

Laugh it Off

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The gang get roped into performing a play based off of Nightmare Before Christmas. Yusuke, Keiko, and Kuwabara are Lock, Shock, and Barrel. Koenma is the mayor, Botan is Zero, and you're going to have to read to find out who Shuichi plays.

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Hilo everyone! Before I do anything, I have to say this: I couldn't help myself. So if you want to flame me, I don't really care so go ahead, but I'm still not going to take it down or delete it because this was just for fun. I can definitely say that I enjoyed writing this. Oh, and it does *not* follow the plot of the manga or the anime, obviously. So if you laugh, great. If you don't and want to strongly opinionate it, I can accept that. Anyway, I hope you enjoy it!

"God doesn't play dice with the universe; He plays an ineffable game of his own devising, which might be compared, from the perspective of any of the other players, to being involved in an obscure and complex version of poker in a pitch dark room, with blank cards, for infinite stakes, with a dealer who won't tell you the rules, and who smiles all the time." - Terry Pratchett

Laugh it Off

It was the official end of summer vacation and the first day of school. The day had gone okay, but a lot of people had looked surprised when they saw me. I had grown four and a half inches over the summer and apparently, the other students noticed. I was now a full six feet and six inches. It was amazing to other people because now I was taller than everyone in the entire school, even all of the basketball males and all the teachers. Everyone. I stood out like a giraffe in a herd of rhinos.

That didn't bother me much anymore, but it was kind of disappointing sometimes. I couldn't find a guy that was taller than me by even a millimeter. No fairytale (taller) prince that could sweep me off my feet and kiss me. Or, hell, just kiss me without having to stand on his toes. It was embarrassing with my one past boyfriend who had tried countless times to lay a peck on my cheek, but I would either have to bend down a few inches or have him stand on something. He broke

it off because of my height, said that it couldn't work out. That was really disheartening so I didn't want to try again.

Anyway, our homeroom class had a meeting for the festival at the end of the semester. We were second years in high school, so some of us had signed up for what we could do before school ended, and we were going to hear the result. Everyone was chatting to themselves, waiting for the teacher to come in and speak. Some were excited, some didn't want to know the horrifying results, and others just didn't care.

"Okay students, I have the results," the teacher said. "I don't want to hear any complaining, because there was only one suggestion in the box. In other words, if you don't like it, it's your fault. We are going to put on a play based on the movie, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. I have the scripts here on my desk, so pick it up on the way out and choose who you want to be. The cast will be set up tomorrow."

"YES!" My sister stood and raised her arms up, yelling excitedly when the teacher finished talking. Her dark blue eyes shined with utter glee and her long black hair had fallen back down and rested against her shoulder blades from the sudden movement. It had looked like she had put on some g-force standing up that fast.

Everyone looked at her. It was obvious that she was the one who had requested it. Few had glared at her for suggesting such a thing (most likely just because it was a play), but most had just looked around in confusion. I figured that hardly anyone had actually seen the American-made Disney clay-mation movie, which wasn't a surprise at all. My sister was practically obsessed with that movie, I liked it a lot too, but I didn't like enough to actually want to perform it in a school play. I was hoping that I could be the corpse with the axe in the middle of his head or the lake monster woman, or even a witch, but I knew that deep inside that that wasn't going to happen. My sister and I are in the Drama Club, so, even though I love acting, I always get the leading male role because of my height, and my sister gets a small supporting role.

The next day, I didn't really need to decide, because no one wanted to be JACK especially because he sings or takes part in almost all of the songs. So, the most sensible decision for JACK's part was either my sister or me, since we knew most of his lines already (the script was pretty close to the movie), but because of my height, I was automatically JACK. The leading male role. Again. My name was already up on the chalk board by "JACK" before the late bell had already rang.

Rini, my sister, was standing up with Keiko trying to vote on who would be who. They started with the smallest parts, but when we got to the bigger parts, Rini was OOGIE BOOGIE and Keiko, Yusuke and Kuwabara were LOCK, SHOCK and BARREL (in order). That left only a few parts left. Hiei didn't want to act at all, so we all told him that he was either MUMMY KID or he helped make the props, was in charge of the music, the curtains and scene change. He merely glared, and didn't say anything, but we all knew what he chose. Botan decided that she wanted to be ZERO because she thought that it would be fun. MAYOR was going to be played by Koenma, which he had to have two masks for the two different personalities.

A lot of the girls wanted to play SALLY, but, well, because I was a *girl*, and my height was intimidating enough, no one was really that comfortable, so we put it to an anonymous vote. We all wrote down a random name of who would be best suited for the part. It couldn't be a name already written down on the board though. Keiko wrote down a few girls names, which I agreed would be good, but then Shuichi Minamino's name was written down, earning a few giggles from his group of friends. When it was done, he had well over 20 tick marks right next to his name.

And so Shuichi Minamino was dubbed SALLY.

The room was filled with squeals from his fan girls and laughter from the boys. Shuichi was blushing as dark as his red hair, which probably was the main reason that people decided to write his name down. I honestly felt sympathetic. Even my sister was giggling from

behind her clipboard. After the bell rang I walked next to him a bit awkwardly. He kept his face level, but I could tell that he was still embarrassed.

"Are you okay, Minamino-san?" I asked.

He looked at me and then looked up at my face. He smiled up at me. "Yeah. I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

"You know if I wasn't so freakishly tall, and if my sister never submitted that suggestion, I can bet that you would be the prince charming. The girls like you a lot." I was trying to make him feel a little better, even if it wasn't a whole lot. I didn't tend to believe smiles, being an aspiring actress and all.

He looked back up at me. "Yeah, you're probably right." He chuckled, as if laughing it off.

"Um, if you want to," I mumbled slightly, "we could practice at my house?" It wasn't as if I was into him, but it would make me feel a lot more comfortable around him and during our performance. He would need to get comfortable too, especially when he is going to be the main female role, not to mention he has to where a patch-job of a dress, and have an arm fall off a time or two.

"No," he said, "but do you have the movie? I would like to watch it, so I know exactly what I'm getting into."

"I can get it from my sister. I'm absolutely positive that she brought the movie with her today. However, I don't think I can lend it to you for over night. Rini doesn't trust anyone with her most beloved things. So maybe if we watch it together at my house or yours."

"Okay. That's fine," he said and got out a piece of paper and a pen. "My house, as soon as you can. Here's my address. Thank you Akako-san." He smiled a small smile at me, bowed slightly and walked off.

I hurried to find Rini, and just as I had suspected, she did have the movie with her. I told her where I was going to be and then I hurried to Shuichi's home. I got lost, but after asking a few strangers they pointed the way. It wasn't as if anyone could hook an arm around my neck and take me down with a stranglehold so I didn't feel uncomfortable asking, it was the staring though.

He lived in a really nice house which was a no shocker. I went up to the door and I knocked lightly waiting for him to answer, which he did. He looked up at me and said, "Oh, hey Akako-san. Come on in." He moved aside so I could get in. I took off my shoes and had to duck a few inches to get through the door. The house was very subtle and had a relaxed feeling to it. "Would you like something to drink and something to snack on?"

My stomach knew its cue and grumbled loudly. I smiled and said, "Yes please. Thank you." I had forgotten to bring a bag of snacks with me today and so I felt like I was starving.

His small smile only grew a little wider and said, "No problem. I'll be back in a few minutes so just make yourself comfortable." He went into the kitchen to get the drinks and the snacks.

"Okay." I had to duck again to get to the living room. There wasn't a doorframe, there was just a plaster frame that divided the hall with the living room. I popped in the DVD before I sat carefully down on the beige couch. It felt more as if I was falling, and my knees were as high as the bottom of my ribcage.

After a few minutes he came back with a bowl of popcorn and two bottles of water. "Here you go," he said, holding out the hand with the water in it. I took one and watched him as he sat down. He didn't seem to have as much problems as I did, even with a bowl filled with popcorn in one hand, and a water bottle in the other. He saw that the movie was already in and so he grabbed the remote and pushed play.

As soon as Sally came on screen, brushing her hair as the line "I am the wind blowing through your hair" from the song, "This is Halloween", came on, I had remembered just how girly she was. *Poor Minamino-san*, I thought. *This will definitely be painful for him.*

I heard Shuichi quietly groan when Sally sang her solo and confirmed it from the script that he would be singing it in the play. During the rest of the movie I cringed, and I could feel Shuichi cringe, every time Sally came on screen and all the corny mushy scenes between her and Jack. We both looked at our scripts when the kiss scene came on in the end.

"At least we won't have to kiss," I said lamely, pointing at the end of the script. I was trying my best for him to look on the bright side.

"At least," he mumbled. "This is worse than what I had expected."

"Well, no one's forcing you to be Sally. You could help Hiei or try for a small role."

He shook his head. "If I was voted to be Sally then I guess I'll be Sally."

He's such a team player, I thought sadly. "You know, I bet if you do a really good job at it, then people won't make jokes about it. Well, maybe Yusuke and Kuwabara, but everyone else shouldn't mind. I mean, if you did a really horrible job then it would just provoke more joking and poking fun at you. You know?" I knew it was obvious that I was struggling for words.

He was looking at me with a blank face at first, but then a small smile grew on his lips as he thought about what I said. "You're right," he said. "If I'm going to be stuck playing this character, I may as well do a good job at it. If I do a bad job at it, it only proves that it will bug me, and so people will keep teasing me in the future, right?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I meant to say," I said, smiling at him. "I'm glad you can see it that way."

"Thank you for letting me watch the movie."

"No problem at all." There was a pause of silence before he picked up the empty popcorn bowl (I ate nearly the entire bowl which I was embarrassed about). As he did that I got the DVD out of the player and put it back in its case. When he came back I had at least thought of something to say before I left for home. "Good luck with the part. See you at school." It was completely lame, but that was all that I could think of. I took my half empty bottle of water, and my backpack with the DVD safely tucked inside. I got my shoes on, and turned to wave my good-bye which he returned. I walked as I turned, and hit my head on the doorframe.

"Are you alright?" He asked, walking up to me.

I had covered my forehead with the hand without the water and started laughing. I had always bumped into things and had taught myself to laugh off the pain. I even laughed when I fractured my wrist when I had tripped during rehearsal and I landed on the hilt of a prop sword, which made the teacher and everyone else who was there stare at me as if I was a masochist or something. "Yeah, yeah," I said in between my laughing fits. "I'm fine. See you tomorrow." I ducked under the door frame and walked home, rubbing my forehead on the way.

The next day after school, it was the first day of rehearsals. Actually, it was the first day of learning the songs. Of course Rini didn't really have any problems remembering the lyrics and she got Oogie's song down immediately. Plus, since she knew her part extremely well, she helped Hiei make the props and started making her costume. It was a huge burlap sack that was painted over with black-light neon yellow paint. With as much planning as she did, I had to wonder if she absolutely knew that we were going to be doing this play (as in destroying everyone else's ideas from the box and putting her own in, like the cuckoo bird). I really had to wonder.

Shuichi tried, but I could tell that he was very embarrassed because a lot of people started to laugh, not me though. I acted like a fool

purposely by singing completely off key to keep the laughter (or some of it) off of him. What got people laughing the most was the "Kidnap Sandy Claws" song. Keiko, Yusuke and Kuwabara were absolutely perfect for the part, if for the acting and not the singing. Botan was lucky. All she had to do was flit ghostly around, bark and light up her nose so she ended up helping out to make the props and costumes.

There were only a few others in our grade that were in the Drama Club so we had to teach everyone about the placement on stage. Everyone knew 'Center Stage,' but some people didn't understand the command, 'Exit Downstage Right,' or 'Enter Upstage Left' which was important because it told where to exit and enter so people wouldn't bump into each other, which there was a lot of when we first practiced.

My sister and I even convinced Yusuke, Keiko, Kuwabara, Botan, Hiei, and Shuichi to come to our house to rehearse during the weekend. Shuichi and I talked a lot more during those times and in between classes so I found out how much of a nice guy he really was, still, he was short compared to me. Everything was going great. That is, until about a couple months into the practicing. I already knew all of my parts, the songs and even how to move on stage, but with the extra condition my sister wanted me to do it was bound to be a disaster. She wanted me to wear... stilts. Not the really tall stilts, it just made me about four and a half inches taller, but still... They were stilts. I couldn't even walk in high heels so how the heck was I going to walk in stilts!

And remember about me tripping and fracturing my arm? Well, I had tripped over my own feet! I was normally clumsy, I think it's because of my height, but with these wooden death traps attached to my legs, I was bound to break another bone in my body, and it was probably going to be my neck next! Want to know my sister's reason for wanting me to wear stilts? It's because I wasn't tall enough. Ironical, no? Apparently, her vision was that Sally be as tall as my bust, even though she was up to Jack's chin, but since Shuichi was pretty tall

himself, he came to about just below my collarbone. I couldn't tell if I hated myself for being so tall or my sister for coming up with this lousy idea.

In order to test them out, my sister and I decided to invite as many of the cast as possible and go to school on Sunday to practice our scenes in the drama room. Unfortunately-or fortunately, depending on which side of the chain-linked fence-not a lot of people came. Basically, Keiko, Botan, Hiei, Kuwabara, Yusuke, Shuichi and some of his fan girls came. So it was less than what I was expecting, but it was still too many people to watch me nearly walk myself to death.

Before I put on the 'death' on my feet, I was sitting on the edge of the stage eating a large bag of vegetable root chips. My sister and my parents hate them because of a lack of flavor, but don't have the heart to tell Grandma that; however I absolutely love them, and I don't think they're bland at all. As we were waiting for more people just in case some people came ten minutes late, one of the girls noted my excessive snacking. "Would you stop eating all the time? The only reason you got this part is because you knew the part so well and that you're tall. We don't need you to get fat and make Minamino-sama look bad."

I got her message instantly. Just because I was supposed to be the main character, I apparently wasn't the star. So I was automatically even more annoyed. I disliked all of his fan girls as it was, but I think this just gave me a reason to actually hate them for my own personal reason. "Maybe you should've been the green monster in this play. Jealous much?" I asked. I was simmering, but I acted calm and smug.

"For what? You're a freakishly tall girl so what guy in their right mind would want to date you? Plus, even if you were normal sized, you're plain. Your hair is an ugly brown, you have obvious zits, and your boobs-oh wait, you don't have them," she said, snickering after.

That hit home. Remembering all of my dating experiences, or lack of, made me want to cry, but my reflexes kicked in, so I laughed. I

laughed so hard that my sides started to hurt, and everyone was looking at us, but I didn't care about the second part. I started to act up again. "You thought I was talking about possibly dating Minamino-san? Please. I was purely talking about you." She was about to speak again before I interrupted her. "If I eat too much, I gain a few inches on my height, and hopefully enough to get out of these stilts in time. So, big deal, but you, on the other foot, you'll be the one gaining a few inches on your midsection. So I wouldn't worry about me."

She merely stared at me, silent, but I could practically see her eyes boiling.

I took my bag of veggie-root-chips and went outside to get some air and to eat out even more. Sooner than I wanted it to, my sister came outside with me. I admit it: I almost envied my twin sister. I would give anything to be short, even if that meant being her four feet and eight inches, because apparently short girls were more dateable than tall girls. Even if that meant not being able to reach the top cabinet without a stool to get my favorite snacks. I would give anything for just one guy to sweep me off my feet, carry me, or just care for me deeply without being intimidated by my height. Of course I have never told her any of it. It was just something I wanted to keep to myself.

"You okay?" She asked. We were both actresses, so she could tell that I was hurt, and pissed, even if I tried lying to her.

I took a breath to calm myself down a bit before I answered. "Yeah," I droned. There was a pause between us before I asked, "Do I really eat too much?" I looked at her wanting a truthful answer.

"Err, well, kinda. It's not that you eat too much, it's just that you are snacking on something all the time," she said; similar to me, she has trouble putting words together that would make sense to other people, but I understood her. I've had to deal with her my entire life. She was grinning from ear to ear, trying to get me to find the humor in all of this.

"Ah, okay. I feel a little better now." It was the truth, I did feel a little better, but it didn't mean that I wasn't still mad. After a few minutes of sitting outside and eating my chips (I offered her some, but she refused to eat anything so bland), I walked back inside with her. When the door clicked close there was plenty of silence and stares coming my way. It was something to be expected after the scene I closed.

The rehearsal was tense, but we all got through it and without me breaking or spraining anything with the help of Shuichi mainly to hold me up. I could sense the glares being thrown my way, but I ignored them. Just get through it all one day at a time, and when the final day ends I wouldn't have to hang out with Shuichi ever again. That was my motto for the next month while we were all rehearsing and practicing. I even got better at the whole walking in stilts thing. I was still shaky on some parts, but not enough for me to fall anymore, and tonight, the night before winter break, was the night we were going to perform in front of everyone for the Winter Fest.

It was nerve-racking for everyone.

There were squeals of nervousness and excitements echoing off the hallways, whispers tingling from ear to ear, flesh shivering and stomachs fluttering. Minds whirling around like a tornado trying to remember lines and placements, sweaty skin pressed against sweaty skin in prayer form, hoping that nothing went wrong. Everyone, except Hiei, was doing something to get their mind off of the tension. We all had our different ways of dealing with it: Rini was checking her list and checking it a million more times, some were practicing their lines, some were just joking around about anything other than the play, some were fiddling with whatever was in their hands, Yusuke, Kuwabara and Koenma were arguing loudly and threatening each other to not mess up, and I pigged out on another bag of colorful veggie-root-chips.

This was all backstage before we got our costumes and make-up on, one hour before we start the show.

My sister got out a stool to stand on, and clapped her hands to get everyone's attention. She always said a short speech before every performance to calm everyone down and to boost people's confidence. She talked about the jittery feeling being nervous energy that should be forced out by acting your best, and that if we forget our lines there would be help, just not to make it obvious, and for us all to have fun with it. When she finished we clapped for her as she hopped off the stool. After that we got ready, but before we took our places on stage, I noticed Shuichi looked extremely nervous, as in that he looked like he would vomit up whatever was in his stomach soon.

"Hey," I said. I was a little wobbly on my stilts, but that was normal for the first few minutes. "Nervous?" I tried to make the question light, so he wouldn't feel like he should worry about it. The last thing he needed was to worry.

He took a deep breath and said, "Extremely." He looked pale, but I couldn't tell if that was him or the make-up. Maybe both.

"I'll be honest with you, alright. There will definitely be laughter because of us cross-dressing, but that's to be expected. Back in Shakespeare's days, there were no female actresses, so the men had to play female parts. It's normal... I'm not making any sense though, am I?" I asked, chuckling a bit.

He looked up at me and stared for a full minute before he spoke. "No, I get it. There will definitely be laughter, which I already knew would happen, but I shouldn't let it hinder my performance, right?"

"Wow, maybe I should talk to you more often. Besides my sister, other people have a hard time trying to figure out what I'm saying. I know that's my fault though because I don't know how to say stuff."

For the first time that day, I saw a small smile appear on his face. "No, you're doing just fine. Thanks for saying that. Break a leg."

It was my turn to stare back at him. "Oh please don't say that, odds are, I will break a leg with these stilts on," I said in a joking manner. We both found the will to chuckle before the opening.

Rini introduced the story since she didn't have to get her costume on until towards the end of the performance, and then the curtain opened to "This is Halloween." Due to heavy practice of singing, nearly everyone was on tempo and on pitch, and the fact that no one bumped into each other on stage was amazing in itself since it was the heaviest scene. I wasn't lit on fire, thank the lord that Rini wasn't that crazy, but there were red and yellow streamers attached to the costume. I didn't jump to do a summersault either, but I had to tumble off the prop horse behind the prop fountain, which was just a big wooden board painted over, to quickly take off the sticks and the plastic pumpkin head and reveal my normal costume. I swear, along with the lines and songs, I had the most costume changes.

People did laugh when they saw Shuichi, but he did just fine acting through it. If he was blushing the make-up covered it. Heck, people laughed at me too when they figured out I was a girl, it took them a while, but I did hear muffled laughing. So with the initial embarrassment over with, everyone had gotten more comfortable acting on stage. What got the most laughs though (that even some behind stage started cracking up [me included] even though we were supposed to be quiet), were Boogie's Boys. Yusuke, Keiko and Kuwabara did an outstanding job with the acting and the singing, however, I don't think that Keiko pulled her slaps like she was supposed to, but oh well, they could take it.

When it was time for Shuichi's solo, I could tell he was nervous. Everyone in the audience had gotten over their initial laughter, but he singing alone had gotten a few fits of chuckles. They quickly died down as the song progressed.

While I was backstage, a rarity since I was the main character, I noticed Rini talking to Hiei while he was working with the music and lights. I knew she liked him, it was obvious from a fraternal twin's point of view, but I wasn't too sure how he felt about her. I was

wondering if I should ask Shuichi about it, but I had told myself that after this play that I wouldn't hang out with him anymore. I felt a little depressed at that thought. Shuichi was such a nice guy, and he understood nearly everything I ever said to him, I didn't want to stop hanging out with him, but his fan girls were so rude, and annoying, I couldn't take it. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I nearly missed my cue to come on stage with a torn and 'scorched' Santa Clause outfit to sing "Poor Jack" before the curtains opened.

The prop grave angel statue was surprisingly strong to hold my weight. Unfortunately, when I jumped off of the statue, there was a twinge in my ankle, and I started laughing during the song, but that was my cue to laugh anyway. I sang clear enough for the audience to understand though. After the song, I disappeared behind the grave statue to massage my foot, but that didn't really do much to relieve the little ounce of uncomfortable tingling in my ankle. Oh well, the show must go on.

The next scene I pulled a cord and Rini's burlap sack came off to reveal her in spandex with plastic bugs superglued to it. She crumpled to the ground to symbolize that Oogie Boogie had diminished since she couldn't really disappear. 'How cool would that be if I could?' She asked me a while ago while I was helping her with her costumes. I have to question her sanity sometimes.

Then I had to almost confess to Sally, and nearly got blinded by the spotlight suddenly shining down on us. I flinched so badly that I felt the twinge in my ankle again and almost fell, but luckily Shuichi held me steady. I was so happy that the play was nearly over by then. One last scene to go before the curtains closed... on everything.

When the curtains opened for the last scene, and the last half of the song, there was a thick layer of cotton all over the stage, our version of faux-snow. Shuichi plucked petals off of a black tulip as I started off the last song, and Shuichi followed. I could feel my whole heart pour into the song without my permission-I didn't want to stop hanging out with him, I really wanted continue to be with him. I wanted to keep talking to him, and joke around with him. I wanted to

feel like I was being treated as a person, and not just some tall freak. I had a chance with him, didn't I?

All of a sudden, tears spilled out of my eyes. I knew it, Shuichi saw them, but no one else, behind stage and the audience, could see them. If he made a big deal about it now, the play would be ruined, and everyone else would make an even bigger deal about it. I swallowed the huge lump in my throat and continued to sing the song, urging him to as well.

We're simply meant to be...

We ended the play with a hug as the lights dimmed and the curtains closed, and when they did, I did the unthinkable. I kissed him. It was a quick peck, but still... I at least wanted him to know my feelings somehow, and talking to him definitely wasn't going to work. I did it in the dark right before everyone got on stage to bow to the audience. When the lights turned on, he looked shocked and utterly bewildered. I got the message clearly.

He never had any closer feelings for me other than friendship.

We all held hands, he and I in the center, and took a step forward to the edge of the stage to take our bows as the audience stood up, clapped and whistled for us. As I bowed my ankle shook too much, shuddering painfully, and I slipped forward, letting go of the hands I was holding to so I wouldn't pull them off of the stage with me. I yelled, falling almost head-first, but I tucked my head in so I could flip forward and land on my back. It was a good thing the stage was only four feet off of the ground.

There were gasps and "Oh my gosh, is she okay?" From the audience. Everyone on stage sat on the edge and looked down on me with shocked, scared, faces.

I kicked off the stilts, grabbed the edge of the stage, and jumped up to my feet, causing my ankle to burn, but that just caused me to laugh. "I'm okay!" I yelled, trying to make it as humorous as possible.

"Hope you all liked our performance, now go home with your family and have a Merry Christmas! Happy Holidays everybody!" I was waving my arms, and laughing like a maniac. Everyone was looking at me with eerie stares including the people behind me on stage.

When the audience started to leave in an orderly fashion, I walked, hiding my limp, toward the stairs to get behind the stage so I could get out of the costume, and check on my ankle of course. I was still laughing, but I was trying to stop it by covering my mouth, and wrapping my stomach with my arm. It wasn't working so well. I had laughed off my pain for so long, that the sheer agony my ankle was in was just causing my instincts to make me laugh harder. When Shuichi and my sister crowded around me, asking if I was okay (everyone else took my laughter as a sign that I was okay), the only two words that I could push out in between my exhailes of laughter were, "It hurts!" More tears were leaking out of the corner of my eyes, whether out of pain or the harshness of my laughter, I couldn't tell.

Both of them had a sweat drop behind their heads. "Where?" Rini asked. We had been in a similar situation when I fractured my arm, but it was more obvious where back then.

I was still cracking up with more tears in my eyes than ever. "It hurts!"

"Ugh, I give up. Shuichi take over," she said, before she sauntered off, probably to where Hiei was.

I tried taking deeper breaths, but I kept leaning on my bad ankle so I just kept laughing. Eventually, Shuichi held my elbow and lead me to a bench for us to sit on. When my guffawing quieted down to chuckles behind my hand, he asked, "Are you okay, Akako-san?" When I nodded my head, he asked, "Does anywhere hurt? Head, back, sides?"

I pointed to my foot, and he got the message. "I... I think I sprained it," I barely got out. I took a few more deep breaths and bent down to

take off the suffocating shoe, and-oh my gosh-it was twice its normal size! I couldn't move any part of my foot at all without it hurting.

Shuichi looked just as surprised as I was, and probably not as grossed out. He meticulously put my foot on his lap to keep it level. "Akako-san, when did it first start to hurt?" He asked looking at me seriously.

I had a sweat drop behind my head. I couldn't really remember which scene because it didn't hurt so badly. "Err... Um, maybe somewhere towards the end. I don't really know." After a few minutes of thought, after someone got a bag of ice, and him massaging my foot, I remembered. "Oh yeah," I extended the words, "it kind of cramped when I jumped off that statue while I had to sing."

"It was hurting for that long and you didn't say anything?"

Weren't the giggling fits in between scenes enough of a hint? I lightly joked in my head. "I just didn't think it would get this bad. I've never sprained my ankle before, and it didn't start to really hurt until I fell off the stage. Besides, the play was almost over, so, why not?"

He gave me a look as if telling me I had missed a point or that I wasn't getting something. "This is serious, it looks like you might have to go to the hospital."

Right at that moment, my sister and his friends showed up. "Whoa! What the hell happened to your foot?" Yusuke and Rini asked at the same time.

"I sprained it jumping off the angel statue," I answered with a smile, hoping that Rini wouldn't overreact.

"Why didn't you say anything?" She yelled. "I knew something was off when you were giggling through and in between scenes! Great, it looks like you have to go to the hospital... *Again* !" She whipped out her cell phone and proceeded to call for Mom and Dad to drive me to the hospital, where they would overreact too.

When they came, my foot was still on ice with Shuichi meticulously massaging the swollen red appendage (it felt good!), they had the same reaction as Rini, if not in a more scolding tone than comfort. They let me use their shoulders for supports as I hopped to the car, still in the make-up and costume, and with the rest of them following us there to wish me well and all. During the drive, with my foot was in my dad's lap in the back seat, Mom and Dad congratulated us in our performance and said that my little 'stunt' in the end was pretty convincing.

The drive seemed longer with my ankle in mild pain, because Dad wasn't as good as a massage therapist as Shuichi seemed to be, and when we walked through the sliding glass doors the people, mainly elderly crippled, in the waiting room were giving me odd stares. Gee, I wonder why? I almost felt the urge to hiss and glare at them for kicks, but I held that in and showed my dazzling whites. It was bad enough that Shuichi didn't seem to have 'special' feelings for me, and that I hurt myself again, so I didn't need any funny questions, remarks or to be asked, 'What's with the getup?'

Luckily, it wasn't as bad as anyone suspected it would be, so I merely went home with a wrapped foot, a huge bag of ice, and a note that gives me the excuse to keep off of my foot. That meant I didn't have to go to Drama Club during the winter break, or get up in general. Hopefully no one will visit though. The only really unfortunate part was that the hospital didn't have taller stilts, so I either had to be in a wheelchair, get a really big stick, or keep hopping. I hated wheelchairs, I didn't want to search for a big stick, and so I was left hopping, which still hurt my ankle.

While no one from school visited, I did get a package from Shuichi. I was really scared to open it, but I had to face it sooner or later. As tradition, I read the card first:

Hello Akako,

I hope your ankle is feeling better. Thank you for your help with the play, and I'm sorry about what those girls had said to you at

rehearsal. You're not a freak, and you can keep snacking on whatever you like, and I don't mind that you're tall. We can still hang out and talk about whatever comes to mind, so you don't have to worry. About the kiss, it was certainly a surprise, and it wasn't a bad thing, I just wasn't ready for it. Maybe after we get to know each other a bit more, outside of the stage (even if it was a little fun), there could be something.

Happy Holidays.

Shuichi.

Well, it wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no either, so still having a chance made me feel better. Plus he said that we could hang out, so I didn't have to give up. When I opened his present I started laughing so hard that I had tears in my eyes. It was a framed photo of me falling off the stage, and everyone looking freaked, including me. Even though my ankle started to throb just looking at it, it just reminded me of all the fun I had performing it.

Rini, Mom, and Dad burst through my door and asked in a panic, "What's wrong?"

I stuffed the photo in the packing peanuts and brought out a strange, yet familiar feel of plastic, so I pulled it out. I laughed even harder when it was an extra large bag of my favorite veggie-root chips. "Shuichi sent me a bag of the chips we ran out of!" I was actually sad when I found that we didn't have anymore of them, so it made me even happier.

They all sighed in annoyance with my snack obsession, but I didn't care.

"Who wants to watch *The Nightmare Before Christmas* ?" Rini asked.

"No, I don't feel like watching it," I put in.

"No, no. Not the movie. Mom recorded it with her camera."

I groaned. I was fine with the photo, but watching the video would be too daunting to me.

"Fine, I'll leave you to your chips," she said before leaving.

When they all left, I took out the photo and smiled. I could hardly wait until break was over. Hey, maybe we could share my chips!

Hilo again! Wow, after almost a year of working on this off and on, it's finally finished. Hope you all enjoyed, and even though it's early, Happy Holidays, including Turkey Day!

"Hitch your wagon to a star." - Ralph Waldo Emerson