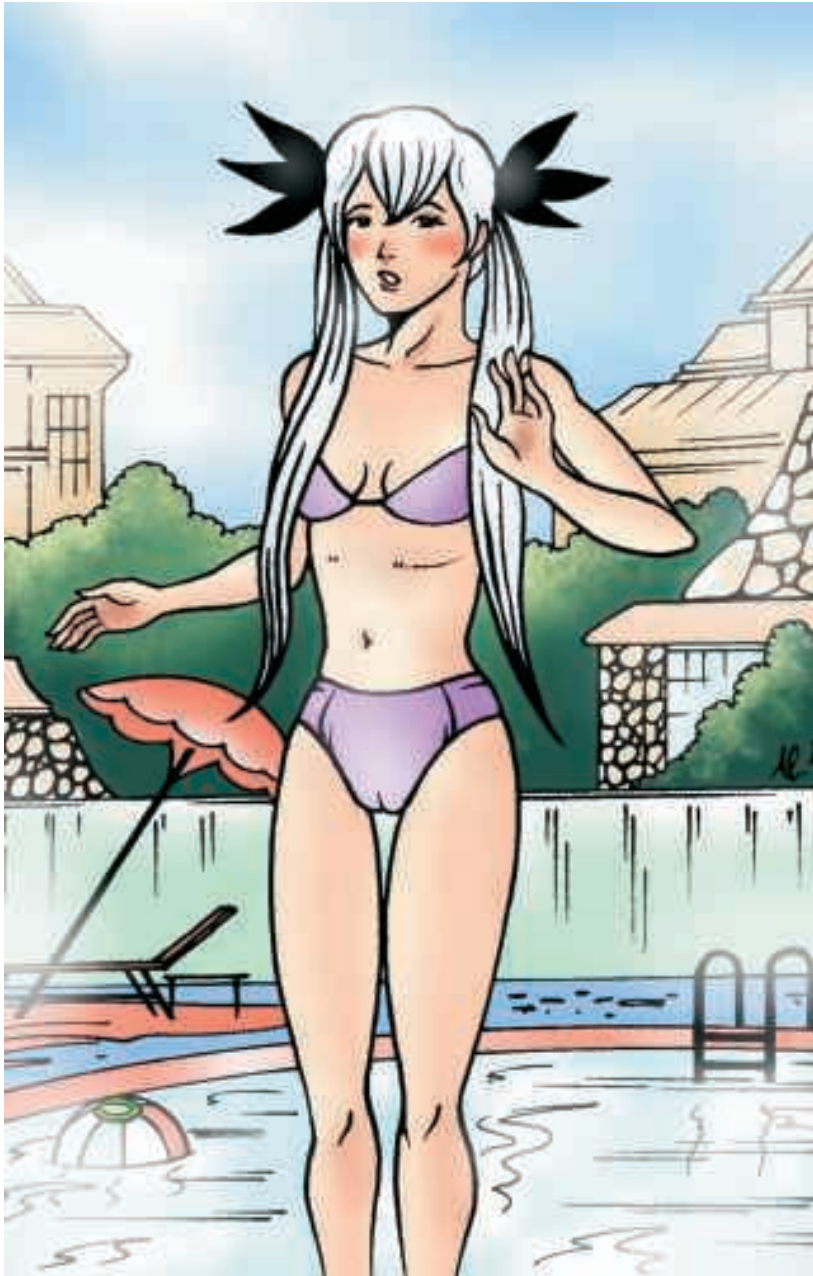
Saturday afternoon I was getting dressed for our poolside photo op. The one thing that bothered me was the gaff or cache-sex. Made for drag queens, it tucks and hides your equipment, so you can wear a bikini and there is no bulge. I wasn't the only one grumbling of course. The only reason we were in swimsuits was because the promoter had watched the show and loved those two episodes.

I was starting to walk out when I heard "Hi Stupid head!" I looked out, and there was Danielle jogging toward Gwen/Akihisa. She was wearing a Japanese-style school bathing suit, and under it, ginormous breasts for her size. Both he and Jesse Schmidt who was playing Kôta fell on their backs, breaking blood capsules under their noses.

I knew a cue when I saw it. "Hazuki!" I ran over as she turned. The falsies under the outfit sagged, and fell down into what now looked like a beer belly. The audience roared as I recovered it, then went back inside. I came back out just as Dita showed up. I turned, saw him, then clapped my hands to my face shrieking, "Worauf fur einem standard hat gott jene unterschieden. Die haben und jene, die nicht haben? Was war fur mich ungenugend!"

Afterward, when people asked, I told them the actual phrase made little sense in English, but it boiled down to a girl protesting because God gave someone else bigger boobs.

If you have never seen the anime, Himeji is constantly worried about her weight. Minami worries about her bust size, and Shôko? I think she had never seen a bust as big as Akira's in a swimsuit. So we were all there, both Dita and I



protesting Hideyoshi's 'milkshake factory' with him protesting at the top of his lungs about being a guy when Tatiana strolled out.

I fell to my knees, "Don't worry about me, I'll just go through my life feeling totally inadequate!" I wailed. Both Dita and Darcy apologized as they grabbed Tatiana, Dita holding his hips, Darcy his bosom.

Then Dita fell to his knees, "Oh it's a cruel, cruel summer!"

"The world just hates us!" I moaned.

Before you ask, yes, another Youtube video.

To set up the next day's shoot, Henry and Gwen wandered around poolside flirting outrageously, but a lot better than the characters did in that episode. Meanwhile Mindy showed up in a pretty good copy of Miharu's suit from episode six of Season One and spent hours chasing me around the pool, professing her love. The brother playing Yuuki wore the bathing suit from the first bathing suit episode, while Hideyoshi walked around in trunks and a jacket marked LIFE GUARD and wouldn't talk about it. As the sun began to set, we moved indoors, but kept the suits. When Akihisa flirted with a girl inside however the FFF Inquisition showed up to carry him off for another faked torture session.

Saturday was a banquet and dance. We dressed as our Avatars, little beings that fought in what they called Summoner test wars. Mine was a blue blazer with white slacks and a saber. Mindy showed up in Roman Legion armor, and a sword. At least here we

could let down our hair as it were and have fun. The dinner was excellent, and I asked Mindy to dance.

“It’s been fun, Carl.”

“For me too.” I said. If you have ever seen a pair of lesbians dancing, it isn’t like a straight couple. They would be merely pressing together, though the more modern forms of dance come as close to sex as you can get without actual penetration. But two lesbians dance slow, and their hands touch not only the hips but the face and hair as well. Mindy had been watching movies where they showed the phenomenon, and mimicked it almost exactly.

“This is making me uncomfortable, Mindy,” I said as she brushed both hands across my cheeks, “I am not a girl, and you are not a lesbian, so all you’re doing is feeding the fantasy.”

She dimpled. “Of course I am, Carl. They,” she motioned toward the fans who attended, “don’t know you are a guy. The character I am portraying is an out and out lesbian, so of course it is two girls dancing right now.”

“What am I going to do with you?” I almost moaned.

“When we can be together, enjoy that time.” She was dead serious. “This is not the first convention I have been to where the Land of Cosplay Fantasy was involved,” She looked up into my eyes, “Do you mind that I have seen you both as a guy and a girl and think you are a fox?”

I smiled, and kissed her gently. “As long as you know the role is not me, sure.”

“Oh Carl!” She threw her arms around me, and gave me one of those kisses with a lot of tongue. I was in my own world when it happened. When I came back to the real world, there was cheering and applause. We pulled apart. I had never spent a lot of time with women in school. It wasn't that I didn't have contact; in dance class I had lifted or partnered dozens of girls. But when it comes to dance, the girls rarely think of their partners as possible lovers. So I would go out, lift, or augment her performance, but beyond that I was like the bars in a practice hall.

Sunday we were back in school uniform, walking around the halls and rooms, pictures being taken like the last convention. When it was time for the costume contest, we again did a little show before.

This time of course, it was the Miss Yukata contest. We came out as we were introduced, everyone in their yukatas. Iron Man came first, dressed in a normal male yukata, then all of the 'girls'. Mine was a yellow with a floral pattern in it, and I acted uncomfortable because both I and the character had never worn one before. Once all of the 'girls' were on the stage, Iron Man took the mike.

“Of course the guys misbehaved yesterday, so the girls are punishing them. So, I would like to introduce you to Hide!”

Hideyoshi came out. He walked to center stage where there was a microphone on a stand. “I didn't misbehave yesterday, so why do I have to compete?”

“Because that is this skit; deal with it.” He joined his 'sister' in the girl's line-up. “Now, Akika Yoshi.”

Gwen came out. The makeup was a bit overdone intentionally, and his hairstyle a poorly done girl's look. Since we had not sent the two other characters, an announcer and a judge, our Iron Man asked the questions. After asking 'Akika' if she had a boyfriend, Gwen almost screamed, "No boyfriend!" The audience laughed. Then when asked what kind of underwear, he screamed again, "No! I don't wear that stuff!" The audience not only laughed but gave howls and wolf whistles.

"Next contestant, Komi Tsuchiya." Jesse came out with a long black wig, and got cheers. Iron Man went through the questions, getting short answers until he got to 'What are your favorite kinds of clothing?' Jesse started into a full list of costumes known for fetish wear in Japan, and by the end the audience was cheering and applauding.

Last was 'Hong Shong Li'. When Henry came out everyone was roaring with laughter. Between the wig and makeup that looked like it was troweled on, he was a perfect over-the-top caricature of a guy dressed as a woman. Iron Man took pity on him, so no questions were asked. If they had been, Darcy would have had to pretend to stun him with the stun gun he carried as Shôko.

This time we didn't supply any judges, so we got to stand back and watch. I was over near the judges, and heard something I had long suspected; when it came to the women, the men on the panel were choosing by sex appeal rather than how good the costumes were. I saw a girl in a stellar Buzam Callessa outfit lose to a girl in a chainmail bikini. Mindy was with us rather than the other patrons, in a blue yukata with delicate peony blossoms. I mentioned it to her.

“It happens,” she said with a shrug. “The promoters choose some of the judges, but the super-fans end up on the panel all the time.”

“Super-fans?”

She motioned to one guy, who looked like the older Otaku in *Comic Party Revolution*. “He has copies of just about every fan-service anime ever sold. My father and I were invited over to dinner one night, and he had them in Beta and VHS, even laser-disc,” she shivered, “and by chance I walked into his private collection. He has pretty much every hentai game invented.

“Dad puts up with him because he owns a controlling interest in one of the local papers. If we tried to bar him or not let him be on the judge’s panel, we’d get all sorts of nuisance articles about everything from vendors cheating the customers to claims they had seen ‘real’ lolicon.” She motioned toward where her sister was talking to Gwen and Darcy. “What was it William Randolph Hearst once said? ‘You give me the pictures, I’ll give you the war’. Think what someone could do with pictures taken at this convention if they wanted to spread hate.”

The rest of the convention I wandered around like the last one, except for Mindy holding on like a limpet. As the doors finally closed, we bid our farewells.

## **No rest for the Wicked**

I always thought there was a season for conventions, but it’s more like ‘Is the weather going to be bad here? If so, we hold it *there* instead’. So there is a season for them, but except for like LA and Las Vegas, it migrated north and south with the seasons.

Our only real down time would be around Thanksgiving. That first Christmas Elf gig had spawned its own section.

By the end of the month, they finally finished the portfolio. But I only got to look at it after the fact. While I would have one or maybe two days off each week, I was always flying out on Thursday for yet another con. I had been told that between Thanksgiving and Christmas we had a slow time, but that was months away.

I got to know my fellow players better in what downtime I had. Jake had always wanted to do an Indie movie for the follow-up of Buckaroo Banzai. It turned out the major producer at the studio for reasons of his own had done everything he could to assure it was never done. Now Kevin Smith, best known to most Americans as Silent Bob had finally broken that log jam, but they were still in negotiation for a series. Half a dozen of the others I had only met in passing. The problem with playing a Trap is that eventually you get too old. It's like any kind of modeling in that way. So I was looking at maybe five years before I would be too old. But that just meant I was going to have all the fun I could between now and then.

Because of my build, I was getting the cute and loli roles a lot. Also, as the newest member of the team, I was being chosen a lot. This I was told, was normal. The promoter almost always chose the new face when he set up his requests. To choose the ensemble, the promoter would go to the website, and click the promoter's button. There he would find a listing of the anime and TV shows where we had cosplayers slotted to fill the roles by personality and special skills, if any.

For example, let's say they had decided to use a crew for Rosario Plus Vampire. You knew they would choose the five main characters; Tskune Aono, Moka Akashiya, Kurumu Kurono, Yukari Sendou, and Mizore Shirayuki. To fill it out they might add Ruby Tojo, Ginei Morioka and Shizuka Nekonome. But to do it properly they would need two Mokas, because you have the sweet-tempered one and her inner vampire.

Then they would add in special skills, such as dance and song. If they wanted to use the dance video used for the opening of Season Two, they would have to add Moka's sister, Koko Shuzen. Of that list I would have a photo as Tskune, Yukari, and Koko, the last two because of being able to dance or my size. If you added being able to sing, I had photos as Kurumu and Mizore as well. The only reason I didn't have one as Moka was that she is the tallest of the six girls mentioned. Since I was only starting to learn martial arts, there would be no photos of me in that section. If you needed twins, of course the Barnard brothers went out often on that, though less than a month after I joined them we had a second pair of twins.

The biggest thing for a proper cosplay was attitude. Can you act well enough to BE the character? My third Con I was Hikari from This Ugly Yet Beautiful World because I could play someone who has only one purpose in life; and that is to destroy the world but act cute and sweet doing it.

It was like casting for anything; you start at this point, say a finished script. and as you chose your actors, they have to match them by ability. Summer Glau who played River Tam in Firefly and Serenity, was chosen because she had that innocent air, but

was also trained in Wushu, a martial art, so she could do her own fight scenes. If they wanted a fighting scene with Koko in my anime example, I would not be there. So as they reach the end, the producers would have the best choices for their ensemble.

## **My Parents find out**

It was my fourth month with the company. I was making an average of four thousand a month, and like Dad always advised, I put most of it in the bank. This con we were the main characters from the Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya. Again I had been tapped for petite and flat, so I was Yuki Nagato, a humanoid construct sent to Earth to find out why this one woman named Suzumiya was causing so much disruption.

So I spent my time walking around with the others, wearing glasses, speaking in a flat monotone when addressed, never smiling, and reading. It had been one of the easiest gigs so far. I was sitting by myself as the others were getting their photos taken when someone coughed. I set my finger in the book, looked up, and saw my father.

“I want to talk to you, Carl. Right now.”

“Certainly, sir.” I kept the voice, standing. “If you will come this way?”

“Where-”

“Sir, if you wish to speak to me, we will have to go offstage, as it were.” I motioned again. He probably wondered if I was on something. How often does the average kid speak to their parents with no inflection at all? I noticed Henry watching, and he mouthed,

‘trouble?’ I made a seesaw motion with my hand as I reached the door to a conference room they wouldn’t be using for a few hours. I opened it, stepped through, and turned, taking off the glasses. “Hi Dad.” He stared at me, then his eyes went up and down. Blue sailor suit with a gray sweater over it with flat shoes. “You know, at this point most people have a conversation.”

He shook his head, looking more confused than disgusted. “I saw the photo and didn’t believe it. Now I see you like this! I still don’t like this - this *obsession* of yours! It’s unhealthy! I don’t know where this - this attitude and behavior came from! I don’t even know you anymore! Son . . . why can’t you dress normally? I supported you when you said you wanted to dance.”

I was confused. “Obsession? Why is this an *obsession*?” He motioned silently at my clothes. “Remember my ‘growth spurt’ in high school? I went from four ten to five feet! I’m never going to be as tall and heavily built as you are, Dad. Except for retail work or a call center, I don’t have a lot of options for work. Not big enough for most jobs a man might have. And I didn’t want to have people calling me ma’am on the phone, or asking the customers if they want fries with that for chump change.

“The company saw me at a convention, and told me they’d pay me to dress up in costume for conventions, and pay more if I didn’t mind crossplay,” I motioned to my clothes. “I am being paid to dress as a cute girl without being gay and you call it an *obsession*? How many jobs pay five hundred a day that you know? Or at least ones where I won’t get arrested?”



“You say you’re not gay, but all your friends are! All of them! You haven’t dated a normal girl since your third year!”

I shook my head. “Dad, my friends are not gay; well, except for Chet and Jeff, and Sherry and Veronica. But having friends who are doesn’t make *me* gay. It’s not like a disease you can catch.”

“As for money . . . yes, five hundred a day is impressive! but you’ll never get a salaried job in an office doing this! And if you did, and this was EVER discovered. . . son, you’d be ruined. I know there are pictures and videos of you on the internet . . . that is forever, you know that, son, don’t you?”

I love you, son. I never want anything bad to come to you. I don’t care who you are with, as long as it’s love. But I’m afraid for you, for your future . . .”

“I don’t have the job skills for an office job. I am actually learning them for the future, but not yet. Dad, I made over four thousand my first month! And it’s all in the bank. We’re talking fifty thousand a year.”

“Fifty thousand? You’re - you’re making a living at this?”

“Yes, I am, and compared to most my age, a good one. As for girls, I met one my second week, and she sees me an average of twice a month. She doesn’t care how I dress, why do you?”

“But what about Julliard? What about the ballet?”

I remembered that dream from junior high. “Do you know how hard it is to get into Julliard? Only one in twenty applicants makes it. And, as a guy, I am too

small for ballet or paired dance. Can you see me lifting even the smallest ballerina? Most of the girls are bigger than I am! Hell, in Drama you saw me in Midsummer Night's Dream. The only role I could play was Puck!" I considered, "though if Mr. MacMillan had been willing, I could have played Hermia."

He looked crestfallen. "I - thought you would work out, work up to it . . . you wanted that so badly. . . Do you still dance, son? You have a gift for it, I swear."

"Dad, there's a dance segment in this Anime, and they paid extra to make sure all of us could."

"Do I embarrass you, son? I'd understand, being the age I am. You've just been so distant these last months, almost secretive."

I chuckled. "Well, duh! How was I supposed to break this to you? I'm being paid to dress up like a girl at conventions! No, mom, I'm not gay, or even bi!" I broke into the Muppet version of 'I Feel Pretty' from West Side Story. As the song progresses, the girl is changing her nose, hair, eyes and finally teeth and a full hairy monster costume, the voice going from a sweet girl to a growling voice.

He laughed, then turned in surprise as another voice sang out the line 'Whose the Pretty Girl in the mirror now?'

I half-crouched, eyes closed, face turning as if looking. 'What mirror where?'

At the end they pretend to kiss, and Henry and I hugged before giving Dad a coquettish smile. "Hi, Henry. Dad, this is Henry Van Dyke, one of our cast. Henry, this is my dad, Patrick."

“Nice to meet you, sir.” Henry shook hands with him. “Part of my job is to play a role. But I am also there to make sure all of our people are safe. When someone tries to take one of our people off, I make sure they are OK.”

My dad looked at him and snorted. “And how are you going to protect my son?”

“Black belt in Aikido, sir,” Henry replied levelly. “I also teach our actors so they can defend themselves at need,” he grinned, “for some of the Animes we do, knowing how to fight is a plus we get paid for.”

“And for singing, dancing, being willing to wear a bikini or a slinky dress,” I added.

“Enough, Kawaii. The dance number is scheduled for right before the dinner and dance tonight.”

“Kawaii?”

“For cute, Dad.” I gave him a curtsy and pirouetted. “Don’t I look cute?”

“Your mother is going to have a fit,” he moaned.

“Call her. She can watch me dance.”

That evening, our team set up. For this gig when it came to dance, we had a serious advantage. In Japan the signers for songs used in Anime are just like bands here in the U.S. The women who did the voices of the three female characters sang the exit music for the show, and made a video of themselves doing it. The only portion of their video that was not shown was the two men in the group, which we added.

We worked like dogs for two weeks before the show. Try learning a song in *Japanese* when you don't even know a word of it, then not lip synching it, but actually singing along with a dance of combined hand and step movements. So the three of us, Sasha, who was Playing Haruhi Suzumiya in the center; Darcy who was playing Mikuru Asahina to the left facing the audience, with me on the right stood there. "We hope you enjoy this!" Sasha shouted, then the music began.

We did it, we did it well! By the time the two guys jumped in just doing the dance moves, the four and a half-minute piece had the audience cheering and screaming as if we were a major rock band. When it ended; all of us posed, the applause threatened to bring down the roof. We stood, taking our bows, then we went together to the table where Mom and dad sat.

Oddly enough, mom hadn't thrown a fit. At first she was confused, but as we came off the stage she leaped up and hugged me. "That was wonderful."

"Thanks, Mom." We sat, and they began to serve. The chat was light and fun. Both Darcy and Sasha dropped out of character long enough to tell them of their lives. By the time dessert arrived, we were all fast friends.

A girl with black hair came toward our table, and I looked up. Then I was on my feet hugging her. "Mindy!" Mindy grinned, nodding. Her tag identified her character as Ryoko Asakura from the same series. "Mom, Dad, this is Mindy Patrick, who I was seeing when we were in Miami that first month. Mindy, this is my mom Julie, and my dad, Patrick."

“Pleased to meet you both. Carl has told me so much about you. I try to get a dance with my honey bunny when I go to the same convention. May I have that dance first?”

“Are you . . .” Dad didn’t say it, but he motioned toward Sasha and Darcy.

“Dad, I haven’t given her the Crocodile Dundee test yet.” I looked at her with a wicked grin. “Am I going to be surprised?”

She grinned back. “If you did it, I would be insulted. If Carl does it, I might consider it foreplay.”

“Behave, Mindy.”

“Badly?”

“You are just asking for a spanking!”

She melted against me. “Promise?”

“Mindy, behave,” Henry said sipping his soda. “She is a genetic girl, Mr. and Mrs. Waller.”

“Spoilsport.” She caught my hand. “Dance with me?” We danced, nice and slow.

## **Preparing for Dresdencon**

Remember I said there is no season for conventions, only different locations? Well, there are times when it is as the real estate trade says, location, location, location.

We had just come back from a convention in San Antonio, moving our bags through the pickup area to

the taxi stand when Henry flinched, then took out his cell phone. He spoke for a moment before putting it away. “Oh joy and yummys. Kawaii, do you know the Harry Dresden Series of books?”

“I remember the TV show on SyFy,” I shrugged. “When they had him using a hockey stick as a staff and a drumstick as his blasting rod, I figured the budget was too low.”

He chuckled. “The TV show needed work but there are a dozen books, and a pretty good fan base. There’s going to be a convention in Chicago called Dresdencon. They want you playing Murphy.”

“Did they send a cast list?”

“Yep. Only ones we might have problems filling is Gentleman John Marcone, Butters and Mouse.”

“Who are they?”

Henry shook his head. “Philistine Marcone is a mobster. Described as very urbane and ruthless; think Marlon Brando from the Godfather, but younger and no accent. Waldo Butters is a chubby little geek who by the end of the Series is a heavy hitter. Mouse is Harry’s dog; a Tibetan temple dog.” He saw my blank expression. “The description is like a Caucasian.”

My eyes widened, “Oh, this is going to be fun.”

We got back to the Y, and the crew was called in. All of the people chosen were ones I had worked with for the main characters. Tatiana was already tapped as Mab the Queen of Winter, Dita for the Leanansidhe, Darcy for Molly Carpenter and the

Winter Lady, Cecily whom I had worked with on a couple of gigs in the last months for Gard, a Valkyrie who works as a security specialist. Jake was Marcone's bodyguard Kendrick, and Henry as Harry Dresden. We would start working into the roles the next morning.

I was used to being small around my fellow cosplayers, but this was going to be ridiculous. The shortest person the next morning was Darcy, who stood five eleven. I was also learning about prosthetics

While most people think of artificial limbs, the term is also applied to body suits where a woman can appear to be a man, or vice versa. I had not used one so far; there were enough female anime characters with flat chests. But Murphy is not described as flat, she is described as athletic but short.

Afterward I thought about how odd our support staff must look to an outsider. Sure, if we were Hollywood actors we would have costuming and makeup. But how many studios have a full-scale full-time prosthetic division? In Hollywood that is an entire 'hired as needed' business. Monday morning I went down and met Steve, our designer.

He first made a full body mold from shoulders to thighs, which is not even close to being fun; being slathered in Vaseline, then covered with impregnated gauze that becomes rock hard while you stand there for an hour. He was going to make bodysuits with breasts between B and single D, For my frame anything bigger would be absurd.

After he removed the cast, he mentioned that since I had been nice and polite, he hadn't inflicted the

worst torture imaginable. One thing anyone who has been in a cast can tell you is about that itch you can't scratch. Add to that if you mention a part of the body itching, it is like your mind says 'Yeah, that does itch.' As we were finishing up, a new hire named Cody came in. After giving Steve crap about how he—Cody that is—had more important things to do, Steve winked at me and I left laughing.

So I had a bosom, but it was about a B cup. It was also the first role where I would wear street clothes, though a woman's outfit instead of a man's. For this gig the costuming wasn't difficult for me. I had two different sets of street clothes, and tacticals, since Karrin Murphy was a cop. So I had two holsters, one clip-on, the other on a belt with a Sig Sauer automatic replica. I had badges in a folder that could be in my breast pocket, or on my belt, or on a lanyard.

We were discussing our specific roles when the gym door opened and two guys came in with an enormous dog. One was a few inches taller than I was, and a bit pudgy. The other, almost Henry's height, was someone you would take for an average business man, I noticed them second, because the dog looked around the room, saw me, and suddenly charged. One moment I was recoiling away from him, the next, I was flat on my back. The dog gave me one of those doggie grins, and began to lick my face.

"Stop it, Mouse!" the businessman shouted, but the dog ignored him. I was frantically trying to fend him off, but the dog was almost four-feet tall at the shoulder, and outweighed me by almost three to one. "Mouse, sit!" I groaned as he did. But he hadn't moved back when he did so I was now pinned at the knees by his rump. Instead of sitting, he instead lay straight down to pin my entire body so he could keep

licking. “Bad dog! Come! Heel!” Finally the dog got up and trotted back to the businessman to sit at his side.

The shorter man came over and offered his hand. I took it and was lifted to my feet. “Are you all right?”

I wiped my face, then glared at the Dog. “Mouse! What’s so mouse-like about something that big?”

The others laughed, then Henry finally got over it, and walked over. “That was a running gag in the books after Dresden was sort of adopted by the temple dog puppy he had rescued. The first intimation for the readers was when his brother bought large breed dog food.” He introduced himself.

“Conner MacBride,” the chubby one said, “I’m playing Butters.”

“Jacob Langtree,” the Businessman said, shaking his hand. “And I see you’ve met Mouse.”

“Met him! I’ve had date with girls who were less forward!” I said. Mouse looked at me, then started to pace forward. “Sit, Mouse!” I shouted. He considered, then sat, tail wagging so hard that I would have been bruised by it.

“Don’t mind him,” Jacob commented. “He’s just an overgrown puppy.”

I looked at Mouse who was inching forward. “Only if his mother was a T-Rex.”

“You remind him of my daughter.” He took Mouse’s collar and pulled, having as much effect as

you would expect from an ant trying to tow a car. “He greets her the same way.”

“And she’s still alive?”

Jacob looked at me askance. “Actually she’s at Annapolis as a Marine Cadet in her third year.”

“After dealing with Mouse, a Zombie Apocalypse would be a treat.”

Mouse seemed to shrink into the floor. Was he upset that I didn’t like him? Jacob noticed. “But he does have one skill.”

“Beyond beating or drooling me to death?”

Jacob walked over. “Madam, your shoe.” I handed him the running shoe. He walked away. “Now say, ‘Mouse, Fetch.’”

I shrugged. “Mouse, fetch!” The dog’s ears snapped up, then he ran over to Jacob, snatched the shoe out of his hand, and brought it back to me.

“If I had tried to hold on to it, he would have wrestled it out of my hand, or dragged me,” Jacob laughed. “A guy stole her bikini top one day, so I taught him that. The top didn’t survive the second time, but the guy about his size,” he motioned to Henry, “was embarrassed when Mouse dragged his ass back to her.”

“Why did you name him Mouse?”

“What can I say? I loved the Dresden series, and I saw him online. Try about a thousand dollars to get

him sent from Azerbaijan. But he was worth it.” He stroked the dog’s head, the tail went into overdrive.

Great, woman’s clothes, and a dog the size of a semi that loved me. What more could go wrong?

I spent the days between the announcement and the convention with Henry, continuing to learn Aikido, since Karrin Murphy trained in that martial art. It wasn’t the only one being taught; we occasionally got asked to do fighting Animes such as Fist of the North Star, Ranma One Half and Naruto. Darcy taught a class in Wushu, a martial art that favors the athletic since he had played both Black Widow from Iron Man Two, and River Tam from Firefly and Serenity; both parts I would be suited for with training.

## **I had to ask . . .**

Dresdencon was a zoo. Before we had gone through more than two rooms, I had seen six other Harry Dresdens, including one who might have been in Junior High School. Hockey sticks and drumsticks abounded. By my count on the first day there were only two who actually worked on proper staves and blasting rods.

Unlike the other cons, we rarely moved in a solid group. The Winter Court; Mab in street clothes as she was when she first met Dresden, the Leanansidhe dressed in the riding clothes she used in the third book walked together the first day. Jacob, Jake, and Cecily moved in a group, which meant Henry, Conner, along with Darcy dressed in street clothes as Molly Carpenter and I were also a group. Oh, and Mouse, mustn’t forget my constant companion. He had decided I was his girl, guy, whatever. At least he didn’t tackle me every few seconds. It was funny that

the dog had more pictures with patrons than any of our group. But I was still halfway through my pack of five hundred cards by dinner.

We went to the bathrooms in our groups because they were requiring us to use the bathroom of our gender. Here we got a lot of pictures. Honestly; when you read books, unless it is part of the story like the scene in Cool Hand Luke, you don't have the characters doing unimportant stuff like going to the bathroom, right? I must have given out fifty cards that first day. I later looked and there were almost four pages of me standing in a bathroom with some guy's arm around my waist. At least I avoided the one problem the other 'women' had. Karrin is only a B cup but the others were Cs and Ds. But there are a lot of small moves both Wushu and Aikido teach to take a man to his knees.

We all ate together, and a lot of the conversation was about the occasional groper. Every one of the others had been felt up at least once, and when one guy took a picture of his friend grabbing Tatiana's breast, he caught the second where Tatiana grabbed two fingers of his hand and took him down screaming. By the end of that day, seven guys had been banned from the rest of the convention; a record. But we had to admit all of the Faerie in our group were smoking hot.

The second day we switched up. Henry in the clothes of the Winter Knight but no staff or blasting rod was with the Faeries. Molly was in her costume as the Rag Lady; a nickname she got I was told when in two of the books she ran a one woman crusade to protect Chicago when Harry Dresden was apparently dead. I was now Sergeant Murphy having been demoted because I gave up my career to help him. The

Faerie were in the bright colors of winter, Henry's tuxedo matching the description from the book *Cold Days*. Again there were more pictures of Mouse than any of us had posed for.

That evening our dinner was punctuated by more photos of us eating. Henry sat at one end of the table, Jacob on the other end, and everyone else in sequence from most important socially; so Mab was on Henry's right The Leanansidhe on Jacob's, Molly on Henry's left, me beside Cecily on Jacob's left. Mouse sat between Cecily and I, cadging snacks as any dog would. At one point a patron asked me a question, and when I looked around, Mouse stole my pork chop which meant even more pictures. Honestly, I was obviously a secondary character if the dog could steal my dinner!

Mouse nudged me, whining. "Why is it I am the one who takes you for a walk?" I complained. He merely hung his tongue out and cocked his head. "Fine, let's go." We walked out of the restaurant and through the lobby. There was a revolving door, but I was not going to try that. Knowing Mouse, he might decide to run, making it a mad carousel. Instead I went to the manual double door. Someone was coming up behind me, and before I knew what was happening, a hand reached around and groped my left tit. As I spun to get away, something jerked at my left hip.

A young guy was running down the street. He'd stolen my replica sidearm! "Stop! Thief!" As soon as I shouted it, I wished I hadn't bothered. Most times in an American city, all you get is people looking at you and watching the person run away. If only I could outrun . . . I looked down at Mouse. "Mouse! Fetch!"

The dog took off like a missile, the guy looked back, then stopped, working the action. He stood with it in his hand angled gangbanger style, and pulled the trigger. Of course it was a replica, so nothing happened. Mouse crouched and leaped in his run and took the man down as he had with me. He bit down on the gun arm and the guy foolishly tried to wrestle it away. Mouse dragged him screaming toward me as two uniforms arrived.

One of them took the gun away, causing him to scream again. “Arrest that faggot bitch! He had his dog attack me!”

“Ma’am, a vicious dog is dangerous,” one of them said.

I walked up, and motioned to my name tag. “I’m working that convention,” I motioned to the hotel entrance. “This idiot thought he was stealing a real gun; even tried to fire it. As for Mouse, he’s an overgrown puppy who likes to play.”

“Play! He broke my finger!” the thief whined.

“After you copped a feel and stole my sidearm.”

One of the cops shook his head. “First he copped a feel? That’s assault and battery, and possibly assault. That along with snatching the prop takes it from misdemeanor theft to robbery. Then he tried to use it? Assault with a deadly, attempted murder, possession of an unregistered firearm, and brandishing a weapon.”

“How can it be possession of a deadly weapon or attempted murder if it’s a replica?”

“Intent.” The second cop had been calling it in as we spoke. “Most people would just see it and think it’s real. If he had dumped it and run, he wouldn’t be facing all the other charges, but the guy tried to use it; therefore he thought and acted as if it was real,” He shrugged. “That’s how the law works.”

“But that fucking dog attacked me!”

Both cops looked at Mouse who was watching each of us as we spoke like it was a tennis match. “Still. He is one big dog.”

“But obedient. I told him to fetch. If the moron had just let go, he wouldn’t have been injured. Mouse, heel!” The dog trotted over, and took his position. “Sit.” He sat, looking from face to face. “You see? He’s just a big puppy.”

“What does he do if you tell him to attack?”

“I have no idea. He belongs to one of our team at the convention. And considering his favorite thing to do, which is tackling me and drooling all over me, I am not going to find out.”

We stood for pictures, each cop holding the camera so the other could get in the shot. Again, Mouse was in them too, including the one with a cop on each side of the monster. As they drove away, we went back inside. Back at the restaurant they had just started to wonder where we were. I told them what had happened as dessert was served. Before I could stop him or even sit down, the damn dog ate my cherry pie! I was ready to scream at him but he had gotten the gun back. “You deserve it, you big lug.” I bent down, catching his head scratching his cheeks and ears. “You are such a good dog!”

Tail imitating a propeller, he flung himself forward, slamming me to the ground to lick my face again. Again with the pictures!

To quote Rodney Dangerfield, I don't get no respect.

The last day we switched up again. This time it was Henry as the Winter Knight, Molly as the Winter Lady with the same team. Jacob and his crew now walked with us, showing the Alliance formed in Harry Dresden's absence. Again there was the costume contest; Tatiana as Mab was in her Black outfit which she wore pronouncing sentence In Cold Days as one of the judges. Since it was a Dresden convention, the costumes had to be related. First prize went to a customer in a perfect match for Tatiana. Afterward, all those who competed got to have shots with the members of our cast they had mimicked. That was why I was standing separately, and in a group shot with six Karrin Murphys.

## Hiatus

The only time where there are almost no conventions is between Halloween and New Years; primarily because it is when people are either taking a run up on Thanksgiving, whining about any weight they gained because of it, or decompressing after Christmas. I did some photo shoots (for Anime Magazines primarily which are a lot shorter than others), and helped with one Star Wars fan film where I played Ahsoka. The others were basically a bunch of kids pretending to be the Rebels, but they needed at least one person who knew some Kendo. Honestly, I spent more time learning how to swing a lightsaber than the 'movie' took. Seven hours of stage work for a fifteen-minute short.

For the first time, I had more than one place I could be for the holidays. I spent a week at Thanksgiving with my folks. Regardless of how much Dad had worried, I didn't have a lot of people coming up and asking if I was Kawaii; though one older guy did watch me oddly a couple of those days until he got up the nerve to ask if I was. I admitted it, and he grinned, mentioning he had been in Miami on business and happened to catch our pool scene. I gave him a link to the website so if he wanted to see our productions, or as he said, happened to be there, he could.

Christmas I flew down to spend time with Mindy and her family. John Patrick, her father, opened the door, looking at me. "Can I help you, son?"

"Yes, sir. I am Carl Waller. Mindy asked me down to visit."

"He looked again, then grinned. "Just never saw you in street clothes." He put out his hand. "John Patrick. I'm Mindy's father."

"A pleasure."

He brought me into the house, then motioned. "Mindy is on the back porch with her sister." He led me through the large house, and motioned to the glass doors overlooking the ocean.

Mindy and Danielle were standing by the rail, and at his call, turned. Danielle came running over, and leaped into my arms. "Carl!" she squealed.

"Trying to steal my boyfriend?"

Danielle turned to give her an arch look. “Why not? You only like him when he’s in drag, anyway.”

Mindy stopped, then in an English Accent said, “Oh Bevin! I thought you were so rugged!” She walked over, took Danielle from my arms, then hugged me. “Nice of you to come.”

I hugged her back. “Well I had a choice. I could spend all of the holidays with my folks, or maybe, just maybe spend some time with you. Decisions, decisions.”

She leaned back, giving me a look that was half exasperated glare, and half loving. “If you had not come to see me, I would have gone to see you. So there.”

“Hah! An empty threat.”

“Not so empty.” A woman came out to watch us with amusement. “Mindy has a will of iron. If she said she’d come see you, she would have. I am her mother Janice. I have coffee made.”

We went inside. The family sat in the conversation pit, Mindy curled up against me like a cat. “So, you’ve been doing this job for a while?” Janice asked.

I thought about it. “Only a few months, Ma’am. I started in early July.”

“And already very popular, from what my husband has said. What is it, sixteen conventions?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“You’ve set a record both for how many and also how many times John has asked for one specific Trap from them. Did you know that?”

“Really?”

“Really,” John said, sipping. “I handle a lot of the convention planning for the East Coast, and some on the West coast as well. They tell me what they want, I find it. Though you might not know it, I was in charge of seven of those conventions, and every time I put your photo out as a character, your company was chosen. Only two fell through, but that was because of other circumstances. Your last in Chicago, for instance, was managed by a competitor, and she got the nod instead by outbidding me. Your first was also one of her productions, so she beat me to that as well.”

I had merely thought I was chosen because they needed someone to fill the roles. People were getting into bidding wars over me? Mindy giggled. “Pay up, Dad. I knew he was clueless.” I looked at her and the giggle became a laugh. “A lot of times, we get the prima donnas. ‘Oh I am so cute that I can’t fail to get hired!’. Considering how hard you work to play the roles and make sure the costuming is the best possible, he thought maybe you were going to go to the Dark Side!” She put her hand in front of her mouth, pretending in a Darth Vader voice, “Yes, I am available, but only when I am in the mood. And the pay must be to my liking.”

“Not me,” I said. “Someone once said money is only a way to keep score.”

“What do you do with your money?” John asked.

“Except for what I do spend, which isn’t a lot, it’s in the bank.”

“Smart and cute.” Janice laughed.

That set the tone for the week I was there. The part that was amusing was both of the girls would catch me under the mistletoe. Danielle would only kiss my cheek since she liked me, but only as if I were an older brother. But Mindy? That one tongue kiss she had given me seemed to be her preferred style. Not that I was complaining.

New Year’s was back at the Y. A lot of my fellow actors either didn’t have family, or were estranged from them. There aren’t a lot of parents who would be willing to say in polite company that their sons dressed up in woman’s clothes for money. Too many explanations would have to follow. So we all sat down to dinner together. Our party was more of a remembering what they had lost. Cody, who had just joined us, spent the evening crying in a corner. He wasn’t the only one.

I was thankful. I had a family supporting me, and Mindy’s family had pretty much adopted me.

## **High School of the Dead**

Back home we had time to rest. Our next gig was going to be High School of the Dead, and I was picked to play Saya, so I had to have my prosthesis upgraded from B to C cup. The anime is known for what is called ‘fan service’. That meant short skirts and visible panties whenever possible, so again I was forced to use a gaff.

Tatiana spoke to me before the convention. As he was now twenty-six, it might be his last convention unless the company needed a man. It wasn't until then I considered this career was finite. The problem is that as a man gets older, his features coarsen, which is why I was the big thing at just over eighteen. It didn't mean he couldn't play as a woman, just that he would have to play older, as in middle-aged or elderly characters. I hugged him as he admitted this. I had enjoyed working with him, and knowing I might not see him on stage with us again bothered me. It made me glad I was banking ninety percent of my paychecks.

So I prepped for the convention with mixed emotions. The convention was in L.A. this time, my first time being there. Our cast wasn't full, however, because we needed an Alice or as the Anime pronounced the name, Arisu. We also needed a black and white puppy to play Zero.

We were all in one of our costumes, me in Dolce and Gabanna discussing that when the door opened. "Carl!" Danielle Patrick ran across the room and leaped into my arms. I caught her, spinning around, then looked at the door where Mindy stood smiling.

"Dad knew you'd have problems with casting Alice, and Danielle liked it when she played Hazuki in *Miami*, so she volunteered to come up and help."

"And why are *you* here?" I asked.

"Putz. If I am here, your team can add Saya's parents; that is if Jake doesn't mind playing Soichiro to my Yuriko," she grinned impishly. "How does that sound, my dear daughter?"

I set Danielle down, then walked over. Right before I got there, I leaped in the air and cried, “Mommy!” She caught me, and we hugged, laughing together.

“Oh, and Dad loved Drifters of the Dead-”

“You didn’t!” I gasped.

“I like that little frilly swimsuit . . .”

“You did!” I covered my mouth. “Have you considered that ‘daddy’ doesn’t have a swimsuit?”

She looked at Jake. “An interesting notion. But he’d get arrested.”

“I slapped her gently. “Perv.”

Zombiecon, as it had been called, was a riot to attend. Each day they had a paintball battle, and all of us were part of it. Our makeup crew, along with professionals from some of the studios, made money hand over fist making up a couple of hundred people as zombies for us to fight. Cody who was playing Rei, Conner as Hirano, and I were armed as the series shows, and Mindy fought in her red dress and Skorpion sub machine pistol. After practicing all week, we were some of the top scorers. The dinners were funny because people would dodge us in our battles, then sit down and chat with us while zombies sat at other seats around us, also eating.

Conner did an excellent Hirano, flip-flopping from an evil grin as he took down zombies, to the simpering he did through the show whenever I was berating him, even in a woman’s swimsuit for the third day. The scene from Drifters where I cuddled up to Yuriko, my mom as it were, had both of us handing out

cards. But the one that had the most cards and the best known video from the convention was when four women in full zombie makeup caught Henry playing Takashi at the pool laying in a lounge chair.

There is a scene at the end of the show where everyone has been affected by burning Hydrangea leaves; in Takashi's hallucination, all of the women in the team are supposedly chasing after him. The others who have awakened from their own hallucination find him with four female zombies in bikinis trying to attack him, so you have each hand and each foot pushing one of them away as he is mumbling their names.

As the convention ended, Mindy and I hugged at the driveway where her limo waited. She and Danielle were flying home but we had already made plans for each other's birthdays. I watched them leave, then turned to our bus. This convention was in the can.

But I had a lot more to attend. Who knew a job could be this much fun?

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