

Super Mahoubeat: Everlasting Shoujo Drifts

by /a/non

*All-new, full-length album featuring nine (?) electrifying tracks sure to put your pedal to the metal! Ride through the night with these dance tunes blasting and feel the heat!
Please don't read and drive.*

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International Liason: Anon
Mastering Engineer: Anon
Art Direction: Anon
Non-Stop Mix by Anon
Creative Coordination: Anon
SMB Promotion: Anon
Promotions: Anon
Club Promotion: Anon
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Thanx:
Anon
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Aniki

All Reader and Critic

Executive Supervisor:

Anonymous

I

Drivin' Crazy

"Running through your soul, the speed of the fire!"

—Ace, "Drivin' Crazy"

"Sugiyama Hanako."

The first time she heard that voice calling her name she mistook it for a lingering dream-memory and ignored it. By the time she was dressed and out the door, the call was all but forgotten. The roads were still wet with evening rain; an autumn breeze chilled her bare fingers. The sun was hiding away, but Hanako was energetic all the same as she made her way to school with a slight skip to her step. After the way yesterday's confession went, how could she be otherwise?

She did her best to keep from pulling her phone out and sending Tamura-kun (she guessed she could start calling him Takumi-kun now, come to think of it) a bunch of messages even though she badly wanted to. A lone car whizzed by her and kicked some of last night's rain into the air, narrowly missing her but knocking her back to her senses.

"Guess I shouldn't cross without looking, huh?" she said aloud to no one in particular. Hanako's walks to school were solitary affairs since middle school, but she didn't mind—her life could be hectic so any quiet moment was welcome.

"Sugiyama-san," called a familiar voice from her left.

"Nakamura-chan!" she called back, waving and stopping to meet her classmate. Unlike herself, whose time in middle-school sports gave her a modestly athletic build, Nakamura was a thin, waifish girl—Hanako was surprised she could run at all on those little legs. "I didn't know you came to school this way, too."

“I don’t,” Nakamura managed, panting from the brief run. Her long, brown hair tossed in the breeze. “I just wanted to talk to you outside school and I knew you lived out here.” Hanako was a little alarmed—she and Nakamura weren’t close enough to be called friends, so it was suspect for the latter to go out of her way like this.

It must have been important. “What about?”

“Tamura-kun,” Nakamura started, having caught her breath. Her short, brown hair fluttered in the breeze. “I heard you confessed your feelings to him yesterday. Is that true?”

Hanako didn’t bother hiding it, but she was alarmed at how quickly rumors could spread. “That’s right—I asked him out and he accepted.” She smiled without realizing it, a little proud.

“I see...well, you two were already pretty close friends. You’ve been in the same class since middle school, right?” Hanako nodded. She didn’t mention it, but she chose her high school to stay close to him. “That’s great! I’m happy for you,” Nakamura said. “Anyway, that’s all it was. I’m going to stop at the convenience store here—you don’t have to wait for me if you don’t want to.”

Hanako nodded, a little confused about what was going on. “I’ll see you in class, okay?” Nakamura nodded before ducking into the nearest store. Hanako shrugged, taking a single step before she felt a tug at her sweater sleeve—it was Nakamura. She started to ask if the other had forgotten something before she was interrupted:

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but...there are a lot of girls who were after Tamura-kun before yesterday. I wasn’t one of them, but a few girls in our class were talking to each other about you two. And there were other girls giving you dirty looks, too.” She looked right into Hanako’s eyes.

“I see. Well, I’m not worried about them. I was first, wasn’t I?” She smiled, and Nakamura seemed relieved. With whatever was bothering her off her chest, she walked with Hanako the rest of the way to school.

Hanako met Takumi-kun at the school gate. She'd known him so long his silhouette was unmistakable; she sped up her pace as soon as she saw it. Nakamura excused herself with a smile and went ahead.

"I didn't know you and Nakamura were friends, Hanako." The two started off for the building, taking extra-slow steps in spite of the autumn air. "You seem like you're cold. Need these?" He pulled a pair of gloves from his bag.

They were *his* leather gloves. Hanako wasn't as tiny as Nakamura, but her hands weren't the size of an (almost) grown man. She put them on for a laugh and the long fingers flopped down onto themselves. "Just how big do you think my hands are?" she giggled.

"I guess I don't know," he smiled. "Yet." Before Hanako could respond she felt his hand take hold of hers. She grabbed his back.

"Takumi-kun, people will see us..." Of course, in spite of her protests, she hoped for only one answer, which she got.

"So?" She smiled as they walked hand-in-hand.

Unfortunately, before they could even make it inside the building, their path was barred by three of the other girls from school, one of which was in their class. The others were in higher years.

"Takumi-kyuun", started the girls, "Good mooorning!" Hanako clutched his fingers tighter as the girls, whose skirts looked just a little shorter than yesterday, moved too close to Takumi for her comfort. He gave them a casual hello and moved to walk past them, but they tried to break Hanako's grip on his hand by stepping in the way.

She wasn't having any of that. "Excuse me," she said in the same obnoxious, overly-cute voice they were using as she roughly shoved them out of the way with her hips. They complained, but Takumi didn't seem to notice (or maybe he didn't care). Hanako turned and stuck her tongue out at the trio of

wannabe homewreckers before the school's doors shut behind her.

* * *

The sound of a revving engine stirred her from her mid-class nap. “Sugiyama Hanako!” called the voice from this morning. She shot up in her seat and saw the teacher staring daggers at her through his nineties-era aviator eyeglasses. The voice that called her was distinctly not his. She must have been dreaming again.

“Now that you’re with us, Sugiyama-san,” began the teacher, “Please read the passage on page 86.” She ignored the other students’ laughter and read the passage, then flopped back into her seat. Just what was up with that voice she was dreaming about? She’d never heard anyone talk like that before...

The rest of the school day was uneventful. She and Takumi both had part-time jobs, but they were on opposite sides of town so they split up at the school gate. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Hanako.” She nodded and grinned.

Her part-time job was simple, but the work was engaging enough that she didn’t notice the time pass by. Stocking shelves at the convenience store across the street from her house wasn’t exactly thrilling work, but the money helped her family make ends meet—even if both her parents worked full-time, taking care of four kids wouldn’t have been cheap. Mom’s choice to stay at home and raise the kids was great for them but it meant that money was usually tight.

* * *

“I’m home,” called Hanako as the door shut behind her.

“Aneki, help us with our homework!” called her oldest brother Gentarou, who was just beginning middle school.

“What about dinner?” she called back, kicking off her shoes and replacing them with her slippers. Or, she would have, until

she noticed one of them was missing. “Where’s my left slipper?”

“Toilet,” called one of the twins—they were in their third year of elementary school. Hanako often had to remind herself that she loved them very much so, when this kind of situation arose, she didn’t exact eternal vengeance for their transgressions.

“Why?” she called plaintively. She decided to make due with just her stockings, though the cold wooden floor sent a chill up her spine.

Mom appeared before her, sighing with a smile. “They thought the way it spun around in the toilet was funny. It’s in the wash, honey.” Hanako furrowed her brow at that but from her mom’s tone she could tell that Iehira and Iehiro had already gotten an earful—no sense in punishing them again. For the rest of that evening, she helped the boys with their homework, managed to wade through her own, and talked on Lane with Takumi for a while before she decided to change and get into bed.

As she walked into her room in her pajamas, the brothers all asleep in their beds and her parents quietly sitting in the main room of the house, she heard that voice call her name again—though this was the first time she’d heard it when she was awake. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind of what she assumed was a hallucination.

“Hey, don’t ignore me again!” said the voice. Hanako looked up at her bed and saw a small, vaguely mammalian creature on all fours resting against her headboard. The way it lay was alarmingly casual. The high-pitched voice it had didn’t match the ‘cool’ vibe she got from its demeanor and appearance. “I know you’ve been hearing me all day,” he said, his red fur glistening in the low light of the moon.

“What?” said Hanako, reasonably startled.

“I’m the one asking the question, here,” the little creature said, standing on all fours and walking across her bed. “Just one, and it’s easy. You already know the answer.” Hanako blinked; when she did, a high-speed slide show flashed through her mind. She saw cars making hairpin turns and burning rubber on unlit mountain roads while onlookers cheered. She saw a car flipped,

totaled, and the driver crawling out of the wreckage to limp across the finish line. She saw cars drifting around corners and rushing ahead at the speed of sound without missing a beat.

When she came to, nothing in her room had changed and no time had passed. The little red fellow continued as if nothing had happened. “Do you feel it?” She had no idea what ‘it’ was or what ‘it’ could be until the words came out of his mouth. When they did, a feeling she’d felt all her life—even though she hadn’t realized it—coursed through her. Her blood ripped through her veins like a bat out of hell and she wanted nothing more in that moment to be behind the wheel of one of those cars, to feel the wind fight her speed, to jettison across the finish line in a blaze of victory.

“I...I feel it,” she said, panting like she’d just run a mile. She wiped the sweat from her forehead with a quavering hand. “What can I do?”

The little creature grinned. There was a flash of light and the next thing she knew, she was sitting in the driver’s seat of a moving Yotoya SW68 “Maximus.” Without stopping to ask why she knew what the car was just from the interior or why her foot was already on the gas pedal, she threw it in gear and shot down the open road. As the roar of the engine and the rumble of the tires against the asphalt rang in her ears, her smile stretched to meet them.

* * *

Her white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel of her Maximus never relaxed as Netsu (that was how the little red creature introduced himself) explained to her what exactly was going on. If she could have been frank with him, she didn’t care and would have done almost anything to keep driving. Still, she got the gist of it.

“If you want to know the terms, you’d better slow down before you cross the finish line and seal the deal,” he started, but from the tone of his voice Hanako could tell that he didn’t *really*

want her to let up on the gas. “If you finish this course, you’ll officially be a Street Witch. That means you’ll get to race other Street Witches like yourself on courses just like this.” Hanako liked the sound of that. “We’ll give you a place to go and a way to get there.”

“We?”

“Me and others like me.” Hanako was going to ask another question but she had less than a second to make a 180 degree turn or her car would fuse with the guardrail, so she shut up and spun the wheel. “Anyway, when you’re there, you can race.”

“What do I get when I win?”

He liked the confidence. “The only stakes are your pride...but when all you have to lose is your pride, your pride is *everything* to you.”

Hanako rounded the turn and shifted hard, driving her feet into the clutch and gas at the same time. If she wasn’t able to hear her heart beating she might have wondered how she learned to drive when she’d hardly been inside a car at all, let alone at the wheel. But the heat in her blood wasn’t in the mood for calm calculation or reasoned lines of thinking—it wanted to *go*.

“Got it. I’ll do it.” Netsu’s eyes lit up, little fireballs dancing within.

“Then without further ado: welcome!” Hanako sailed across the finish line and again there was a bright flash of light.

II

The Race of the Night

“Once upon a time, everyone was free...”

—Dave Rodgers, “The Race of the Night”

When her vision cleared, Hanako was back in her bedroom. She felt a good bit calmer, but her heart rate was still high. “Before you ask: no, it wasn’t your imagination.” She looked at the clock by her bed and it was later than the last time she looked at the clock in the car—2:42 AM. Of course, that wasn’t incontrovertible proof, but Hanako wasn’t in the mood to argue with what seemed like enough evidence. Besides, the feeling of the steering wheel still lingered in her hands and that was enough for her to know it was real. She wasn’t sure how so much time had passed, though.

“Well, what do you think?”

“I want to drive,” she said.

Netsu laughed. “I can tell. Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of time to drive starting tomorrow. There are races every day and the tracks are always open to solo drivers. Any time you want, you can drive. But you’re beat—you were running on fumes when I introduced myself and now your engine is starting to seriously putter. Take a breather and we can talk about getting you into a car tomorrow.”

“It won’t be the same one?” She couldn’t hide her disappointment.

“You like the Maximus, huh? I thought you might. It’s yours if you want it. Most Witches like to shop around a little before they settle on one, though. They all have different advantages—”

“No, that’s my car. I can tell.” Her fingers curled as if around the steering wheel.

“Hey, I won’t argue. Here.” He tossed her something, which she caught before it hit her. “That’s the key to it. Press the red button and it will come to you.”

Hanako nodded, Netsu left, and in a second exhaustion hit her like a wrecking ball. She flopped down onto her bed, asleep before she landed.

* * *

Sleep passed in the blink of an eye and the morning was a blur. She ate—of that much she was certain, since she woke up hungrier than she’d ever been – and somehow made it to school. She’d never felt so disinterested in the day-to-day doldrums of life before, she realized. Compared to the rush of being behind the wheel, everything else was a slog. All the way she walked to school she was tempted to press the button on her key.

Her day brightened a little bit when she saw Takumi waiting for her outside the school gate, same as yesterday. He smiled when he saw her. “I was worried you wouldn’t show up today,” he started. Hanako raised an eyebrow, inviting him to elaborate. “Did you miss my Lane message? I sent you one this morning.” Hanako realized she didn’t even take a glance at her phone since she fell asleep the night before.

“Sorry, Takumi-kun. I’ve been feeling a little groggy all morning. I didn’t get much sleep last night.” He shrugged, still smiling.

“Oh well. Come on, let’s go.” He extended his hand to her and she took it. She felt a little bad walking hand-in-hand with him like this when she’d ignored him, but it was a relief that he wasn’t angry. Takumi wasn’t the kind of guy to let little things like that get to him, which was part of why she liked him.

Yesterday’s entourage of jealous girls left them alone that morning (though they did plenty of sneering and side-talking), so they enjoyed a peaceful walk to class together. For the first

time that morning Hanako didn't have intrusive thoughts about wanting to drive.

Class was uneventful, or Hanako was so bored that it was. She talked with Nakamura—they were a little closer after their walk yesterday—and ate lunch with Takumi, but otherwise the day was a total drag. Hanako and Takumi parted ways at their usual spot. Before they split up he fixed her messy hair with his hand, stroking her face a little. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Takumi-kun,” she said before he turned to head to his job. Her face was nearly as red as her hair.

* * *

“I’m home,” she called, but no one answered. She remembered that her brothers had judo practice and her dad was working late, so she was on her own. She took a deep breath, trying to stop her hands from trembling. “Netsu, can you hear me?”

He appeared on cue, riding in on some motorcycle-like flying machine. He lowered his aviator sunglasses and she could see his fiery eyes. “I can always hear you if you want me to,” he said. “Convenient, huh?” He dismounted his “bike” and it disappeared. “I can tell by the look on your face what you’re about to ask me—unfortunately, the races don’t start until the sun is down.”

“Then why were you trying to reach me during the day yesterday?”

“New blood is an exception. You can drive any time of day you want to, if you’re brave enough—night-driving is scary for most people who’ve never been behind the wheel before. You’re a rare type. Of course, that heat in your blood is why I came to you in the first place.”

With her head a little clearer (at least, compared to the adrenaline-addled state it was in last night), Hanako had the wherewithal to ask an important question. “So, what’s the point of all this? Why are you recruiting Street Witches to race at night, anyway?”

“I’m glad you asked. It’s simple: people like you are brimming with passion and energy, and that energy doesn’t get used very well the way the world is now. With all that power just sitting around, we’d be fools not to take advantage of it. The cost of fuel, cars, closing the roads, and so on doesn’t even put a scratch in the surplus we get in energy output from you all. Plus, you hot-blooded types live for that kind of thrill—don’t pretend you haven’t missed being in that car since the second you got out. It’s a win-win.”

“So what, do you guys just get energy from anyone who does anything like this? Do people always have to get ‘recruited,’ like me?”

Netsu smiled. “Let me show you something.” He gestured for Hanako to take a seat and from...somewhere he brought forth an ancient TV set and a video tape.

“You see, Hanako,” he said somewhat presumptuously, “before very recently, people had *outlets* for their passion. It’s pretty uniquely human, but some other species, like mine, can do it too.” The video showed footage of samurai rushing each other in battle, then cut to American cowboys shooting Mexicans from horseback, then again to armored Athenians making the march to Marathon. Several other kinds of battles were displayed on the screen, not all of them bloody—last, it showed a scene not dissimilar to the ones she’d seen last night. This time she could make out who it was in the cars—grown men from all around the world. What they did in those cars would have been beyond her comprehension before she’d done some of it herself last night. “No matter the reason, there used to be real *fight* in you all. But that changed not too long ago. Now everyone just sits around. Suddenly the cost of getting energy from this planet started outweighing the benefits. So, we decided to rekindle that fire. Make sense?”

Hanako nodded. “I think so, but why girls, and why racing?” “Short answer—it’s cool, and we like to watch. The longer answer is complicated and involves a lot of math.”

“I’m not that interested. I just—”

“—want to drive, right?” Hanako wasn’t surprised that he knew what she was going to say. All the sitting around she’d done that day was starting to make her antsy. She’d never been like this before. “The thing is, people around your age are the only ones who haven’t had that lust for life totally beaten out of them with work and other bullshit that doesn’t matter. It just needs to be brought to the front.”

“I think I understand.” Hanako stood up. “I’ll see you tonight, then.”

* * *

The time between Netsu’s departure that late afternoon and sun-down was like water torture—the kind where a subject is forced to listen to a slow leak drip, drip, drip over the course of hours until they lose it. She did her best to keep from losing her temper and held it together through her mom and brothers getting home, then her dad, having dinner, taking a bath (which was a brief moment of respite from the tension all throughout her body), and finally going back to her room. Of course, by this time the sun had been down for a while. Netsu was already there.

“It’s rude to keep someone waiting like that. Are you ready?” Hanako paused.

“One last thing.” She grabbed her phone from her dresser and sent Takumi, who she’d been Lane messaging back and forth since Netsu left earlier, a quick message that she was going to bed early and looked forward to seeing him at school the next morning. He replied in kind and she set down the phone. “Alright.”

The pair stepped outside Hanako’s house and, after she ensured no one was looking, she pressed the button on the key. In the blink of an eye her car from last night appeared. It wasn’t running—it just sat there in front of her house, begging her to get in the driver’s seat. From a street lamp overhead she could tell the car was red—just a shade or two darker than her fiery locks. She found herself unconsciously running her hand along its angular hood. *A relic of another time*, she thought, though she

didn't really have a frame of reference for that sort of thing. The headlights were hidden.

"Ready to go?"

"I think so." She didn't know how, exactly, but she knew the exact path she needed to take to get to the races. Hanako slid the key into the ignition and, the second she turned it, became someone else. "Yeah, I'm ready." Before Netsu could respond, Hanako's foot found the gas pedal.

* * *

It was a short, easy drive. Frankly, Hanako was a little disappointed that there wasn't much to maneuver around on the track there. *It's not enough of a warm-up*, she thought as she pulled into the hidden parking lot where the other Street Witches left their rides. *I'm ready for more action*. She begrudgingly shut her car off in the parking spot marked with her name. Just as she stepped out she heard a familiar voice calling her.

"Hanako-chan?" Hanako was taken by surprise—someone here knew her? She turned to face the source of the voice and, surprising her further, it belonged to none other than Nakamura Teiko.

"Teiko-chan?" They'd gotten a little closer since the day they walked to school together and were on a first-name basis now. "I didn't expect to see you here!" She was glad to see a familiar face and embraced her with a hug.

"Me neither...how long have you been a Street Witch?" She brushed her long, black hair behind her ear after Hanako released her.

"Today's my first time coming to the lot, actually. You?"

"Me? I've been coming to races for...a few weeks. I haven't raced yet, though."

"No? Why not?"

"Well..."

Netsu cut her off. "She keeps insisting that she doesn't fit in here and that we made a mistake, but she crossed the finish line

just like you did.”

“Only because I didn’t know what I was doing, or how to brake...”

Hanako laughed. “Well, I’m glad you’re here in any case, Teiko-chan. I’d hate it if no one knew who I was when I won my first race tonight. You can help make me famous,” she beamed.

“You’re going to race on your first day?” gasped Teiko.

“Sure, what’s wrong with that?”

“Well, there isn’t a rule, but it’s dangerous. It’s not like the starter track. Most girls watch a few races before picking their first track and car—”

“I don’t have time for all that, Teiko. Can’t you feel that screaming from your heart, telling you to just hit the gas already? Besides, I already know which car I’ll be using.” She paused to pet her Maximus, but Teiko held that furrowed brow and worried expression. “Well, since you’re so concerned, I’ll watch a race or two first...but I’m going to ride tonight, make no mistake.”

“That makes me feel a little better, I guess.”

“Anyway, what kind of car did you pick?”

“I...haven’t picked one yet. I’ve been trying a few different ones on my rides here.” She blushed a little—Hanako was so decisive, while she hadn’t done much but make excuses since coming here for the first time. A part of her *did* want to race, of course (why else would she show up every day)...but a larger part of her was scared.

“I see. Well, you’ve got lots to pick from, but I love this car. Care to show me where I can watch a race?” Teiko nodded, glad at the change of subject. She did like to watch the races.

“It’s this way,” she said, and the two walked off the lot, Hanako slipping the keys into her pocket. Pocket? She looked down and noticed that her clothes had changed. She left her house in the kind of outfit anyone might don on a brisk fall evening, yet now she was wearing somewhat loose-fitting blue jeans, a cropped leather jacket and an untucked button-up shirt underneath. *Must have changed when I got in the Maximus, somehow.*

Teiko's outfit was a touch more conservative, but Hanako could tell it wasn't something the former would normally wear—a white and black bomber jacket over a dark blue t-shirt that was just barely too short to cover her whole stomach, and reasonably tight khaki slacks.

Ignoring their new outfits—other than remarking to herself that she probably looked really cool—Hanako and Teiko strode up to a waist-high barrier on the edge of the cliff inside which the parking lot lay hidden. The view overlooked a couple of tracks, Hanako saw, but neither of the tracks were fully visible even at their great height.

Seeming to read Hanako's mind, Teiko said, "There are screens where you can see what they call 'action cams' in the parlor, if you want to watch from other angles. I prefer to watch from here though."

"For now, I want to see it for real." On cue, a trio of cars zipped by on one of the tracks, each edging each other out for the lead for milliseconds at a time. Even from the hundred-or-so meters away Hanako could feel the wind as they passed. The sound of their motors was music to her ears.

"Looks like a close race."

"They usually are," chimed in Netsu. "Everyone here wants to win. There are a few real greats, Witches who stand on another level, but don't worry about them yet."

Hanako nodded, but made a mental note to look out for these 'greats.' She suspected, at bare minimum, that her name would be enshrined among them—but that was the bare minimum. No, Hanako was sure that she would stand at the top of this scene before long.

This wasn't just hubris, though that did play a large part in her self-assessment; the way these girls raced was missing a certain something that she knew she had. Whether it was a love for the drive, a spark in her heart, or something else, Hanako was sure that something about her set her apart from the rest of the competition. Whether their experience would be enough to outpace that *something* was a matter to be determined, but as for the

race she was watching, she pictured herself at least a full car's length ahead of the pack clawing for first.

Then she noticed that she wasn't the only one seeing that picture—in fact, a fourth car *had* sneaked up on the three while they were vying for the top spot. She took advantage of their constant shifts in position and their focus on each other to rocket past right as the finish line appeared. “Who’s that?” asked Hanako.

Teiko muttered something Hanako couldn't understand.

“What?”

“She said, it's one of the best Witches on the road. This is her last day of racing, as a matter of fact. Guess she wanted to go out with a win.”

Hanako smiled. “In that case, I'll have to race her tonight.”

“What?!” cried the pair in unison. Hanako's smile turned mischievous.

“Can it be arranged, Netsu?”

“Wait, Hanako-chan...it's dangerous. If you have the wrong attitude—”

“I'm not worried about that, Teiko-chan. Once they see me race, they'll understand what they're dealing with. Win or lose. Netsu?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Whether she'll accept is another matter, though.”

“I'll go talk with her.” Teiko didn't bother to protest any more and followed Hanako to the winner's circle, looking around to see if anyone had heard her friend.

III

Gas, Gas, Gas

“Do you like my car?”

—Manuel, “Gas Gas Gas”

Satou Heather pulled onto the ramp leading to the parking lot and waved to the crowd on the cliffside from inside her Menschkart Tennis. She made a show of revving the engine as she passed the girls, who cheered wildly for her final victory. Well, most of them were cheering. One redhead was just staring at her as if sizing her up—a redhead she’d never seen before, in fact. She shrugged it off and parked. Her smartphone buzzed in her hand right as she picked it up.

You have a new challenge, read the notification. She had a pretty good idea who that challenge came from...she almost rejected it outright, but something prevented her; she thought she ought to at least size the redhead up before writing her off. After all, she was new herself once. A lesson in humility might have done her some good in her past.

“Alright,” she began in English and followed with somewhat stilted Japanese, “which one of you lovely girls is Sugiyama Hanako?” Hanako stepped forward, ignoring Teiko’s hushed pleas for her to rescind the challenge and start slower.

“That’s me,” said the redhead while she looked Heather up and down. “You’re Satou Heather, right?” The blonde nodded, her cool countenance contrasting with the crashing ocean waves in her eyes.

“I saw your challenge, but I also saw your record. Not often a total newbie wants to stand up to someone on my level.” There wasn’t an ounce of audacity in her voice—she was simply stating a fact. The redhead returned her smile.

"I saw you race. I'm on your level." The crowd gasped in unison, breaking their silence. Some of the more experienced racers were offended; the newer blood seemed inspired and afraid to show it. Teiko's knees practically knocked together she was so nervous.

"That so?" She took a step forward, her unbuttoned flannel blowing in the wind, and locked her blue eyes with Hanako's fiery reds. "Alright. I'll race you. One-on-one. One lap. You pick the track." The crowd started to jeer and complain right away, but Heather was having none of it. "That's enough, now," she said in English with a southern American drawl, raising her hands to silence the other girls. "I want to race this kid. If she can bring the kind of heat to the track she's saying she can, it'll be a hell of a ride." Teiko wished she paid more attention in English class—she couldn't understand some of what Heather was saying. *Hell?*

Hanako had already started walking toward her car. "I'll see you at the starting line," she called behind her.

* * *

The track Hanako chose for the race was a fairly simple one—an irregular L-shaped road which included a loop at the base of the L and part of which ran beneath an overhang in the mountainside. She estimated that, accounting for slopes and turns, it would be a two-minute lap assuming nothing went wrong with her Maximus.

The two cars hummed at the starting line, both sets of brake lights bathing the road behind them in red. Teiko stood at Hanako's passenger side door.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked timidly.

"I'm more than sure." She did some last-second systems checks and everything seemed to be in order. It amazed her just how much she knew about cars, seemingly out of nowhere. "Don't worry—I'll be fine either way, remember?" Teiko stepped back from the car, still looking apprehensive. She'd never known

Hanako to be so headstrong at school, and getting closer to her the last couple of days hadn't changed her opinion.

"All right," called Netsu at the front of the track. "Welcome, Street Witch racers and spectators alike, to what may be the most exciting race so far this season! The Star-Spangled Satou Heather has agreed to one final race before she parks her Tennis for good—and against a fiery-red newcomer in a matching red-hot Maximus! Can you feel the heat?!" The crowd cheered, mostly for Heather to put the new kid in her place. "The rules of this exhibition are simple. This is to be a single-lap, one-on-one race around Zeus's Boot. He pulled forth a green flag. "On your marks!"

Heather and Hanako both pulled as close to the starting line as they could without crossing it. Hanako was almost itching.

"Get set!" Heather revved her engine, looking over to Hanako and winking.

"You'd best make my last race a good one, Red!" Hanako smirked and nodded.

"Go!"

The flag fell and they were off—Hanako rapidly shifted from first gear to second and so on as the Maximus shot forward, Heather's Tennis not far behind. The track started at the top of the L and was a mostly straightaway at first until a hard left reared its head. Hanako maintained her lead over Heather but she could tell something was 'off' about the way the other girl was driving.

Still, she let it go as that left turn approached, shifting gear and drifting to maintain more speed. She nearly fishtailed into the guardrail, an opportunity which Heather greedily took to get ahead. Nothing frustrated Hanako more than seeing tail lights, she soon found as she was unable to find an opening to pass Heather. Someone with less drive would have been happy just to keep up as well as she did, but that wasn't enough.

For Heather's part, she was impressed that Hanako started the race ahead and just as impressed that the setback at the turn was so minor—if she wasn't careful, she might really lose here.

They approached the loop at the foot of Zeus's Boot and Hanako found herself lagging behind a little more. "Come on!" she cried aloud, nearly driving her foot through the floor mat to try and catch up. Heather's green Tennis taunted her from ahead.

"Looks like another win," Heather thought aloud, glancing at the red blaze in her mirror. The overhang was up ahead, and owing to the angle at which it rose over the road there was simply not enough room for two cars to fit under it at the same time. Heather would shift over to the right, which would force Hanako to either try to pass her (which was impossible at these speeds) or accept her fate and slow down enough to get behind and fit beneath.

That wasn't what went through Hanako's mind at all—losing was simply not a future she saw for this race. She rode up against Heather as hard as she could, trying to slip past the opening left behind by the latter's lane-change. Their bumpers nearly collided, and several times Hanako's front end reached Heather's rear doors, but it was to no avail. Hanako grit her teeth.

The overhang drew nearer and nearer, the shadow beneath taunting the Witch to just try and fit. "Fine then. Sorry, Maximus..." she said aloud. And on her maiden voyage, too...

Teiko looked on in horror from her viewpoint by the parking lot. "She'll never fit under there," she said aloud, biting her fingers with anxiety. "Why doesn't she get over?"

"There's still time—she could pass Heather before the overhang...but it'll be close!" Netsu's voice rang out over the loudspeaker. He'd been commentating the race from the beginning, but Teiko had tuned it out. She may have had no experience but she had a knack for understanding the circumstances of a given race—probably thanks in part to Netsu's magic.

Hanako knew better. She wouldn't be able to pass Heather in time to make it under the overhang. She wouldn't be getting behind the other car, either, though—seeing those tail lights again was as good as giving up at this point in the race. She held fast to the steering wheel, took a quick look at Heather—who realized with amazement what Hanako was planning a second be-

fore the audience did—and flipped the lever at her side to lay her seat back.

The crunch of rock-on-metal was nearly deafening, but over in an instant. She opened her eyes and saw rock pass by overhead—soon enough the stars were in view again. She thanked them and set her seat (and self) upright. The wind knocked her against the headrest, but she could see through her tears that she was starting to pull ahead. The crowd had gone totally silent; that or she couldn't hear them over the wind.

Heather grinned. "I expected a fight...but I didn't expect *that*. Still, I won't give up!" She let her foot off the gas when they went under, mostly out of shock, so she remedied that error once she returned to her senses.

"Unbelievable! Sugiyama went under the shear of the overhang! It's a miracle she's even alive—but she's starting to pull ahead!" The wind whipped her hair in every other direction. It was amazing, even if she looked stupid.

"The track is running out! Can Hanako take advantage of the momentum and pull ahead?" Hanako's foot hadn't left the gas pedal once since they went around the loop, and thanks to Heather slowing down earlier the two were neck-and-neck as the finish line approached.

"Come on!" cried Heather in English. Hanako gripped the steering wheel tighter. Her leg was starting to quiver. Just a little more...

The air choked her. She could barely see. Her car was a wreck. She'd never felt more "alive." If she could feel her face, she'd have grinned. Instead, she drove on, pushing against the rushing wind even as it forced her back into her seat. The crowd was going insane—she could hear them plain as day now.

Finally, the two cars crossed the finish line. No one could tell who had won—or if one of them had won at all. What was clear to everyone watching that race (which, thanks to Heather's prestige, was just about every Witch) was Hanako's prowess. She slowed to a stop and parked her car, taking heaving breaths. Heather rushed out to meet her.

“How you holding up, rookie?” She smirked. “You look a little worse for wear. I’d think you were just driving at eighty miles per hour with the top down, or something like that.” Hanako could only nod, still catching her breath. It took a lot to keep from passing out right away in that condition.

“Hanako-chan, are you okay?” called Teiko, running to the torn-up Maximus. The roof of the car and the windows were completely gone—nothing more than a pile of wreckage on the track behind them. “That was incredible!”

“Told you, Teiko,” Hanako said, having finally caught her breath. She shook her head frantically to restore some sense of order to her red locks. “Win or lose, the Witches know what I’m about now.”

Heather nearly bust a gut laughing. “You didn’t need to do *that* to prove yourself, you know!?”

Netsu’s voice rang out over the loudspeaker. “After carefully reviewing the results, the winner of the exhibition match between Star-Spangled Heather and the newcomer, Sugiyama Hanako is...” Hanako held the breath she’d just caught as Netsu paused overlong for dramatic effect.

“Satou Heather, by just an inch!” She released her held breath. She hid it well, but Teiko and Heather could both tell that Hanako’s heart sank at the sound of the announcement. The prospect of never truly avenging herself with a win against Heather gnawed at her. Even if Heather came out of retirement in the future to race her again, it would be a totally different Heather—and she’d be a totally different Hanako.

An image flashed on the jumbotron showing the final second of the race as Heather’s car crossed the finish line just a split-second before Hanako. It was just a hair’s breadth, but it was irrefutable—not that Hanako was enough of a spoilsport to refute the result anyway.

Heather extended an open hand to Hanako. “Not bad for your first race, Hot Streak. You gave me a hell of a send-off.” Hanako hopped over the shattered remains of her window and stood before Heather. She pondered the gesture for just a second before

returning it. The crowd cheered as the two shook hands, lights flashing.

IV

Queen of Mean

“Take your hands off my heart and soul!”

—The Snake, “Queen of Mean”

“Looks like Satou-san won after all.” The soft-spoken, short-haired girl held a phone screen in front of a taller girl with long, straight black hair who smirked at the flashing result.

“As I said: loathe as I am to admit it, the American can race as well as me. Even accounting for the suicidal stunt she pulled, Sugiyama stood no chance.” Her straight bangs stirred a little in the wind. She waved the other girl—one of three that followed her every movement with bated breath—away with a flick of her wrist. “I suppose we ought to congratulate the winner.”

Heather started to wave to the crowd, still holding Hanako’s hand. Hanako followed suit; once she started paying attention to the girls’ cheers she distinctly heard her name among them. Just as suddenly as they started, however, they died away. The silence was eerie—it reminded her of when a teacher got fed up with side-talking students and raised his voice, only there was no yelling, only the rhythmic tapping of boot-heel on concrete.

“Ishikawa.” Heather had turned to face the stifling presence. Her blue eyes were the sternest Hanako had seen them. She followed those blues to the source of the silence, and there she saw a tall, dark-eyed girl with black leather pants and a v-neck top under a matching leather jacket. Surrounding her were three girls with short-cut hair in various styles and less imposing dress.

“Come now, Heather,” said the apparent leader of the pack. “I told you to call me Chizuru. There’s no need to act so hostile. I’ve only come to congratulate you on your final victory.” She and her

entourage clapped quietly. “A shame you were never able to even out our record, though...”

“You and I both know that the last race you won was unfair,” started Heather. “You know what they found in my car after the race as well as I do.”

“Yes, it’s too bad that your negligence caused such trouble for you. Nevertheless, it was...is my win.” She grinned, her eyes glistening like a hungry cat’s.

“I *know* you tampered with my car, Ishikawa.”

“Oh? You know? That’s surprising. I don’t know. Do any of you know?” She gestured to the girls behind her, who all stood silently. Each shook her head. “My word against yours...Of course, now that I’ve seen you nearly lose to someone who’d never been on the track before, I have to wonder if you *could* settle our score.”

“That’s pretty low of you,” said Hanako. By this point Heather and Hanako had released each other’s grip and turned fully to face Ishikawa.

“Ishikawa-sama didn’t speak to you.” said one of the trio, a girl with round glasses and a seemingly permanent frown. “Mind your manners.”

“Stuff it, nerd,” said Hanako. “I don’t care who she is. Cheaters don’t deserve respect.”

Ishikawa raised an eyebrow. “You’re quite the little firecracker, aren’t you?” She took a few steps toward Hanako, right hand on hip. “Of course, being brand new to this you have no idea what you’re talking about. I won my race against Heather fair and square—unlike you.”

“Doesn’t matter. I take Heather’s word over yours, and Heather’s word is that you cheated.” By this point Teiko had run up behind Ishikawa and began waving frantically, mouthing for her to stop. Hanako ignored her. “Besides, I’d rather lose honorably than win by doing something underhanded.”

“Hmhm. Say what you will, but it’s clear that you’re all talk. If we race in the future—if I decide you’re worth my time—and you

try to pull one of those stunts you pulled today, your car won't be the only thing that gets totaled."

That was enough. Say what you will about her—don't talk about the Maximus. Hanako raised a fist to deck the pretentious princess smugly grinning in her face, but Heather caught it. Ishikawa didn't bat an eye.

"Don't, Hot Streak." Hanako fought with herself to lower her hand, but glared daggers at Ishikawa.

"Better be careful, upstart—reckless driving is a leading cause of accidents." She turned and walked away without another word, her entourage in tow. "Wouldn't want you getting hurt."

Teiko let out the breath she was holding. "Hanako-chan! You can't do stuff like that! It's crazy enough to try to race someone on that level for your first match...you can't make enemies!"

"She made an enemy of me, Teiko-chan. Am I supposed to take her insulting Heather, me, and my Maximus?"

"Still, that's Ishikawa Chizuru! She's nearly unrivaled—"

"Show me," interrupted Hanako.

"Huh?" Teiko was taken by surprise.

"Can I watch some of her races? I want to see how she drives."

"I can. They don't let just anyone into the archives—you have to have a winning record with at least 50 races under your belt." Heather spoke up for the first time since Ishikawa left. "As thanks for sticking up for me, Hot Streak." She started walking toward her car. "On the way we can take your Maximus to the shop. You can meet Sumiko-chan."

* * *

It was a short, brisk ride to the mechanic shop. Her hair mussed once again, Hanako hopped over her driver's side door and followed Heather inside, leaving the car running as was suggested. It took some doing to get it started on the way.

Inside the shop was a short, black-haired girl with freckles wearing a boilersuit. She was covered from head to toe in grease

and oil stains, and over her shoulder was a greasy rag—well, in its current state it was more like a spot with some rag left. When the girls entered the shop, a little brass bell on the door chimed, so she was facing them by the time they saw her. “Heya. Need something looked at before you take the Tennis out for good, Heather?”

“You weren’t listening to the last race?”

“I had the radio on, but I was so into the last job I stopped paying attention. Why, what happened?”

“Hanako’s car is a wreck. Can you give her a hand? Think of it as one last favor for me.”

“I thought your one last favor was a week ago, and yet you keep calling them in...” she smiled. “Alright, bring ‘er in and I’ll see what I can do.”

It took about a second for Sumiko to realize “what she could do” and “what was necessary” were basically the same thing. Hanako felt a little shameful when she saw the joy drop from Sumiko’s face. “Sorry.”

Sumiko just sighed. “Don’t be. I’m surprised you were able to tear her up this good, but I’m also a little excited to, basically, rebuild a car. It’ll take me a week, at least, but when I can get her back to you it’ll be like this never happened to her.” She gave Hanako a thumbs up.

“So how will I get back here, then?”

“Netsu can get you a rental car to get you from A to B in the meantime. That race was probably worth its weight in gold, energy-wise, so he’s bound to reciprocate in kind.”

Hanako nodded. “I’ll leave her to you, then. If there’s anything I can do to help...”

“No, that’s alright. I work best when I’m on my own.” True to her word, she set to work examining the damage to the Maximus and taking notes in a pocketbook. Hanako wondered privately why that was necessary given the extent of the damage.

“In that case, we’ll be going to the archives. Hot Streak wants to see how the Queen of Mean drives.

“Queen of Mean?” asked Teiko and Hanako in unison.

“Ishikawa. You’ll see.”

* * *

She saw. It drove her up the wall, seeing how Ishikawa raced. Teiko was surprised, herself, but Hanako’s anger was on another level. “That’s just racing dirty!”

“Unfortunately, there’s no rule against that style of driving. You heard the rules for our own race—other than laps and the number of racers, they’re usually the same. Like it or not, she’s free to race that way, and she’s damn good at it.”

“But it’s...it’s cruel! Look there!” Ishikawa’s white Dazma TZ-9, decorated with a black stripe on the hood, swerved just-so into the bumper of the car in front of her. At those speeds, even a slight impact like that can be devastating to someone’s momentum. In this case, the car in front of her spun out, crashing backward into the rock wall on its right. The camera cut to the inside of Ishikawa’s car, where she sat grinning.

“If I’d known she raced like this I wouldn’t have let you stop me from hitting her before. She deserved it!”

“Was that girl okay?” Asked Teiko, timidly.

“She’s fine now, but she was banged up a little at the time. Mostly it was her psychology that suffered—Netsu’s magic protects us physically somewhat, but being run off the road like that can have a serious effect on a Witch’s mind. The girl’s still talented but the crash took the bite out of her.”

“It’s not right! I can’t believe Netsu and the others allow this.”

“Why wouldn’t they? That kind of stuff is good for energy production. No one has suffered any permanent or life-altering injuries, as far as they’re all concerned, so what sense would there be in changing the rules now? It would just make Ishikawa and her cronies quit in protest.”

“Why do those girls follow her around, anyway?”

“They aren’t the only ones. It’s not hard to imagine why. If someone is the best—or presents herself as the best—and you want to get better, or want security, or just want to be some-

one who mingles with a great talent to make yourself look better, you get in with that person. She embraces that because it means more power. There are also Witches who are afraid of racing with her when they aren't 'on the same team.' I don't like it, but I also don't have a network of girls who would quit for my sake."

"There has to be something I can do about this." Hanako scratched her head.

"Probably is. I tried just beating her in races, but we're too closely matched for that to do anything but piss her off."

"Um, Heather-san...why is it you're quitting if you still have a score to settle with her?" Teiko spoke up.

"I'm too old to keep this up. You two still have a good ten years in you yet, but I'm an old hag at this point. I still love to drive, but I've proven myself well and good, I think." Teiko pulled up Heather's driving record, then showed it to Hanako. It was astonishing compared to the average. 364 races. 320 wins. Ishikawa's record was similar—of 291 races, she'd won 256 of them. Accounting for the 73 extra races Heather had over Ishikawa, the system "tied" them for the top spot. The other girls in the top 5 had similarly impressive records, but these two stood far above them.

"I would say you've more than proven yourself. Even if Ishikawa beats your win percentage, it was with underhanded tactics," said Hanako.

"Thanks, Hot Streak." She checked her watch. "We'd better head back. It's almost morning. I'll take you home."

It was then that Hanako realized that she had to go to school that morning.

V

Express Love

:: epigraph “What is the reason why you keep me waiting?”

—Mega NRG Man, “Express Love” :::

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us, Teiko-chan?” Hanako asked.

Teiko nodded. “I’m sure. I have something I want to take care of before I head home. I’ll see you in class, okay?” Hanako nodded and closed Heather’s passenger door. “Wonder what she’s up to,” she thought aloud.

“That was a pretty crazy race, and she hasn’t raced yet. Maybe she’s got something to think about.”

“I hope it didn’t scare her off. I want her to get some races under her belt. She’s here because Netsu saw potential in her, after all.”

“Could be she’s like Sumiko—no good behind the wheel but great under the hood. Or something else.”

“Maybe. Time will tell.”

They drove in silence for a while. The Tennis rode pretty nice, but it made her miss her own car even more to be riding along with someone else. She leaned out the open window and felt the cool wind against her cheeks, eyes closed.

“That *was* a great race,” said Heather out of the blue.

“Same to you. Wish we could do it again.”

“Maybe, someday. It’s not unheard of for retirees to come back as a guest and embarrass themselves.” She chuckled.

“Maybe...” Hanako laughed along with Heather. She meant, though, that she wished she could relive that exact race at least once more. The way she felt from the minute the starting flag was waved to the second she crossed the finish line was unbelievable. She didn’t think much about it in the moment because she was

focused on winning, but that brief period was the most complete she'd felt since she was small—probably the most ever.

“Nah, I don't think I'll do that. Probably best for me to end on such a high note. Might be the best race I've ever run.”

“You're just flattering me.”

“What use do I have for that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Flattery is only something you do when you want something, right? What could flattering you get me? I mean what I say.”

Hanako laughed. “Take it easy, I was just joking. I can say that was the best race I've ever run.”

It took a second for it to sink in, then Heather chuckled. “Smart-ass,” she muttered in English.

It was just then that they pulled up to Hanako's house. There didn't appear to be any commotion and her phone didn't have any missed calls or messages, so they hadn't noticed her absence. “Thanks for the ride,” she said.

“My pleasure. Real quick—” She stopped Hanako closing the passenger door. “—Teiko is right that you should be careful about making enemies too soon, Hanako. I know Ishikawa is a hard pill to swallow, but you've seen that she's capable of putting people in what she deems to be their place. Be careful, okay?”

“Thanks for the concern. I'm not afraid of her, but I'll watch my back.” She waved Heather off and sneaked into her silent house. It was just about the time of day that Dad usually got up, but it seemed he hadn't gotten out of bed yet. She crept into her room the very second her morning alarm went off. No sleep tonight...

* * *

The week she waited for her car was one of agonizing tedium. The tension in her fingers had become nothing but a lingering memory, a yearning for action and speed that was just out of reach.

She tried to enjoy the time she spent with Takumi, Teiko, and her family – it was clear to all of them that she was distracted by something, but only Teiko really knew why. Her family was satisfied with the excuse of being busy with school and work.

Takumi, on the other hand, could tell that something else was bothering her. After all, if school was so bad he would be just as busy. They were out on a date together when he brought it up with her. She was obviously distracted and it affected her mood in a bad way. “What’s bothering you, Hanako?”

“Nothing. What do you mean?”

“It’s not nothing, I can tell something is getting at you. You can tell me. I’d like to help, if I can.”

This back-and-forth went on for a little while. She almost caved but explaining that her 80’s-era Yotoya was totaled in a magical girl street race in an

unknown part of the country without looking like an insane liar was impossible for her to figure out. Instead, she just copped out with, “It’s nothing big, Takumi. You don’t need to worry, okay?” He let it go but he wasn’t happy.

Not long after that she got a message from Sumiko. “Hey, Hot Streak. Your car is ready. I’d send a picture, but I want you to see it in person first.” She almost called the car to their date spot.

“Hey, I gotta go. Something came up.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just have to run—I forgot about this thing I had to do. Besides, it’s getting late.” The sky was faintly orange, but it was hardly “late”.

He raised an eyebrow but shrugged. “Alright. I’ll see you at school tomorrow, then.”

“Yep, see you!” she said, without turning around to say good-bye. She walked out quickly and headed home. Once there, she frantically pressed the button on her key to summon her car. Instead, Netsu appeared.

“Not so fast—I want you to see something, first.” Impatient, she headed outside, locking the door behind her.

“What’s so—” she started, before the sound of a revving motor caught her off.

To Hanako’s eyes, it *was* no Maximus, but it was a beautiful ride. The street lamps shone off the black exterior like the stars off calm waters. It was impossible to see who sat at the driver’s seat, but she had a pretty good idea.

The electric window of the passenger seat rolled down when she approached, and sure enough, the driver was none other than Teiko. “What do you think?”

“She’s a beauty,” remarked Hanako. “Makes me jealous. How does she ride?”

“Like a dream.” Hanako got in—the leather was cool but not bone-chilling.

“What made you go with a Rusabu?”

“Just a feeling. The Venture worked for me. You know?”

“I know the exact feeling. I’m impressed you kept it from me all this time.”

“It was hard.” Hanako could tell right away that her style was totally different from Teiko’s, and both were pretty far-removed from Heather’s as well. There was a sense that Teiko thought ahead about every move, weighing her options—Heather always seemed to know the best option on instinct, and Hanako only turned, changed lanes, or stopped begrudgingly. Speed was the name of her game, but the calculating Teiko seemed more than happy to take the scenic route.

The first place they stopped was Sumiko’s shop. The only car in the garage was covered in tarp, and the mechanic was there waiting for them. Her coveralls were practically doused with red paint. “You made it! Glad to see the Venture is holding up well, Teiko.”

She seemed to know that Hanako wasn’t much for ceremony, so without further ado she pulled the tarp from the Maximus.

“It’s beautiful,” blurted Hanako. Sumiko chuckled.

“Glad you like it. I thought about keeping the basic look, but I couldn’t resist.”

From bumper to bumper, over the driver's side of the Maximus, ran a pair of white racing stripes—one twice as thick as the other—with the words *Hot Streak* in English between them, also white.

“I want to drive.” Sumiko tossed her the keys, which she caught mid-step. “She is fit to drive, right?”

“It is. Just...be careful with her, okay? Wouldn't want everyone to have to wait another week.”

“What do you mean, everyone?”

Teiko spoke up. “I guess you haven't been checking the challenge queue, Hanako.” She didn't even know what that was. “You must have 20 challenges lined up after last week. You made a great impression on everyone.”

She wasn't horribly shocked—she knew that it was a great race. The number of challenges took her aback somewhat, but compared to the number of races Heather or Ishikawa had run it was a drop in the bucket.

“Time to get started, then,” she said. “How do I accept?”

* * *

The rest of that night was a blur. Hanako ran several races and regardless of the track, ruleset, or opponents, won them handily. Her Maximus rode like it just rolled out of the factory. By the end of that night she'd won all four races. Each was a race of at least three Witches—at first there was some skepticism about Hanako's ability to handle multiple opponents, but by the midpoint of the second race it was clear that Hanako was the real deal; that her race with Heather wasn't a fluke.

Midnight came just as she finished a fourth race. The other Witches clamored for more, but she insisted that she would be back tomorrow—and every day, if she could help it.

Teiko, still yet to manage the courage to challenge someone to a race herself, left at the same time Hanako did. She marveled at her friend's skill, and several times throughout the night she thought hard about issuing a challenge to another rookie

driver...but something held her back. She wasn't sure what it was, but it ate at her that she didn't have whatever Hanako did that was rocketing her to such heights.

* * *

School was a blur for a long time after that. Hanako found herself sleeping in class more and more, and she'd even fallen asleep at her part-time job a couple of times. Once she fell asleep in the bathroom while on a date with Takumi—she felt pretty bad about that one.

She did her best to keep her mind off racing when she was with him, but her desire to drive kept poking and prodding her and, without realizing it, she was ending her dates with him earlier and earlier so she could get behind the wheel. Racing was becoming the only time that Hanako really felt alive.

Naturally, the disinterest at school had caused her grades to start falling, which prompted Takumi to offer to help her study if she was having trouble. “No, I understand the material, it's just...”

“That thing you have your mind on, right?”

“What?”

“You seem really removed from reality lately. It's like you want to be anywhere but here, Hanako.”

“That's not...I do want to be here, with you,” she started.

He cut her off. “Then why, when I'm with you, are you always on another planet lately? If there's something causing you trouble, I can help.”

She felt terrible. “You don't need to worry about me...” she said.

“That's not what your friend told me.” Huh?

Teiko? “Why would she—”

“She said you've been really busy lately and asked me if I could bring it up with you.”

That didn't seem like something Teiko would do—she knew exactly why Hanako was busy. So who? “She was blowing it out

of proportion. I'm fine, really."

"It just seems like you don't have much time for me, or your other friends, or anything at all anymore. I don't want to lose you. Anyway," he changed the subject, "I have to get to work. If you need anything..."

She nodded. "Thank you, Takumi-kun. It means a lot to me." He leaned down, took gentle hold of her shoulders and looked deep in her eyes for what felt like a very long time. Hanako just kept blushing, and eventually Takumi released his hold.

"I'll see you tonight, then." With that, he turned and walked away. Hanako heaved a sigh, partly of relief and partly of frustration.

VI

The Top

“Do you think you can survive the top?”

—Ken Blast, “The Top”

It didn't take long for Hanako's racing record to become the talk of the streets. Over the course of a few weeks she racked up win after win after win, with only a couple of close races against Ishikawa's entourage (never the Queen herself) to show that she was still human. Challenges kept pouring in; everyone wanted to be the one to break the Hot Streak. It was unquestionable that Sugiyama Hanako was a genius at the wheel, and many said she may have been the best of all time—that her loss against Heather was purely due to inexperience and nerves. She didn't correct them.

Almost everyone, anyway—Teiko still hadn't managed to hit a track with any other Witch, though she'd gotten quite comfortable with her Venture in the meantime. Hanako had tried to get to the bottom of whatever was holding Teiko back, but the timid brunette wasn't budging. “I just don't feel ready,” she lied, and Hanako knew it. Still, you can't get blood out of a stone, and racing was more fun than bothering her friend.

Just when she'd won her seventy-fifth race (a remarkable amount of races for such a new Witch, nevermind that they were all victories save her bout with Heather—a testament to the number of challenges she'd been issued), she was approached by a familiar, hateful figure.

“Sugiyama Hanako-san,” began Ishikawa. Hanako glared. “I have to say, I misjudged you. It's clear to me that your racing abilities are second to one.” Hanako stifled a retort and let her continue. “With that said, I've come to offer you a proposition—”

“Not interested,” spat the redhead. “I don’t need you.”

Ishikawa frowned. The curl of her lips was almost alien in its disgust. “Don’t interrupt Ishikawa-san,” said one of the trio that stuck closest to her.

“I’ll do what I like. Unlike you, I don’t need any help winning.” She’d raced that girl—a somewhat familiar-looking girl with short black hair—and won in spite of pressure on her from Ishikawa. Hanako tried to think of her name, but hadn’t bothered to remember.

“You’ve made a mistake,” growled Ishikawa. “This world could have been ours.”

“I want it for myself. There’s no room at the top for you.”

Sparks flew between the two Witches, the intensity of their stares only matched by the heaviness of the air.

“Hmph. We’ll see about that.” She put her fist on her hip. “Fine then. If you won’t see reason, I’ll have to teach you humility the hard way. Race me, Sugiyama Hanako. I’ll give you a week to prepare. You’ll need it.”

“I accept. We’ll race on Ace of Spades. Two laps. One-on-one. No tricks.”

Ishikawa jeered. “I won’t need any.” She leaned very close—uncomfortably so—to Hanako’s face. “Remember what I said before: that Maximus won’t be the only wreck when I’m done with you.”

Before Hanako had the chance to reply she turned and walked away, saying something to her underlings. Teiko came over to her.

“She’s bluffing,” said Hanako. “I can see it in her face. She’s scared stiff to race me. She knows she’ll lose.” With that, she went to her car.

“Where are you going?”

“The Ace of Spades. Where else?” She grinned.

Normally, reserving a racing track for solo practice drew a lot of negative attention from the other Witches. On top of that, it was an unwise move strategically—one’s opponent could see just how a driver handled a track and use that to her advantage.

Hanako's clout took care of the crowd's disdain – her confidence took care of the rest. The look on Ishikawa's face after she finished her practice lap was delectable.

She was interviewed about the coming race just as she got off the track. "What are your thoughts on the race? What do you think of your chances of winning?"

"I won't put it to numbers—I'll just say that Chizuru-chan needs to practice." She smiled for the cameras.

* * *

The days leading up to the race were fraught with distractions. Hanako wanted nothing more than to get in her car and drive—she would have really liked to race Ishikawa right away, in fact. Alas, real life was still something she had to deal with (all pretense of "balance" had fallen away by this point).

Hanako wouldn't admit it to herself, but Teiko could see that there were *some* nerves hiding there under her outward confidence. She tried to approach Hanako about it but the latter simply denied the jitters and said, "I'm just excited to finally race her!" Teiko knew better than to think Hanako could be reasoned with at times like this. Besides, Hanako knew best, right?

Four days before the race, Hanako was approached by her boyfriend, Takumi. "Hanako, I want to talk to you about something."

"Okay," started Hanako, but Takumi cut her off.

"Let's go behind the school."

Hanako was a little nervous about this—Takumi wasn't one to hide things about their relationship, so this must have been serious. She almost deliberately slowed her pace. Her heartbeat grew more and more intense as she followed him. Something in her gut told her this was not going to be a friendly chat.

"What's going on, Takumi?"

"You never showed up the other day."

"What?"

"A few days ago. We were supposed to meet at the mall that night. Did you forget?"

"I..." she started.

"I don't get it, Hanako. If you don't want to spend time with me, you can say so."

"That's not—"

"Then what is it? Your friend Junko knew where you were, but she wouldn't tell me."

Junko? thought Hanako, wracking her brain for any memory of an acquaintance with that name. With Takumi staring her down it was hard to think. A lump had formed in her throat. Her vision was getting blurry—she knew where this was going to go if she didn't turn it around.

"Takumi, wait...I'm sorry." She couldn't look up. "I want to tell you what's going on. I just don't know if you'll believe me."

He clicked his tongue. "So you won't tell me, then?"

"Wait, Takumi—"

"I'm through waiting. I don't want to keep tabs on you, Hanako, but I don't want you to disappear on me either. I can't afford to worry about you off doing who knows what with who knows—"

"It's not that kind of thing!" She shouted, her voice uncharacteristically raspy. She'd started to sweat.

"Whatever kind of thing it is, it seems like it's all you care about anymore. If you don't want me involved in what's important to you—"

She remembered who Junko was and cut him off with a gasp. "Wait! You can't listen to her," started Hanako. "She's not my friend! She's trying to—"

"Don't start making excuses now to get out of this, Hanako."

"I'm not! I swear, she's not my friend. She's just trying to hurt me through you!"

"Hanako, I can't believe that. Even if it was true, I wouldn't want to be involved anymore." There it was. Her heart sank. She almost felt it hit her stomach.

"Please, don't, Takumi."

“When you think you can talk to me about whatever this is about, I’ll listen. But if you want to keep secrets from me, we can’t be together.”

He didn’t let her respond before turning his back to her, eyes downcast. She wiped her cheeks with her uniform’s sweater sleeves, silently weeping.

When she moved her arm away, her eyes were narrowed, furious.

VII

Crazy On Emotion

“You got me really crazy—gone crazy for you!”

—Ace, “Crazy On Emotion”

“Where’s Ishikawa?!” She shouted, nearly stomping out of her car toward the area Witches tended to congregate.

“Hanako, wait,” called Teiko, who’d followed her here after she’d told her what happened with Takumi.

“I just want to talk to them,” lied Hanako. Her countenance hadn’t changed since she left school earlier. Her red eyes were narrow and vicious looking, like a tiger’s.

“Are you looking for us?” Ishikawa called, two of her dogs at her heels. Her usual smug expression had returned. “What could be the matter? Are you dropping out of our race?”

“Where’s Junko?” She remembered too late that Junko was one of the girls she’d raced and beaten on her winning streak. One of Ishikawa’s pets – the one who always spoke up to defend the Queen. When she realized that she realized exactly what was happening with Takumi.

Ishikawa smirked. “Junko-chan wasn’t able to make it tonight. She has a date.”

For a split-second, Hanako was stunned. She quickly recovered with a lunge at Ishikawa. “I’ll kill you!”

Lucky for Ishikawa, Teiko held her friend back. “Stop it, Hanako! That won’t do any good!”

“Lemme go!” She fought bitterly to get free, but Teiko was stronger than she appeared.

Ishikawa didn’t flinch. “This is pathetic, Sugiyama. Just because dear Takumi didn’t want you anymore, you’re acting like this? It’s not like Junko seduced him to get him to leave you. Not

yet, anyway..." Hanako was fuming. "You should have paid him more attention if you cared so much."

"You bitch! You'll regret this!"

"We'll see." She and the two walked away without another word.

Once Ishikawa was out of sight, Teiko released her surprisingly firm hold on Hanako, panting. "Save it for the race, Hanako..." she suggested.

"Feh. She's lucky you were there, or she wouldn't be able to race." Her fists were still clenched tight. "I'm going to drive."

"Don't do that now, Hanako! You aren't thinking straight!"

Hanako stopped walking, but didn't turn around. "Teiko." It was eerily calm.

"..yeah?"

"I want you to leave me alone right now. I can't be like you, always thinking about what will come next. All that will do is confuse me." She looked over her shoulder. "I'm going to go drive for a while."

Teiko didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything.

* * *

Takumi released a frustrated sigh through pursed lips. He leaned back in the cafe's booth so he could rest his head on the back of it, looking up at the spinning ceiling fan and thinking about that afternoon. What could it have been that held so much of Hanako's time and attention these days? He thought about when it first started, but the only thing he knew of around that time was that she made friends with Teiko—he doubted it was her.

"Takumi-kun?" called a somewhat familiar voice. He looked up and saw the girl he'd been talking with for the past few days, Fujiwara Junko. She was a second-year who said she'd been friends with Hanako since they were kids.

"I'm glad you showed up. I wanted to talk to you about something."

Junko smiled, oddly happy to be there. “What is it, Takumi-kun?”

“I wanted to ask what exactly Hanako has been up to. It’s bugging me that no one will tell me what’s going on.”

Junko’s smile faltered, then she made a rehearsed-looking surprised expression. “She didn’t say anything?”

“I tried to ask her about it today, but she wouldn’t budge. I couldn’t accept that she was keeping secrets, so I broke up with her. She said I wouldn’t believe her, but I am willing to believe a lot of things at this point. So, tell me. What is Hanako doing?”

“Takumi-kun, I don’t know what to say...why are you so concerned about it, if you two aren’t together anymore?”

“What? It’s not like I can just stop caring about her because I’m not dating her. She’s still my friend.” He made a skeptical face. “And yours, right? What exactly is your relationship with her?”

“Takumi-kun, why do you keep asking weird questions? I already told you, Hanako and I have been friends since elementary school.”

“She said you were out to get her. So what’s really going on, Fujiwara? Why did you contact me in the first place?”

Junko sat silent for a moment. “Takumi-kun, I just wanted to get closer to you.”

“So, what, you got me to break up with Hanako? Because you like me?”

“It’s not that simple. I do like you, which is why I agreed to do it, but—”

“‘Agreed?’ What do you mean you agreed to do it?”

She went silent again, this time for much longer. He didn’t break her train of thought. If she wanted to lie, she wouldn’t have admitted to as much as she had already.

“I was put up to breaking you and Hanako up.”

“Why? By who?”

“You want to know? Sugiyama was right—you’ll never believe it.”

“I’m tired of hearing that! What is with this secrecy!?”

“Fine, fine. I’ll tell you. The damage is done, anyway. Even if you do believe it, you won’t want to get back together with her. And even if you do, she’s too proud to accept your apology.” She pulled her phone from her purse. “Watch this.”

It was a video of one car, a red Yotoya Maximus with white stripes, racing past a pack of three others. The camera cut into the driver’s seat, and there sat Hanako. “What is this?”

“Your ex’s hobby. She’s a street racer. A good one, too. Don’t tell anyone I said this, but she’s probably the best on the asphalt right now. She has a big race coming up against a woman who has a lot of influence. That woman asked me to sabotage your relationship since we go to the same school. Headgames. If Hanako thinks about you for even a half-second while she’s on the track, she’ll lose—or worse. At those speeds, the slightest distraction can be deadly.”

He couldn’t believe what he was watching, but clip after clip played of Hanako and her car speeding past other racers. One race, it cut to a defeated Junko. “How long has she been at this?”

“Just a few weeks. Pretty amazing, huh?”

“It’s...” he set the phone down. “Not nearly as bad as you made it sound.” He stood up.

“Takumi-kun, where are you going?”

“To find Hanako.”

“She’s racing now. You won’t find her. Just stay with me. I was honest with you, right? I told you everything.” She grabbed at his hand.

Takumi flicked his wrist to get her off him. He glared at her with the kind of contempt reserved for one’s worst enemy. “Never contact me again.”

She protested, pleading for him to stay, but he ignored her. The other patrons looked at the defeated girl on her knees with a mixture of pity and confusion as he ran out the door.

* * *

Hanako sat silent in her car. Her fingers traced the outline of the key while her mind raced. She went over the afternoon's events over and over again in her head, replaying the exact second that it went wrong. It hurt to think about it. "So I won't anymore," she said to herself.

With a roar the Maximus came to life. The sensation of the rumbling racer in her hands made her feel good, like usual...but what happened with Takumi still stung. Just sitting wasn't enough of a distraction.

She was very deliberate and gentle when she drove through the parking lot. It wasn't normal for her to drive so carefully, but she was still elsewhere mentally. It was the first time she'd *ever* felt like something else mattered when she was behind the wheel. If she had sat down to ponder it, she would have known what happened with Takumi earlier for the reality check that it was, but right now all she wanted to do was feel the wind fight her momentum like usual. So why couldn't she focus?

In the blink of an eye she was at the starting line of Big Zero, the simple test track. Such a feeling—surprise that she'd gotten somewhere so quickly in her car—should have set alarm bells ringing in her head. She was so eager to get driving and leave that memory behind her that she didn't pay the nagging voice at the back of her head any heed.

The engine roared when she hit the gas. The practice track was a straight-away for while until it suddenly turned. That wasn't good enough—a straight-away meant she didn't have anything to think about on the road. So she floored it until she reached the curve, when she braked.

She swung around the curve a little faster than one might consider "safe," but no one was in the car to warn her about that and she was just concerned about getting around the curve at all. Just concerned about thinking of anything but the sad look on Takumi's face, really.

Another straightaway. The track—a test track to ensure everything about your car was operating smoothly—was a fairly simple loop where Witches tested top speeds and similar bench-

marks. Hanako thought it would be a good distraction to go for that top score, and she knew her Maximus could handle it.

She waited until she rounded the second curve to go for it. Once she was out of the curve she shifted up and hit the gas. By now, the rhythm of gear-shifting in her Maximus was second nature to her. She didn't even need to watch the odometer—she did, this time, to see if she could hit the speed record before she needed to slow herself down for the turn. She could tell from the curve's approach that she wouldn't hit it this time. Begrudgingly, she politely slowed for the turn.

"This time." She said to herself. Some of the fire had come back to her eyes where it had been extinguished before. The engine roared, sending subtle vibrations into her steering wheel. "Come on..." she commanded, shifting up and up again. It was a good pace. Her engine cried out for more—at least, that was how she always interpreted the sound of building speed.

"More, then," she said, grinning. The car sped up further, and she watched the odometer closely. It was right on the cusp of a new record. She pressed into the gas a little more...

"Yes!" she cried, triumphant. The anxiety had all been washed away with that familiar antidote of victory. With a content smile, she went to the clutch to slow down for the coming curve, ignoring the fanfare from her record-breaking lap.

There was a screech. The sound of a pop, then metal grinding on metal.

In that moment, Hanako's Hot Streak came to an abrupt end.

VIII

Adrenaline

“Fear thunders in my heart and I...and I..”

—Ace, “Adrenaline”

To call Hanako’s crash scene a gruesome spectacle would be to undersell the scale of it. The Maximus was practically embedded into the mountainside. Hanako was another story entirely. In that state it would be a miracle if she walked again, let alone drove. It was a miracle she was alive.

Teiko was so thunderstruck that she couldn’t even cry. She could barely think, her heartbeat was so loud in her ears.

The grind of the Maximus’s faulty brakes sent a grotesque chill up her spine. She was happy that Hanako earned the record and was even feeling a little better about her being on the road, but that metallic scraping sound...it was horrible. One she hoped to never hear again.

She sprinted down to the track as fast as she could. The emergency response ambulance sped past her, nearly knocking her down. From her angle, she could see everything. They tore the door off Hanako’s treasured car and pulled her from the wreckage. She was limp, eyes closed, covered in broken glass. Most exposed skin was bloody. Her legs...Maybe they were magical girls of a type, but they were still human. Teiko nearly got sick on the road, but kept running.

Finally she caught up. “Hanako!” she called. The redhead didn’t respond – she wasn’t conscious. Probably for the best. “Hanako, hold on!”

Netsu and the others came up with a fine enough cover story—she was hit by a swerving motorist on the way home from school and someone took her to the hospital right away. It might

not explain all her injuries but her family was too happy she survived to care about the details.

The first person to come to the hospital after her family was Takumi. The sight of Hanako in such a state struck him profoundly. He sat at her side and slept there, but the hospital staff insisted that he didn't stay through the school day. He hated to leave her side. What if the monitor stopped beeping?

Her father never left her side. Her mother only left to care for her brothers – it was questionable whether either ate for days. Several Witches visited her, most out of worry but a few to get a sense of satisfaction from it, Teiko was sure.

The day of the race she paid her first visit. On the way in, she passed a silent Ishikawa. The satisfied look on her face nearly threw Teiko into a rage, but she held back. Once she was in Hanako's room she greeted her parents and brought up their friendship. Hanako's mother cried into Teiko's shoulder when they hugged. Her father patted his wife's back. "We never knew our Hanako had so many close friends. It's all been very touching to see so many people who care." It was a bittersweet feeling. Teiko looked sadly at Hanako. It had been two days...she still didn't know what to do. She hated to think of herself in this situation.

On the way out, she passed Heather. They talked a little about the situation.

"I see. That's rough. The smallest distraction can be deadly at those speeds, and with a mechanical problem to boot..."

"I wish I could have done more for her..."

Finally, Teiko let it out. Her sobbing shook her whole body. Heather held her close. "It's not your fault, kid. What happened out there...that wasn't your doing. There, there."

She caught her breath and wiped her eyes dry. "What should I do?"

"What do you think you should do?"

"I still don't know. I feel paralyzed."

"What would Hanako do, if it were you in that bed?"

She sat and thought about that for a while. Heather stood and went into Hanako's room—when she left, Teiko was gone. "I guess she decided." The blonde smiled a little."

* * *

A few hours before the race was scheduled to start, Sumiko had called Teiko to her garage. The Maximus in all its broken glory had been towed there. It was a grim sight; visions of Hanako's bloody near-corpse came back to her. She shook herself out of the haunting memory. "What is it?" "I wanted to talk to you about this." She held up a small, twisted, metal object and let Teiko take a look. "What is it?"

"It was one of the Maximus's calipers. Found on the side of the road near the wreck."

"It fell off?"

"Seems that way."

"So, what does this mean?"

"This is just my opinion, now—Hanako took great care of that car. On top of that, she brought it to me for full-inspection regularly. This isn't something I would miss on the first pass, let alone taking a deep look like she made me."

"Are you suggesting that it was tampered with?"

"It's just my opinion. I don't have any evidence besides this and my gut."

Teiko was irate. "Fine, then. And what's the news about tonight's race?"

"It's still on. It won't be officially canceled unless both racers withdraw. If Hanako doesn't show, it's Ishikawa's victory."

"That's not—"

"No, it's not fair, but this kind of injury is unprecedented. Normally you all are shielded from the worst harm...Hanako was just going too fast. It's only thanks to the magic in these cars that she's alive at all."

Teiko clenched her fist.

The night of the race came. Ishikawa stood by her Dazma at the starting line, that smug grin of hers plastered on her face. She glowed in the floodlights and her white paint job reflected her like a mirror. Her expectation was a race against a distracted, lonely Hanako—a totally absent one was even better as far as she was concerned. Many thought it poor sport that she didn't withdraw, but no one spoke up. At least, not to her face.

Teiko watched with mixed emotions, mainly disgust, as Ishikawa got set to “win.”

The time until the start of the race grew shorter and shorter. Ishikawa was asked if she had any words. She said, “It’s a shame my opponent couldn’t be here. I was looking forward to racing her.”

Is she serious? Thought Teiko.

“Of course, this is how it would have turned out anyway.”

Teiko could feel her heartbeat accelerate. Ishikawa was really doing this.

“Still, it would have been good to race her before this happened. A little humility would have done her a lot of good and may have prevented the whole accident.”

Everything that Teiko stood for up to that point went out the window. This wasn't a time for patient analysis of the situation.

She vaulted the barrier, eliciting a gasp from nearby spectators. That caught the camera's attention, which perturbed Ishikawa.

“What is it?” asked the raven-haired Queen as the shorter, younger brunette approached.

Teiko shot daggers at Ishikawa. “I'll race you in Hanako's place.”

Everyone went silent for a moment. Ishikawa's face showed surprise for a second before her usual pomposity returned.

“I reject your challenge,” she said with a haughty laugh.

“Scared?”

“What? Of you?”

“Of anyone, when you can’t sabotage their car ahead of time.”

“Oh, this again? You have no—”

“You’re a coward. If you were half the driver your record suggests, you’d have accepted my challenge straight away and ‘put me in my place.’ I’m just a nobody without a single race under her belt. It should be trivial for you to humiliate me and claim your victory tonight. But you’re scared.”

Ishikawa glared at Teiko. “You won’t bait me into racing you, Nakamura.”

“Everyone is watching, Ishikawa. They’ll know you’re a coward if you reject my challenge.”

The crowd stared intently. Thanks to the interviewer, they could hear the pair’s every word. Ishikawa frowned.

“Fine. You and me. Tonight. Here. Now.”

Teiko swallowed, trying to hide it. Honestly, she didn’t expect Ishikawa to call her bluff...but it would be spitting on Hanako to withdraw now. “Fine.”

She turned away and did her best to hide the panic on her face from the audience. Her hand shook so violently when she got to her car that she could hardly open the door. As soon as it was closed, she exhaled a heavy sigh. “What have I gotten myself into?”

She sat in the seat for a long time, silent, thinking about nothing in particular. Her fingers clutched the key, still trembling though she found some comfort sitting in the Venture. A few moments passed.

Finally, she slid the key into the ignition. With a flick of her wrist, the car would come to life...she hesitated. The keychain jingled in her tremulous hand. She looked over to her passenger seat, and remembered Hanako. A second later, the engine roared to life.

She pulled up to the starting line next to Ishikawa’s TZ-9. Already, the “promoters”—Netsu and his kind, that is—had begun to take advantage of the juxtaposition between the two racers. The most talented Witch around (now that Heather was retired

and Hanako was out of commission, Teiko remarked) was staking her pride against an untested newbie with no record to speak of. Ishikawa was known for her aggressive tactics, and Teiko's inexperience allowed them to frame her as timid. To really drive home how different the two were, Ishikawa's car was white—Teiko's was black.

Netsu hovered at the starting line. "Alright, Witches and spectators. Get ready for tonight's new headline race. Witches, start your engines!" A bead of sweat ran down Teiko's forehead. *Am I going to do this?*

"On your marks!" The two pulled up to the starting line. *I can always quit here. None of them know me anyway.*

"Get set!" Ishikawa revved her engine and looked over to Teiko with a smirk. Teiko averted her gaze, but out of her peripheral she could see Ishikawa laughing at her.

"Go!" Teiko shot forward without another thought.

IX

Grand Prix

“Grippin’ my steering wheel so tight!”

—Mega NRG Man, “Grand Prix”

The difference between driving to-and-from the tracks and racing was palpable. There was a direct current from the gas pedal to the steering wheel, and she was the circuit. The gravity of the situation—especially given her opponent’s penchant for violent tactics—sobered her a bit, but the adrenaline rush of finally surging forward in her Venture never quite wore off. She tried to think about the course ahead but couldn’t remember which turns came up when. Unlike most tracks, whose names had something to do with their shape, “Ace of Spades” was useless—Heather had earned her first victory there and called it that, and it stuck.

Ishikawa was right on her tail and catching up fast. Teiko had a solid start on the first straightaway, but the tempo of a race was totally alien to her. When driving casually it’s not common to reach the higher gears at all, let alone in a couple of seconds. She managed to keep from stalling, but only barely.

The white TZ-9 edged closer and closer to her front bumper in spite of going around the outside, to the left. She looked in her side mirror and saw Ishikawa with a serious look on her face for maybe the first time. Normally she carried herself with such a pompous demeanor that Teiko was wondering if she ever took anything seriously.

She looked back at the road in front of her. The first turn, a long curve to the right, approached fast. Teiko attempted to drift in such a way that she blocked part of the road, forcing Ishikawa

to slow down, but botched the execution and just pulled an exceptionally wide, slow turn.

Ishikawa wasn't one to let such an opportunity go to waste. She let Teiko pass her while she made a much tighter turn, then punched the gas to rocket ahead. Once Teiko saw her rear bumper she realized why Hanako never gave up first place, even early on when there might be a tactical advantage to it ("I just won't screw up like that," was Hanako's reply when Teiko brought a situation not unlike the one she was now up as a hypothetical). The sight of someone's car passing yours, the humiliation of staring at her license plate...it was like she was being taunted. Mocked, even.

She swerved to the inside, Ishikawa's left, and built her way up to sixth gear. The track didn't have too many hard turns so it was easy to stay fast the whole time. Of course, this meant it was difficult to pass someone who was in front of you—anyone, let alone someone as skilled and experienced as the Queen of Mean.

The main thing keeping her out of first wasn't Ishikawa's speed, in fact – she was subtly shifting position to prevent Teiko from even having the chance to pass. It was so seamless Teiko felt like she wasn't even moving, which made her swerve more aggressively, which slowed her down...it was an effective tactic, but she sensed that it was supposed to be something an experienced racer could get around. After all, if the name of the game was just to get ahead once, the tracks wouldn't be so complex.

They rounded the second turn, another right, uneventfully. The next straight was quite long, then there was a curve left into and through a tunnel. So, she had some time to think about how to get past Ishikawa, and if she timed it right she could potentially leave a lot of pavement between herself and her opponent.

So what *was* the secret? There was no passing Ishikawa when she was paying attention to what was happening behind her—easy to do when there aren't any turns approaching or obstacles in the road. *What can I do here?* she thought as she clenched her teeth. As she approached directly behind Ishikawa and prepared to try another swerve, realization struck her.

She saw Hanako do it once, but was so impressed she didn't think about how, exactly, it happened the way it did. But she knew *what* happened back then, and that was good enough. She stopped herself from swerving, instead getting as close to Ishikawa's bumper as possible. If Ishikawa brake-checked her she could swerve out of the way and make a move, but that wasn't her plan.

Ishikawa looked back at her in the rearview mirror. There was a glint in her eye—the cold, ruthless gaze of the snake constricting her prey. Teiko locked eyes with that reflection as the two cars wore their tires against the asphalt. That was when she noticed her car settling into the slipstream of Ishikawa's slightly larger ride. She backed off a pace, keeping a note of the sweet spot she'd found.

The entrance to the tunnel approached. Teiko held her breath and tracked the tunnel's entrance, timing it in her head. Then, she nudged her car up the extra few feet she needed to catch the draft. *Perfect*, she thought as she settled in. With a flick of her wrists she shifted around Ishikawa before the latter could react, using the momentum boost to fly past her and settling in front just as the two cars passed into the darkness of the tunnel.

There was no way around Teiko while in the relatively narrow tunnel, which gave her a little time to “relax,” as much as she could while driving at 100+ miles per hour. The walls of the tunnel seemed to close in on her as she raced past them, forcing her to pay close attention to her trajectory. She tried not to think about anything but moving forward, but Ishikawa's high beams in her mirror weren't helping matters.

Other than that minor disruption, though, the time in the tunnel was the most “quiet” part of the race. She breathed deeply, watching for the starlight to appear, shining through the tunnel's exit. She noticed her hands had stopped shaking. Finally, she'd gotten somewhat used to the speeds...

* * *

“What’s happening? Where are we?!”

“You’d better grab the steering wheel or this will be a short ride, kid!” She had reflexively covered her head after the little red monster that called itself “Netsu” blinded her with a flash of light. The setting sun bathed the area in a deep orange glow, helping her eyes adjust. She wished it hadn’t. When she came to, she was behind the wheel of a rapidly accelerating car. She was rocketing forward at untold speeds and the noise of the engine overwhelmed her senses.

“O-okay!” she replied, gripping it like a vise and trying to gain control over the speeding vehicle. “Like this?”

“Loosen up a little! You’ve gotta become one with the car, don’t just drive it.”

“What does that mean?!”

He started going on about things she didn’t understand like Street Witches and races and hot blood. She was too frightened to make a reasoned response, and by the time she realized what he meant by “crossing the finish line” she was too close to stop. Thus, with another flash of light, Teiko had become a Street Witch.

“So, what do you think?”

She was hyperventilating. “What do I think? I think you almost killed me!”

“No way, no way. I knew you had it in you from the beginning. I wouldn’t have come if you didn’t.”

“No, this is wrong. You must have been meant for someone else.”

“Nuh-uh. I can see it in you. Maybe you don’t know it’s there, but the fire is absolutely dormant in you.”

“But—”

“No buts. You sealed the deal. If you want to see what it’s all about, call for me and I’ll take you there.”

* * *

A bump in the road brought her back to the present. That memory was from over a month before Hanako had first arrived. In that month Teiko did just about everything but pick a car and race—to Netsu’s chagrin. She learned which Witches were the strongest racers, who was friendly with whom, who hated whom, and so on. She’d learned who drove what car and why, which tracks were whose favorites, and just about everything there was to know – mostly, anyway, since she couldn’t get into the archives—about the world of Magical Girl Street Racing. Except how it felt to win or lose.

That was going to change tonight, one way or the other. The exit of the tunnel approached. After, there were two right turns in fairly quick succession, then a lazy left-hand curve, which was what worried her the most. She was sure that if a moment came for her to lose the lead, it was that one.

The two rights came and went. She didn’t try anything fancy to slow Ishikawa down, preferring to simply stay on the inside of the track, forcing her rival to take “the long way” to keep her own lead intact.

Then it hit her. Literally. Just after the second of the two right turns Ishikawa nicked her bumper. Teiko began to fishtail, slowing as a reflex to regain control. Ishikawa took her opportunity, sailing past the flailing Venture as the left-hand curve approached.

“Fine, then,” growled Teiko, all the trepidation in her voice gone. She quickly caught up to Ishikawa’s rear bumper, but the latter knew better than to let her have the draft this time.

Teiko, of course, knew that was coming. As Ishikawa slightly veered right to keep Teiko out of her slipstream, the latter darted to the left to get on the slightly shorter side of the track. Her bumper caught up to Ishikawa’s driver side door. She kept her distance from the side to keep from getting run off the road (and into the mountain wall). Ishikawa’s longer path caught up to her and soon the cars were at parity.

“Just a bit more...” muttered Teiko under her breath. All that stood between her and the end of the race was three turns, and

she was neck-and-neck with her opponent. Of course, the next two turns were right-handed, meaning Ishikawa would have the slight advantage of being on the inside, but there was no way Teiko was going to willingly get behind her opponent now. She floored it out of the curve, rapidly pumping the clutch and shifting gears.

Right turn number one came and went, and Teiko found herself just a quarter car length behind Ishikawa. The straight between here and the next turn was short—not a lot of time for either to speed up again. She bit her lip. If she went for an outside drift she could more easily pick up her pace. Ishikawa probably wouldn't expect another attempt after she'd failed her last one, but...she'd failed her last one. *Can I do it?*

There wasn't time to weigh her options. She felt her back tires begin to skid, heard the unmistakable screech of the rubber, and short forward out of the drift and toward the finish line. One more left turn, and victory would have been hers...but Ishikawa was no slouch. She pulled a tight drift inside the turn herself and the two were bumper-and-bumper, neck-and-neck.

She looked through her passenger side window. Ishikawa's eyes were angry, brow furrowed, and locked on the road ahead. Even if she lost, Teiko was proud to make Ishikawa take her seriously.

She grit her teeth and went for another drift. She might have knocked a filling loose, but she'd done it again and not losing her momentum was just enough for her to keep pace despite Ishikawa's own drifting.

There were seconds remaining until one of them would cross the finish line. She held her breath and, unable to watch, closed her eyes as the two vehicles darted past the checkered flag, one after the other.

* * *

She sat with her eyes closed and with her fingers white-knuckle gripping the steering wheel for a moment to just listen. The

crowd was silent for a second – a second that felt like hours. Had she lost? It felt like Ishikawa was ahead of her at the end.

Then, like someone flipped a switch, there was an uproar. She half-opened one eye to look around, then opened both when she saw the spectators cheering wildly and heading in her direction. She took a look at the large screen where the race was being broadcast and...

She won!

It took a second for her to process, but when the realization hit her she couldn't stop smiling. Finally, she came to understand the way Hanako felt. Just in time.

X

Hidden Bonus Track: Déjà Vu

“And I know it’s my time to go.”

—Dave Rodgers, “Déjà Vu”

Ishikawa threw a holy fit right after the race but the results were indisputable. She disappeared after that. Most Witches thought the shame of losing to what she would have called a “nobody” was too much for her to bear. The girls who’d taken to following her around still kept close to each other but moved away from most of their underhanded tactics and all sabotage without her influence.

There was another theory, that Ishikawa was practicing in private and would return to take her throne back. Time would tell whether this theory held any water, but for a while after the race it seemed she had permanently retired.

Hanako recovered, quicker than expected of her. When she heard news of Teiko’s victory from Heather, who visited her quite often, she started pushing herself even harder to get better. “I can’t let Teiko think she’s better than *me!*” It was hard for Heather to tell whether this was a joke, but she laughed anyway.

Hanako and Takumi stayed together throughout her recovery and beyond. Hanako’s still nascent blood-heat caused some friction between the two, but she never hid anything from him again and they made up before long every time they fought. Her family never learned about her racing—she didn’t want them to worry, once she returned.

As for Heather, once Hanako had recovered enough that regular monitoring wasn’t necessary she took to the open road. She was seldom seen in Japan, but she came back once in a while to check up on things.

Like Ishikawa, Teiko disappeared from the racing scene after that night, much to the chagrin of the organizers. What's more, she even moved schools – for unrelated reasons—and lost touch with Hanako. It was unclear why she quit racing—the more pessimistic of the remaining Witches thought The Black Knight was trying to keep a technically perfect record. Some thought she wasn't interested in racing at all and only raced against Ishikawa that night to defend Hanako's Hot Streak. Others, that she knew she couldn't match the thrill and stakes of that race again and didn't want to try. Only Teiko herself knew for sure...

* * *

Years passed. A new generation had ascended to The Top of the world of Magical Girl Street Racing. Hanako eventually came back to the scene. It seemed like she was unaffected by her injuries and absence and her record reflected that—the Hot Streak had yet to be broken. Her return rocked that world just as hard as her arrival shook the scene when she first arrived. It took some doing to earn her old reputation back, but before long she was the undisputed champion.

One evening, a black Rusabu Venture pulled up next to Hanako's red and white Yotoya Maximus. The tinted window of the black car rolled down and inside was a brunette with a bomber jacket wearing sunglasses.

She tipped them down and locked eyes with Hanako, who already knew who she was. "Care for a race?"