

*Tail Kinker Presents***Goddess Fayu**

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Nabiki's Unlucky Day?

Nabiki was not happy.

Most of her underlings were scurrying about, trying to keep from attracting any wrathful attention. Sadoko had drawn the short straw, and was, rather unwillingly, trying to draw said attention.

"Um...Boss?"

Nabiki picked at her bento, then dropped it on the table. "Man, this sucks."

"Boss?"

Nabiki's eyes slid over to Sadoko, then back down at the bento. "Look at this! This is supposed to be my lunch. What was Kasumi thinking, letting Akane make lunch?"

Sadoko shuddered; she was a year younger than the Boss, and two grades ago, had been partnered with Akane in Home Ec. "So why didn't you just refuse it?"

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "You think I want to get pasted? I smiled, said thank you, and then tried to sneak into the kitchen to replace it." She shuddered. "Kasumi gave me such trouble for that..."

"Not Kasumi!"

"Your sister worked very hard on that! And other such lies. What could I do?"

"I...I guess..."

"Then that bonehead Kuno manages to tick off Hinako-sensei. I managed to head her off before she drained him."

"...Why?"

"I dunno." Nabiki shrugged. "Maybe because I felt sorry for the poor goon. Ever since his father was committed...Anyway, what do you have for me?" Nabiki grabbed the clipboard, and scanned it quickly. And groaned.

"I'm sorry, Boss, but I think we should have offered longer odds on Ranma. It might have scared some--"

"We could offer thousand to one odds on Ranma, and everyone would still bet on him." Nabiki considered. "Pay 'em."

"But we could--"

"No, we can't. You know what happens to a bookmaker who welches?" Nabiki scowled. "No-one ever bets with them again."

"We don't have enough in the treasury."

"We can make it up."

"Okay." Sadoko took the clipboard back. "I'll see what I can do to drum up sales of Ranma pics--"

"No."

Sadoko blinked.

"No, it was my call to set the odds this way." Nabiki heaved a sigh, and dropped a wad of yen on the table. "I was saving this for a rainy day, but it looks like that day is today."

"Boss..."

"Don't tell anyone." Nabiki scowled at the yen. "I got a reputation to keep."

"Don't worry, I won't." Sadoko grinned. "Who'd believe it, anyway?"

* * * * *

Nabiki dropped a coin into the pay phone, and dialed her home number.

"Tendo-ke."

"Hey, Kasumi! Listen, I thought I'd remind you that I'm not going to be home for dinner tonight."

"Thank you, Nabiki. It was thoughtful of you to call."

"I just didn't want to see you waste effort on food I wasn't gonna eat."

"I'll save a little something, in case you're hungry after the concert."

"Thanks, Kasumi. You're the best."

"Thank you, little sister."

She hung up the pay phone, and walked – almost ran – down the street. It was her best of luck - and best of connections - that had secured this ticket. Regal was breaking up after this concert, and since they'd started in Nerima, they'd planned their final tour so that their last stop was right here, in their home town.

Not only that, but she'd saved back the three grand she'd need to buy the live concert album. She'd been planning to also buy a new jacket. The one she

was wearing, though proof against the chill of the autumn evening, was starting to look a bit shabby.

"But hey. What can you do?"

She paused, just outside the auditorium, and turned.

The speaker was a younger girl, perhaps five or six years younger than Nabiki herself. Despite her youth, the girl was nearly as tall as Nabiki herself, though much skinnier. Her long black hair stretched down to her hips, and was caught up in a bow, and the outfit she was wearing was a bit outlandish.

"Hey, kid."

The girl turned in anger, and Nabiki blinked. "Hey, you're not a kid, after all."

The anger changed to a smirk. "Nope. I'm definitely not a kid."

"Not quite a woman yet, either." Nabiki looked the girl up and down. Her hair had concealed - from the rear, anyway - the fact that she was a foreigner, but her Japanese was crisp and unaccented. "You from the base?"

The girl shook her head. "Nope."

Nabiki glanced up at the wall. "You were staring at that poster. You like Regal?"

The girl beamed, and nodded. "They're the best band I've heard since coming here!"

Nabiki grinned. "I kinda like them, too."

The girl opened her mouth to add to her enthusiasm, but was cut off by a sudden growl. She looked down, embarrassed.

Nabiki leaned in a bit. "You're starving, aren't you?"

"Yeah." The girl's expression turned cross again. "My sister brought me here, but then dumped me and went off to the bar. And I haven't had anything to eat since this morning."

Nabiki blinked. "Not much of a sister."

"Tell me," the girl growled.

Nabiki considered. She had that three thousand...but she wanted that CD. She looked again at the girl, and sighed.

"It looks to me like this isn't the first time you've gone hungry." She turned, and glanced down the street. "There's a place over there...why don't we get something to eat?"

"But my sister said I..." The girl looked up at Nabiki. "She said that Tokyo's a dangerous place, and I shouldn't go off with people I don't know."

"And where is she now?" Nabiki was starting to get a little angry. "Off at some bar! She left you all alone, with nothing to eat, and no money. If my older sister were here, you'd already be fed, dressed in something warm, bathed, and tucked into the spare bedroom."

"You have an older sister like that too, eh?" The girl dimpled. "I'm the youngest of three."

"I'm stuck in the middle." Nabiki chuckled, her bad humour fading. "Let's go get something, shall we?" She let her voice become taunting. "They serve ice cream..."

The girl's eyes lit up.

* * * * *

"Man, can you put it away!"

The girl had made almost three liters of ice cream vanish already, and was working on another outlandish banana split. For her own part, Nabiki had purchased a tall parfait - the sort of thing Ranma liked, she mused. But she'd only put a dent in it, and the scrawny tornado in front of her was eating to beat even the whole Saotome clan.

The girl dropped her spoon into the banana split, and grinned. "Sorry. It's really good!"

"I know. My brother-in-law likes to come here."

"Yeah?"

"He brings his mom and my younger sister." Nabiki looked around. "He says he likes the way their eyes light up." She glanced back at the girl. "Much like yours."

"That's nice of you. And thank you for the treat."

"That's all right." Nabiki waved it off. "Kasumi's always telling me I should be nicer to people."

"You're not normally this nice?"

The waitress snickered. "Girl, I could tell you stories..."

Nabiki glared at her; she hung her head and moved off.

Nabiki glanced back at the girl. "You see?" She sighed. "Last month, I did something really nasty to my younger sister. She's only maybe a year or two older than you."

"What did you do?"

"She was going to marry her fiancée, and I invited people that I knew would break it up."

The girl considered this. "I think I know what you mean. You like your brother-in-law, don't you?"

"Not that way." Nabiki chuckled. "He's really good-looking, and he's a sweet guy, always trying to help people out. But he's a little too...unpolished...for my tastes."

"Yeah. My sister's boyfriend..." She looked down. "I never thought I'd call him that. But he is." She picked up the spoon again, and started pushing the ice cream around the plate. "I wasn't very nice to him, kept trying to come between him and my sister." She dropped the spoon again. "I shoulda known I was going to fail."

"Don't worry, kid. You'll grow to like him."

"I already do, kinda." She looked up, and grinned. "Don't call me kid."

"All right, all right!" Nabiki held up her hands in mock self-defense, then laughed. "When do you think your sister will be back?"

"Who knows? Probably not till last call."

Nabiki's hand was already in her pocket. She paused, and considered. "You know what? I already have all of Regal's CDs. Probably, they aren't gonna do anything I haven't heard before." She pulled out the ticket, slid it across the table. "No need for you to be bored before your sister gets back."

The girl looked down at the ticket, her eyes gleaming. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Knock yourself out."

"Oh, Nabiki, thank you!" The girl jumped around the table, and hugged Nabiki tightly. "This means a lot to me!"

"Sure. Just don't tell anyone." Nabiki sighed. "I got a reputation to keep."

"Okay." The girl grabbed the ticket, then squawked. "It starts in five minutes!"

"Get going, then."

The girl was gone in a flash, and Nabiki chuckled.

She had almost finished her parfait before she realized that she'd never given her name.

* * * * *

"What was I on?"

Nabiki shook her head, and stepped out of her outdoor shoes. "I'm back."

"Welcome home." Kasumi wandered out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "Did you not go to the concert?"

"No. I gave the ticket away."

"Oh..."

Nabiki waved it off. "Don't worry, it was for a good cause. I'll tell you the story tomorrow."

"All right." Kasumi gestured towards the kitchen. "I saved you some pork buns."

"Thanks, Kasumi. But I'm really tired. I'll have 'em for breakfast, all right?"

"All right. Oh." Kasumi raised a hand to her mouth. "I almost forgot! I moved the television from my room into yours, while I was rearranging furniture. It's still on your desk. Is that all right?"

"Sure. Mind if I use it?"

"No, go ahead."

* * * * *

Nabiki flipped on the television, then collapsed across the bed.

"I can't believe I gave away that ticket. And the money for the CD. And the money for the jacket." She paused. "Okay, the money for the jacket, I didn't really have a choice."

She sighed, and rolled over to face the television.

'And that wraps up weather. Now for the financial department. Sayoko?"

Nabiki sat up. "Financial? At nine?"

The woman on the screen was not the usual financial anchor, but a tall, bronzed woman with long, flowing white hair. She looked a bit familiar, though Nabiki couldn't remember ever seeing her before.

'Thank you, Ichigyo. A mild drop in gold futures today, though the fluctuation seems to originate in the rise in value of the yen against the American dollar. This despite the fact that some Japanese girls are being much more free with their money.'

Nabiki blinked.

'I mean, random acts of kindness like giving away concert tickets and buying little girls ice cream...'

Nabiki backed away from the television.

It didn't help.

The woman seemed to step *through* the screen, flowing out like a ghost, until she stepped lightly down on the floor of Nabiki's bedroom.

"I'm talking to you, Tendo Nabiki."

Nabiki wanted to scream. She wished she could remember how.

The woman stepped up closer to her. "My little sister was very happy with you, Nabiki. She also told me that you've got a major Karma imbalance." She smiled at the frozen teenager. "You've done some good, and you've done some bad...all of us have. But today, you've done so much more good than you ever have before..."

She stepped back, and crossed her arms. "This area has been getting--"

"Your sister?" Good, her voice had returned. "The little girl with the black hair?"

"Oh, yes."

Nabiki scowled, and launched a right cross. It connected squarely with the woman's chin.

The woman yelped, and grabbed her chin with her hand. She turned back, and scowled down at Nabiki...then sighed.

"Okay, I guess from your point of view, I had this coming." She pushed at her jaw gingerly. "Come to think of it, my sisters wouldn't be very happy with me, either. So I'll let it slide." She grinned down at Nabiki. "The only chance you'll ever get to punch a Goddess."

"Goddess?"

"Yep." The woman fished down her top, and produced a card. "Urd. Goddess Second Class, Limited License. On special assignment from

Yggdrasil, to find the source of the karmic imbalance in Nerima." She looked Nabiki up and down. "I'd say we've found a good portion of it."

"...Me?"

"Yes, you." Urd smiled. "There are others, of course. Your sisters. That hunk that all three of you have lusted after. Even that spinny purple-haired bitch. But you've had the largest net adjustment of Karma in the last twenty-four hours. So we're giving it to you."

"...Giving what?"

"Whatever you want, of course." Urd's smile widened, and she held up a finger. "One wish."

"A wish?"

"Yep. Just one wish should push the karmic balance back to normal." Urd tried her best to look dignified. "We had to plan this carefully, you know."

"Planned."

"Yes. I left Skuld where I did, because it was the best place to do so. I triggered that witch of a schoolteacher's rage, to see who would act to protect her victim. And do you really think that that sweet boy who attacked Ranma would do so of his own volition?"

"Ryoga? Constantly."

"But near a water fountain?"

Nabiki paused, and eyed the Goddess. "So you've been pulling strings all day."

"Yep."

"Including mine."

"Right again."

Nabiki's eyes narrowed. "That takes considerable power. And you're just a second-rate Goddess?"

Urd frowned. "That's Second Class!"

"Oh, my apologies, great Urd." Nabiki's voice dripped sarcasm. "Second Class. Limited License. You can't handle a little wish-granting without your little sister tagging along. You can't even look after her while you're off partying! I wish I was her sister! I could show you how--"

Nabiki broke off in horror. "Did I just say..."

"Yes. I'm afraid you did." Urd's voice was sad.

"Oh, no! That's not my--"

Urd was glowing. Her hair was flowing outward, defying gravity, and a triangular tattoo glowed on her forehead.

Nabiki backed away, raising her hands. "Please, forgive me! I didn't mean to say--"

"Yes. You did." Through the glow, Urd's saddened face glistened with tears. "And I am very sorry you did, Tendo Nabiki."

There was a blast of searing white light.

* * * * *

Nabiki groaned, and sat up. She winced; the action caused her earrings to jingle loudly in her still-bruised ears.

"Earrings?"

Come to think of it, she'd never even had her ears pierced. She raised a hand, and was relieved to feel the clips.

She struggled to her feet, and turned towards the mirror...and gasped.

Her jeans and T-shirt were gone, replaced by long, brown flowing robes. Her hair was unchanged, but on her forehead was a tattoo, two half circles, one above the other. She rubbed at it, but it just felt like skin.

"No way." She stepped back from the mirror, and groaned. "What the heck have I done now?"

The mirror shimmered.

"Ack!" Nabiki stumbled backwards, tripping and falling on her backside, as a woman floated out of her mirror.

The newcomer - she looked a bit like Kasumi, if Kasumi had been born in Europe somewhere - was dressed in a manner similar to herself, though in blue and white. She floated an inch off the floor, and had a tattoo on her forehead, a slender oval.

"Don't tell me," Nabiki sighed. "Another Goddess."

"Yes." The woman floated a little closer, and held out her hand. "Goddess, First Class, Unlimited License. Velthandi."

Nabiki looked puzzled. "Berudandi?"

The woman smiled. "Yes, my Keiichi-sama says it the same way." She touched down, and took Nabiki's hand. "It may be easier for you to call me Belldandy. I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Likewise." She glanced around. "Hey, where's Urd?"

"When she realized what happened, she came back to our Temple to get me."

"Temple. Makes sense." Nabiki shrugged. "Look, I didn't really mean for this to--"

"Yes. You did."

"Sure I did. Wish myself a Goddess. Why not?" Nabiki sighed. "I'm sure you guys have rules or something."

"We do."

"So didn't I just break a bunch of them?"

"That was as a mortal. Now, you're immortal."

Nabiki's eyes lit up. "So that's true, is it?"

"Yes," said Belldandy. "But this three-dimensional form you wear...It is not immortal. Eventually, you will shed it, to be born again."

"Reincarnation?"

"Not in the sense you mean, but yes." Belldandy turned, and pulled Nabiki gently towards the mirror. "It's time to go."

"I--but my sisters--"

Belldandy smiled sadly at her. "We are your sisters now." She turned back, and touched the mirror. It seemed to melt before her, creating a tunnel. "This is your path. It will take you home."

"But **this** is my home!"

Belldandy turned back to her. "If you stay here, all the chaos that you regret bringing on your family will be magnified a hundred-fold. For their good as well as yours, you must come."

Nabiki bowed her head. "I..."

"You must learn our ways. You must learn to control your powers, and to touch the hearts of others."

Nabiki sniffed. "I'm gonna miss them..."

"They will always be here." Belldandy placed her hand over Nabiki's heart. "And you will be able to come back. I promise."

"Okay." Nabiki heaved a sigh. "As long as they don't worry about me..."

"I'll have Urd come back and leave a note."

Nabiki laughed, then turned to the mirror. "Time to say goodbye to the old Nabiki."

"And hello," added Belldandy, "to the Goddess Fayu."

A Family History

"Hey, Keiichi."

Keiichi glanced up from his computer screen. "Urd. Did you happen to see where Belldandy went?"

"Yeah, she's off taking care of some family business in Nerima. Can I use your computer?"

Keiichi blinked. This was the first time that Urd had shown any interest in electronics more complex than a television. "Be my guest." He stood, stretched the kink out of his back, and stepped away from the machine. "What sort of family business?"

"Well, that's kinda what I want to find out." Urd knelt before the computer. "This thing got a modem?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." She began to tap at the keyboard. "Where's your terminal program? Oh, never mind. Here it is."

The modem chirped, and rapidly dialed a long sequence. Keiichi blinked.

"Where are you connecting to?"

"Yggdrasil."

His eyes bugged. "That's only a fifty-six kay modem!"

"That's all right. I just need one file." She selected it and started the download, then leaned back.

"So about where Belldandy is..."

"Told you. Nerima, on family business." Urd considered. "I'm not really sure of the details yet, but you can bet we'll have company coming tonight."

"Company...Bell's family?"

"Yep. Almost certainly Bell's family. Or one member of it. Ah. Transfer complete." She killed the modem connection, then opened the file. "Yep. Kinda what I expected."

Keiichi was nearly pulling his hair. "C'mon, Urd. Fill me in here."

Urd sighed. "I botched a wish-giving. Not surprising, really, since it's not my department. But Belldandy has found a long-lost sister because of it." Urd tapped the screen. "Fayu. Half-mortal, half-divine. Raised by mortals of uncommon ability, though. She could be a true hero."

"Another Goddess...Don't we have enough already?"

"Some would argue that we have too many," smirked Urd.

"So what's this Fayu's story?"

"Sorry, Keiichi. I'd love to tell you, but she and her sisters need to hear it first."

* * * * *

The glass of the mirror shimmered, and Belldandy stepped out, hand in hand with Nabiki.

"Welcome home, my sister."

Nabiki looked around the room. "Nice. When you said 'temple', I assumed that it was gonna be all stone, drafty, and in bad repair."

"It was in bad repair, when we first came, but Keiichi and I have put it right." She stepped to the wall, touching it lightly. "It shelters us because we have cared for it."

"I bet." Nabiki walked over to the television set. "These standard issue for temples or Goddesses?"

"No." Belldandy's smile took on another cast, one that Nabiki had seen once or twice on Kasumi. "My Keiichi is wonderful with electronics and machinery. That television had been cast aside callously by its former master, because it was not showing its colours properly. Keiichi taught it to do better, and now, out of gratitude, it serves us."

Nabiki chuckled. "I believe it. Y'know, Belldandy, you have an odd way of putting things, but I like it."

"I'm glad."

"Bell!"

The light returned to her face. "Keiichi-sama!" She turned, and grasped the young man's hands.

He was rather short, somewhat homely, but in the good sense - he was comfortable-looking, like a well-worn jacket. He seemed to exude both confidence and humility. Nabiki's analytical mind took him for an easy mark...but she decided to reserve judgement.

Bell turned towards her, and smiled. "This is Keiichi-sama. I am his, by my contract, but I would stay with him even if I were not."

"Pleased to meet you." He bowed to her. "I take it you are Fayu?"

"I guess. Pleased to meet you." She returned the bow, then glanced over at Belldandy. "I was meaning to ask. You called me Fayu earlier?"

"Yes. That is your divine name, and the name of your Rune."

"Ah." She pondered. "Can I still use my human name?"

"Of course. Your divine name is that which the Gods and Goddesses will use, though; you should grow used to it."

"Sure. I'm just not ready to give up my mortality one hundred percent." She turned back to the young man. "Keiichi, I would be pleased if you would call me Nabiki."

"Sure." He grinned. "Keiichi Morisato, third year engineering student, Nekomi Institute of Technology."

"Nekomi?" Nabiki blinked. "We're still in Tokyo?"

"Yes." Belldandy nodded. "This is where Keiichi lives, and so I stay here with him."

"In a temple, huh?"

"Yes." Belldandy turned towards the window. "We have thirty hectares of land, and so the noise of the city is a little less intrusive."

"Thirty--" Nabiki caught herself. "Do you have any idea how much you could sell this land for?"

"It is not ours to sell. We hold it in trust for another."

"Oh." Nabiki chuckled. "Guess I've gotta give up my old habits, huh?"

"Not all of them." Urd was leaning against the doorframe. "Your new portfolio guarantees that."

"Portfolio?"

"The realm with which you are concerned." Urd walked over to the table, and sat down. "It seems that our family finally has a patron Goddess of Wealth."

* * * * *

"The temple is quite large, and we have three rooms not currently being used." Keiichi opened a door, and stepped back. "If this one suits you, you can use it."

Nabiki walked in, and glanced around. The room was at least twice the size of her old room at the Tendo-ke, and at the moment completely empty save for a cardboard box. A large window overlooked the compound wall - not the best of views, but she decided that it could be a lot worse. "This will do me nicely. Thank you, Keiichi."

"I'll get that cardboard box out of here before you go to bed."

"What's in it?"

Keiichi looked embarrassed. "I don't actually know. It's one of mine, though, so it's probably electronic or engine parts."

"A nice guy, and he has a brain. You're lucky Bell already has dibs on you."

"I think so, too." He grinned at her.

"Cool under pressure, too."

He shrugged. "After what I've seen the last year and a half, one more Goddess hitting on me is nothing. And it wasn't like you were crawling into my futon wearing next to nothing."

Nabiki smirked. "How many of them have tried that?"

"Three."

This drew Nabiki up short. "Three? Even Skuld?"

"No, though she did try hitting on me a couple of times as well. There were, before your arrival, four Goddesses living here. You've made it five."

"I've met Urd, Belldandy and Skuld - my new sisters. Who's the fourth?"

"Peorth." Keiichi sighed. "I managed to dial Asgard accidentally, and she decided to give me a wish. I've already had one, from Belldandy, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. Worse, she wouldn't stop hitting on me until I made my wish."

"So why haven't I seen her yet?"

"She's on assignment at the moment. Could be anywhere."

"Nabiki-chan!"

Nabiki turned, and a red-and-white blur slammed into her at warp two. The pair of them tumbled to the ground, and Keiichi turned away quickly, face red.

"I'm so glad you're here." Skuld was bubbling over with joy.

"Thanks, Skuld. Me too." She chuckled. "But we'd better sit up. I'm afraid that this robe doesn't afford much modesty from this angle, and poor Keiichi looks like he's gonna have a stroke."

Skuld sat up quickly. "That's because he's a pervert!"

"No, he's a man. Seems the same thing, I'll admit, but he can't help it." She sat up, and rearranged the robes. "Is there a rule that we gotta wear these, or can I get some jeans and a T-shirt?"

"We can get some of your stuff from your old room, I think that Bell would be happy to help you with that. I can't go, unless you keep water in your room."

"Not usually." She considered. "So you can travel only through water?"

"Yes. Bell can travel using a few different media, but prefers mirrors; Urd can only travel through televisions."

"So when I learn to teleport, do you know what my medium will be?"

"Nope." Skuld grinned. "You'll get to pick it." She turned to Keiichi. "Urd and Belldandy want us to go to the family room, and Urd's gonna fill us in on Nabiki."

* * * * *

"It's no surprise that Belldandy ended up working for the Goddess Assistance Agency. Her mother is a high-ranking official of the Agency."

"Really?" Skuld was surprised. "I thought she was the one who designed the Yggdrasil System."

Belldandy smiled. "Mother is one of the first Goddesses, and has worked on many careers in her day."

"Excuse me." Nabiki leaned forward. "Couldn't help but notice the way you put that, Urd. 'Belldandy's mother'. Isn't she your mother, too?"

"No." Urd shook her head. "I'm half-sister to Belldandy and Skuld; I have a different mother. You have a different father, but the same mother."

Nabiki laughed. "No. I remember my mother. I remember the day she died."

Urd looked sad. "She didn't die."

"But...I was there." Nabiki was shocked. "I was only seven, but I remember the day she died. Father was so depressed; he didn't really come out of it."

"What do you expect?" Urd grinned. "He lost his wife, it is true, but he had three daughters to make up for it.

"You see, Freya was sent by the Goddess Assistance Agency to help out your father. He had prayed for a wife, and Freya was sent to guide him to a woman he could love. But she fell in love with him herself."

Bell looked up, startled. "You mean Mother--"

Urd nodded. "She asked for some time off, and married the mortal. But she was only given ten years on Midgard."

"Hold on," said Nabiki. "Skuld looks like she's two years younger than my sister Akane. But Mother didn't die - or leave us - until Akane was six."

Urd smiled indulgently. "Do you think time matters to a Goddess? Skuld is almost five hundred of your years old."

Nabiki blinked.

"Time passes differently in Asgard than it does here on Midgard." Bell lifted the lid of the teapot, and poured a cup. "Sometimes it runs at the same speed, sometimes faster, sometimes slower."

"I only remember fifteen years of my past," said Skuld. "From the day I was born - yes, I remember that - to today. But a lot of that time was spent in Asgard."

"Anyway." Urd crossed her arms. "Normally, Tendo's kids would be just any other mortals. But Freya gave each of them a touch of her divinity, so they would exceed what most mortals can accomplish. So when you made your wish, Nabiki, it was easy for the Ultimate Force to elevate you to fully divine status." She grinned. "As to your being Skuld's sister...You already were. So are Akane and Kasumi."

Nabiki glanced over at Belldandy. "This explains so much." She blinked. "Wait. So my mother isn't dead!?"

"Nope."

Nabiki jumped up. "Then I can see her again!"

"I'm sorry, Nabiki." Belldandy looked crestfallen. "It would have been in the terms of her contract, that she can never see your father, or his daughters, again."

"Oh."

Keiichi piped up. "I'd listen to them. If it's a matter of contract, the Ultimate Force will keep you from seeing her. You do not want to oppose the Ultimate Force." He gestured towards Belldandy. "Bell's the most powerful Goddess I've ever met, and even she can't oppose the Ultimate Force."

"Damn..." Nabiki sat down heavily. "Dad wasn't the only one who took her leaving hard. None of us came through that unscarred." She looked up in surprise. "But why didn't Dad tell us any of this?"

"He didn't know."

"That doesn't make sense," muttered Nabiki. "How could he not have known she was a Goddess? He lived with her for ten years."

"This too was part of her contract." Urd sighed. "She had to spend ten years, mortal in every way. No powers." Her voice softened. "She really loved you. All four of you. It hurt her a lot to give you up."

Bell walked around the table, and laid a hand on Nabiki's shoulder. "You will probably be able to see her again, once you reach Second Class."

Nabiki snorted. "And what Class am I now?"

"Fourth Class, Unlimited License."

There was a stunned silence in the room.

"Fourth Class?" Skuld looked shocked. "They made her Fourth Class?! That's barely even divine!"

"Unlimited License?" Urd ground her teeth. "Unlimited?!"

Bell smiled. "With training, you will be able to improve your Class, Fayu. But your license will probably be limited in the future. The more power you have, the greater the limits on your license, unless you can prove that you can handle that power."

"Yeah...You're First Class, Unlimited License." Nabiki nodded. "I take it you're the only one of that level here?"

"Not quite." Bell sighed. "Peorth has an Unlimited License as well. But she isn't here very often."

"We all appreciate her little absences," chuckled Urd.

"Amen," added Keiichi.

* * * * *

"So what does a Goddess do on a daily basis?"

Skuld shrugged. "Well, to begin with, you'll need to be trained in the basics. Once you have your Third Class, you'll have to choose where you want to work, and train for that. When you get your Second Class, you can then apply to your chosen agency. If they don't accept you, there are others that might. But

if none of them decide you have what it takes to work in that field, you may be demoted back to Third Class, and have to re-train."

Nabiki laughed. "So it's school, career counselling, college, and then job-hunting. I could have stayed mortal for that!"

Skuld sniffed. "I think that the jobs we do are a touch more important than those on the Mortal Realm."

"Probably. But the methods seem more or less the same. What Class are you?"

"Second Class, Unlimited." She smirked. "I am the chief debugger for Yggdrasil. Only my sister has a higher position than me, but she's had her license reduced a few times, even had it revoked once."

Nabiki grinned. "No wonder she was mad that I had an Unlimited License."

"At the moment, you have even fewer powers than me. I only really have two."

"And those are?"

"I can teleport. And I have learned to..." She looked a bit embarrassed. "I can cause writing to appear on things. Mostly, I only use it when I'm mad, to label someone - usually Urd - an idiot."

Nabiki blinked...then started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Skuld looked cross.

She managed to get her laughter under control. "More and more, you guys remind me of my mortal sisters." She continued to chuckle.

Skuld smiled impishly. "Maybe we should invite them out here some time."

"Yeah..." Nabiki considered. "We could tell them that Mom had another family, out here, before she met Dad."

"Fayu."

Nabiki turned, to see Belldandy standing nearby. "Yeah, Sis?"

Bell hesitated. "I would love to meet my other sisters, but..." She sighed. "I fear that this would not be wise."

"Can you let me think about it for a while, and then we can discuss what may or may not work?"

"Of course." She stepped closer. "But promise me you won't do something rash."

"I never do."

Bell continued to stare at the recent Goddess, and she sighed. "All right, Belldandy. I promise."

"Thank you." She held up a bag. "I brought some of your mortal clothes from your room."

"Thanks." Nabiki took the bag. "Did you happen to bring my school books, too?"

"You won't be needing those." Belldandy smiled. "You will begin at a new school tomorrow. I will be your teacher."

"...Forgot. Sorry."

"Can I help too, Sis?" Skuld's face lit up. "I wanna help!"

"Of course, Skuld." Belldandy laughed. "It's very kind of you to offer." She turned back to Nabiki. "You should get some rest; until you learn how to regenerate your third-dimensional form, you will still need to eat and sleep."

"Gotcha." Nabiki stifled a yawn. "Was just headed that way now, actually."

"Good night, Sister."

"G'night."

Nabiki slid the shogi shut behind her, dropped the canvas bag on the floor, and stretched. She noted a futon that had not been there before. "Thanks, Morisato." She stumbled towards it, and dropped onto it.

"Oof!"

She jumped back in shock.

A slender female form sat up, and looked around blearily. "What the heck...?"

"Shouldn't that be my line?" Nabiki crossed her arms and scowled at the intruder. "What are you doing in my bed?"

"It was handy, and I was tired." The newcomer had short black hair, and was wearing only a light tunic. "And who are you?"

Nabiki smirked. "Fayu. Goddess Fourth Class, Unlimited License. In training."

The intruder grinned. "Ah, yes. The Lost Sister. She bowed, half-mockingly. "I am Peorth."

"First Class, Unlimited. I've heard." Nabiki scowled again. "You're still in my bed."

"I don't feel like leaving."

Nabiki considered, and then shrugged. "Have it your way." She unfastened her robes, and they fell to the ground.

Peorth started. "What the heck are you doing?"

"I'm tired, and I want to sleep." She made a show of ogling Peorth's barely-dressed body. "You're welcome to stay."

"Ack!" Peorth jumped up, and ran from the room.

Nabiki laughed. "Don't mess with the Ice Queen, lady."

* * * * *

Atop the roof, Peorth scowled.

"Humiliate me, will you, Fayu?"

She shook her fist at the heavens.

"I will make you pay!"

Of Channels and Splits

“I’m home.”

Kasumi looked up from the soup pot. “Welcome back.” She set down the spoon carefully, then walked out to the family room.

Nabiki was standing near the television, rummaging through some papers. By the door was a tall, white-haired woman, even taller than Father, dressed in a severe business suit. Kasumi noted the triangular tattoo in the middle of the woman’s forehead, but decided against mentioning it.

“Sorry I left so abruptly last night, Sis.” Nabiki stood up, and Kasumi was shocked to see a tattoo on *her* forehead, as well. “Got a tip, and had to follow it up.”

“A tip in the middle of the night?”

The tall woman spoke up. “We’re a 24/7 operation.” She bowed. “Urd, at your service.”

“Tendo Kasumi. Pleased to meet you.” She returned the bow, then turned back to her sister. “What sort of tip?”

“A job offer. Seemed perfect for me. Urd recruited me, but I’m gonna be training under another woman, a real master in her field.”

Urd grinned at that.

Kasumi stepped a bit closer to her sister. “Are tattoos part of the corporate culture?”

Nabiki seemed startled. “You can...is it that noticeable?”

“Just a bit.”

Urd grinned. “Henna washes off in a week. But yes, a lot of our staff wear these.”

“What sort of job?”

Urd paused. “We’re not sure where exactly we’re gonna have Nabiki working, but I know she’s got the qualifications for most of the jobs we’ve considered. Probably, she’ll be in our Accounts Payable department, but you never know.”

“Ah.” Kasumi shifted to Big Sister Mode. “And what of schooling?”

Urd shrugged. “Nabiki’s file indicates that she’s only one credit shy of graduating from High School. We can cover that. Plus, she’ll receive a full diploma from our affiliate College. We’re covering all expenses for that.”

Kasumi blinked. “Full...”

“Yep. We have high hopes for Miss Tendo, and see no reason that she may let us down.”

“This is certainly a generous offer, Miss Urd.”

“You bet it is, Sis.” Nabiki sighed. “But it's not all roses. I've gotta move to Nekomi, pretty much today.”

“Oh, dear. We'll miss you.”

“I'll miss you guys, too.” She grinned. “Give Ranma my room, once I've moved out. He'll need the space. Is Akane up yet?”

“Yes, and already out. I'm sorry.”

“Me too. Give her my love?”

“Of course.” Kasumi picked up a pen and scratchpad. “Can you give me your address and phone number?”

“Sure.” Nabiki took the proffered items, scratched out the address and number. “Listen, Kasumi...”

“Yes?”

“I know you're worried.”

“Just a bit.” Kasumi's tone indicated that it was more than a bit. “It seems that you've jumped into something without thinking, and that's not like you.”

“I did, kind of. But I think it's for the best.” She sighed again. “Can you trust me to know that?”

Kasumi considered, and nodded. “Yes, I think I can.”

“Thanks.” On an impulse, she pulled Kasumi into a hug. “You've been the best big sister anyone could have, Kasumi. Thank you, so much, for everything.”

Kasumi smiled, and hugged her back. “Be safe.”

* * * * *

“Wow. You're right. The resemblance is scary.”

“I know.” Nabiki chuckled. “But then, they are sisters, right?”

“True.” Urd smiled. “We’re gonna have to take the train back. Beaming in was fine, but I don’t think I can take you and all that stuff with me on the way back.”

“All that stuff?” Nabiki looked at her travel tote. “This and one backpack.”

“With you alone, I’m pushing my mass limit. Those two bags put me over. Sorry.”

Nabiki waved a hand. “That’s all right. I’m used to the train. Did you mean what you said back there, that you wouldn’t be part of my training?”

“That’s true.” Urd frowned. “My license prohibits me from training.”

“Pity.” Nabiki looked up at the taller woman. “I’m getting to like you.”

Urd smiled. “Must be my naughty side.”

* * * * *

“Courage.”

“Courage is better than cowardice.”

“Correct.” Bell smiled at the two smaller girls. “Skuld, the second virtue?”

“Truth.”

“Strength is better than weakness.” Nabiki considered. “How is strength related to truth?”

“Who has the greater strength, one who faces up to an unpleasant truth, or one who hides from it?”

“Gotcha. Sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize, Fayu. If you do not ask, you will not learn. This itself is Strength.”

Nabiki chuckled. “Honour.”

Skuld finished the Virtue. “Honour is better than dishonour.”

“Yes. Remember, Nabiki, that a promise made must be kept.”

“Fidelity.”

“Kinship is better than alienation.”

Bell smiled. "Are you not happier, knowing us?"

"I think so. Discipline."

"Joy is better than guilt."

"That one puzzles me, too."

"I can see why. Skuld?"

Skuld's expression took on a serious bent. "One who leads an undisciplined life will find herself with a string of would-haves, should-haves and didn'ts. These will prey on her, causing her guilt. One who can go to bed, knowing that that which must be done, will be done, will rise in the morning with a glad heart."

Belldandy beamed at her sister. "Very good."

Nabiki shook her head. "I'll need to think about that one."

"Then do so. This too is Discipline."

"Hospitality," continued Skuld.

"Freedom is better than slavery." Nabiki considered. "If you offer a person hospitality, you are saying to them, 'You are free to come and go as you please?'"

"There is more to it than that. You grant yourself liberty as well."

"Add that to my list to consider. Self-Reliance."

"Ancestry is better than universalism." Skuld grinned. "It is more important to be true to yourself than to try to conform to what others believe. And who you are comes from your ancestry, including those who raised you."

"Skuld. This is Fayu's training."

"Sorry."

"I was going to ask, anyway." Nabiki chuckled. "It seemed pretty far-fetched to me."

"My favourite. Industriousness."

"Vigor is better than lifelessness. Makes perfect sense."

"Consider it tonight, nonetheless. There is more truth in that than you immediately see."

"Gotcha. Perseverance."

"Realism is better than dogmatism."

Nabiki frowned. "Doesn't that one contradict itself?"

“Not at all!” Skuld leaned forward. “Perseverance includes knowing when you're on the wrong track, and finding a new path. It's one I have to keep in mind when I'm working on my devices. Sometimes, I realize that I'm going at something the wrong way. Then, I've got to change the way I'm thinking about the problem.”

“Oh.”

Belldandy smiled. “These are the nine Noble Virtues. On these, our conduct hinges, for we must be exemplary in our keeping of them, to act as an example for Mortals.”

Nabiki nodded. “They seem a good set. Sort of a Nine Commandments.”

“They are not Commandments; they are guidelines. If you live by the Noble Virtues, you will have a better life.” She took a more serious expression. “But for us, the Goddesses, we must try to uphold them as much as possible.”

“Or we can lose our license?”

“Yes.”

Skuld piped up. “Urd lost her license once, because she told too many lies.”

“This is true.” Belldandy nodded. “But she has earned it back, though adhering to the Virtues.” She stood. “Enough of theory. I can see that you are itching to get to the practical part of today's lesson.”

“Magic. Yummy.” Nabiki hopped to her feet. “What are we going to start with?”

“The very basics. Channelling.” Belldandy touched her chest. “All of life on the planet generates energy. Some energy is good, and some is evil. Most of it is neutral in flavour.”

“Is this related to karma?”

“It is the same thing.” Belldandy smiled. “Action always is countered by reaction. An action on the material plane has a spiritual component as well, and this component produces a spiritual reaction. To work our magics, we can use our own energies, or we can channel the energies around us. For now, you will have to rely on channelling, until you learn how to unlock your Element.”

“Do the Virtues help with unlocking your Element?”

“No. But they will guide you to it. Come with me.”

They stepped out the front door, and walked some distance away from the temple.

“This is part of the reason I am glad we have this land, Fayu.” She smiled. “Early channelling attempts can be chaotic.”

“I bet.” She glanced over at Skuld. “Did you do your training here?”

“Yep.” She grinned. “I didn't make too much of a mess, at least.”

“Okay, let's find out what sort of disaster I make.” She looked over at Belldandy. “What do I do?”

“Open your mind, to all the life around you.”

Nabiki closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. “Dad taught me to meditate, even while standing up and wide awake. Should I try that?”

“If you think it will help.” Belldandy smiled. “Reach out with your consciousness, and touch each life form around you.”

Nabiki took a deep breath, and tried to picture what Belldandy suggested.

“Touch each person with your hand, from where you are.” Belldandy's voice was soothing, almost hypnotic. “Let them feel your love.”

She felt almost as though she were drifting away. She could hear the sounds of the city, mixing together like a glorious symphony

“Gather their love for you, and draw it into your heart.”

She could feel the warm glow...hear the pounding of the orchestra, as the music of life unfolded around her...

“Now raise your hand to the sky.”

In her mind's eye, she saw her hand raised, and a deep golden beam shot heavenward.

* * * * *

“What in the name of all that is holy...?”

Keiichi stared out the window, at the massive column of golden light flaring up from the yard. He ran out the front door, and over to where the girls were standing.

Well, Belldandy was standing. Skuld was seated ungainly against a tree, and Fayu was crumpled on the ground, her robes badly singed.

“What happened?”

Belldandy looked a bit shocked. “She did it.”

“Did what?”

“She nearly blew us to Asgard, that's what.” Skuld picked herself up off the ground. “She's got more power than Urd!”

“No, Skuld.” Belldandy shook her head. “But she grasped the basics of channelling faster than even I did.” She smiled impishly. “I am impressed.”

“So am I.” Skuld shook her head. “How can she tap into such power?”

“Let me check.” Belldandy walked over to the unconscious girl, and touched her temple with two fingers. “Her father's meditation techniques; she already knows the benefits of networking; long-term exposure to magic.” She stepped back. “She's not a prodigy, and she still will need a lot of training, but her background gives her a step in the right direction.” She glanced over to Skuld. “This could make training her more hazardous than I first thought, Skuld.”

Skuld flashed her a thumbs up. “I'm not backing down.”

“Perseverance.”

“Yep.”

Belldandy sighed. “Let's help her inside...”

* * * * *

“I am sorry, Fayu. I honestly didn't expect you to succeed at channelling so early.”

Nabiki waved it off. “That's all right. It's good to know that I'm not completely useless at this job.”

Bell smiled. “That's a good thing, yes.” She turned a bit more serious. “You will have to use channelling to power most of your magics for a while. Please, try not to channel so much.”

“Don't worry. I'm not anxious to repeat that.” Her eyes took a faraway look. “It was a rush, though.”

“I know.” Belldandy smiled. “Skuld and I felt it, and it was...invigorating.”

“So what's next?”

“Well, since you seem to be able to draw power, we can try teleportation.”

“I'd like to learn that one, yes.” Nabiki grinned. “Beats taking the train.”

“Myself, I've learned to appreciate motorcycles.”

Nabiki stared at Belldandy in shock. “You? On a motorcycle?”

“Oh, yes.” She smiled. “Keiichi's bike just begs to be ridden. Who am I to deny it?”

“Weird.” Nabiki shook her head. “You on a motorcycle seems as out of place as Kasumi on a motorcycle.” She considered. “Maybe I ought to buy one for her.”

“Teleportation.”

“Yes.”

“First, you should choose a focus. I know that this seems trivial, but the proper choice of a focus will aid in learning.” Belldandy considered. “Foci are usually based on your Element, and we haven't learned yours yet. Round objects, or reflective objects, often make good foci for a beginner. All three of us, the Norns, use reflective surfaces of one type or another.”

“Round and reflective, huh?” Nabiki thought for a second, then said, “How about a coin?”

From the doorway, Urd snorted. “From what I've heard, it sounds perfect for you.”

“Sis!” Skuld scowled at the older Goddess. “Be nice, will ya?”

Belldandy raised a hand. “Skuld.”

“Sorry.”

Belldandy turned to Nabiki. “How do you feel about the coin?”

Nabiki thought about it. “Urd's kind of right. Money's been a big thing for me in the past. And from what I've heard, it's going to stay that way.” She considered further, then nodded. “Yes. A coin.” She fished into her pocket, and pulled out a five-yen coin. “This one.”

“A good choice to start. Two circles, and reflective.”

Urd grinned. “You see, kid?”

“Don't call me a kid!”

“Please!”

They both cut short, and looked over at Belldandy. She looked cross; that in itself was unusual.

“If you are going to fight, I will ask you both to leave while I am training Fayu.”

Both sisters immediately looked contrite.

“I’m sorry, Belldandy. I’ll behave.” Skuld looked down in shame.

“Me, too.” Urd sighed. “I can’t seem to resist teasing her. So I’ll keep away for a bit.”

“Thank you, Urd.” Belldandy looked as guilty as the other two. “I don’t ***want*** you to leave, but if you feel that is the best way...”

“Dunno about best, but it’s the easiest. And training is as hard on the teacher as it is the student.” Urd grinned. “I’ll just nip on down to the bar.” She turned and walked out.

* * * * *

Beneath the window, Peorth smirked. “Coins, eh?”

She pulled out a handful of five-yen coins.

* * * * *

“I’m sorry I’m such a pain, Belldandy.”

Belldandy turned to Nabiki. “Sisters help each other, as much as they can. There is no need to apologize.” She paused. “Do you have another five yen coin?”

Nabiki dug into her pockets again, and produced a second coin. Belldandy took it, and concentrated.

A single, pure note rung out, and the coin glowed for a second.

Nabiki blinked. “Whoa. Was that your channel?”

“Yes.”

“I see what you mean. I could feel the power as you called it.”

Skuld piped up. “So you know what it felt like for us. You had a lot more energy leakage.” She grinned. “It was like having my brains smashed out with six liters of Haagen-Dasz.”

Bell held up the coin. “I’ve cast a minor spell on this coin, to make it a bigger target for teleportation.” She smiled. “Its spiritual footprint is about six feet wide now.”

“So big, I could just walk through it.”

“This is what I hope.” She handed the coin to Skuld. “Please put this by the bell outside.”

Skuld gingerly took the coin. “Got it.” She walked carefully out the door. Nabiki watched her go.

“She's treating that like it's made of nitroglycerin.”

“She could find herself falling through it, if she's not careful.” Belldandy took the other coin from the table, and concentrated. Again the note rang out, and Nabiki shivered. Belldandy put the coin on the floor, stood, and stepped back.

“Stand up.”

Nabiki stood.

“With a source and target this strongly amplified, you will probably succeed the first time. But don't be discouraged if you do not. Teleportation comes naturally to a Goddess, but it can take practise.”

“Gotcha. Perseverance.”

“You are a good student. Stand on the coin.”

She stepped forward, and placed one foot on the coin.

“Open your mind, and seek the other coin.”

She reached out mentally, and found the other coin. It was easy; it called out to her.

“When you have found it, begin to channel, and draw energy through this coin and to the other.”

She reached out again, heard the choir, and poured the energy through the coin.

“Whoa!” Skuld's voice reached her from outside, and she started. She looked around.

“Didn't go anywhere. Rats.”

Belldandy smiled. “You're not channelling quite properly. There was an energy flare outside. The energy went through, but you did not.”

“Try again?”

“Of course.”

Nabiki grinned, then reached out again. Touched the sound of the city, and drew it in. Down through herself, into the coin, and out to the other.

And fell through the coin.

Golden light nearly blinded her as she fell, and she felt herself pushed along, as though through a tunnel. Up ahead, a glowing disk seemed to beckon, and she accelerated towards it.

Only to see it splinter at the last moment, just before she reached it...

* * * * *

“Aaaahh!!!”

“Fayu!” Belldandy ran out the front door.

Nabiki was standing by the bell.

Also by the garden shed.

Also just near the shrine.

Actually, with a quick glance through the ether, she realized that Nabiki was in about ten different places around the compound.

“Oh, dear.”

Nabiki was staggering about, one hand on her head.

“What's going on? I can't--”

“Focus on this coin!” Skuld was kneeling beside the coin she'd placed near the bell. “Focus on it, and pull yourself out of it!”

All over the compound, Nabiki popped out of existence, and then reappeared.

“I can't do it!” Nabiki was shaking like a leaf. “They keep calling me back!”

“Skuld.”

Skuld nodded, and closed her eyes.

The various Nabikis vanished again, and then one reappeared, over the coin. She collapsed to the ground, trembling.

“What happened?” She clutched her stomach. “Did I miss the target?”

Skuld was grinding her teeth. “This was no accident.” She reached through the coin, causing it to flare golden, and pulled back a handful of coins. “Bell, these were trapped. And there were a lot of them, all over the gardens.”

“Oh, no.” Bell looked crumpled. “Who would do this?”

Skuld scowled. She concentrated on the coins, and a ghostly image appeared above it. An image of a rose.

“Peorth.”

* * * * *

“You interfered with my student.”

Belldandy was about as mad as Nabiki had ever seen her. It reminded her of that first day that Ranma had arrived. Kasumi had shocked them all by nearly throttling the panda.

Peorth shrugged. “She was gonna have to learn to deal with multiple targets eventually, right?”

“It was for me to decide when to tackle that problem! With a coin as her focus, it would come sooner than later. Do you have any idea what kind of setback this could be for her?” Belldandy crossed her arms. “Suffering a split on her first teleportation? She might never learn the art!”

Nabiki stood, and walked towards Peorth. “You did this out of revenge, didn't you?”

Peorth glanced over at her. “Be quiet when the adults are talking.”

Nabiki turned to Belldandy. “She wouldn't leave my futon last night, so I embarrassed her until she fled.”

“Oh?” Belldandy turned a full glare back at Peorth. “And because of that, you decided to sabotage her training?”

Peorth shrugged. “Hey. I'm First Class, Unlimited License. That gives me a right to assist in her training.”

“A right, not an obligation. Assist, not resist. If Kami-sama heard of this, I think you would face severe punishment.”

“Well, I'm not gonna tell him.” She shrugged. “Are you?” She tossed one of the five-yen coins in her hand. “With a focus as stupid as coins, she's gonna face this more than once.” She glanced over at Nabiki. “Might as well get used to it.”

Nabiki closed her eyes, and channelled a massive wave of force, through Peorth and into the coin. Peorth winked out of existence, and the coin clattered to the ground.

“Fayu...that wasn't very nice.” Belldandy looked more surprised than disappointed.

“She was getting on my nerves.” Nabiki glanced around. “Why didn't she split?”

Belldandy sighed. “Because of her disparagement of the medium, she cannot teleport through coins.”

“So she's stuck?”

“Yes.”

“Rats. I wanted to put her through what she put me through.” Nabiki sat down, and scowled. “Nearly made me barf my guts up.”

“Splitting causes disorientation, unless you have a lot of practise.” Belldandy sat as well. “Your senses are taking in information from multiple points, and it takes a clear mind to keep those points separate. Otherwise, it can cause nausea and physical pain.”

“Makes sense.” She glanced down at the coin. “I guess I should let her out.”

Belldandy considered. “No, I think we've done enough teleporting today.” She took the coin from the floor. “You should spend the next few hours in meditation. I'm going to start dinner.”

“Meditation or sleep, whichever comes first. I'm still pretty messed up.” Nabiki got to her feet, and walked towards her bedroom.

Belldandy looked down at the coin, then reached into her pocket and added a large number of other coins of various denominations to it. “Skuld?”

Skuld stepped in. Her head was hung, and tear streaks marked her cheeks. “Yeah?”

“Thank you for helping Fayu.”

“I shoulda seen the trap.” Skuld looked up angrily. “When I held the coin, I shoulda felt the others!”

“Coins are not your medium.”

“It doesn't matter! I let her down. I let you down!”

“No, Skuld.” Belldandy smiled. “Your quick actions spared Fayu more pain than she experienced. You made me proud today.”

“Really?”

“Yes, my sister.” She handed Skuld the coins. “Go buy yourself some ice cream.”

Skuld nodded. “Okay. Thanks, Sis.” She grabbed Belldandy, and hugged her.

* * * * *

Somewhere in Yokohama, a cracked camera lens glowed, and Peorth appeared.

She glanced around the landfill site, and grumbled. Turned back to the camera lens on the garbage heap, and scowled. “Broken. I can't teleport back through this.” She glanced around the landfill in disgust, then leapt into the sky.

And promptly fell down into the garbage.

“What--” She looked down at her hands. “My powers...”

“Suppressed.”

She looked over, to see Skuld staring at her.

“What do you mean, suppressed?” Peorth smirked. “By you?”

“Nope.” Skuld pointed up at the sky. “Maybe Sis couldn't rat you out, but I sure can. One week suspension, starting now.”

“Kami-sama...”

“It's a long walk back to Tokyo. Have fun.” She jumped into a nearby puddle, and vanished.

Three May Keep A Secret...¹

Nabiki sat, cross-legged, and considered the coin.

Over the last week, she had been struggling to teleport. Somehow, she was unable to repeat her earlier success. She could still channel, but even that was becoming erratic; she'd nearly blown up the temple last time she'd tried.

Belldandy, of course, had been most understanding.

- - -

"After what Peorth did, I am not at all surprised that you are having difficulty." Belldandy's anger had abated, but it was obvious that she had not quite forgiven Peorth.

"I keep telling you, I'm over it, Sis."

"Well, I'm not."

Nabiki blinked. "You're not really the sort to hold grudges."

"Normally, no, but..." She sighed. "She *knew* you're at a delicate point of your training. Why she would choose to do something so rash..."

"Actually, I don't really get it either, Bell." Keiichi sat down next to the middle Norn. "Sure, she's got determination, but she was never really vindictive before."

"But I--"

"Came on to her?" Keiichi grinned. "That's nothing compared to her usual tactics." He sipped his tea, then continued. "No, there's something about you that's bugging her, Nabiki."

- - -

"Something about me?" Nabiki pondered this for a moment. "Or maybe my situation...or my parentage..." She sighed, and stood. "I need more information."

1 "...provided two of them are dead" Ben Franklin

* * * * *

"Urd."

The elder Norn waved a hand. "Not now."

"It's important."

"So's this."

Nabiki gritted her teeth, walked over, and pulled the plug on the television.

Urd scowled at her. "You pulled the plug on Big Z. You better have a good reason."

"You mentioned that you pulled my file from Yggdrasil."

"Yes. I did. Is that all?"

"I want to see it." Nabiki crossed her arms. "Peorth's good and pissed at me, and I need to know why."

Urd considered this, and then sighed. "Well, I guess that is important." She stood up and stretched. "C'mon, let's see if it's still on the hard drive." She smirked. "My favourite part of the computer."

* * * * *

"Parentage...history...ancestry...portfolio..." Nabiki sighed. "Most of this I already know. Nothing about my rating, I see."

"That's because I pulled it before it was assigned. Yggdrasil auto-updates, but this is just a 486."

"So this doesn't really tell us a lot."

"Sorry." Urd considered. "Maybe we should pull the updated file."

"That might help--no." Nabiki grinned. "Pull Peorth's file."

Urd shook her head. "I can't. File access restrictions; Peorth's one Class higher than me."

"What about Belldandy? She's equal Class."

Urd considered, then shook her head. "I don't think so. That's not really the sort of thing Belldandy would consider doing."

"Besides, I don't know the system well enough."

They turned, to see Belldandy at the door. She smiled.

"When Keiichi told me that you two wanted to use his computer, I figured it would be something like this."

"Oh." Urd scratched the back of her head. "Well...you aren't gonna tell anyone, are you?"

"You know me better than that, Sister." She walked over and sat down in front of the keyboard, tapped in a few lines.

The modem dialled out, and Belldandy tapped out her login and password. Then turned to Urd.

"Please don't get caught. With my access level and your skills, you should be able to access Peorth's file."

Urd blinked.

Nabiki tilted her head. "Feeling a bit larcenous today, Sis?"

"No." Belldandy stood, and stepped back. "I want to understand why Peorth sabotaged your training."

* * * * *

"Money." Nabiki dropped the printout on the table.

Belldandy looked up. "Money?" Comprehension dawned. "Of course! As part of the Earth Assistance Agency, she would want access to that portfolio!"

"Yep." Nabiki grinned. "And it must have burned her biscuits to know that I got it, basically out of the starting gate."

Belldandy looked puzzled. "But Peorth doesn't usually cook..."

"Figure of speech. She must have been very angry."

Belldandy leafed through Peorth's file. "Oh...she's applied for this portfolio six times. Denied each time."

"Yeah." Nabiki sat down, poured herself a cup of tea. "I kinda wonder why. It's not like anyone saw me coming."

"Don't be so sure." Belldandy laid a page on the table, and pointed at a name. "According to this, the portfolio was denied by Skuld."

"Someone call me?" Skuld had just wandered in, carrying an empty ice cream tub.

"Yeah." Nabiki turned to the younger Norn. "According to this, you've denied Peorth a portfolio. Six times."

"Five, actually." Belldandy looked a little closer. "The first time, she was turned down by the Council."

Skuld looked puzzled. "I don't remember doing so."

Belldandy turned to Nabiki. "Do you realize that Skuld is the most powerful of the three of us?"

Skuld's puzzlement grew more obvious. "I am?"

Nabiki considered. "Goddess of the future. She must have known I was coming."

"Skuld's main job is to keep Yggdrasil on an even keel--to eliminate system bugs before they can cause instability. She does this at a remote level; to her, or those around her, it appears that she is striking them down with her hammer." Belldandy indicated the weapon. "What she doesn't really realize, even though we've tried explaining it to her, is that in order to debug Yggdrasil, she has to be able to see the future."

Nabiki nodded. "But being able to see the future could cause as many bugs as it fixes."

"More. As a result, while Skuld can see the future, it is only on a subconscious level. So when Peorth applied to the Wealth Portfolio, it caused a bug, and Skuld...did her job."

Nabiki considered this. "Could Peorth access this file?"

"None of us can access our own files. And no Divine being, not even Kami-Sama, can access the file of a Norn. As Time Goddesses, the possibility of paradox is too high."

"I betcha he'd give his right eye for those files, though."

"He did," said Skuld. "For nothing more than a single page of mine."

Nabiki blinked.

* * * * *

On the other side of Tokyo...

Kasumi nearly dropped her grocery bag in horror.

"That poor woman!"

Indeed, the woman in question appeared to be in very rough shape. Barefoot, wearing only an abbreviated shirt and a ripped pair of panties, covered in dirt and filth, she was trudging along the road. Depression radiated off of her; for an instant, Kasumi wondered if perhaps Ryouga had fallen into the Spring of Drowned Girl. Kasumi hurried towards the woman, her expression of horror giving way to one of compassion.

"What happened to you?"

The woman looked up at Kasumi; the dark circles under her eyes made her countenance even worse. "I angered the wrong woman." She blinked, and seemed to recover some of her composure. "You're Tendo Kasumi."

Kasumi raised a hand to her mouth. "Have we met?"

"No. But I know your sisters all too well."

"Did...they do this to you?"

"No." The woman chuckled. "Really, I did it to myself. I should have realized who I was dealing with."

"Please, I really should make amends for them." Kasumi bowed. "Come with me. I'll see that you get a bath, a hot meal, and some...warmer...clothing." She still hadn't quite come to grips with this woman wandering around in her underwear.

The woman considered her. "Okay. Sounds good. Thank you." She managed a smile.

* * * * *

Bathed, dried, and dressed, Peorth tore into one of Kasumi's better efforts.

"This is very good! I haven't tasted cooking like this in a hundred years!"

Kasumi smiled. "That's very kind. Thank you."

Peorth chuckled. "Now I see why everyone says you and your sister are just alike. I'm Peorth, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you." Kasumi paused. "I just noticed. You have a tattoo on your forehead, like Urd."

"Guess there's no use in hiding it from you."

"No, it kind of stands out." Kasumi paused. "Do you work for the same agency as Urd?"

"Not quite." Peorth considered; no telling what sort of lies Urd spun out for this woman. "Same parent company, but different branch."

"Ah." Kasumi leaned in. "So can you tell me how my sister Nabiki is doing in her training?"

"Nabiki? It surprised me, but she's fitting right in." Peorth grinned. "I'm afraid that I got in the way of her training, and was...punished."

"Oh, dear." Kasumi's hand flew to her mouth. "I'm really starting to worry about my little sister."

"Don't worry." Peorth waved a hand. "It's really not as bad as you think. Trust me." She smiled. "Our job is to help those who cannot help themselves. We distribute largess from...an anonymous benefactor. But sometimes we have to learn that we're not at all different from those we help." She sighed. "I have certainly learned that lesson this week."

Something was preying on Kasumi's mind, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She shook it off. "So this is a charitable organization?"

"Yes." Peorth was getting back into full flower. "Many people exist who, through no fault of their own, are cast down and trodden upon. We help those people back on their feet, give them pride and assistance, and set them back on their paths."

"I'm home!"

"Welcome back!" Kasumi glanced towards the doorway. "Tell me...was Akane involved in this too?"

Peorth shrugged. "Only as much as you."

Akane walked in, and glanced down at Peorth. "Hi! Who're you?" She did a double-take. "And why are you wearing my clothes?"

"I'm sorry, Akane, but Ranma's things were too small, so yours were the closest fit." Kasumi looked troubled. "This poor woman was wandering the streets, covered in dirt and wearing only her underclothes..."

"And you brought her home and fed her. Well, now we have to keep her." Akane bowed. "Tendo Akane. Pleased to meet you."

"Peorth."

It hit Kasumi, almost like a freight train. "You've not met before?"

"Nope." Akane shrugged. "Never seen her before now."

Kasumi turned back to Peorth. "Which 'sisters'?"

"Oh, heck."

* * * * *

"You're kidding!" Akane was fuming. "You just have to be lying to us!"

Peorth sighed. "I'm sorry to say, but no. Your mother had two other daughters, and they live in Nekomi."

"Is...Urd...?"

"No."

"Oh." Kasumi sighed. "I was worried."

Peorth chuckled. "Urd is really a nice girl. She just doesn't look that way." She sobered. "Nabiki's training is under Belldandy, your oldest sister. She's a lot like you."

"That's what you meant, then." Kasumi paused. "But you would think that Father would have mentioned something."

Peorth shook her head. "I doubt she would have told him. When she left her first husband, he kept the girls."

"But surely Mother would have said something to give it away!" Akane was working up to a horrible rant. "I can't believe that she would never have mentioned them, or kept a picture, or--"

"Please, trust me. You don't have the whole story, and neither do I." She shook her head. "There's only one person who knows the entire truth, and she's in Heaven."

"Well, there's one way we can get some more of the story." Kasumi stood. "Akane, get dressed. Your kimono and geta. See if you can find one for Peorth; if I recall, Ranma's tend to be a bit big on her."

"What are we gonna do? Track 'em down?"

"I wish you luck." Peorth shook her head. "Do you have any idea how big Nekomi is? It's a college town, in the middle of term."

"But you can take us there!" Akane whirled on Peorth. "You know where they live, right?"

"I am sorry, but I promised to never lead you there."

"I think I can persuade you." Akane cracked her knuckles.

"No, Akane." Kasumi shook her head. "There's an easier way. I saw it on the news; Nekomi Tech is hosting a fair." She smiled. "If our sisters are anything like us, they won't be able to stay away."

* * * * *

"Woohoo! A fair!"

Belldandy watched with amusement as Skuld bounced around the room. Nabiki chuckled. "She reminds me so much of Akane sometimes."

"In a lot of ways, she's different."

"Yeah, but that just makes the similarities stand out so much more. So why exactly are we going to the fair?"

"You said you were starting to have problems with channelling."

"Yeah. And?"

"When you are in the midst of those people, I want you to feel their emotions."

"Okay. And what if I accidentally zorch them?"

"You won't." Belldandy shook her head. "You won't be channelling; you'll be looking at the colours of their auras."

Nabiki blinked. "I can do that too?"

"Not yet. But by the time we head for home, you will."

* * * * *

The lights and sounds of the fair threatened to overwhelm Nabiki.

"You were not quite right. I don't see their auras as colours."

"No?"

"No. I hear them as music." Nabiki grinned weakly. "It's pretty noisy here."

"Try to isolate one. Treat it as though you were trying to hear one note in a song."

"Hmmm..." Nabiki tilted her head. "A simple, sprightly tune. Happy and expectant. Probably a child."

"Over there." Belldandy pointed. "That little girl, getting a cone of candy floss."

"Another happy tune, more complex, proud and brassy. A young man?"

"There. It looks like he's won a prize for his lady."

"This is even better than people watching." She concentrated again. "This one's farther away...Anger? Disappointment? It seems familiar..."

"Oh, dear. It's probably Peorth. It's been nearly a week, so she's probably nearly home."

"No...it's not Peorth. I'm not sure...but she does seem familiar." Nabiki shook her head. "I'd rather not stay with that one, if it's all the same. Mostly drums and organs."

Belldandy laughed.

"Here's another familiar one." Nabiki grinned. "Frantic, energetic tune, rendered in techno. Probably some kid."

"I am not a kid." Skuld stuck her tongue out at Nabiki, then turned back to the carnie. "Five hundred yen for ten shots."

The young man took the coin, then fed a tube of paintballs into the compressed air gun. "Cover the clown completely with the paint to win a prize. If I see any red on the card after your gun is empty, you lose."

"Gotcha!" Skuld brought the gun up - it seemed obvious to Nabiki that the only time she'd ever seen one was on TV - and proceeded to blast away at the clown card.

She fired her last shot, looked dismally at the spotless target, and then back down to the gun.

"I know! I can increase the air pressure, add an auto-targeting module--"

Belldandy took the paintball gun from her. "No, Skuld."

"But it would be easy!"

"It's not yours." She smiled. "Come on, there's lots more to see."

Skuld glanced around. "Where's Keiichi? Normally, he's hanging off you like a barnacle."

"He went to the Motor Club's exhibit."

* * * * *

The Alta 50S was not a prizewinning beauty of a motorcycle, but it has been built in 1962 and now, almost fifty years later, its brightwork gleamed and

it was still purring like a kitten. Keiichi stood up, and flashed Hasegawa a thumbs up. "Very nice work, Sora."

"Thank you, Sempai." She beamed. "From you, that's high praise."

"Nabiki told me she wanted to try getting her sister Kasumi on a motorcycle. Think we could borrow this one some time?"

Nearby, Akane's ears perked up.

"Maybe. What sort of girl is she?"

"Apparently, Kasumi's a lot like Belldandy, but even more gentle."

Target locked.

"More gentle than Bell?" Hasukawa laughed. "Can the world survive?"

"Anyway, if you don't think this one is appropriate--"

"It's kind of hard for a beginner. I'd actually suggest starting her with a SuperCub."

"Bleah."

"You're just mad because Tamiya and Otaki made you ride that souped-up funny bike."

Keiichi turned, grinning. "I'm gonna go find the girls. Hold the fort down here, Sora."

"You want to give me orders, you shouldn't have made me Chief." Sora grinned.

Akane fell in step behind him.

* * * * *

"Hey." Urd waved casually to Belldandy and Nabiki. "You two almost look lonely."

Belldandy smiled. "It'll be nice when Keiichi returns."

"Speaking of returns." Urd glanced through the crowd. "I think I just saw a familiar face. Peorth."

"Oh, really." Nabiki turned and crossed her arms.

It was indeed Peorth, and she was moving towards them as quickly as she could. But Nabiki realized that it was not to attack; she looked very worried.

"Thank heavens I found you first." Peorth was winded. "You really need to get out of here. Nabiki, Urd, and probably Belldandy and Skuld, too. It would be best if you get out of Nekomi altogether."

"Why?"

"Because I slipped, and let the truth out." She looked like she was about to go on, but Nabiki leaned forwards, and grabbed the collar of the kimono she was wearing.

"I recognize this kimono." She turned to Belldandy. "Peorth is right. We really ought to go. Now."

"All right. You and Urd find a dark corner, and--"

Nabiki's eyes widened. "Too late."

She turned, to see Keiichi approaching.

"Hey, girls." He waved to them, then did a double-take. "How'd you manage to get Peorth into a kimono?"

"Keiichi..." Nabiki shook her head. "You led her right to us."

"Who?"

"How could you not see her? She's as stealthy as a bus."

"See who?"

"My sister."

Keiichi blinked, and turned. To find himself face-to-face with a rather angry young woman.

"Tendo Akane."

Of Sisters And Friends

"I can't believe it."

The eight had returned to the temple. Belldandy had made tea--like Kasumi, she felt that everything improved over a cup of tea--and Kasumi now clung to her teacup as though it were a lifeline. To her left was Keiichi, Belldandy on the other side of him; The thought had flicked through Nabiki's mind that Bell and Kasumi looked like bookends. Peorth and Nabiki sat on the other side of the table.

Kasumi shook her head. "I'd come to accept that we had two more sisters. I realized that you meant well, Belldandy. You did not want to be a disruption on our lives.

"But now I see you two...." She shook her head. "Peorth must have been confused." She pointed to Skuld, leaning against the door. "For this to be true, this girl would have to be older than me!"

Nabiki frowned; explaining this discrepancy was going to difficult.

"Oh, that is easy to explain." Belldandy smiled. "You see, we're Goddesses."

Kasumi blinked. "Really?"

"No!" Keiichi jumped up. "She likes to joke around a bit, but the truth is..."

He paused.

"You didn't think that far ahead, did you, Keiichi?" Nabiki sighed.

"Now I am confused." Kasumi shook her head.

"Okay," said Nabiki. "Let me spell it out as clear as I can.

"Skuld and Belldandy are our sisters, through our mother. But they have a different father. One whom, as I recall, had already left her former husband. She must have had good reason to leave Belldandy and Skuld with their father, but whatever reason, I still haven't been told."

Nabiki paused, and poured herself a cup of tea. "Now, Skuld and Belldandy have another sister, Urd. As I heard it, Urd's mother was far too career-oriented to have a child, and felt she'd do a bad job of raising her, so left her with her father. I haven't met their father yet..." *And with luck won't anytime soon*, she thought. "...But he sounds like he's a saint, at the least."

Kasumi nodded. "I can certainly agree. To take on the raising of three daughters on your own..."

Peorth nudged her. "Much like you did, kiddo."

Nabiki sipped her tea. "Chamomile and mint, lemon grass, tilia flowers...Nice combination, Bell." She flashed a grin at her Divine older sister, then looked back at the mortal one.

"At any rate. You might have noticed that none of these three look very Japanese."

Kasumi wrung her hands. "I didn't want to say anything..."

"We know you're not racist or anything, Kasumi, but it must have preyed on you." Nabiki grinned. "Their father wasn't Japanese, but Norse. Skuld's older than you by more than a bit, Sis, and Belldandy older still. They get their longevity from their father. Skuld may only look fourteen, and sometimes act it--"

"Hey!"

"--But to misjudge her wisdom would be an error." Nabiki set down her teacup. "Does this help?"

"A bit." Kasumi sighed. "But why didn't you tell me any of this?"

"Because Bell asked me not to!" Nabiki stood, and started to pace. "Of course I wanted to tell you everything, right from the moment I learned of it! But Bell told me a few other things, things that I was asked not to share. Some things, I'm not ready to share. But there's one thing I can tell you."

"Sister." Belldandy stood. "No!"

"I'm sorry, Bell. This I have to tell them." Nabiki turned back to Kasumi. "Mother knew she wouldn't be with us long."

Anguish crossed Kasumi's face.

"No..."

"Mom new she'd be leaving us alone, and she went ahead and had three kids anyway." Nabiki knelt down in front of Kasumi, and took her hands. "She knew that she'd be leaving all this on your head. You know why?"

Tears streaked Kasumi's face; her only answer was a shake of the head.

"Because she knew we'd be special. She knew that we--that you, could handle it." Nabiki clasped Kasumi's hands tightly. "She was right."

* * * * *

Akane sat near the shrine, away from the residential part of the temple.

She'd been unable to join the conversation. Seeing two sisters, both older than Kasumi but both looking younger, had been just about too much for her. Add to that Kasumi's tears and general unhappiness, and Akane had been left confused and uncertain. And since there was no-one she could attack--Ranma was nowhere nearby--she had chosen to run instead.

Three times, she'd jogged around the compound, trying to sort out her feelings. By the third time, she'd started to get tired--the compound was quite large--and so had run back through the gate.

But still, she could not approach the residence. So instead, she had sat down here, on the front step of the shrine, and wondered what to do next.

There was a footstep behind her, and she turned, ready to chew someone out...but it was a little girl, perhaps ten or eleven, who stood behind her.

"State your name." The girl had a fist cocked in her general direction. Akane blinked at her rudeness.

"Tendo Akane." She rose, putting herself into a defensive stance. It was a well-defined stance, as it looked casual, even cowardly, to the observer, but was a good stance for avoiding or countering attacks. "And who are you?"

"Tendo Akane..." The girl lowered her fist. "You are recognized, Akane, and welcome to the Tariki Hongan Temple."

"Why, thank you," Akane replied dryly. "Since the owners already invited me in, why exactly do I need your welcome?"

"Because I am the Guardian of the Temple." The girl's expression did not change. "Sigel."

It took an effort of will not to chuckle at that. "You take your job seriously, don't you?"

"Of course." She cocked a thumbs-up. "Banpei may have been built as a Guardian, but I chose to do so. Who has the greater determination?"

"Never thought of it that way," mused Akane.

"At any rate, Skuld-sama told me that you were a guest, and I have verified your identity by your voiceprint--"

"Voiceprint?"

"A recent upgrade." Skuld had walked up behind Akane; her voice startled Akane. "I equipped her with a voiceprint identifier, so that she'd be more easily able to identify people. I gave her a sample of yours--" She reached down the top of her shirt, and produced a handheld recording device. "--from when we met at the fair."

Akane blinked. "That gizmo's bigger than both my fists."

"Yeah. And?"

"So how did you fit it down the top of your shirt? That collar looks loose enough, but I don't see how I couldn't have noticed that thing."

Skuld darkened. "Are you saying something about my bust size?"

"No!" Akane raised her hands. "That's not what I mean!"

Skuld smirked. "I was told you were the second greatest martial artist in Tokyo. Surely a simple hidden weapons technique shouldn't faze you."

"I guess I--hold on." Akane leaned in. "Second greatest?"

"Well, even you gotta admit, Ranma's better."

"Hmph. Better at collecting girlfriends, or mooching off people, or being a pervert--"

"Sounds like someone I know." Skuld glanced toward the residence. "I've said the same things about Morisato. How the heck, I always wondered, could he catch my sister's attention?"

"You ever figure it out?"

"Yeah." Skuld grinned. "I spent some time with him. Once I saw his good points, I started to understand."

Akane snorted. "There you go. Ranma has no good points."

"Has he ever broken a promise?"

"Well, no, but--"

"To anyone at all?"

"...no." Akane looked down at her sneakers.

"Has he ever let someone weaker than him get bullied?"

"No."

"Does he ever give up?"

"No."

Skuld raised three fingers. "There are three good points. I don't even know him, and I came up with those." She crossed her arms. "You're his fiancee; you should be able to do better than me."

"I...I guess you're right."

"You have wronged him, Akane, and you will have to do penance before all is right between you two again." Skuld smiled. "But I think Ranma will forgive you."

* * * * *

"Fayu, I would speak with you."

Nabiki sighed; she'd suspected that this was coming, and sooner rather than later. She turned to the black-haired Goddess. "Yeah?"

Peorth bowed deeply. "I apologize, and I beg your forgiveness."

Nabiki blinked. "I forgive you." She shrugged. "It was a rotten trick, but no harm done. I can look back at it now and laugh."

"Others won't." Peorth stood up straight. "But I thank you."

"Listen, Peorth, I found out that you wanted my portfolio."

"Yes."

"I don't think I can give it to you..."

"Not as a Fourth Class Goddess, no."

Nabiki smirked. "I should have said, I'm not willing to give it to you." Her expression softened. "But if there's any way that you and I can cooperate...let's just say that we don't have to oppose each other."

"You mean..."

"Yes." Nabiki nodded. "I can assist you with your duties, if you will assist me in mine."

"But you don't have any duties." Peorth was looking more puzzled by the second. "You're still in training."

"Exactly."

You could almost hear the click. "You would trust me to assist with your training?"

"I just said I forgive you, didn't I?" Nabiki tilted her head.

"Then yes, I shall assist you." Peorth smiled, and Nabiki was taken aback.

She looks almost as sweet as Belldandy right now...

"Of course, I will need to clear that with your primary instructor, and I can't do anything until my suspension is lifted. That should happen tomorrow."

"I understand." Nabiki sat down, her back against the wall. "I know we got off on the wrong foot--"

"I was tired and cranky, and then I found out that you'd gotten the portfolio I'd wanted." Peorth waved a hand.

"My coming on to you had nothing to do with it?"

"I wasn't really in the best of moods, as I'm sure you discovered." Peorth smirked. "If not for all that, you might have discovered that you'd bitten off more than you could chew."

"...Really?"

"Oh, yes. My job is granting mortals their heart's desire." She grinned evilly. "I am very good at my job."

Belldandy ran by the family room door.

Nabiki's head twisted around fast enough to produce a crack. "Bell was--"

Urd ran past next, followed by Kasumi and Keiichi.

"What's going on?" Nabiki jumped up and followed them, as quick as she could.

"Fight!" Keiichi yelled over his shoulder. "Akane's gonna fight Sigel!"

* * * * *

By the time they got out to the compound grounds, it was obvious that this was merely a sparring match, and what had been a rescue party turned instantly into a cheering section. Divided into three camps.

"Show her your stuff, Sigel!" Urd flashed the diminutive robot a V.

"You can take her, Akane!" Nabiki brandished a fist. "Show her what the Tendo School stands for!"

"Do your best, both of you." Kasumi smiled. Of course.

Akane smirked at her opponent. "Don't think I'll go easy on you because you're a kid."

"Kid?" Sigel's smile turned evil. "I shall teach you not to underestimate me."

Akane launched herself towards Sigel, closing with a quick snap kick. Sigel countered, by stepping to the side, grabbing Akane's ankle, and pulling her past. Akane's rear leg overextended, and she pulled the front leg back, to turn the throw into a roll.

She regained her feet, and smiled at her opponent. "Not bad. I think I've just been taught."

Sigel grinned.

"This time for real." Akane approached with a bit more caution this time. She launched a three-punch combo, only to have each attack parried. She dropped, and spun into a foot sweep, knocking Sigel off-balance. She shifted again, following up with an axe-kick to Sigel's backside. The smaller girl was knocked to the ground with a loud clang.

"Clang?"

Sigel picked herself up, and looked down at her backside, which now showed a definite dent. "It's going to take Skuld-sama hours to put that right."

"What--How--?"

On the sidelines, Kasumi raised a hand to her mouth. Belldandy looked over in surprise.

"Didn't you know?" Belldandy sighed. "Too many other things to talk about."

Sigel turned to face Akane, and raised a fist. "I don't blame you. I wasn't made to fight, but I've chosen this job. And it seemed that I underestimated you as well."

Akane shook off the surprise, and grinned. "An android, huh? Skuld's cooler than I thought."

"Shall we?" Sigel opened the extended fist, and beckoned Akane.

Akane's grin sharpened, and she launched herself towards the droid.

"Rocket punch!" Sigel's lower arm and fist detached, and blasted towards Akane. It grazed her temple, and Akane stopped, her forward momentum stalled by the impact. Sigel's fist retracted on its cable, snapping back into her upper arm.

Akane grinned. "An opening."

"Rocket punch!" The fist blasted forwards again, but Akane was prepared this time. She stepped an inch to the side, and the fist sailed past her, striking the wall behind her. Akane waited a fraction of a second, until the fist started retracting, then grabbed the cable and leaped into the air.

"She's riding it in!" Keiichi whooped.

The cable's retraction gave Akane's kick terrifying speed, and she slammed into Sigel, releasing the cable just as she made impact. The droid was knocked backward into the dirt, sliding five meters before coming to a halt.

Akane touched down, but before she could come to full readiness, Sigel's other Rocket Punch caught her directly in the stomach. She sat down heavily.

Peorth nodded. "Basic tactics."

"Your opponent has two fists, just as you do." Nabiki sighed. "But I suppose that there was no reason to suspect that Sigel didn't have something else in the other arm."

Both combatants regained their feet. Sigel's chassis was now badly marred, a foot-shaped dent in her torso armour to match the one on her rump. She finished retracting her fists, and snapped into a ready pose.

Akane regarded her warily. Rather than leading with her left hand, Sigel was now leading with her right. *Did I damage her internals? No--she's out of power on the right fist!*

Sigel grinned. "You're quite good."

"Thanks. You too."

"One more round?"

"Oh, yeah." Akane ran forward, and Sigel promptly blasted a Rocket Punch at her.

"Got you."

The Rocket Punch missed, as Akane leaped clear over the attack, and landed within inches of Sigel. With a quick pivot, she snagged the line, and promptly tied up the robot.

Jaws dropped across the compound.

"She only has four, right, Skuld?"

"Yeah." Skuld shook her head. "I can't believe you beat her!"

"She's a bit too predictable." Akane winced, and rubbed her temple. "But very powerful." She knelt next to the struggling Sigel. "Yield?"

"I cannot!" Sigel struggled harder.

"She's not programmed to yield, Akane." Skuld pulled out a device, and tapped it; Sigel stopped struggling. "She needs the countermand signal."

"I see." Akane untied the robot, and helped her to her feet. "You're very good, Sigel. I enjoyed our match."

"As did I." Sigel grinned, and offered a hand. Akane took it warily, and they shook. "But I'm going to ask Skuld-sama to install a random number generator, and then you better watch out."

* * * * *

"They're really cool." Akane examined Banpei's power systems, and shook her head. "I've gotta admit, I know nothing about this sort of stuff, but this is way more complex than anything we have in our home."

"Banpei-kun is a state-of-the-art combat robot." Skuld grinned. "His algorithms are self-programming and randomized, and his emotion circuits quite elaborate. He's as much a friend as a Guardian."

"When you make new friends, you really *make* new friends." Akane laughed. "And what about her?"

"Banpei saw her once, and I guess decided that he wanted to keep her. She was just a store-front mannequin, and Chihiro was going to use her at the bike shop. But I got her, and installed her servos and AI systems."

"Why?"

"Because Banpei-kun fell in love with her." Skuld snapped a component into Sigel's torso, and flipped a switch. "Problem is that Sigel doesn't much care for Banpei. They've sort of evolved into complementary programs."

"Just friends, huh?"

"No, more than that." Skuld tugged out another component. "You kick like a Fire Giant, Akane! This part is rated to fifty gees." She tossed it aside and started fishing through a box of parts. "You see, Banpei-kun was built to protect Belldandy. Mostly against Keiichi, but I altered his programming later. But he'll protect Sigel just as much. For the most part, Sigel will protect Banpei as well, but it's hard to call their behaviour 'love.'" She closed up Sigel's chassis, and rebuttoned the android's dress. "Sigel considers Banpei-kun's behaviour to be boorish and perverted."

Akane sighed. "Like me and Ranma. Ranma worries about me, and all I ever do is brush him off as a pervert."

"It's good to see strength." Skuld touched a hidden control under Sigel's hair, and the robot came to life with a sudden jerk. "Welcome back, Sigel."

"Good morning, Skuld-sama." She looked over at Akane. "Akane-sama, it is good to see you."

"Good, her recognition circuits weren't damaged."

"Damaged?" Sigel blinked. "Oh, yes, I recall. Akane, that was a good fight. You taught me quite a few things. I shall remember them."

"Sigel, I would like you to continue patrols. I'll fix the dents tomorrow. Is that all right?"

"Yes." Sigel bowed to Skuld.

"All right. I'm starving. Akane, you want some ice cream?"

* * * * *

"It was very good of you to have us." Kasumi bowed to her sisters. "I promise, we will come and visit again, though I cannot say when."

"Thank you for visiting." Belldandy smiled. "I was worried how it might turn out, but I'm glad it happened."

Skuld grabbed Akane's hand. "Listen, Sis. I know we only just met, but please, trust me. Give Ranma a fair chance. He may surprise you."

"Who am I to argue with my older sister?" Akane grinned.

"Akane, we have to catch the train. Nabiki, stay well."

"You too, Sis."

Nabiki waved to her mortal sisters as they walked down the street, then lowered her hand with a sigh.

"What's wrong, little sister?" Belldandy looked down at Nabiki. "I promised you that you'd see them again."

"Yeah, but what happened to Strength and Truth?" She sat down on the steps. "It seemed that I spent a lot of my time lying to them."

Belldandy laid a hand on Nabiki's shoulder. "It is true, that we had to keep them from learning our true nature. I am afraid that I have a hard time at this; I tend to speak without thinking."

Nabiki chuckled. "And you still manage to say the right thing every time."

"The precise circumstances that allowed you to join us are still unknown." Belldandy looked up. "We may never find out what they were. But it is very unlikely that your other sisters can join us, as anything other than mortal sisters."

"So we gotta keep this lie going for the rest of their lives."

"Unless they discover through their own merits, yes."

"About that cause..." Skuld frowned. "I think we will know."

"Cause...You mean why I became a Goddess?"

"Yeah. I think I know why you came here, why your Divine spark was empowered."

"You do?" Nabiki jumped to her feet. "Why?"

"The Doublet System." Skuld looked up. "It prevents Gods and Demons from all-out war; whenever a God is slain, a Demon also dies. No-one knows their Doublet, except for one Demon. Even then, his Doublet doesn't know."

"So how does this affect me?"

"Banpei detected a new demon about a month ago. Very powerful, Class Two or better." She looked up. "The Demon was created in Nerima."

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A Demonic Wager

"I am uncomfortable with this, Peorth." Belldandy set the breakfast dishes on the table. "You have interfered with her training once before, with disastrous results. Her progress has badly stalled since your...prank."

"I have apologized for that, both to you and to her." Peorth sighed. "And if I've caused this blockage, I need to be the one to remove it."

"Fayu has allowed it. My misgivings are mine alone, and I cannot stop you." Belldandy looked up. "But I must intervene if it looks like you are acting improperly."

"I can agree to that." Peorth looked down at her hands. "But I was expecting my powers to return before now. Can I use your phone?"

"Yes; the number you want is Speed Dial 9."

* * * * *

"Good morning, Belldandy." Nabiki bounced into the kitchen, looking quite energetic. "Boy, I'll be glad when I master that self-regeneration thing, but while I'm still in training, waking up each morning has become a treat."

Belldandy smiled. "That is because you're beginning to learn the regeneration, so each hour of sleep seems more like two."

"Good to know." Nabiki grabbed a bowl of rice, then suddenly noticed Peorth.

"Whoa. You look like hell."

"Thanks." Peorth grinned unsteadily. "I think we're going to have to further postpone your training with me."

"Why?"

"Well...it seems that my suspension has been extended two more weeks."

Nabiki sighed. "What did you do this time?"

Peorth scowled at her. "I was trying not to blow your cover! When I was talking to Kasumi, I bent the truth pretty far. Too far; the Council decided that I ended up lying overall, and slapped me with a two-week suspension."

"It could have been worse," said Belldandy. "They don't have the authority to strip your license, but their recommendation carries a lot of weight with the Almighty."

"Yeah, they decided that since I was lying for someone else's benefit, not my own, that they'd let me off light." Peorth's voice was sour. "I'm sorry, Fayu, but I guess I can't teach you at the moment."

"Bell?" Nabiki turned to her older sister. "Does Peorth need her license to teach? Or is being First Class good enough?"

"Well, the license is not needed, but since her powers are suspended--"

"Then she can still cover the theory, right?"

"Yes, but--" Belldandy looked down. "Are you unhappy with my training?"

"Not at all!" Nabiki jumped to her feet, and grabbed Belldandy's shoulder. "I really enjoy learning from you, Bell. But this is a matter of honour between me and Peorth."

"Honour is better than dishonour." Belldandy sighed. "All right. I can understand a little better now." She looked up again. "Can I help?"

"Of course!"

Peorth smiled. "It'll be nice to be working with you again, Belldandy. But we'll need one more person, a mortal." She tilted her head. "Know any mortals around here?"

* * * * *

"Blessings are the core tool of Gods and Goddesses." Peorth leaned back in a squashy armchair. "They are our stock in trade, and as such, they are one of the most important things you will need to learn to reach Third Class."

"So I take it they're on the exam." Nabiki smirked.

"Yes."

Nabiki blinked.

"Oh, yes, you do need to pass an exam to become Third Class. I have administered several Third and Second Class exams, and even one First Class." Peorth smirked. "But since Skuld, Belldandy and I have all trained you, you will not be tested by any of us, but by another, Third Class or higher."

"Let me see...there are five Goddesses living here. I'm the one being tested, and you three are training me..." Nabiki's voice was dry. "Who could be my examiner? I wonder?"

"It might not be Urd." Skuld grinned. "Usually, your examination is held by a God or Goddess of the Class you are applying for. Peorth was sent to examine Urd when Urd sat her First Class--"

"Whoa. I thought Urd was Second Class."

"Yes." Belldandy nodded.

"Did she fail?"

"No. She turned it down." Peorth drew a pair of wire-rimmed glasses from a pocket and unfolded them. "Being First Class requires a lot of commitments, that Urd wasn't willing to make." She set the glasses on her nose, and unrolled a scroll. "Now then. We've covered the theory. Shall we move on to practice?"

The shogi opened, and Keiichi stuck his head in. "Hey, Bell. Urd said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes." Belldandy smiled. "Would you be willing to help train Fayu?"

"Uh, sure." Keiichi shrugged. "What am I supposed to do?"

Peorth grinned. "First step in a Blessing: The mortal has to want it." She unrolled the scroll in front of Keiichi.

His eyes bugged out. "What?!? A Suzuki GSX-1300R Hayabusa, for only ninety thousand yen? Who the hell is that desperate?" He pulled out his wallet, and opened it. "I haven't got even two thousand...Man, I wish I had the money for that bike!"

Peorth turned to Nabiki. "That would be your cue."

Nabiki clasped her hands. "Metal and fire, gather and bless this man with the spoken desire of his heart."

The doorbell rang.

Nabiki blinked. "Was that supposed to happen?"

Belldandy grinned. "Blessings often take indirect routes." She turned to Keiichi. "That's probably for you."

Keiichi jumped up and ran.

"Not bad effort, Fayu, but I'm afraid that if your performance during your exam is the same, you are not going to pass." Peorth rolled the scroll. "You made one mistake."

"And that is?"

"Because you called on Elemental Spirits." Peorth tucked the scroll back into its case. "Other powers do exist; Elementals are great for short-term

effects, but anything that lasts longer than a few seconds needs a better energy source."

"Oh."

Keiichi walked in, holding an envelope and looking depressed. "Thanks for trying, Nabiki." He handed her the check.

Nabiki looked at it, and blinked. "This check is drawn on your account."

"Yep." Keiichi sighed. "I don't think that my bank account has ever had ninety thousand yen in it at one time."

* * * * *

Nabiki collapsed into bed with a groan.

"Six tries, and not once did I manage to pull it off." She sighed. "This is turning out just like the rest of my training."

"Pity."

Nabiki sat bolt upright, to see a young boy standing at the foot of her bed. His grey hair was thick and full, but the cast of his features was definitely that of a young man.

"Okay, who the heck are you?"

"Gere." He bowed courteously. "God Third Class, License Limited to research."

"Third Class." Nabiki sighed. "You're gonna be my examiner, aren't you?"

"Yes." Gere sat down, cross-legged. "But don't worry. I want you to pass, so while I must ensure that you have learned what you need to know, I will be trying to help you pass at the same time." He grinned. "Since my portfolio includes education, I know that often a test signifies the beginning of education, not its end."

"Yay." Nabiki rolled her eyes. "All right, Gere. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow morning." He rose. "I want you well rested, and you're to have a hearty breakfast before we begin."

* * * * *

"Your examination will be marked out of forty." Gere unrolled his scroll. "You will be asked to demonstrate three techniques, and marked out of ten for each."

"And the final ten marks?"

"That will be for general attitude. Pass rate is thirty points, but if you score less than eight on attitude, I have to fail you, regardless of your overall score."

"Fair enough." Nabiki set down her bowl. "Finished my breakfast. Let's get started."

"Produce your teleportation focus."

Nabiki reached into her robes, and drew out a five-yen coin.

"Somewhere, there is a mortal that needs help. Find him."

Nabiki closed her eyes, and stretched out her mind.

--almost nothing left in the house to eat--

--bills are due next month--

--need to put some aside for tuition costs--

She tasted the karma at the other end of the five-yen channel; highly positive. This person needed money badly, and certainly had the positive karma to fuel a Blessing. Almost automatically, she slid through the focus.

Gere blinked as the five yen coin clattered to the floor. "Oh, she's good at that." He frowned. "The moon has already set; I need to follow her! Belldandy--"

"Certainly." Belldandy touched Gere's shoulder, and the two followed Nabiki's path through the Ether.

* * * * *

A five-yen coin is not worth much; often, if dropped, it will be ignored and forgotten. This one had fallen into a storm drain; Nabiki materialized a few inches above the drain, and dropped to her feet.

"This looks like--"

She leaped to the top of the nearest house - amazing how easy that was when you knew the trick - and looked about.

"Nerima. So I'm guessing the voice that I heard was Kasumi." She fished out another five-yen coin and focused.

And blinked in surprise.

"That's kind of a surprise." She grinned. "Ranma, worrying about anything non-Martial Arts related?"

Gere and Belldandy appeared nearby. Gere pulled out his scroll and made some notes, but otherwise took no action.

Nabiki paused. "Hey, Gere...I know we're in the middle of an exam, here, but my brother-in-law sounds like he needs a hand. Can I..."

"We can resume any time you are ready, Fayu."

"Thanks." She turned back, and closed her eyes.

And tasted a dark presence.

Her eyes snapped open. "Guys, there's something bad around here."

"Oh, dear." Belldandy raised a hand to her mouth. "It might be that Demon that Skuld warned us about."

"Maybe...but it's really powerful." Nabiki shuddered. "Even I can feel its power level; it's almost on par with you, Bell."

"A Class One Demon?" Her eyes widened. "There's only one on Midgard."

"Never could get the drop on you, could I?" A figure stepped out of a shadow. Nabiki blinked; the shadow could not possibly have concealed this Demon.

The Demon was tall, blonde, and rather attractive. Gender was difficult to determine; Male or female seemed equally likely. Bell's next sentence cleared that up.

"She's Mara, a First Class Demon with an Unlimited License." Belldandy sighed. "Evil, but not sadistic or twisted."

"Why thank you, Bell." The Demon made a mocking bow towards the Goddess. "Nice to know I have some friends in Heaven."

"You're always welcome to visit us, Mara, provided you leave any bad behaviour at home." Belldandy smiled.

Mara chuckled, then jerked a thumb towards Nabiki. "This the hatchling I've been hearing about?"

"Goddess Fayu, Fourth Class, Unlimited." Nabiki scowled at the Demon. "Skuld warned me about another Demon in the area, a new one." She jerked her head towards Belldandy. "Since Bell knows you, I doubt you're the new Demon."

"As a matter of fact, the new Demon is well known to you." Mara grinned, and jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "Meet my protege. Asherah, Succubus in training, Fourth Class Demon."

The woman that walked out of the shadows moved with the grace of a cat. She was all curves, and every one of them wiggled in just the right way with every step. Her long red hair was unbound, and she was dressed in a simple halter and skirt. Her ears were longer and more pointed than Nabiki recalled, and when she smiled, Nabiki noted that her eye-teeth had become much longer.

Nabiki gulped. "That's Ranma--the Demon Ranma, that Happousai summoned. I thought Akane destroyed her."

Mara laughed. "You should be very glad that she didn't. Asherah is your Doublet."

Asherah smirked. "You're here to Bless Ranma. I still haven't forgiven him for choosing that bitch Akane over me." She raised a fist. "He left me to be bound in a world of pain! I spent thirty days in that living hell, until Mara released me and offered me my contract."

She smirked at Nabiki. "Do your best, Goddess. I shall ensure that it comes to naught.

"I shall make Ranma suffer!"

* * * * *

"Greetings, Belldandy. And good to see you too, Gere." The small black cat sat down between the two.

"Welsper!" Belldandy reached down and scratched between his ears. "Is this where you have been?"

"Someone has to sit examination for the girl, and since I'm a Demon Third Class..." He sighed. "Demotion sucks."

"I've heard that you've been researching Midgard felines." Gere's voice was mocking.

Welsper scowled at him, then shifted to speaking Wolfen. *You cannot mention anything about me to Belldandy. She must remain unaware of my true reasons for being here.*

I'll say nothing to her. Gere grinned, exposing long canines. *But if you interfere with my examination, I'll chase you up a tree.*

* * * * *

Nabiki scowled at Asherah. "That's my family you're trying to hurt. I can't let you do that."

"But you can't hurt me, either." Asherah's voice was mocking. "I'm just as good a martial artist as Ranma...and I'm your Doublet, as well."

"That means that this must be a battle of wits." Nabiki grinned. "You ever won against me in that arena?"

Asherah waved her off. "That was before I became a Demon. I think I can handle anything you can dish out."

"Want to make a bet?" Nabiki raised her eyebrow.

"All right." Asherah turned back. "You're on. What are the stakes?"

"If I win, you never try to harm Ranma, Akane or Kasumi."

"Very well." Asherah smirked. "If I win, you will renounce your Divine status. Fair?"

Nabiki blinked. "Not hardly!"

"That's my offer, and I've already accepted yours." She turned back towards the dojo. "If you don't think you're up to it..."

Nabiki ground her teeth. "Fine. You're on."

"Excellent."

"But you're gonna lose." Nabiki stepped forwards, and clasped her hands.

"There is a wanderer below, one who would call this house a home. Should his state remain the same, he and those he protects will lose their shelter and go hungry. In the names of Tyr the Warrior, Odin the Teacher, and Hugin and Munin, bring to this wanderer that which he needs to survive." She raised a hand, and traced her Rune in the air. "I call upon the Elements of Metal and Air." She closed her eyes, and drew Karma from the house below, and from the entire Ward. "I call upon the Earth Spirits who guard this land, and upon the Spirits of the wanderer's Ancestors. Let his path of wisdom and guidance be shown!"

A golden shaft of light leaped up from her, piercing into the heavens, sounding a single brilliant note.

Asherah smirked. "Did Belldandy not teach you the basic Runes?" She stepped towards the Tendo-ke. "Fehu is an unstable Rune. Its effects are temporary at best. To invoke Metal and Air make it even more unstable. Tyr and Odin? Questionable at best. I almost don't need a spell."

She reached into her mass of red hair, and withdrew a toothpick. "But I will use this. I prepared it some days ago, bound it to the Dojo's wealth. You are quite right, Fayu; Without wealth, the Dojo is doomed."

She snapped the toothpick. "As this is broken, so is their bank."

"Are you done?" Nabiki was examining her fingernails, an attitude of boredom clear on her face.

"Yes." Asherah grinned. "Your Elemental energies are drained away uselessly, and without those, the Earth Spirits and Ancestor Spirits cannot be called. Why make it so easy on me?"

"Because those were my decoys." Nabiki turned back to Asherah. "I was hoping you'd do something like that. A broken bank would be a bad thing for the Dojo, were it not for one thing." She turned and pointed down towards the compound. "Or more likely, fifteen or sixteen things."

Asherah gaped at the small crowd gathering at the back gate.

"Normally, your ploy would have been a good one. With the bills due, and no food in the house, Ranma and the girls would have been worried to death. But with Ranma finally deciding to accept students..." She grinned. "The Ancestor Spirits responded to the need, not to the energy. You countered the Elemental Spirits, so the quick burst of wealth they will receive will be gone as fast as it arrives, but next week, those students will still be there."

"Certainly, Fehu is an unstable Rune...for wealth. But for social standing, you only need a quick leg up. The rest of the climb is done on Virtue."

Asherah roared angrily, and vanished in a cloud of smoke. Nabiki smirked. "I win."

She turned back to Gere. "All right, that was entertaining, but back to the business at hand. What's next?"

Gere shrugged. "Back to the Temple. Can you give me a lift? My Focus is currently unavailable."

"Sure." She flashed a thumbs-up to Belldandy. "See you back there."

* * * * *

The coin flared, and Gere and Fayu appeared in the family room. Fayu turned, and tilted her head. "How did I do?"

"Teleportation. Seven out of ten. Mastering side-along teleportation will come with time, but at least you can manage it when flush with energy."

Peorth gave her a thumbs up. "Good work!"

"Channeling. Eight out of ten."

"Whoa." Fayu raised a hand. "Channeling? Did you score me based on my little match with Asherah?"

"Of course." Gere grinned. "How better to test you than to pit you against a Demon?"

"That's not fair!"

Gere shrugged. "We don't promise fair. Channeling is eight out of ten."

"Why only eight?" Skuld looked puzzled. "She can draw down a lot of power at once."

"She still hasn't learned to tap her source, and her access to Elements is not yet up to par. But yes, she can access a lot of power, though with less than perfect control. Eight out of ten."

"Don't argue, Skuld." Peorth shook her head. "He's the examiner, and he can mark her as he pleases."

"Blessing. Seven out of ten. Too many ruffles and flourishes for a simple task, and the fact that it was your family was a mark against you."

"Yeah, but I set up that nice trap for Asherah."

"That you did, and I marked that in your favour."

Fayu did a quick calculation: twenty-two points. She needed eight or better on the fourth score.

"Attitude...nine out of ten."

"Yes!" She leaped into the air.

"One point lost for hesitation. But you risked your position to help those who needed it, went head-to-head with a Demon though you had an unfair condition placed on you, and you faced up to a Class One Demon without so much as a twitch."

He rolled the scroll. "Fayu, do you accept the rights and responsibilities of a Goddess of the Third Class?"

Fayu bowed. "I do."

"Excellent. You will receive your license and classification notices by telephone within forty-eight hours; Asgard will need to process your test results and file your portfolio."

Fayu blinked. "No glowing bolt of light, no writing in fire on the wall?"

"No." He shrugged. "Just your license card, which as long as it doesn't get lost in the mail, should be here within the week."

"Oy."

"Now if you'll excuse me...I can't leave until the moon comes up, so I might as well kick back and relax." He shimmered, and took on the form of a large grey wolf.

"Oh, he's so cute!" Skuld launched herself towards the wolf.

Fayu laughed.

* * * * *

Belldandy set the two bags down on the doorstep, and knocked on the door.

"Another student?" Kasumi opened the door, and smiled. "Belldandy! How nice to see you!"

"May I come in?" She picked up the canvas shopping bags again.

"Certainly." Kasumi led her into the kitchen. "I'm afraid that you've caught us at a busy time. Ranma has twenty new students. I'm not sure why exactly he decided this morning to start taking students, but it took all of five minutes for the first to show up." She looked pensive. "We took their first week's fees, but then the property taxes arrived in the mail; it left us quite out of cash, and the electric bill is due tomorrow." She sighed. "Without Nabiki to manage the finances, we are not doing as well as we used to."

Belldandy smiled. "Luckily, you have sisters to help you out." She set the two bags on the counter. "This should be a week's worth of food, even with the way Ranma and his father eat. Without having to budget for food, can you meet the electrical bill?"

"Oh, my." Kasumi's eyes sparkled. "Yes, this will make all the difference. Thank you so much! I must find some way to repay you."

Belldandy smiled, and tilted her head. "Your thanks is all I need, my Sister."