

Ryoga Saves Christmas

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Ryoga Saves Christmas

by [uragaaru](#)

Summary

Does what it says on the tin. Nine months after the failed wedding, Ryoga finds himself lost in a Winter Wonderland. After being rescued from hypothermia, he's asked to do the impossible: Save Christmas. But how does a directionally-challenged stubborn pig of a man save Christmas? With a friend to help, of course.

Almost titled it "P-chan Saves Christmas", but this is more Hallmark Movie than Rankin Bass claymation film.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Ryouga Hibiki was lost. Normally he would blame his curse for confusing things again, but this time, as he sat in what seemed like a middle of white tundra and a darkened sky lit only by a crescent moon, a few stars, and the wavy drapery of colored light he recognized as an aurora, he could only blame himself.

Ryouga clutched his parka more tightly. He traded some of his souvenirs from Hiroshima for it from a small village he thought was Hakodate, though they didn't know Japanese. Even with a hood lined with fluffy arctic fox fur, the sealskin parka could only shield him so much from the buffeting winds which kicked up and hit him with force. Ryouga's legs began to go numb as he walked. He thought of stopping to build an ice shelter, but the whale oil lamp he traded his Hoseki Jelly candy for was low on oil. And besides, Ryouga began to see a light in the distance. It was a bright bluish-white light that ebbed slowly, like a heartbeat. For a second, Ryouga thought he might have been seeing a mirage, but he dismissed that notion. Mirages only happen in the desert right?

With effort now, his breath exhaling in audible grunts that puffed up in clouds of steam, he made his way up a hill of packed snow and ice. The light had grown closer. It was real. His breathing grew ragged as he chanced upon a large building. A chalet? A warehouse? Ryouga had no idea. He was growing too tired to care when he approached the main gate of the structure.

"Hello?" Ryouga called in English. There was a pause. He then switched to Japanese and called out, "Is anyone home?"

Ryouga was startled when an animal burst from a pen towards the gate. It was a quadruped that seemed deer-like, with brown and white fur and large antlers on its head. It made gruff snorts which puffed out white clouds of steam in the cold.

"Who the fuck are *you*? What didya do to da boss!?" the animal asked in angry, heavily accented English. Ryouga felt dizzy all of a sudden and, upon noticing the deer's nose glow, he fell asleep from exhaustion.

Seven months ago, it was the day after the ruined wedding at the Tendo Dojo, Ryouga found himself sitting on a corner table. His pack was set to an adjacent chair. Ryouga was leaning back, arms crossed, half asleep. If he was honest, the chaos was a relief. It made the decision to walk away easier to take. He had a more difficult decision waiting back at the Unryuu farm.

"Closing time, Sugar." a kind, but tired voice said in a low voice.

Ryouga looked up and saw Ukyou. Her face bore a few small cuts and her uniform was slightly singed at the ends. *Still can't believe they went for the bombs*, Ryouga thought to himself.

"I'm surprised you opened at all after yesterday." Ryouga stood and began to stretch.

Ukyou cocked an eye, "It's business as usual, sugar. Wouldn't have it any other way."

Ryouga picked up his pack, "Really? Don't you ever need a break?"

Ukyou replied, "If I stopped working, I wouldn't make enough money to live, hon. It's my livelihood."

Ryouga nodded, "I guess we all need something to move towards, huh?" He started for the door. Ukyou watched him go before calling out, "Hey! How about an okonomiyaki for the road?"

Ryouga turned to Ukyou and replied, "I'd like that. I won't know when I'll get another square meal."

Ryouga sat at the counter and saw Ukyou perform her art. A lightly oil griddle took pork belly, batter, cabbage, into a fresh pancake. Within moments Ryouga's plate was filled with the dish, topped expertly with sauce, mayo, nori, and bonito flake.

"Thanks," Ryouga said digging in, "I suppose you're gonna stick around here, no matter what?"

"I need to give Ranchan a home when he comes to his senses!"

"What about Konatsu?" Ryouga asked, taking a large bite. As he kept eating Ukyou wiped down the griddle, scraping the burned bits off.

"Oh, Konatsu doesn't need much room, sugar. I have a spare closet I can empty out to make small bedroom. Or he can rent a room at that boarding house nearby."

Ryouga raised an eye, "Have it all figured out, huh." He finished the okonomiyaki and drank from the glass of water.

"Of course I do! You have to have a business plan! Ranchan will choose me, we'll get married, I'll run the shop and he'll train his school! Konatsu will waitress and assist me. I got it all planned out. Good plan, right?"

Ryouga stood. He gave Ukyou a shrug, "I wouldn't know. I don't really have the luxury of planning things ahead of time..." He thought of his next stop, "And plans change, Ukyou."

"Are you saying I'm wrong for thinking I can win Ranma's heart!?" Ukyou called out as he opened the door.

"No, just things never go exactly as you planned. You should keep your options open."

"Well, *of course* an aimless drifter would say that!" Ukyou yelled.

"That's all I'm good for." Ryouga said wistfully as he walked through the door... and into the bathroom. He had Ukyou lead him outside a moment later.

It was the last day of school before winter break. Ukyou however had opted to skip the day. She scored well enough on the semester exams to not have to think about make-up exams or, heaven forbid make-up classes. Granted she would probably get some alone time with Ranma that way, but... Ukyou sighed. It wasn't quite far enough in the past she could laugh about it yet. Either way, Ucchan decided that, rather than mess around on a day with nothing much to do, that she open up and try to make some money.

It was moot, as the place was deader than the chicken her foodservice company delivered. Ukyou sat by the griddle, it's heat turned low more to provide ambient heat to the dining area than for any customers at the moment. The TV she set up on one corner of the place was on mute and playing some puff piece about famous regional foods. The radio was on and currently "Last Christmas" by Wham! was playing for the third time that day.

"Ugh.... I hate the holidays," Ukyou whined.

"Oh, I think there's something nice about them, Lady Ukyo," a soft contralto voice chimed in, "If nothing else, I enjoy the New Year's Day cleaning."

Ukyou sighed, "you would Konatsu, but first we gotta worry about Christmas. You know how to defrost 100 kilos of chicken quickly?"

Konatsu shrugged, "We could ask Kasumi Tendo? I'm sure Nabiki could ask her quickly enough."

Ukyou winced at hearing Konatsu bring up the middle Tendo sister. Bad enough Akane had... Ukyou closed her eyes for a second and shook her head.

"Whatever you think could help. Otherwise, I think I may need to borrow a few tubs from the fishmonger and get a garden hose. I got to try out my idea for fried chicken okonomiyaki for the 'Christmas couples' and see if I can get *something* nice out of that damn holiday."

Konatsu replied easily, "Yes, Lady Ukyou..." Konatsu grabbed the hem of her kimono sleeves and brought her broom close to her chest, "Um, well, Lady Ukyou? Actually, speaking of Christmas..."

Ukyou tried not to visibly sigh, instead letting out a slow breath before replying, "Yes, Konatsu?"

"I know we will be busy, but... if it was at all possible. Could I have some time off, perhaps after the dinner rush? I know you planned to stay open later with karaoke and all, but maybe... Nabiki asked if I had some free time to spend together with her and..." Konatsu looked down, gripping her sleeves tightly and swaying a bit. Ukyou couldn't help but notice Konatsu face grow red as she murmured to herself.

Ukyou slumped. "Yeah, Konatsu. After the dinner rush at like eight or so, you can go and be with your girlfriend." Ukyou took a little pleasure in seeing Konatsu panic when she said girlfriend. "But I expect you back by morning prep, d'ya hear me?"

Konatsu bowed, "Yes, Lady Ukyou! Of course."

Ukyou sighed, "Glad *one of us* is going to have a good Christmas."

"I'm sorry things are not looking well for you, Lady Ukyou." Konatsu said. "Are you going to travel to see your family over the New Year?"

Ukyou let out a laugh, "HA! Not a chance. If I never see them again, it'll be too soon. *Last* thing i need is for those jackasses to be mocking me through the new year. Forget Christmas. All I want is to lay low, sell okonomiyaki and maybe, just maybe, clean the slate for the new year and maybe have something *good* happen for once in my miserable life."

Konatsu looked at Ukyou, her expression a bit sad. "I see. I suppose I can understand that feeling a little." She began sweeping again. "When I'm done here, I'll give Nabiki a call and see if she can help with our fried chicken problem, Lady Ukyou."

Ukyou returned to her slow afternoon. She flipped the channels on the TV. The radio faded out the poppy song singing

*Maybe next year (maybe next year) I'll give it to someone
I'll give it to someone special*

Ukyou sighed. She briefly considered getting a jump on Winter homework before the dinner rush.

Ryouga was awoken by a bright red light. He blinked and took a gasp as four faces bared down on him. It was four of the deer he thought he saw before falling asleep. As Ryouga slowly sat up, Ryouga realized someone had dragged him to a large empty warehouse and covered him with a blanket. He also realized that light came from the nose of one of the four deer. His brain began recalling everything he could recall before passing out.

"What kind of petting zoo is this?" Ryouga mumbled.

"Oh, A wise guy, eh?" the deer with the glowing nose yelled, "What did ya do to da boss man, fat boy!?"

"Fat boy?" Ryouga asked, "Is that slang? My mom never taught me much slang. And I'm only like 70 kilos!"

A second deer, tall and broad-shouldered said, in a deep baritone, "Okay Rudy, calm down. We're not gonna get anywhere if you hound the poor kid."

"But how in the *heck* did he find the Workshop. I didn't even get a blip on the scanner until he was less than 2 clicks away!" Another deer said, in a slightly nebbish tone. He wore what looked like pince-nez glasses sized to his face and snout.

"Whatever dude, maybe like, he's here to help us find the big guy!" A fourth deer suggested in a relaxed, hopeful voice. He walked up and lightly poked Ryouga with his small stubby antlers.

"Hey. I'm Blitzen, bro. What's your name?"

"Bli-tzen?" Ryouga said slowly, wincing slightly at his pronunciation, "I'm Ryouga Hibiki. I... where am I? Are you cursed, too? Did a wizard awaken you or something? Oh god! The snow and talking animals... I'm not in Narnia, am I?" Ryouga asked panicked, "I can't go back there. That pompous lion will fucking kill me!"

"Jesus tap dancing Christ," The tallest deer mumbled, "You're at the North Pole."

"North Pole?" Ryouga looked confused.

"You know, snow, Reindeer, Christmas?"

Ryouga scratched the back of his head, "Christmas? Like going on on a d-date with a cute girl or eating Kentucky Fried Chicken and cake with family?"

"Dash, he's *Japanese*. " The bespectacled reindeer said, "He'd only recognize Santa if he was crucified at a shopping mall, probably."

Ryouga stood finally and gave that reindeer an angry glare. "Hey, don't make fun of me! I know about Santa Claus! He got me a bike when I was seven! Well, mom said it was Santa, anyway. We had a tree and everything like Mom had when she was a kid in New York!"

"Okay, well, does any of this strike you as familiar then?" The bespectacled reindeer asked, gesturing around the room with his eerily symmetrical antlers. Ryouga saw garlands of mistletoe. Red and green wrapped boxes with bows on them and, with an irritated look, a reindeer with glowing nose.

"Um... Is this Macy's?"

"Oh, I'm gonna beat his ass from 'ere ta McMurdo Station, Comet!" The glowing reindeer said, scratching a hoof on the concrete floor."

"Rudy! Chill the hell out for one second!" The tall reindeer said. "Look, we should be more direct. This is Santa's Workshop on the North Pole. We're Santa's reindeer. Well half of 'em anyway. Vixen and her gang are out looking for Santa. I'm Dasher. That's Comet," Dasher motioned to the reindeer in glasses, "Blitzen you already know," and on cue Blitzen gave Ryouga something approximating a smile, and the pissy one who maybe isn't as famous as he thinks he is, that's Rudolph. Rudy for short."

Ryouga slowly nodded. "So... what's going on that gotten everyone weirded out?"

"Well," Dasher looked to Comet, "You wanna explain it?"

Comet fixed his glasses again. "Okay well, about ten days ago, right when the production was at its peak throughput, Santa gets an email from someone. He wouldn't say from who or what it said, but he grabbed his 'chopper' and left."

"Chopper?" Ryouga asked. "Can you operate a helicopter in this weather?"

Blitzen let out a laugh. "Haaaaaah. Nah, dude. Santa rides a Honda CB750 he, like, got enchanted to fly." Blitzen piped up. "After Christmas, he and the missus used ta go down to Cabo to chill out."

"Well, that being the case," Comet said, "He-he hasn't come back yet. And Christmas is in two days! He's gotta get back here by tomorrow night or... or..."

"Or we're fucked sideways," Rudolph interrupted. He walked up and moved his glowing nose towards Ryouga's face. "Who do you work for!? Walt Disney? Nah.. Comet says yer Japanese... NamcoBandai!?"

Ryouga shielded his eyes from the light. "I don't work for anyone! I just... I lost my way," Ryouga sighed, "Look, if I offered to help you find Santa, will you get off my back?"

Rudolph took a few steps back, his hooves echoing on the floor. "Well, how d'ya think you can help us."

Ryouga flexed an arm. "I'm Ryouga Hibiki! I'm the strongest martial artist in the world. If Santa is kidnapped or in trouble, I can break him out."

The four deer walked away from Ryouga to confer with each other.

"Well fellas, what do you think?" Dasher asked

Comet replied, "Well the others haven't turned anything up and, while I'd normally advocate one of us stay put at the monitoring station... We can get Herbie to keep an eye on it and take up the human's offer."

Rudolph sniffed the air, his nose blinking, "I dunno... somethin's fishy 'bout all this. I don't trust the bastard."

Blitzen shook his head. "Dude, take a chill pill, or like, I got a few benes around if that'd calm you the hell down."

Rudolph got in his face. "Oh, I bet you'd love it if we all fuckin' calmed down, you white-tailed dopehead!"

"Hey Hey Hey!" Dasher broke them up with his antlers, "Cool it, everyone. All in favor of going out to a search party?"

"Aye," Comet said.

"Hell yeah, bro!"

"Rudy?" Dasher asked.

The light in Rudolph's nose dimmed. "Ah, fuck it, I get to laugh at you all if I'm right and Christmas gets fucked."

"Okay, then it's settled. Comet, get the human acquainted with the sleigh and controls. Blitzen, Rudy, let's harness up!"

Comet came back to Ryouga who was presently sifting through his pack. He pulled out a bit of beef jerky, which was still cold enough to be more of a meatsicle. Ryouga sighed and snapped off a piece and shoved it into his mouth.

"Um, uh... Ryouga, right? I, uh, I've been asked to escort you to the sleigh and do a basic tutorial."

"Sleigh?" Ryouga looked confused.

Comet blinked, "Well... it's the thing you'll be riding. Normally Santa uses it and we pull it."

Ryouga nodded, "Ah, a *sori* !"

Comet began walking out of the warehouse. "No need to apologize. Your English is quite good, actually..."

Ryouga blinked and then moved to follow Comet. He was led down what felt like a maze of metal and wooden corridors.

"Where are we?" Ryouga asked.

"Um, I'm just leading you to the loading dock. Why are you looking that way, "Do-do you need to use the restroom?"

Ryouga looked at the door again and he opened it revealing a half bathroom with a toilet and sink.

"Errr... I'm good." He turned and walked closer to Comet. They came upon a room that was like an extra large garage. In the middle of the room, in shiny gleaming red painted wood, black patent leather, and silver steel rails, as the sleigh. The reindeer were harnessed to it, Rudolph at the lead, Dasher behind him, and Blitzen in the back. Comet walked up and began strapping into the reins, between Dasher and Blitzen.

"Oh!" Comet said, "You'll find a fur suit in the closet by the sleigh. Should be a bit warmer than what you were wearing. And less stinky, to boot!"

Ryouga blinked and, for a second, bent his head down to smell his armpits in worry. He walked out the closet and opened it. Hung on a sturdy hanger, as a red, fur lined suit, thermal pants, red fleece pants, black boots, and a red triangular cap, with a poof of fur at the top, which weighted it down.

Ryouga turned back to the reindeer. "A Santa Suit? Are you kidding me?"

Rudolph's nose glowed bright red, "OH! Look at the fuckin' fashionista over heah! Put on the fuckin' suit and let's go! We got 12 hours ta find da boss before all hell breaks loose!"

"Ugh. Fine. Faster I do this, faster I can get back..." Ryouga sighed. Where was he trying to go to anyway? As he started putting on the clothes he chewed through that question. *All I've been thinking about is where I didn't wanna be. Avoid the Tendo Dojo, Avoid the Unryuu farm. Served me well so far until I started to freeze to death... I wish I had somewhere to belong to, just a warm house and a kind—*

"You finished there, tubby?" Rudolph yelled.

"Rudy! Stop instigating shit with him!" Dasher yelled.

"Yeah, Yeah. One sec. These boots are a bit small." Ryouga said, tugging the large boots over his pants. Ryouga tightened the wide patent-leather belt and looked at the mirror. He forwent the hat and , his yellow bandanna clashing aside, he looked pretty good all told.

"All right. I'm good to go. You'd think it's be bigger. I thought Santa was tall and fat?"

Dasher replied, "Well he did go on Atkins a few years ago and lost like 80 pounds... But actually the suit is made to fit the wearer. It's magic, you know?"

Ryouga was taken aback a bit as he entered the sleigh. "Oh, that's convenient." He picked up the reins and said, "Okay, so what do I do?"

"All you gotta do is, like, hold on to the reins and, like think of where you wanna go. We got the horsepower!" Blitzen said, before correcting himself, "I mean, like the reindeer power."

Comet added, "Yes, well. I installed a radar system that should pick up Santa's signal when we get within 100 kilometers. Oh and there should a button for the loading bay doors!"

Ryouga looked to his left and saw, indeed an old-fashioned radar screen made up of a green console with a green line that swept the screen in a gridded circle. Above it was a more modern LCD screen with a map of the Earth. Next to it, was a small plastic box with a red and green button. Ryouga pressed the green button. With a click and whirr of an electric motor, the front doors of the loading bay began to open.

"All right dude! We're off!"

"Okay everyone, just stay frosty. We'll take this as methodically as possible."

"Fuckin' A. When we find Santa, I'm gonna give the fat man a piece of my mind."

"Just tell us where to go, Ryouga, and we'll lead you there!"

Ryouga looked down at the map of the globe and gulped. *Where the hell am I?* He thought as the reindeer, along with the sleigh they pulled, took off and headed southwards.

An hour later, they had circumnavigated the globe... vertically across the Pacific Ocean, over Antarctica, and over the Eastern Atlantic. When they grazed the Eastern Icelandic coast, Rudolph yelled.

"Where we goin', fat boy!? We're just fuckin' around on the ocean!"

"That's not true, Rudy!" Comet replied. "We can cross of New Zealand, most of Francophonic East Africa, Southern Europe and the UK and Ireland... I think. We sometimes get false positives on the scope cause of 'Father Christmas'."

Ryouga looked at the globe and panicked, "Okay um, right then?" And pulled the reins to the left.

"That's not riiiiiiight!" Dasher yelled as they swerved towards a westerly direction.

"Okay, So now we can go check China, right?"

"Um, like, isn't that back that way?" Blitzen asked.

They soared over Canada. Ryouga pointed down and said, "See that's Beijing! I'd know that dome anywhere!"

"That's Vancouver, numbnuts!" Rudolph yelled as they zoomed westward "Were you born this stupid or did you have to work at it!?"

"Hey! Don't lay this on me! You're the ones making me try to find something when I can't even—" Ryouga covered his mouth.

"Can't even... what are you talking about?" Dasher asked.

"Is this a bad time to admit I was at the North Pole because I got lost trying to find my house?" Ryouga asked sheepishly.

"WHAT!? That's it I'll fuckin' gore your guts out and let 'em sprinkles all over Upper Mongolia ya fruitcake!" Rudolph turned his body towards the sleigh.

"Rudy, no! You're gonna imbalance the whole array!" Dasher yelled out.

"Do I look I fuckin' care? I was right 'bout this asshole! He's a goddamn saboteur!"

"Wait, Rudolph!" Comet yelled from his place, behind Dasher. "If you disrupt the weight array, we'll stall and well, to put it mildly, we lose all of our altitude at a fast enough rate to kill us!"

Rudolph moved, undeterred. "Then, I'll take the bastard out with me!" The sled and reins harnessed to the reindeer began rocking violently.

"Aw jeez man." Blitzen frowned and closed his eyes. "I shoulda taken Dramamine if I know we'd be rockin' around like a custom van in '78!"

The sleigh and reindeer suddenly dropped 10 meters and stopped. They hung in the air over a large metropolitan city set against a bay to the east. Ryouga felt his heart sink as the sleigh seem to go over an invisible precipice.

"Ah, fuck me," Rudolph muttered as they began falling from the sky rapidly towards the city below.

Ukyou lay in bed, unable to sleep. She looked at her bedside alarm clock. It flashed '2:30 AM' in bright red LED numbers.

"Ugh... This stinks." She looked up at her blank ceiling. Two years in in this little town in the middle of Tokyo and what did she have to show for it. A restaurant that was successful enough to keep the lights on and probably support her during college, but that was it. After it was painfully obvious she lost the Ranma derby, there wasn't much in the way of a social life. And now, even Konatsu was moving on without her.

"What is with the Tendos? Next thing I'll hear Kasumi's dating Tsubasa and then every boy/girl I've shown interest in will have been claimed by them..." She shook her head and let out a muffled groan in frustration. "Ugggggh, I'm being a bitch... I hate Christmas. And Valentine's Day. And wishing people happy anniversaries. And just acknowledging people are happier than I am."

She flopped her hands on her face. "I wish there was someone around I could talk to..." She turned over in bed and looked out at her small alleyway window, noting it was catching just a corner of moonlight.

"Wonder whatever happened to Ryouga?" Ukyou asked. "Been six months since... his luck, he's probably happy with someone too. Probably some sweet girl who isn't a horrible weirdo like me."

Ukyou closed her eyes and tried to settle her brain for a long winter's nap.

~~CRAAAAAAAAAASHHHSHHHSHHHSHHHSHH!!!~~

Ukyou shot up in her bed when she heard the clatter from the alley. She sprang from her bed, still hearing the echoes of alleyway trashcans and groans of pain.

"What the hell!?" She yelled as she grabbed her coat, battle spatula, and wooden geta and walked out the back of her restaurant. Ukyou expected to see something different. A crashed car, horny alley cats fighting, hell Ranma having a late night fight with Pantyhose Taro.

She didn't expect to see four deer piled on each other moaning in pain along with a toppled over sleigh and, as she slowly walked towards him, Ryouga Hibiki splayed out in a red Santa suit, groaning.

Ukyou crouched down in front of her friend and asked, slowly, "Ryouga?"

Ryouga grasped his head and, after a moment to breath and groan once more, he slowly opened one of his eyes and murmured, "Ukyou... what are you doing in San Francisco?"

"This is Tokyo, moron," Ukyou said, "What in the hell is going on? It's almost three in the morning!" She pointed to the reindeer, who were finally coming to ans standing on shaky hooves, and at the sleigh they were hitched to.

"And what the hell is this? Did you *steal* Santa's sleigh or something!?"

"Ow! Stop yelling at me!" Ryouga grabbed his head at the temples. He whispered pointedly, "I didn't steal it! The reindeer made me take it to help them find Santa!"

Ukyou looked at Ryouga a moment and, after a beat, slapped herself. Ryouga looked horrified for a second before Ukyou clicked her teeth.

"Damn, I thought I finally fell asleep," Ukyou said.

The reindeer got back up on their feet.

"Everyone okay?" Dasher called out.

"I think so... I'll probably feel that tomorrow, though."

"Dude, I'm just glad we didn't like break any limbs. Don't wanna end up like Nestor the Donkey..."

Rudolph worked himself out of his reins and stomped over to Ryouga. "Hey Fat Boy! I ain't done with you yet." the reindeer made it a point to shine his nose as bright as he could and got in the lost boy's face.

Ukyou looked confused and asked Ryouga, "Did he just talk? In English?"

Rudolph turned to Ukyou, smelling her briefly with his red nose flashing like a strobe light. The reindeer huffed, "Oh, I see! You wanted ta see your girl instead of save Christmas to all the kids in the world! I hope you're happy you monster."

"What!?" Ryouga turned to Rudolph. "I'm not dating Ukyou! She's just a friend!"

"Rudy! Calm the hell down, this is your fault for getting agitated!" Dasher yelled.

"Did he just ask if I was *dating* you!? You better do some explaining, Hibiki!" Ukyou replied before staring oddly at Rudolph.

"Okay!" Ukyou said in accented English, "You all. Inside! We talk!" She pointed at the back door of Uchans before saying, "Wait. I open... other door. Bigger so..." She sighed and changed back to Japanese, "Ugh. Ryouga? Tell 'em I'm opening the front of the restaurant so they can get inside."

Ryouga nodded and waved them over. "Look guys, this is Ukyou Kuonji. She's gonna let us in. I'll explain things to her."

Rudolph replied, "No fuckin' way! We already shouldn't be out here lettin' humans in on the whole bag. Right the sleigh and let's get back lookin'!"

Ryouga sighed, "I trust Ukyou. And... well I'm only going to mess it up if I try again."

Ryouga led the four reindeer around the restaurant and slid open the door.

"Okay Ukyou, we're here."

Ukyou popped up from behind the griddle, which she turned on. "One moment. I don't have the heat on and, knowing you Ryouga, you're probably hungry."

"Well, maybe a little but..." Ryouga paused as his stomach rumbled.

"Woah, nice place," Blitzen said, "Has like a cool diner vibe."

Ryouga said, "Just relax a moment, okay? I'll try to explain everything to Ukyou."

Ryouga sat at the counter and whispered, "I'm sorry about this. I know this is kind of weird."

Ukyou shook her head as she gathered batter ingredients together. "Sugar, this is Furinkan. Is this more or less weird than when Herb, Lime, and Mint rolled into town and you three got your curses locked?" She set down a glass of water to Ryouga.

"Okay, less weird." Ryouga took a sip of water as he gathered his thoughts. "I've been kind of lost the last couple of months. I ended up in this really snowy place, but I found this large cabin and passed out. When I woke up I found those guys," he pointed back at the reindeer, "They're Santa's reindeer! And Santa's missing? So they asked me to help find him, but..."

Ukyou slapped her forehead with a spatula, "You!? Find someone missing? Ryouga, you can barely find your own butt with two hands and a map!"

"I'm not that bad, Ukyou!" He groaned. "Anyway, we were looking around lost and... well things happened and we fell out of the sky."

"And into my back alleyway. Just like you, sugar." Ukyou let out a small chuckle.

"It wasn't on purpose, Ukyou. I've been trying to avoid Furinkan."

Ukyou muttered as she placed a few strips of squid on the oiled griddle, "Oh... yeah. I guess this town has too many bad memories."

Ryouga blinked, "No it's... I'm just trying to give certain people space." He sighed, "I don't know how you do it. Maybe 'cause... hey, now that I think about it, where's Konatsu?"

Ukyou gave a dark look to Ryouga, "She... she's with her girlfriend."

"Wait, girlfriend? I thought you n'..." Ryouga trailed off as he saw Ukyou turn to intently focus on pouring the okonomiyaki batter on the griddle.

Ukyou shook her head, "I had my head in the clouds hoping Ranchan would change his mind. I knew she liked me, but... maybe it's for the best. Not good to mix work and love, you know?"

"Aw, jeez, that sucks Ukyou..." Ryouga

"What about the farm girl? Akemi?"

"Akari. Yeah... that kind of went bad. She's a nice girl and I liked her, but... it just got weird being around all those pigs when I turn into one, you know?" Ryouga asked. "So it's just the restaurant right now?"

Ukyou shrugged. "It keeps the lights on. Once graduation happens, I may take a vacation and go off to hone my skills. I've been slacking on my martial arts.... You?"

"Dunno. Didn't have any plans aside from staying away from people for a while... Maybe in a year or two I can go back and challenge Ranma to a fight without it being awkward between me and Akane? I don't really have much going on otherwise..."

"Hey, loverboy! What the hell's goin' on!?" Rudolph yelled in English. "Stop flirtin' with your girlfriend! We have a mission."

Ryouga turned around and yelled back, "I already told you, Ukyou's just a friend, okay!? I'm getting to it!"

"Jeez," Comet hushed Rudolph, "They were having a moment, too." The reindeer adjusted his glasses with a hoof and then walked up to the counter and turned to Ukyou, saying, in halting Japanese, "I'm sorry. Rudolph-san is a little rude."

Ryouga blinked, "You speak Japanese?" He asked in English.

Comet looked away and replied in Japanese again, "Just a little. I'm Comet. The tall one is Dasher. The rude one is Rudolph, and that's Blitzen..."

"Buri...tzen?" Ukyou repeated.

Ryouga sighed, "Well, I guess I have *that* going on. I promised to help them find Santa. That's why I'm dressed like this and everything..." He grabbed his glass and finished his water. "I just don't know how I'm gonna find someone that doesn't want to be found."

Ukyou considered a moment as Ryouga sat there, brooding. She flipped the okonomiyaki onto a plate and served it to Ryouga.

"Well that's easy enough, sugar. I'll help you."

"Wait, what?" Ryouga turned to Ukyou.

"Yeah, I mean Christmas is tomorrow right? You don't have a lot of time! I'll leave Konatsu a message. She can handle things. She was gonna take Christmas off tomorrow to be with Nabiki so it's only fair I get a day off, too."

"I... are you sure?" Ryouga asked again, but Ukyou busied herself pouring four more okonomiyaki onto her griddle.

"Sure, I'm sure! I never get to go on capers anymore!" Ukyou replied.

Ryouga looked at his okonomiyaki, a bit fascinated by the dancing bonito flake. He also noticed that she wrote "Don't be an idiot!" in okonomiyaki sauce and underlined it in mayo.

Ryouga turned around in his stool and said, "Okay, Ukyou says she'll help us find Santa. She should be able to navigate."

"Oh, that's great!" Dasher said.

"I think she's also making you a snack."

"Well, um..." Comet began, "this time of year, we normally survive on the moss and lichen from our hooves... but we won't turn down a meal!"

Ryouga frowned a bit before turning to Ukyou, "Add some mushrooms onto theirs, okay?"

As the reindeer sat around a table, enjoying their okonomiyaki Ryouga went upstairs with Ukyou. He stood outside her room as she changed into her winter gear.

"Thanks for coming... I'm still a bit surprised you'd want to come along," he said a bit loudly, "I know I'm usually a bother."

"Please Ryouga, you've come to my place in worse shape. Remember that time I found you half dead in your curse and thought you got crushed by my freezer? Or when you got beaten up by Ranchan after that stupid koi rod of yours. I'm surprised you were able to walk again the next day."

Ryouga gulped, "Yeah, well... thanks anyway."

"So what's the deal with Santa being missing, anyway? Someone didn't kidnap him or... oh my, nobody kidnapped Santa, did they!?" Ukyou asked, half joking before her eyes widened

in panic.

Ryouga shrugged. "I don't think so? The reindeer said he just left the North Pole like a week and a half ago, but he didn't say where he was going to. They were holding down the place, but they need Santa to do the actual Christmas. I kind of showed up in the North Pole and since I'm a human with thumbs and stuff, they dragged me into it."

Ukyou stepped out of her room, dressed in a puffy purple down coat, black fleece tights, gloves, and a pink scarf "Well... did you ask anything about what reason Santa would have taken off?"

Ryouga looked at Ukyou and, for a second was a bit speechless. "You look... different." Ryouga said.

Ukyou looked down. "Oh. Yeah, I didn't have a lot of winter stuff, but I went with Konatsu to buy a new coat. I guess I shouldn't have let her pick the color, huh?"

Ryouga shook his head, "No! I mean, it looks good. It, um, makes you look like a girl."

Ukyou blinked and adjusted her scarf on her face. "Yeah. I, I kind of am a lot of the time, Ryouga. What's with you?" She noticed Ryouga nod dumbly and sighed, smacking him lightly. "Now's not the time to be a dumbass, sugar. You have reindeer counting on you." Ukyou grabbed the white fur collar of Ryouga's Santa Suit and dragged him downstairs.

When they got downstairs, Comet and Blitzen were hanging around Ukyou walked over to put on her boots. She was a little surprised when Comet spoke to her again in Japanese.

"Oh, um, Kuonji-san, thank you for the meal. It was delicious."

"Oh. You're welcome, sugar. And just call me Ukyou. Sorry my English is so poor."

Comet shook his head, "It's okay. We'll do our best!"

Blitzen interrupted in English. "Tell her that Japanese pizza stuff was pretty good, Comet!"

"I said it's 'konomiyaki'."

"Whatever, weeb."

Ryouga put a hand to his face. "Where are the others?"

"Oh!" Comet replied to Ryouga. "They're righting the sleigh and getting it ready to take off. What about you guys?"

Ukyou called out in English, "I'm ready to help. Ryouga will translate for me. Okay?" She went behind the counter to grab a small thermos and filled it with some tea she started boiling for Ryouga.

Ryouga spoke to Comet. "She'll manage the sleigh. If anything's happened to Santa, I can kick some ass." He slammed his fists together before noticing Ukyou holster her battle

spatula over her coat. "Well, Ukyou can probably kick their asses, too," he added as there was an audible 'shink' when the spatula was holstered.

With only a bit more rustling and knocking over of trashcans, the sleigh took off once more into the early morning sky. The headed south-west, seeing as they were starting off from Japan and aimed at making lazy S shapes up and down the planet, making sure to hit up large cities Across the continents. After Australia, Indonesia and the rest Southeast Asia, China, and the Indian Subcontinent, they made their way around Russia. Back south, they crossed off Central Asia and the Middle East before checking Western Europe and down through Eastern Africa and the Sub-Saharan part of the continent.

As they cruised past Soweto, Ukyou leaned back and sighed. "Well that's pretty much everything in this hemisphere. My shoulders are stiff from looking down at this screen." Ukyou brought a hand to rub her neck but stopped when she felt Ryouga's large, strong hands rub her right shoulder, right where it met her neck. She let out a relieved sigh.

"Well aren't you a gentleman, sugar." She smiled. "Thanks,"

Ryouga blinked, finally realizing what he was doing. He froze, "I-I'm sorry, I just wanted to help cause you're doing a lot and—"

"Keep going, sugar. I appreciate the attention."

"I-I, uh, um, okay..." Ryouga said, weakly as he resumed rubbing her shoulder. "Are you sure this is okay? I know I kind of started without asking, but I mean, it's kind of..."

"You're my friend, Ryouga. I trust you..." She looked at Ryouga and saw his face seemed to resemble a cherry tomato. "Now do the other one, would ya, sugar?" Ukyou requested, raising her left shoulder for emphasis.

Ryouga swallowed the lump in his throat and moved his hand around Ukyou to massage her left shoulder.

"Thanks. Seriously. I haven't had a good rubdown in ages. Nabiki convinced Konatsu she should charge for her work. I don't really have the money for that kind of luxury."

"No problem..." Ryouga relaxed a bit and sighed. After a bit he took his hand away and grabbed the reins again.

"Need a massage yourself?"

Ryouga sat up straight. "Uh, no.. I'm, I'm good."

Ukyou shook her head, "Typical. You know you try too hard to be this stoic lone wolf. Trust me, sugar. I know from experience. That was the kind of guy I was, too."

"Hmm?"

"Back in middle school, when I was living full time as a guy. I kept people at arm's length. Only weirdos like Tsubasa tried to get in. It was easier to stay hidden as a guy, but it was pretty lonely, always being on the outside, looking in."

"... I'm not trying to do that. I just... I stopped wanting to feel like a side character in my own life. That's why I got lost like I did. I was just a rival or an idiot and I got to a point where I didn't like who I was, I didn't even know who I was anymore."

"I get that, Ryouga. I was one of "the fiancées" after Ranchan and Akane. There was a point maybe where it was equal but, after the cave or maybe when you all came back from China..."

"It was them and the rest of us."

"Yeah. You were the smart one for just leaving. I tried holding on... I deluded myself until I got a bad wake-up call and... I'm sorry. I yelled at you the day after the wedding."

Ryouga shook his head, "Nah. Don't be. I don't think it was bad you had a plan, Ukyou... I mean I was off to tell a girl I gave up Akane to be with that I couldn't really be with her either. We've both messed up in our own ways."

Ukyou suggested, "Well no time like the end of the year to clean the slate, right?"

Ryouga nodded blankly. "I guess? I hadn't really thought of it like that." He turned back to the sky in front of them, "So... I guess We're gonna try heading towards... What's west of Africa, Kanagawa?"

Ukyou sighed. "You are not that bad, are you?"

Ryouga paused. "Is it Osaka?" Ukyou put a hand to her face.

Ryouga laughed, "I'm kidding. I know we're going to Hawaii, Uk—"

There was a loud thump. Comet turned back and asked Ukyou in Japanese, "Are you okay, Ukyou-san?"

Ukyou responded in kind, sheathing her battle spatula. "I am now. Just had to teach Ryo-chan here a lesson."

Ryouga cradled the back of his head, "Ow.... jeez Ukyou, you didn't have to..." Ryouga trailed off. *Ryo-chan*? He thought to himself as he gathered the reins once more.

They spent another hour combing through South and Central America to no avail. They brought the sleight up the eastern seaboard of North America and found nothing. As they turned westward, they changed heading to pass through Chicago when they heard a faint blip.

"Hey! I got something!" Ukyou said. She pointed towards the North. "That way!" Ryouga pulled the reindeer towards where she pointed.

"We're getting warmer... well closer to the big guy!" Ryouga corrected himself.

"Thank fuckin' Christ!" Rudolph yelled. "Even my fur wasn't helping stop the shrinkage."

"Ew," Ryouga muttered.

"What did he say?" Ukyou asked.

Ryouga shook his head. "Trust me, you don't wanna know."

The sleigh slowly lowered in altitude as it slipped northward past Chicago and, further north still, past Milwaukee. The ground below them was white with newly fallen snow. In the air, Ukyou looked up and saw flecks of snowflakes contrasted against Ryouga's jet black hair. The signal from the radar grew stronger and louder until Ukyou pointed at a tall, white building.

"There! It's coming from that building..." Ukyou and Ryouga looked at it, trying to make out the words from their distance

"Hey That's a hospital!" Dasher announced, shocked.

"St. Nicholas Hospital," Comet read the lit sign on the side of the building slowly. "Huh. What are the odds?"

"Aw, bummer." Blitzen said, "Hope the big guy ain't goin' to that party in the sky yet."

Ukyou said to Ryouga, "I think we can land on the roof there without being noticed." Ryouga nodded and slowly brought the sleigh down on the rooftop of the attached parking garage, the rails of the sleigh and the hooves of the reindeer muffled by the snowfall

Ryouga and Ukyou got off the sleigh and stretched their limbs.

"Jeez," Ukyou said, "I think my foot fell asleep..."

"So what now?" Ryouga asked. "This place is huge. Santa could be anywhere."

"I dunno about 'we' fat boy," Rudolph huffed. "We reindeer can't exactly go around a hospital looking for the boss man. That what people like you are for."

Ryouga sighed and turned to Ukyou, who looked unsure after Rudolph's profanity filled, heavily accented English.

Ryouga said to her, "They want us to go find Santa in there." He held a hand to his chin thinking aloud. "Two people, especially foreigners, just wandering around aimlessly? That'd be pretty suspicious."

"So, what?" Comet asked Ryouga. "We just sit here and hope Santa just walks out the front door?"

"This ain't the time ta be be sittin' on our asses!" Rudolph yelled.

"Let me think, okay!?" Ryouga yelled back.

Ryouga crouched down, resting his back on the red sleigh. He muttered to himself, "How the hell am I supposed to know what to do. Usually the other guy is the one waiting for *me* to show up. I've never been the person doing the waiting."

"Ryouga!" Ukyou called out. "I think I have an idea." Ryouga stood up to see Ukyou holding a thermos in her hand. She popped open the out the lid and held it upside down like a cup. With a free hand, she packed it half full of excess snow before opening the thermos bottle and pouring some steaming liquid in it.

Ukyou turned to face Ryouga and smiled. "Two people might be suspicious, but one person plus her pet is easier! Plus P-Chan can get to places I can't!"

Comet looked at Ryouga and asked, in English, "Who's P-Chan?"

Ryouga took a step away from the sleigh, "H-Hey Ukyou! L-Let's not be hasty here! I mean there's got to be anot—" Ryouga was interrupted as Ukyou sent the cup flying at him with the help of a throwing spatula. The cold liquid hit Ryouga dead in the face and the curse triggered.

"Bweee~" Ryouga, in pig form seemed to finish his sentence with something of a porcine sigh. He noticed he still wore the Santa suit, it having changed size to fit his much smaller form.

"Holy shit! Fat boy turned into a Christmas Ham!" Rudolph said with a laugh.

Ryouga turned and bent his hind legs to jump at Rudolph but was startled when he felt human arms scoop him up. Ryouga wriggled in her arms a moment before he felt Ukyou bring him to her chest where he froze again.

"Hah. I knew that's why Akane did it," Ukyou whispered to Ryouga as she brought the little pig close. "I don't blame you, though. She only looked small next to Ranchan and Shampoo."

Ryouga felt a bit floaty for a moment nestled between Ukyou's arms and her sizable chest *oh, it's like I'm being held by a girl... wait. I am being held by a girl. But it's Ukyou. This is embarrassing! But she is pretty cute right now... better than being eaten by a wolf or a large owl.*

"Hey Ryouga. Still here?" Ukyou asked. "I'm gonna take your pack inside, get in and hide."

Ryouga grunted in assent, "Bwee." Ukyou set him down next to his open pack and Ryouga jumped inside, raising his head so he could peak from the top flap.

"Okay! I'll see you in a while," Ukyou announced to the reindeer as she ran to the roof door and began descending the parking garage.

Inside the hospital, Ukyou ducked into the gift shop. She casually walked around seeing the bouquets of bright flowers, teddy bears, and cards. She paused and saw a teddy bear dressed in a Santa suit not too different from what Ryouga wore. Ukyou smiled to herself.

"Doing okay in there, P-Chan."

"...bwee..." Ryouga oinked in a way that Ukyou was pretty sure was meant to be sarcastic.

Ukyou rolled her eyes and whispered, "Okay, okay. I just wanted to not be too obvious we're looking for Santa."

"Bwee."

"I know, we're probably the only non-white people in this building. And you're cute little P-Chan right now," Ukyou giggled. She felt Ryouga rustle in the pack a bit and she said, "I'm sorry. I forget that's still a sore point with you. You are pretty cute like that though." Ukyou found herself at the end of a hallway with a directory pointing towards different places towards the left and right. The signage, however, was all in English that was a bit hard to read through, with only a few helpful symbols to show where places like the bathroom or cafeteria was. Ukyou scratched her head, struggling to figure out which way she should go. She took off the back pack and held it in front of her, opening the top flap a bit.

"Which way to the waiting area, Ryouga?" Ukyou asked. After a second she felt the piglet push the bag to the left. She took a step to the left then paused, before going towards the right.

"Bwee!"

Ukyou hissed back at Ryouga, "I know But you understand English, not directions!" Ryouga huffed inside the backpack as Ukyou approached what looked like a large waiting area. There was a TV playing on old Black and White movie at a low volume and a vending machine advertising coffee off to one side. It was pretty empty.

Ukyou looked around, but there was no one waiting. She eyed a nurse or an orderly quietly making rounds, typing onto computers at their stations or catching a small bit of shut-eye, leaning back in a rolling chair, near the nurse's desk.

Otherwise it was desolate and quiet.

Unsure what to do next, Ukyou sat down on a chair in the waiting room. She spotted the snow coming down again against the gray sky of the early December afternoon

"Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?" Ukyou looked up at the old black and white movie playing, and saw a man in a trench-coat and hat lean on a mailbox as he spoke. She didn't quite grasp all of it, but she understood enough..

Ukyou sighed wistfully. "Santa goes missing and everyone will wonder what happened to him. Christmas will be ruined. But you know, I just disappeared, I don't think anyone would notice. Not really."

"Bwee?" she heard from the pack she had set in front of her.

"Konatsu doesn't count. She needs the salary, but... she could move on without knowing, I bet. I don't have much of a family. I don't really have anyone who would care if I wasn't around, huh? Just the customers and I know customers. They're fickle. If my okonomiyaki wasn't there, they're just go to the Nekohanten for ramen, or Hikari for monjayaki, or MOS Burger, or, hell a microwave meal from Lawson. Nobody really cares."

Ryouga rustled wildly in the pack, before he forced the top flap open. He turned to look at Ukyou, his eyes wide. He gave her a slow, gentle oink.

"Bwe-bweeee. Bwee-bweeeee."

Ukyou blinked and started laughing. "I don't understand what you're saying. I've only been guessing, you know." She laughed a bit more but stopped as she heard heavy footsteps approach the waiting area. A middle-aged man, thin, bald, and wearing a zip-up jacket, jeans, and a toque, came from a hallway yelling, "Nick! Nick!" until he was shushed by a nurse. He came towards the waiting room and said, in a more measured voice, "Nick? Where did you go?"

He approached Ukyou as she quickly shut the flap of Ryouga's pack

"Excuse me, miss. Have you seen an older gentleman. A bit fat, grey hair, red sweater?"

Ukyou shook her head, "No. No see that man. What name again?"

The older man slumped his shoulders, "He goes by 'Nick'. I don't really know him that well. I haven't really been home in a while. I like in North Dakota." Ukyou dumbly nodded, having even less knowledge of U.S. Geography than she did of English.

"George?" a raspy voice caled out towards the restroom, "What are you shouting around for?" he asked. He was tall and, while he could be described as fat, it seemed to be mostly centered at the waist in a compact belly. He was dressed in loose black slacks and a red sweater. In his hand was a red flat cap.

"Nick! Thank goodness I found you. It's time... her breathing is getting weaker."

Nick walked up to George and they both began a brisk walk back down the hall.

Ukyou opened the pack and, after looking around a second, picked up the tiny pig and set him on the carpet.

"I think that's him, Ryouga!" she whispered. Keep following him. I'll go walk around in case it isn't him."

Ryouga gave a quick "bwee" before quietly moving to follow the old man in the red sweater. At one point, the clacking of his tiny hooves on the tile floor caused George to look back, which made Ryouga duck into an empty room. After ten minutes, Ryouga saw the two men enter a room. He followed after waiting a beat.

It was a hospital room that didn't seem too different from one's he saw in Japan. There were two beds and machinery around them though the one nearest to the door was empty. At the far end of the room, The two men two by the bed, the open window behind the, The snow was coming down pretty hard now, the overcast sky seeming more like early evening than early afternoon, even in the depths of winter.

Ryouga,, unsure what to do, found a small space under a plush wooden chair to hide himself as he observed the scene. He couldn't see who was in the hospital bed as the side he was viewing was blocked by a privacy curtain. He could make out George holding his hand out and looking despondent.

"Goodbye, Mom. I'm sorry I wasn't around more these last few years, but I'm glad you had someone by your side. Someone to keep you from feeling like you had no one to turn to. He's a good man, mom. You were loved. I love you, mom."

Ryouga heard a voice speak. It wasn't timorous, the strain was from effort and the rhythm and pace reminded Ryouga of a sutra.

*"She-ma yisrael, adonai eloheinu, adonai echad
Baruch shem kavod malchuto l'olam va-ed"*

Then there was a silence. Ryouga held his own breath. He could feel the ki in the room grow slightly dimmer and he felt it. The woman was on her deathbed and he was witness to her passing. There was no more sound of breathing. The old man, Nick, took out an index card and, while holding the woman's arm tenderly, slowly began reading from it.

*" Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba. B'alma di v'ra chirutei, v'yamlich malchutei,
b'chayeichon uv'yomeichon uv'chayei d'chol beit Yisrael,*

baagala uviz'man kariv. V'im'ru: Amen.

Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach l'alam ul'almei almaya.

*Yitbarach v'yishtabach v'yitpaar v'yitromam v'yitnasei, v'yit'hadar v'yitaleh v'yit'halal
sh'mei d'Kud'sha B'rich Hu, l'eila min kol birchata v'shirata, tushb'chata v'nechemata,
daamiran b'alma. V'imru: Amen.*

Y'hei sh'lama raba min sh'maya, v'chayim aleinu v'al kol Yisrael. V'imru: Amen.

Oseh shalom bimromav, Hu yaaseh shalom aleinu, v'al kol Yisrael. V'imru: Amen."

Ryouga didn't know what the man had said, but it was obvious, even from his perspective that this was a solemn moment of mourning as both men closed their heads and observed a moment of prayer.

Ryouga decided he needed to find another place or time to confront the man. *I need to find Ukyou and some hot water.* He took a step back, aiming to leave the room quietly. As Ryouga started looking around, however, his mind began feeling disoriented and he was unable to see the door out. Seconds later, that effort to find a way out proved useless as a group of orderlies entered the room, blocking the obvious path out.

Ryouga tried craning his head up, seeing if there was a vent or a side exit, but saw nothing. Lost in thought as he spun around under the chair, he didn't notice when an orderly in well-worn, yet sturdy, nursing shoes stepped on his tiny curlicue tail.

"BWEEEEEEEE!" Ryouga squealed loudly, pulling his tail out from under the orderly's foot, dashing around the room. The crowd of people looked at the small piglet in the red suit. One of them yelled "What the hell?" as Ryouga darted off.

"Get that pig!" Another orderly yelled as they rushed out of the room. The old man looked off, confused as he saw the pig in a familiar suit run out of the room. He looked at the woman who lay there, now gone, and kissed her one last time on the lips before he slowly left the room to follow.

"Nick?" George asked.

"Take care of things for me, Georgie," Nick said in a low, steady voice. "I have something I need to do. I won't be gone long." Nick walked out of the hospital room.

Ryouga ran down through the hallway, chased by three large orderlies.

"Who the hell brought a damn pig into this place!"

"Probably some damn kid who got a pet for a present!"

"Well that kid better get him out of here or I'm making pulled pork tonight!"

Ryouga let out a squeal. *God damn it, why do I keep running into people happy to eat pork!?!*

Ryoga ended up at the end of a hallway. He contemplated bulldozing his way through when he heard Ukyou yell "Ryouga!" to his left. Ukyou stood next to an open stairwell, holding her hands out.

Ryouga let out a plaintive squeal as he kept running. Suddenly a tall, burly orderly jumped out in front of him.

"Got you now, piggy!" he said, his arms spread wide to seem intimidating.

Ryouga sighed, coiling his back legs he jumped in between the oderly's legs.

"Bwee-bwee, bweebweebweee!" Ryouga squealed and, in an instant, the orderly's hospital scrubs exploded, leaving him naked save his shoes and tighty whiteys.

The other ordelies paused, staring at the maroon confetti that was once their co-worker's clothes as Ryouga dashed towards the stairwell and Ukyou's awaiting hands.

Ukyou took a step back into the stairwell and checked up on the pig, who was breathing a bit heavily.

"You okay, sugar?" she asked. Ryouga nodded and let out a tired grunt..

Ukyou sighed in relief, "thank goodness... Did you find out if that was Santa?" she asked.

"Young lady?" A voice asked behind her. "Is that piglet yours?" Ukyou turned and saw the older gentleman named Nick behind her, coming down the stairs from the floor above.

Ukyou began to blush, "I, no. He not..." Ukyou sighed and thought to herself *how the hell do you say 'shape-changing curse' in English?* "Uh, I need hot water. Show you who Ryouga is."

"Hot water, yes? Well follow me." Nick led Ukyou downstairs and out back into the public area. Entering a single occupant restroom. Ukyou shut the door and, with a level of efficiency, she turned on the hot water in the sink. After the water began to steam, she dropped Ryouga into the sink.

Nick took a step back as the small piglet became a teenage boy who stood from the sink and sighed.

"You could've just poured the water over my head, Ukyou," Ryouga pouted. Now my butt's gonna be all wet and gross..."

The man stared walked up to Ryouga and said.

"How did you get one of my suits?"

Ryouga looked at Nick and replied, with a bit of a relieved smile on his face, "A bunch of reindeer asked me to find Santa Claus. Do you know where I can find him?"

Ukyou, Ryouga, and the older gentleman named Nick sat in the hospital cafeteria. It was quiet this early in the morning on Christmas Eve. The old man slowly stirred his coffee with a red plastic stirrer. Ryouga and Ukyou, meanwhile sat with paper cups of Lipton tea.

Ryouga noticed there was Christmas music playing, specifically a song he had only heard before from his dad's record collection. It was Dolly Parton's "Hard Candy Christmas." He looked at the old man in front of him, and wondered if his father was even still around.

*Maybe I'll get a car
Maybe I'll drive so far
they'll all lose track*

"So who dragged you here to find me? I expected the elves or Jack Frost or Paul of Tarsus try to come for me, not a couple of teenagers."

"Well... I sort of got lost and ended up at the North Pole..." The old man raised an eye at that. "Then I passed out and then Rudy yelled at me when I woke up saying I owed them to find you..."

"Yeah, he's always been hotheaded. He's a good kid, just had a hard life growing up. Grew a chip on his shoulder to compensate. Just like a certain Hibiki child."

Ryouga looked surprised.

"Christmas 1990. You wanted a bicycle and a map of Tokyo. Sorry the map didn't help."

Ryouga took in a sharp breath. "Well shit," he said. "I mean I was pretty sure, but... You really are Santa Claus."

"Nick is fine. I'm off the clock," he gave a slight chuckle, a faint echo of his trademark laugh.

Ryouga shook his head, "Any-anyway, I agreed to help Rudy and the other, but I'm... I'm not so good finding my way around. So my friend Ukyou was helping me find you."

Ukyou bowed slightly as he name was referenced. "Hello, er, Santa. Sorry. My English not so good. Ryouga speak English for me."

The man smiled and said, "That's quite alright. You're doing fine enough, Ukyou. You didn't write to me as a kid, but I keep track. It's only fair if the whole world is going to secularize Christmas..."

Ryouga and Ukyou looked at the man blankly. Nick waved a hand. "Nevermind. Now's not the time for jargon..." The slight smile and chuckled faded as he looked down at his cup of coffee.

"Rachel liked Christmas, even if she was annoyed by the sanctimony from the 'entitled goyim', as she put it. Don't blame her."

"Was Rachel the woman who..." Ryouga asked.

Nick nodded. "Renal cancer. She tried to find a donor. Even wrote to me," he chuckled sadly. "She knew if I could, I would have tried, but..." Nick shook his head. "It was her time."

Ukyou whispered into Ryouga's ear, "Did I understand right? He was here to see a woman who was dying of cancer?" Ryouga replied sadly, "Yeah, I think they were together. Not married or anything, just very close."

Ryouga looked at Nick and said, "How long did you know her?"

Nick replied, "Five years. I lost my wife ten years ago. Complications from pneumonia. We had a good long relationship. She was my rock and I tried to be hers. She wrote novels and helped with morale at the workshop during the busy time. I spent my time grieving. A few years ago, after Christmas, I decided to do something different than my usual tropical vacation. I ended up in Chicago for New Years, I wandered the Navy Pier, just being a tourist

like all those others. So many young folks, so many people from near and far. And yet, I just felt old..." He chuckled. "I am old. I've been at this a long long time."

Ryouga felt a bit floored. "I.. um, I'm sorry for your loss. My grandfather had liver cancer and passed away when i was a little kid." He rubbed his neck, unsure how to say what else needed to be said. "Look, Santa, I'm sorry for being blunt, but..."

"Yeah, Christmas Eve's starting now isn't it?" Nick shook his head. "I just can't do it this year. My place is here. They're probably going to have the burial tomorrow. Good to bury her as soon as possible and, hey, not exactly a lot of demand for goyim funeral services on Christmas."

Ukyou looked confused and asked Ryouga in Japanese, "He's not gonna do it!? But, he's Santa, right?"

The old man shook his head, "I'm just Nick right now. I need to be Nick for a while..." he sighed. "There've been years without me..." He brought his hands together, "I know I'm letting so many down, but who will be there to see Rachel interred? Her kids, they..." He shook his head.

Ryouga sighed. He looked at Ukyou and, for a moment, they shared looks, gauging each other until they came to a silent agreement.

"Why don't we do it?" Ryouga said.

Nick looked up, "I can't ask you to do that. You already did more than enough just finding me."

"So?" Ryoga asked, "Trust me. I didn't have any plans." he turned to Ukyou and asked in Japanese, "What about you? Any plans?"

"Nothing on my plate."

"Then it's settled, Santa." Nick held up his hand, "I know. Okay Nick, just tell us what we have to do and how to do it!"

It was quiet again and the song in the background grew a bit louder as Nick thought about the request

*I'll be fine and dandy
Lord it's like a Hard Candy Christmas
I'm barely getting through tomorrow
But still I won't let sorrow bring me way down*

"Okay, kid. You're on. You have control of the sleigh, so now all you have to do is pick up the load of presents from the warehouse and the list! Then..." Nick stopped. "How's your throwin' arm, kid?"

Ryouga gave Nick a smirk. "I think we're good on that end. If I can't throw it, Ukyou can hit it where it needs to be."

"Good!" Nick grabbed a pen from his jacket and began writing on a napkin. "Here's my phone number. Call if anything happens, okay kid?"

Ryouga nodded dumbly as he received the phone number. "But I don't have a cell phone."

"There's a phone on the sleigh," Ukyou said in Japanese. "Old fashioned, but it should make calls."

Ryouga and Ukyou stood and bowed to Nick.

"We'll do our best," Ryouga said turning to Ukyou. Both of them gave Nick a thumbs up.

Nick smiled in return. "Thank you. I should get back to the room. I'm sure George is looking for me and the staff will need me to help settle Rachel's affairs." He cracked a wry chuckle as he stood up and threw away his coffee cup. "Take care of yourselves now. It's Christmas, after all."

A few minutes later, Ryouga and Ukyou opened the door to the roof of the parking garage, running towards the sleigh.

"Where's the old man!?" Dasher asked.

"Change of plans. We're doing the delivery!" Ryouga said breathless as he and Ukyou jumped back on the sleigh.

"Wait, what!? That's crazy!" Comet replied.

"Yes! Very very crazy! We do it, anyway!" Ukyou yelled out as she turned on the map screen and tapped on it while Ryouga took the reins.

"Back to the North Pole to pick up the presents, then we go off to deliver them!" Ryouga tightened the reins and, with a small jolt, they took off... heading south for half a second until a smack on the head with a spatula righted their course.

Back at the North Pole, the sleigh docked and there was a small army of elves and five other reindeer waiting.

As soon as they entered the bay, Dasher announced, "Everyone, this is not a drill! We found Santa, but he can't make it. These two are doing the delivery!" before the yells of outrage grew any louder he added, "I know! But Santa gave them the A-OK and they have enough practice. Just load her up and get the list uploaded to the system, Herbie!"

"They don't look like much, " one of the other reindeer said skeptically.

"And what the fuck do you wanna do 'bout it, Dancer!?" Rudolph said, "We ain't got time ta be bitchin'. Fat Boy and his girl'll get the job done, okay?"

Ryouga sat back, somewhat impressed until he parse everything Rudolph said, "Ukyou's not my girlfriend!? And I'm not fat! I'm not!"

Ukyou whispered to him, "Well you're a little chubby as P-Chan."

Ryouga groaned then replied in an annoyed whisper, "P-Chan is pig! Pigs are supposed to be a little chubby!"

After about fifteen minutes, all of the reindeer were in their reins and there was an audible thump and shaking as the sleigh was loaded with a large, dense, sack of presents.

"Okay," Comet began, "just follow the points and aim the present to the dot. The bag will auto allocate presents to location, you just have to give it enough force to make it to each home, okay?"

"So I don't have to go down a chimney or use a magic key to get in or something?"

"No, you're playing Santa Claus, not Lupin the Third! Who the heck came up with that story?" Comet asked.

"But my mom always said..." Ryouga sighed, "Nevermind."

"Okay that's everything," Dasher announced.

"Booyah! Let's fuckin' do this!" Rudolph said, making his nose shine bright as the sleigh took off.

"Wow, this is a lot of beach stuff getting gifted here," Ryouga said as he hurled down gifts of surfboards, charcoal grills, beach balls, and inner-tubes."

"It's Australia, Ryouga. It's the middle of summer," Ukyou explained.

"I thought it always snows in Australia?" Ryouga replied, "Are you sure you're not thinking of Greenland?"

Ukyou smacked Ryouga's head against the sleigh with her spatula.

"Wait, why are you dropping off so many gifts here!?" Dasher yelled back to Ryouga. "This is Israel!" Dasher yelled.

"Whoops, sorry!" Ryouga rubbed the back of his head feebly, "I thought the thing said it was 'Ireland'!"

"Hanukkah Harry better not get up on our asses over this," Rudolph muttered.

"Hell just, like, sic his asses on us," Blitzen quipped.

"Yeah, that. I hate that sunavabitch Herschel..."

"How the hell do all these Playstations and cell phones not break when they land in their houses?"

"Magic, my dude!" Blitzen yelled.

"Well what about," Ryouga looked inside the box the present was in, "A Furby!? Who the hell wants a Furby?"

"Oh, that's a bug in the system," Comet said, "Well actually we wanted alternatives to coal for naughty children, since it turns out you can gather a lot and cause climate change. So we switched to bad gifts for environmental reasons. One year we used Furbies and..." Comet paused and shuddered. "They never went away. We stopped manufacturing, but somehow... they just keep self-replicating."

"KA-CHEEK-KA-ONE-OF-US!" the toy exclaimed. Ryouga's eyes widened.

"KOO-CHAAAY-KOO-I-HAVE-ALWAYS-BEEN-HERE...HEEHHEE-HEEHHEE"

Ryouga shut the box and threw it down.

"Ryouga! That's going towards..." Ukyou checked the monitor, "Rancho Palos Verdes, California?"

"Aw, that's close enough, dude," Blitzen said as the sleigh zoomed up the West coast of North America, "somebody there probably, like, had it coming, anyway."

Nearly 18 hours after they left, the sleigh returned to the small city where Santa Claus was. The tracker did not find him at the hospital, but in an area not too far away. The sleigh

alighted outside of a small cemetery outside of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. It was early morning still, the footpaths were freshly shoveled and the snow was freshly fallen, powdery white.

Ryouga and Ukyou jumped out and slowly walked through the gate. They came across Nick, standing near a grave. There was no snow on it. Only freshly churned dirt and a small bed of freshly laid flowers laid in front of the granite headstone that read "Rachel Weiss 1922–2004".

"Santa," Ryouga called out, raising a hand to get his attention.

Santa Claus adjusted his hat and wiped his eyes before turning to Ukyou and Ryouga. "Just Nick right now, son," he said.

Ryouga and Ukyou, nevertheless bowed to him.

"So you two had quite a busy night, huh?" Nick considered for a moment and corrected himself. "Well longer than that, I suppose. Anyone back home to be worried about you?" he asked.

Ryouga and Ukyou shook their heads before Ukyou gasped. "Oh, my restaurant!" Ukyou said in English, struggling a bit to say more.

"Here, young lady. Use my phone," Nick handed her a cellphone. "Don't worry about the long distance. I got a good plan."

Ukyou politely bowed to Nick before dialing the phone. After a few rings she heard it pick up. "Konatsu? Oh thank goodness! Where am I? Sugar, if I told you, you wouldn't believe it. I won't be back for a little bit. Keep the restaurant going while I'm gone. If you need help running the place, just hire on your sisters in-law... I'm just teasing Konatsu, I know you're trying to go slow... I was talking about Akane and Ranchan... Oh please, that ship sailed ages ago. You know damn well she'll put on the waitress uniform and talk up the customers... I know what happened last time, but that was a year ago and I trust you, okay? See ya later, sugar."

Ukyou turned off the phone and gave it back to Santa Claus. "Thank you, San—Nick"

"Now what?" Ryouga asked.

Nick sighed. "Well the emergency is over. I need a week or two more here to settle some of the paperwork. George wasn't her only kid, just the only one who bothered to show up," Nick pursed his lips a moment. "Rachel and I... we weren't *legally* together, so I don't have any stake in the estate. Thanks to you kids, I have a few months free. I'm the executor of her will. For the moment, I got myself set up in a long stay hotel off by the highway. There's off street parking so Dasher or Vixen can come by if anything else comes up."

Ryouga and Ukyou nodded. "Well..." Ryouga began, rubbing the back of his head. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about your loss."

Ukyou bowed. "I not know how to say in English so I want to say Japanese. *Kokoronokori no nai yō ni, jibun no karada ni kiwotsukete jūbun kanbyō shite agete kudasai.* "

Santa chuckled, "Dear, I speak a lot of languages," he said in English before patting her on the head. " *Hontou ni arigatou gozaimasu* . I will."

He gave Ryouga a pat on the cheek, "And thanks to you, my boy... You *are* a boy who turns into a pig and not the other way, right?"

Ryouga groaned, "Yes, Santa."

Santa gave Ryouga another, more careful look. "You know, I'm not getting much younger. Ever consider the 'once-a-year present delivery' business? Very stressful Decembers, but otherwise you got a lot of free time."

Ryouga sighed, "Thanks for the offer, but..." He shook his head, "Even if I wanted to, my sense of direction is.... It's kind of a weak point, Santa."

Santa tilted his head, "What the hell does that matter? You gotta travel all over the world anyway, you can handle it. Tell ya what, I'll get Comet, Donner, and Dancer some more R&D funding to automate the address system. I bet ya by next year, it wouldn't even be a handicap to deliver presents. Whaddya say? Wanna be my intern? You don't have to start right away. Hell we don't even get back in the office until August!"

Ryouga blinked. "I'll think about it. But how will you find me?"

Ukyou interrupted in Japanese, "Just come to Ucchan's in Furinkan, Nerima Ward, Tokyo, Santa! I'll know where he is."

Ryouga blinked, "What?"

Ukyou elbowed Ryouga, "Come on, sugar, it's Santa! And besides you didn't have any plans other than being a wandering martial artist. It helps to have a day job to support your life's goal."

Santa bellowed and replied to Ukyou in kind, "Fine! Fine! Why don't you two head back to the North Pole and take a vacation for awhile? I'll come back in a few weeks to get things arranged and take you two back to Tokyo, okay?"

"Great!" Ukyou said.

"Well then, I'll be seeing you." Santa adjusted his flat cap and gave the two a wink before he walked away.

Ryouga looked at Ukyou and said, "Okay, my weirdness meter is broken. Was this the weirdest thing that's happened to me or not?"

Ukyou waved a hand, "I mean, objectively you got a job offer. Not *that* weird."

Ryouga narrowed his eyes, "By that standard, Saffron was a water rights management issue."

Ukyou smiled, "Exactly. Count your blessings, P-chan." She gave Ryouga a wink and a smirk before she skipped off back towards the sleigh.

Ryouga blinked before he moved to catch up, yelling, "Hey wait up! This is the last place I want to get lost in!"

Back at the North Pole, Ryouga, Ukyou, and the reindeer were welcome with a loud cheer from all of the staff.

With a sigh of relief, Ryouga changed out of the Santa suit and back into his regular clothes, which had thankfully been laundered since he left.

As soon as he was led back to the main cabin by an elf, he saw streamers and decorations everywhere.

"Hey, what's all this!"

Ukyou walked up next to him, she had a cup of mulled cider, complete with a cinnamon stick poking up from the mug, "It's the after party. They work hard, they party hard! There's gonna be a dance later, but I think they're all just gonna get drunk."

Ryouga considered a moment. "Party? I really could use a nap."

"No way, dude!" Blitzen came. Atop his antlers hung what looked like pony kegs that had long plastic tubes which ran down to his mouth like straws, "You can sleep in January! It's party time!"

Ryouga sighed, "Okay, but I really could use a bit of quiet for a bit before I can get into the spirit. It's been a long week."

Blitzen nodded, "I got ya, bro. I'm copacetic. Here dude, I'll take ya both to the dance hall early. It's still empty."

Ukyou and Ryouga followed Blitzen out of the bedlam of elves, reindeer, and other Christmas workers.

Blitzen led to the two to a large room, similar in size to the warehouse Ryouga woke up in two days ago. It was some sort of shipping and stock room, but with had been converted to a dance hall. There were more streamers and tinsel, side tables with punch and, at the front a DJ setup with turntables and large speakers.

Ryouga was admiring the space and spectacle when he saw Blitzen climb up to the DJ station and rifle through a milk crate of records, before selecting one with his teeth.

"Is that... Is that the Thompson Twins?" Ryouga asked as he saw the reindeer pull an album from its sleeve with his mouth. He set the record into the player and nudged the needle with his nose.

"Yeah, dude. It's a party!" Blitzzen said, "I'm gonna go get myself a 'tall glass of water', if you know what I mean. It's legalized here, man," Blitzzen trotted off in a very casual strut, making a point of dimming the lights and starting up the disco ball.

Ryouga stood in the large empty room. The small disco ball and silver tinsel reflected the tiny blue-white spotlight and gave the room a effervescent, starry look as the strains of "Hold Me Now" began.

In the dead center of the room, Ukyou stood. The spinning dots of light swarmed over her, occasionally reflected by her battle spatula. Her hair was loose now, draped along the sides of her face and, with the low light of the room, she seemed ethereal, the dancing bits of starlight reminded Ryouga of Orihime. He slowly walked up to her as the song played.

I have a picture,

Pinned to my wall.

An image of you and of me and we're laughing and loving it all.

Look at our life now, tattered and torn.

We fuss and we fight and delight in the tears that we cry until dawn

Ryouga approached Ukyou, stopping at arms length away. "God, this is embarrassing, huh?" Ryouga said, rubbing the back of his head. "I mean, I guess they thought that we... you know?"

Ukyou gave a sly smile, "Well I mean, it *is* Christmas, sugar." She waved a hand around the room, "At least they gave us privacy."

"Still, sorry you got dragged into this." Ryouga gave Ukyou a small bow and an unsure look. "I'm sure there was someplace you'd rather be than play detective for the cheating symbol of Christmas cheer."

Ukyou shook her head. "Nah, I wasn't doin' anything," Ukyou sidled up close to Ryouga, until she was right in front of him.

Hold me now, warm my heart

Stay with me, let loving start (let loving start)

"Wha-what are you doin', Ukyou?" Ryouga's face felt warm and he looked around, worried. Ukyou took her hands and grasped Ryouga's face by the cheeks and turned him towards her.

"You got anybody waiting for you back home?" she asked with an even, serious tone.

Ryouga shook his head. "... no. Not since Akari and that was a while ago," he admitted.

Ukyou released her grip. "Well, aside from tomorrow's customers, my dance card's been empty for far too long now." She wrapped her arms around Ryouga's waist, resting them

comfortably on his lower back. Ukyou could feel his brawny muscles tense up.

"Uh...wha, what are—" Ryouga was stopped by a finger on his lips.

"Just dance," Ukyou whispered and she led him in a slow dance.

*You say I'm a dreamer, we're two of a kind
Both of us searching for some perfect world we know we'll never find
So perhaps I should leave here, yeah yeah go far away
But you know that there's no where that I'd rather be than with you here
Today*

Ryouga looked down at Ukyou, unsure what to say. He admitted this was not exactly where he expected his wandering to end up at, both in terms of actual location and the present company along for the ride. Ukyou was nice, smart, willing to call him out on his crap and, he had to admit, even when she was dressed up as a boy, she, or he, was easy on the eyes.

"I'm not sure if I... How far were you thinking of going?"

"How far do you wanna go, sugar?" Ukyou asked.

"I... I'd like to be friends no matter what, but... Would you want to go out? I mean, I don't think dinner and a movie will top this, but..." Ryouga found himself laughing with a wistful chuckle, "but maybe boring is okay?"

Ukyou nodded. "I'm not a fan of dinner n' a movie, anyway. Hazards of working retail." She stole a glance at Ryouga, "Doing anything over New Year's?"

"... Not really. Hard to schedule family to come home when no one can find home."

"Why don't you stay with me at the restaurant, then? I have the room."

Ryouga considered, "Why not?" he asked.

*Hold me now, warm my heart
Stay with me, let loving start (let loving start)*

Ryouga had imagined a moment like this with Akane for what felt like ages, but never materialized. *Heh, she'd probably would have preferred a rock concert and Akari was more into enka. This... is kind of nice.*

Ukyou meanwhile rested her head on his chest. She smiled feeling his warmth and her mind was quieted, simply enjoying the primal comfort of a good friend embracing her.

*You ask if I love you, well what can I say?
You know that I do and if this is just one of those games that we play
So I'll sing you a new song, please don't cry anymore
And then I'll ask your forgiveness, though I don't know just what I'm
Asking it for*

Ryouga felt his shirt grow grow wet. With a hand, he brushed back Ukyou's hair and she saw her turn to look at him. Her cheeks were wet, as was a spot on his shirt.

"Are you okay, Ukyou? Did I do something to you or..."

Ukyou shook her head, "No, just... I guess I still had tears to shed over the past. What about you?"

"I cried out my tears a while ago," He rubbed Ukyou's back, between her shoulder blades. He hoped he was making her feel better. Ryouga began to finally feel more at ease and he more easily followed Ukyou motions, getting into the easy simple synthpop rhythm.

"Hey..." Ryouga said, "you're leading, aren't you?"

"I only learned to dance the guy role, sugar."

*Hold me now, warm my heart
Stay with me, let loving start (let loving start)*

"Hey... what if I get lost again?" Ryouga asked, suddenly worried.

"Well.. Say you're looking for Ucchan's and you'll find me, Ryochan."

"But what if I end up somewhere weird like... Wisconsin?"

"Did I mention I've been thinking of franchising?" Ukyou leaned in slowly. They gave each other a look. Hesitantly, Ukyou closed her eyes and gave Ryouga a kiss on the cheek.

*Hold me now, warm my heart
Stay with me, let loving start (let loving start)*

THE END

End Notes

Thanks to my pre-readers. Ryoga2013, i hope you enjoyed these gifts. I'm going to go sleep a while.

Happy Holidays!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!