

~8. The Hermit's Curiosity~

In the days that followed, Koron learned more about her new roommate. As it turned out, Nanako was Dr. Hashizawa's daughter—Koron didn't see much family resemblance, but it wasn't as though she had any room to talk on that front. Nanako was an athletic sort—there was actually a small track amidst the facilities for socializing with your fellow psychics, and Koron would often find her running about in there.

Nanako would always listen intently to whatever Koron said, but she had a particular interest in stories about her times with Ageha at school, or stories about her family—Koron initially suspected a simple absence of Nanako's father, but the answer was a bit more surprising.

“I've actually never been to school,” Nanako said.

Koron blinked. “...You were homeschooled, then?”

“Well, I mean, for a bit... No, well, I guess I have been to school, I just don't really remember it,” Nanako said. The two were sitting cross-legged in their room, playing a simple card game. “I actually don't really remember anything before I woke up with my psychometry, and Mom took me into the hospital pretty quick after that.”

“Ah,” Koron said. She raised her eyebrow. “That raises questions, but I will admit that it also answers a number.”

“Huh?” Nanako had a habit of tilting her head to the side farther than most people Koron had ever known—she had jokingly suggested to her parents and Ageha that perhaps her roommate's father was actually an owl. “Whaddya mean?”

“That wide-eyed innocence of yours. People who go to public schooling rarely come away with such a demeanor,” Koron said, and Nanako let out an, 'aahhhh.' “...That sounds difficult, though.”

“Yeah, it is,” Nanako said. “I mean, I had to relearn a lot of stuff, and I had a lot of trouble focusing on stuff for a bit before I started talking to Kojiro. I mean, I still kinda do, but it was like, way worse? Mom says it was some kinda like, my brain developing a new sense really made my mind go all wonky or something.”

—A flash of red appeared in Koron's mind, and she grabbed her head in response to a twinge of pain, grimacing. “I... I know what you mean.”

“You do?” Nanako asked.

“...Not in that exact sense, but yes, I experienced a similar sort of cognitive distortion when my abilities started developing further. The doctors who've seen me have never managed to pin down exactly what it was, but...” Koron cleared her throat. “You see, my theory is that my mind was beginning to develop thermal vision—causing my eyes to see the cells that I could

manipulate to create fire. However, the strain was far too much—my eyes had to be removed.”

There was a moment's pause, before Nanako said, “But... you have eyes?”

In response, Koron reached up and casually popped one of her glass eyes out of the socket, a sensation she had long since gotten used to. Nanako let out a loud squeak when she saw it, which made Koron chuckle at her roommate's expense. “Hey, you scared me! Don't laugh!” Nanako said.

Placing her eye back in the socket, Koron stopped laughing and said, “They're both glass. I have several spares. The sensory aspect of my psychic abilities took up the slack and has instead served as a replacement for my sight.”

“Oh, huh,” Nanako said. “Neat!” She recovered from the fear quickly, as she was right back to smiling.

—Okitama Children's Hospital was a hospital with six floors open to the patients and public, but a large portion of the facilities for the psychic patients were present on the three lower floors; a segment of the building was dedicated to a social ward for psychic patients. When Koron arrived, it appeared there were around thirty young patients in the hospital that met the bill. Koron and Nanako were thoroughly middle of the road in terms of the age range—children ranging from six years old to one nineteen-year-old who was soon to leave all called the ward home. The walls in this area were also rather more colorful than the stark white of the patient wards—color theory dictated that the place being rendered more pleasantly was better for the emotions of the patients, Koron supposed.

Koron was antisocial by her own admission, but Nanako was a veritable social butterfly, and being that Nanako considered Koron a friend, this meant that once again she was the hanger-on of a person many got on with. The difference here was that Koron was not immediately dismissed as odd—after all, there was nothing 'normal' about psychics.

Enrichment facilities offered rooms with a variety of ways for psychic children to utilize their powers—though Koron's destructive powers were difficult to hold, more mundane psychic abilities like telekinesis, telepathy, clairvoyance, and the like were much easier to show off. Koron found herself people-watching with some regularity at these tests when Nanako was present.

More of the children trended younger, and it was about a week into her stay when one young child no more than eight years old, a young girl with black twintails, actually walked up and asked her, “Excuse me, *onee-san*?”

...It took Koron a moment to register what had just happened. She put down her book. (Incidentally, this young girl, who attempted her best to make her hospital gown look as frilly as possible due to a passion for ballerina and its associated fashion, was named Airi Toranosuke—she is not particularly relevant to this story, but nevertheless Koron did know her name.)
“...Huh?”

“You're the smartest person in the hospital, right?” Airi asked. “Everyone says so. Especially Nanako.”

Koron had to take a moment to process that, but proceeded to laugh. “I'm glad everyone understands the order of things, then. Yes?”

“Are ghosts real?” Airi asked.

This gave Koron some pause. “I couldn't say. It hasn't yet been definitively proven, but it's certainly possible—I find myself thinking it would be interesting if they did, but that people ascribe them a terrible amount of mysticism. Why?”

“Well, see, Ren told me that he saw a ghost the other day in the hospital when he was sneaking out of the room, and other people have been saying that ghosts aren't real, but Ren is really bad at lying,” Airi said.

“Doubtless he isn't lying intentionally—if he's wrong, he simply saw something that wasn't what he thought he saw,” Koron said. “What does he say he saw?”

“A boy, about your age, I think,” Airi said. “He had white hair, and really pale skin, and eyes that were kinda red—not as red as yours, paler, he said.”

“A young man with albinism, then,” Koron said. “It's not that unusual.”

“Yes, but he says he saw the boy at the door to the M Ward,” Airi said.

—That caught Koron's attention. The M Ward was the point at which the public facilities for psychic children ended and the private facilities for more heavy-duty testing began—patients like Koron weren't allowed back there. “Hm,” Koron said, “I see. I'll ponder this and get back to you.”

“Okay!” Airi said. She headed back over to a group of children around her age, including the aforementioned boy who'd seen this 'ghost', and informed them all that she'd talked to Koron, and that Koron was going to look into it.

...This meant that the other kids were both astonished she'd worked up the nerve to talk to Koron, and that they all wanted to talk to her themselves. Koron broke out in a cold sweat. Not one child, but... Oh, dear god, that was five! Five children! How was she going to manage—?

Nanako slid in between Koron and the group of children rapidly approaching, to kneel down and say, “Hey, Koron's got problems talking to people too much, okay? Sounds like whatever you were talking about, she's got it handled, so let her take it at her own time.”

—Pacing about the track, with Nanako 'jogging' at a pace that could stay next to Koron's leisurely walking, Nanako struck up conversation. “What's this about a ghost?”

“Kawashima-*kun* apparently claims he saw a ghost,” Koron said, “and I've told Toranosuke that I'd have an answer for her as to whether it's a real ghost. What exactly have you been telling them about me?”

“That you're the smartest person I've ever met?” Nanako said, tilting her head as she jogged. “I mean, you are. You know way more things than my mom.”

“...That's somewhat insulting towards her, but I have no doubt that on the subjects in which I am well-versed, that is true,” Koron said. “Your mother doesn't strike me as the sort of woman to have read much philosophy, or to know much else behind what lies at her work desk.”

...Wait.

“Not, mind,” Koron continued, raising her hand, “that that's a problem, of course. I doubt I could do what it is she does here without years of practice at the very least. However, your faith in me is appreciated.” There was another pause, where the only noise was a quiet squee from Nanako at that statement. “...Anyhow, it seems there was a boy with albinism behind the door to the M Ward that frightened Kawashima last night. I'll have to investigate for myself.”

“Oh, you're gonna look?” Nanako asked.

Koron smirked. “Do I look like I became as intelligent as I am by being incurious? Naturally, I'm going to look. I'll inspect the veracity of this rumor.”

“Cool beans! We get to go ghost hunting!” Nanako said, forgetting herself and going sprinting off at a speed Koron knew she could never match in a million years. It took her about thirty seconds to return to Koron's side on the track.

“...You're coming along, then,” Koron said. It wasn't a question, but Nanako didn't dignify it with an answer—she was off like a rocket again in her excitement.

~9. The Hermit's First Infiltration~

Koron, with Nanako in tow (and both of their companions by their side) exited their room at 10 PM, well after Dr. Hashizawa's last check of the evening. The sun had already fallen by this point, and patients were supposed to be in their rooms. However, Nanako happened to be aware that Dr. Hashizawa's office gave her a clear view of the patrol of the security guards who guarded the public areas at night to ensure the safety of the patients, at a time when most of them would be near each other.

Nanako held tight to a spare pair of her mother's glasses, focusing tightly on it. “Okay... we're good,” she said. “We've got about foooooty-five minutes to get to the door before Mom goes home for the night.”

Much of the patient ward of the third floor was simple hallways, some of which had multiple doors for larger width—it made it easy to see what was coming, and reaching the stairs was a simple task with their knowledge of the guards' routines, and they hurried down a flight of stairs. Koron led, as Nanako was bad at focusing on going down quickly while attempting to both hold her mother's glasses tightly and not break them.

The M Ward's entrance—at least, the one in question—was on the ground floor, through the atrium of the psychic social area. You then hung a left through a cafeteria, along the hallway that led to the nearest restrooms, then took a right, and then another left through a glass door that led back into the stark white areas and was only dubiously public. The M Ward's entrance was then down another hallway to the right, through a much heavier set of glass walls with a keycard reader.

The front door of the atrium was very thoroughly guarded, so Koron instead took a right from the stairs into an earlier door in the same hallway, into one of the enrichment rooms whose door was left unlocked from now until 11 PM for cleaning purposes. “Are we good?” Koron asked, and Nanako nodded.

Koron ducked behind a table as she opened the door, and managed to avoid the gaze of the flashlight of one curious guard who turned around and looked at the atrium at an inopportune moment. She signaled to Nanako with a wave of the hand, and the two then ran through the atrium to the hallway on the center-left of the area.

Then pass the cafeteria, Koron recalled, and take a right, and then another left. Rather conveniently for the two of them, security cameras in this area were rather dry—the primary shareholder, who ran the M Ward, perhaps valued security cameras inside more than she did outside. The glass door opened easily, and Koron and Nanako ducked inside.

Nanako put her finger up to her lips, and shoved her thumb at one of the doors on the wall in front of them—and Koron saw that there was a 'Dr. Rin Hashizawa' nameplate on it, so the meaning was understood. The two waited for just a moment, Nanako holding up three fingers, then two, then one...

There was a teapot Dr. Hashizawa had heating in her office, so based on Nanako's understanding of the layout of her mother's workspace, Koron focused on that spot in space and began to accelerate. A touch of sweat trickled down her forehead as she did, but nothing too bad—and when Nanako began moving, Koron let go of the heat.

As Dr. Hashizawa got up to get her surprisingly quickly ready tea, Nanako quietly opened the door (a trick she was awfully good at, Koron noted,) quietly crept into the room, and grabbed a spare keycard Dr. Hashizawa kept on her desk in case she lost her proper one. Thank the world, Koron supposed, for absent-minded professionals.

“...must really want me to drink you, huh?” Koron heard Dr. Hashizawa say before, twisting the doorknob as she closed it to minimize noise, Nanako closed the door with the keycard in hand.

With that, it was an easy slide on the card reader to open the door to the M Ward and head on inside. The first thing Koron noticed was that it was a touch colder on the other side of the door—and the already-dim lights appeared to dim even further. Nanako sighed and finally let go of her mother's glasses, placing them inside a glasses case and putting that in the pocket of her gown. “Man, ghost-hunting is stressful,” she said.

—Koron's breath was quiet and slow, as she took a step forward. Sound echoed a bit more within the hallways of the M Ward, and the dim lights meant that the distance was blanketed in darkness. However, she was able to see well enough to notice that she saw no security cameras at this entrance, which she had really expected.

Taking a few steps further in, a second door opened to a dark reception area, where a single secretary likely sat during the day to greet those who entered the M Ward... or, as the directory on the wall called it, the M-1 Ward. The wards were tiered to higher levels of clearance, it seemed—M-1, M-2, and M-3.

Nanako had to squint in order to read the map, but Koron was able to well enough. The M-1 Ward began here before heading into a two-way intersection—one way forward, and one way to the right. It seemed that forward led to the meat of the ward, whereas to the right led not only to a secondary entrance to the M Wards, but also to the entrance to the M-2 Ward, further into this segment of the building. Several interconnected rooms sat in the thick of the M-1 Ward, with a number of rooms dedicated to pieces of medical technology Koron had to admit even she wasn't familiar with.

However, what interested Koron the most was a room furthest in the back—“Inpatient Chamber”, it said. There was a counter for the ward's current occupancy, and it read that only one patient currently resided here. “Come along,” she said to Nanako, who hadn't finished reading the map yet, or so Koron supposed as she, flustered, hurried to follow.

The door was to the side of the empty desk, and as the two walked through into yet more stark white hallway, Nanako shivered. “It's cold in here,” she said.

“Yes,” Koron said, “so it is.”

There still weren't any security cameras. Something about that just didn't sit right with Koron—the hairs on the back of her neck were starting to stand up. She clutched Nagamimi tightly as she continued to step forward, the only sound aside from a quiet hum of the lights being the sound of the two girls' sandals on the tiling.

And then, just ever so slightly—

Koron threw up her arm in front of Nanako to stop her. “Don't move,” she whispered.

—there was a *third* sound of footsteps from behind them. A meter on the wall whose purpose Koron hadn't understood flickered a little, then returned to its regular purpose.

...A proper guard, Koron surmised, would've said something immediately. Called out to these girls that they shouldn't have been here, attempted to surmise them. However, this was not a hired guard—whoever was behind them had no such instinct. They had said nothing.

Koron knew one thing for absolutely certain—the person behind her was a *threat*. A sort of pressure that Koron hadn't felt from anyone before was emanating from behind her in a frequency that made her heart race. Her first guess would've been the boy—

—but when she turned, she did not see the boy. She saw no boy—it was a girl, and she... well, she certainly didn't look like a patient.

Koron believed the style of her dress was called 'gothic lolita'—frills and lace around a fluttering skirt and petticoat, with—and Koron was stabbing at things much outside of her comfort zone here—a long bolero jacket with wide bell sleeves and a high collar, layered over a ruffled camisole...? Right. That sounded right. It was all layered in black on blue on purple, over a pair of striped purple-and-black leggings and dainty black mary janes. Her golden blonde hair was held in a pair of twintails that reached all the way down to by her knees, with a spiraling flow, held in place by blue-and-black ribbons. She wore a small crown on top of her head to complete this... look.

She was dainty, and short—about Koron's height, and perhaps even a bit thinner than Koron was. There was a sort of porcelain quality to her skin, rather like a doll, and her brilliant blue eyes had a light glow to them that pierced through the darkness.

All of this detail, striking in its absurdity, was to say that when Koron turned around and saw this girl standing there, utterly motionless in the hallway, she could do nothing but utter—in English, as Japanese suffers from a paucity of expletives—“*What the fuck?*”

“Hey—hey, Koron, language!” said Nanako, who had turned around at the same time. “You shouldn't assume she can't speak Japanese just because she's blonde and has blue eyes!”

“Wha—” Koron sputtered. “You think *that's* what I was doing that for?!”

In response to this exchange, the doll girl said nothing—instead, she lifted up her arm, and reached over to put it flat on the wall to her right. “Two signals located and engaged. List of cleared personnel contains no matches. Based on perceived physical age, chances of priority threat level minimal. Moving to detainment protocol.”

She took her hand from the wall, and as she did, a glowing blue line hung in the air that followed her index finger. And then, before Koron's eyes, the ceiling itself began to *shift*—pieces of machinery above melded and combined into a—a ceiling-mounted *gatling gun*—?!

—“Firing.”—

~10. The Hermit vs. The Doll~

The deathly quiet of the M-1 Ward was blown apart by the sound of makeshift gunfire. The doll girl's crafted ceiling turret began to fire with a loud *ratatat-tat*, and Koron hardly had time to even register it before, at the same time, she ducked to push Nanako out of the way with a cry of '*Move it!*', and Nanako *successfully* pushed Koron out of the way.

Clashing like this left Koron a touch discombobulated as Nanako rolled to the ground with Koron in her arms, but Koron spun her head to take a look at where the shots had landed. Small makeshift syringes, about forty-eight, now covered the ground in a burst pattern where the two had been standing. Koron surmised that they likely contained some manner of anesthetic—'detainment' protocol implied that they were to be detained.

“Hey—hey, hold on!” Nanako said, standing up and waving her hands about. “Stop! We don't wanna fight or anything!”

—Based on the fact that it hadn't continued firing, Koron surmised that it was likely the gatling gun had a limited amount of ammunition based on what the girl could modify with her ability. However, this wasn't much help to the two of them unless Koron could figure out exactly how to stop such a thing from being performed again.

The doll girl's expression did not shift, and she didn't respond to Nanako. Instead, she swiftly dodged downward, throwing her hand—

—Nagamimi's ear was tight in Koron's hand.

It was worth trying, so Koron, in response, focused on a spot just below where the girl was liable to touch, and rather than creating an active burst of fire, attempted to simply speed up the cell movements enough to partially melt that piece of the floor. Sweat began to build on her forehead as she did, but sure enough—

—“?!” The sticky texture of the partially melted floor caused the doll girl's hand to become briefly stuck, and it surprised her enough that the blue line didn't begin to form. Koron's mouth was dry now, but it had worked well enough for her to grin. “Unexpected result—”

“Nanako!” Koron barked. “If she can't touch the walls, she can't shift any of the machinery. Get over there and grab her already!”

“Wha—but I don't want to! Should we even be fighting?” Nanako responded, but then she shook her head and grumbled, “Oh, fine!” and started running the short distance between them and their opponent.

Having recovered from the shock of the floor working improperly, the doll girl recognized Nanako coming toward her, and with a small grunt, she leapt into the air, touching the ceiling—and creating a grip for herself to hold onto. Then, the ceiling shifted behind her, pieces

of tiling and machinery twisting themselves into a small conveyor belt for the doll girl to get distance. She could jet backwards faster than Nanako could run.

In response, Nanako stopped running forward, and hurried into a door to the side. “One sec, I’ll be right back!”

—Fine, sure, Koron could deal with that. With the distance in play, it was likely Nanako couldn’t quite see that distance, but Koron could see as the hook the doll had held onto disappeared into her hands with the conveyor belt, as she flipped backwards off of it, allowing her feet to touch the back wall. From here, Koron expected some manner of projectile—

—but not for that projectile, as it turned out, to be the doll herself. A flash of blue formed a springboard under her feet on the back wall, catapulting her back down the distance of the hallway towards Koron at an even faster speed than before—and Koron was ever so briefly able to see six more of the girl’s small syringes between her fingers as she flew towards her.

Koron clicked her tongue, and leapt back herself to just barely miss a swing from her assailant, catching herself with a hand to the ground. Not missing a beat, the doll girl took a step forward and went for a direct strike to hit Koron with her projectiles. And then—

“—There!” Koron exclaimed, as she thrust her arm out to cross the doll girl’s in her arc, her arm brushing against the doll girl’s skin as the two met in a near-miss cross-counter. With a direct conduit to Koron’s body, this would be much easier—from arm to arm to syringe, Koron’s other hand clenched into a fist as she sent a burst of flame inside the glass tubes of the syringes the doll girl held. The glass fogged over, and Koron knew she’d startled the doll girl—the sight of her anesthetic liquid flash-evaporating in syringes was certainly unusual.

“Recognizing significant psychic ability in target,” the doll girl said. “Running auxiliary search.”

Tossing away the syringes, the doll girl went for a low kick to attempt to trip Koron up. Koron spun in the opposite direction, pirouetting just outside of the kick’s arc and leaving her back facing her opponent.

“You should know I’m taking it easy on you,” Koron said, smirking as she took another step back. “If I were fighting to kill, you should have little doubt you would be dead by now.”

“—!” The doll girl gasped aloud, and her eyes widened slightly. She leapt back, slapping the left wall as she did before throwing her hand down to the ground. “Subject’s actions indicate potential control over heat! Current situation: untenable.” Her second hand joined it, and she threw her arms up to shift the machinery into a tile wall in front of Koron, from the floor to just next to the ceiling and walls.

Shaking her head, Koron chuckled. “Ah, you believe this will stop me?”

—Fire can be a blade if formed precisely enough. Koron’s fingers once more sprouted

flames, forming into a sharp edge not unlike the claw of a tiger over her right hand. While she felt her body drying out by the second, she couldn't help but find some satisfaction in leaping toward the wall and splitting it in two with an upward swing.

The doll girl's eyes were wide as her makeshift wall crumbled to pieces in front of her, pieces of it having been burnt into ash and falling to the ground. Koron's smirk only grew wider as she brandished her claw before the doll girl. “Still want to keep fighting? Really—I can go for as long as you like, girl.”

In response, the doll girl once again took a step back before the wall had fully crumbled for Koron to pass by, and she threw her hands backwards—

—only for a *clicking* sound to come from behind her. “Alright!” said Nanako, pumping her fists, as the doll girl suddenly realized her hands had been cuffed together behind her back. “Found 'em!”

“...Handcuffs?” Koron said, raising an eyebrow. “How did you know—?”

“Well, this keycard belongs to my mom, right?” Nanako said. Koron nodded. “I can find some odd things from looking for stuff my mom knows about, so I figured I'd look for something to tie someone up with! That was the first thing I got.”

Koron... preferred not to think about the implications of that sentence. The doll girl was now attempting to kick the wall to get something done, but Nanako had also grabbed her, and Nanako was no doubt *much* stronger than this small girl. “Whoa now, hey, hold on, let's all calm down.”

“Situation critical!” Now that she was being held down, the doll girl's struggling was kind of cute in a funny way. Her face had twisted into an attempt at being threatening that really looked more like a pout, and now her legs were kicking out uselessly from Nanako's grip. “Situation critical! Require assistance! Situation critical! *Situation critical!*—!”

“Chelsea, it's past my bedtime,” said a voice from behind Koron, meaning this hallway had just gotten even more cramped. “What are you yelling about—?”

Everyone stopped dead, and Koron turned around, taking a few steps back to be standing next to Nanako as she did to be sure she wasn't seeing things. Here was another person that stood out in the dark hallway, but in this boy's case, it was because he—wouldn't you know it—had white hair and skin so pale he'd likely blind someone in the light. This boy, however, *was* wearing the clothes of a hospital patient, and sleepily rubbing his eyes as he put on a pair of glasses, carrying a plain white pillow with him. He was a bit taller than Koron, but by hardly more than a centimeter or two, and he too looked rather dainty.

“Huh,” the boy said, putting on his glasses. His eyes looked at the doll girl—or 'Chelsea', as it seemed—then at Koron, then at Nanako, then back at Chelsea. He then looked down at the floor, and then looked back up before blushing loudly. “Eh?! Chelsea, you didn't tell me we had

guests!” His Japanese, Koron noted, was well-formed, but his accent was rather imperfect.

“Situation critical!” Chelsea continued squealing. “Sensitive assets should return to their rooms! Unauthorized intruders—!”

Koron and Nanako looked at each other. Nanako hardly needed to even try to keep Chelsea down. “I can't tell if that was easy or hard,” Nanako said. “Was that an easy ghost hunt or a hard ghost hunt?” Koron responded with a shrug.

“A ghost hunt?” The white-haired boy asked, walking a bit closer. “Chelsea's no ghost, if that's what you mean. She's very real. Oh—Chelsea, please stop struggling. These two can't be much older than we are. I really doubt Ms. Director would be too concerned about them.”

With the boy's words taken, Chelsea's struggling slowed, and after a moment her head drooped. “...Situation has become utterly untenable. Ending detainment protocols.”

The boy chuckled a little, though he still had that awkward blush on his face as he said, “Thank you, Chelsea. I'm sorry about her, I really am—well, it's not as though I'm her keeper, but she takes her directives very seriously, you see, and one of them is to protect me. So I suppose she—”

“My name is Koron Nagataka,” Koron said, “an S-Class psychic patient in Room 304. My companion is Nanako Hashizawa, a B-Class psychic patient also in Room 304. Is this identification enough to satisfy her that neither of us are liable to cause problems?”

Chelsea's head was still drooped, but she muttered, “...Orders insufficient for current situation. Utilizing own judgment. ...Please, let go of me. I will not continue attempting to detain you.” Nanako did so, and undid her handcuffs. “Much obliged.”

Going to join the boy's side, Chelsea then bowed her head to both Koron and Nanako. “Welcome to the M-1 Ward of Okitama Children's Hospital. I am Chelsea, and from this point I shall serve as your guide to the facilities you wish to peruse. Please be careful not to act inappropriately towards any medical equipment.”

—That, then, was how Koron's first battle with an opponent on equal footing ended.

~11. The Hermit's Action~

The white-haired boy had soon said that this was a poor place to talk in his opinion, so a short ways down, he led Koron and Nanako to his room. “I'm the only patient in here,” he said, “so when it's alone at night like this, I basically have the run of the place.”

His room was a touch smaller than Room 304, given that it was for one person, but it had clearly been tailored to his tastes. There was, for instance, a carpet with a blue-and-white star pattern, a television on the wall as opposed to hung from the ceiling like theirs with video players and a small collection of programs to insert, a personal bookshelf (whose contents seemed to

trend toward adventure stories and medical texts,) and...

Nanako gasped aloud. “You get to have a *stove*?!”

“Mmhm!” The boy nodded with a smile on his face. “I’ve been practicing with whatever I can get my hands on, so they’ve started delivering me things. I can request a meal from the hospital instead of one I make myself, but I think I’ve gotten pretty good at it.”

—And so on. The walls were, while not fully outrageous, still much more decorated than a hospital room would imply. Posters of old movies, a few pieces of memorabilia for assorted anime... ah, and there was a video game console, the likes of which Koron was fairly certain many ordinary high schoolers would find childish or out of date, but which was clearly well-loved and well-used. And for his part in the ‘inappropriate cabinets’ competition, a glass case full of assorted, small medical tools sat locked by padlock.

Chelsea was last to enter the room, and she closed the door behind them. She bowed her head as Nanako and Koron looked about, saying, “Welcome to the Inpatient Chamber of the M-1 Ward. Currently, this facility houses only one resident. Please be aware of general hospital etiquette.”

...This was a subject Koron found fascinating. “So, tell me. Does this one ever... stop doing that?” Koron asked.

“She can make conversation!” The white-haired boy said, sidling in beside Chelsea. “I think you can stop guiding them now, Chelsea.”

“Understood,” Chelsea said. “In that case, I am capable of conversation, though my conversational acumen is somewhat limited. My apologies in advance for my insufficient ability.” She raised her head, and then said, “On a personal note... My apologies for attempting to detain you so violently. The hospital’s primary shareholder is insistent that I ensure those without clearance do not enter—however, I possess neither a commanding presence nor physical strength, and as such must utilize more forceful methods to detain, as laid out by my directives.”

Nanako was off in her own little world, whizzing about the room with her arms out like an airplane, but Koron was able to respond to Chelsea by raising an eyebrow. “You couldn’t be older than I am. What do adults have you doing guarding a private ward?”

Chelsea responded with a blank stare before the white-haired boy said, “Well, Chelsea says that’s because she’s an android, not a human.”

—Eh. “Eh?” Koron blinked. “A what?”

Nanako whizzed to a stop, but she was still turned away as she said, “Actually, if she’s a girl, the proper term would be ‘gynoid’! That’s a Robot Fact!”

“That is correct,” Chelsea said, bowing her head once more. “I am an experimental

gynoid designed to protect those within the M Wards. My outward appearance is designed to resemble a human girl of a similar age to the hospital's clientele such that I do not cause undue stress in my caretaking duties.”

Koron barked out a laugh, and that caused Chelsea's eyebrow to raise almost imperceptibly. “Ahah! So you're telling me that androids and gynoids are part of this hospital's confidential work? Well, isn't that astonishing.”

“I assure you,” Chelsea said, with a tone Koron would describe as 'irked', “this is not a falsehood.”

“Oh, no, I have no reason to doubt you. I just find it funny, that's all,” Koron said. She smirked. “To think, I get to be the first human being to defeat a gynoid in a fight. Isn't that something?”

“I mean, yeah! It is cool, isn't it?” The white-haired boy said, though Chelsea continued to silently fume. “Er, I mean, that they have machines that can walk and talk and feel things like human beings. I think that's really neat. Not that she beat you, Chelsea.” The boy paused.

“Your meaning is appreciated,” Chelsea said, and with that done, she went to sit down on the boy's (frankly rather astonishingly large for this hospital) bed. “However, I am capable of being mature. It is true. You have indeed made history.”

—There were a few cushions on the floor for seating, so the four of them sat down to look at each other. “Yes,” the boy said, “it's true, I do sometimes wander the ward at night. I'm not really allowed to leave, so I—”

Nanako threw up her hands. “Hold on one sec! Hi. What's your name?”

There was a moment's awkward pause before the boy started back, looking genuinely stunned by the question. “Oh—oh gosh, I am so sorry! It's just, most of the people who come in here are adults who already know my name, so I'm not used to being asked. My name is Pavel Weber. It's nice to meet you, Nanako, Koron.”

“Where exactly are you from?” Koron asked. “You're clearly not Japanese, but you've certainly found yourself in a Japanese hospital.”

Pavel averted his eyes for a moment, but said, “Ah, I'm from Romania, actually. It's just... ah, sorry. I don't talk about this much.”

“Do you not have friends either?” Nanako asked, and that made Pavel sputter aloud. “Because I can totally relate to that! Koron was my first human friend and we only met like a week ago.”

“R-really?” Pavel said. “Your name is Hashizawa—aren't you Dr. Hashizawa's daughter, then?” Nanako then launched into a very clipped explanation of the same backstory she'd given

Koron, which caused Pavel—and Chelsea, for that matter, though much more mutedly—to react with shock and surprise. “Gosh! That’s sad.”

“It’s fine now, though!” Nanako said, pulling Koron over with one arm and squeezing the two of them together. Koron made an undignified noise. “Bestieeeee!”

“Well... in my case, it’s that I was... donated?” Pavel mumbled. “I suppose...?”

—That made Koron’s ears perk up. She wriggled out of Nanako’s grasp and leaned in, staring at Pavel more intently. “Donated’ is an unpleasant word.”

“It’s essentially true, though,” Pavel said. “Well, you know, it’s... When I was a boy, I was very ill. I couldn’t go outside or play with other kids, because I was terribly weak. I suffered from, I think, a genetic illness of some sort—I’ve never learned what exactly, but I know that I was on death’s door when I was eleven.”

Koron grimaced. “Unfortunate. You are alive, though.”

“Right. That’s actually thanks to my Akaneno’s Syndrome. I developed my abilities all of a sudden, overnight, around when the condition appeared—and my abilities totally counteracted my illness. All of a sudden, I was totally healthy—well, except my powers had... you know,” Pavel trailed off, and gestured at himself.

“Ah,” Koron said. “Hungry for melanin, were they?”

“Right,” Pavel said, nodding. “Oh—Koron is a pyrokinetic, and Nanako is a psychometrist, correct? I’m not certain there’s a word for what I can do, exactly, but... here, watch, you’ll see!” He was smiling brightly.

There was a button to turn the lights in the room on and off, and Pavel raised a finger towards it. Then—with a small noise, a piece of his *finger nail* launched off and struck the button with just the right amount of pressure to turn the lights off. Nanako squeaked aloud, and when a second fingernail fragment launched at it to turn the lights back on, Koron’s eyes were wide.

“It’s not just that, but I’ve got a sort of control over my own bodily processes, I suppose? Little injuries like paper cuts don’t bother me at all, because I can direct the blood to clot very quickly, for instance. I can actually even help other people a bit—one time one of the doctors got a broken ankle, and I was able to partially mend the bone to help with first aid!” Pavel said, his voice increasing in pitch as he continued. “I’d really like to get better at it so that I can assist in helping people.”

Having taken a moment to digest that, Koron shook her head and said, “Fascinating.”

“Right, yes!” Pavel said, nodding. “Since I was so medically fascinating, people with connections from the hospital I was at offered to take care of me... ah, permanently. So, hence ‘donated’. I’ve bounced around a number of hospitals, you see, but Ms. Director got a hold of me

and I've been here for about a year now.”

There was a pause before Nanako asked, “Wait, what about your parents?”

Pavel shrugged. “I suppose they must've gotten all their grieving done already. I don't hold it against them, really. I was nothing but trouble, so...”

“Oh, come off it,” Koron scoffed, narrowing her eyes. “Nobody's so pure they wouldn't hold a grudge at their parents for donating them to science while they were alive—”

It was at this moment that Koron realized that she was the only human person, at least, in this room with a proper set of parents who hadn't done anything intensely bizarre or detestable to them, and this left her cutting herself off, her eyes wide. ...The possibility remained, of course, of her parents doing that, but she had a good enough objective view of their characters that she seriously doubted they would ever do something like that.

“...So you've been essentially by your lonesome in this room for a year now, then? Save for her,” Koron said, gesturing with her head at Chelsea.

“I speak to doctors fairly often,” Pavel said, “but yes?”

“And for your part,” Koron said, looking at Chelsea, “as far as I can tell you're a fully sentient and sapient being whose sole job is to patrol these wards and ensure that nobody shows up. Would you agree?”

“Within my own understanding of my intelligence, yes,” Chelsea said. “I would not suppose to a one hundred percent certainty that I am a wholly genuine artificial intelligence, but it seems fairly likely.”

“A wise admission,” Koron said, as her face shifted through a number of expressions. She stood up, and wiped some dust off of her gown. “Come along, then,” and she turned to leave the room.

“H-huh?” Nanako's eyes were wide. “We're not leaving already, are we?”

“I meant all of you,” Koron said, opening the door. She clapped her hands. “Come on now! Hop to it!”

After a moment's quiet, Koron heard the other three mumbling to each other, but they *did* wind up following her. “Where exactly are we going?” Pavel asked.

They passed through the hallways, through the reception area, and to the entrance of the M-1 Ward. Koron then opened the door, and that caused Chelsea to say, “Please be aware that it is expressly forbidden for either Pavel or myself to step past this door.”

“I know,” Koron said. “Just stand right there, where we can see you.”

Looking at each other, they shrugged and did as they were told. Nanako followed through to ensure Koron wasn't locked out, but no doubt found herself similarly surprised when Koron banged her fist on Dr. Hashizawa's office door. "Koron, what are you doing?" Nanako asked.

Koron didn't answer. Instead, she waited until Dr. Hashizawa opened the door, her eyes bleary, a new tea stain present on her lab coat. "Hello?" Dr. Hashizawa said, before realizing who'd arrived at her door. Her eyes went wide as dishpans as she sputtered, "K-Koron? Nanako?!"

"Hi, Mom! I don't know what we're doing here, either," Nanako said with a wave.

"Dr. Hashizawa, evening," Koron said. "So tell me—you're one of the primary people relevant to goings-on for the psychic patients at this hospital and in the M Wards, correct?"

Dr. Hashizawa looked like she was about to try to chide the two of them for being awake, but opted instead to answer, "W-well, yes, I would say so. I-if you're asking about the M Wards, I'd say I'm about the third-highest up the rung? There's the director of the hospital above me, then there's the director of the M Wards, who's the hospital's primary shareholder."

"So you hold a fair amount of sway there, then," Koron said.

"...Y...yes?" Dr. Hashizawa was sweating. "What. Why aren't you in bed?"

"Come out here, would you, Doctor?" Koron asked, and took a few steps back. Once Dr. Hashizawa had left her office, Koron gestured to the doorway, where Pavel and Chelsea were obediently standing. Dr. Hashizawa let out a loud squeak, and Pavel gave a genial little wave.

"Wha—what—?" Dr. Hashizawa sputtered. "You—oh no. Did you go in the M Wards? Nanako, did you let her go in the M Wards?"

"I helped!" Nanako said, giving a thumbs up. "You should hide your spare keycard better, Mom."

"I—you know—" Letting out a loud sigh not unlike a balloon deflating, Dr. Hashizawa slumped over.

"You see, Doctor," Koron said, "I don't approve of keeping someone who's not sick under complete quarantine, to say nothing of two people. Therefore, I'm petitioning you that this is absurd."

"I mean—well, you're right, of course..." Dr. Hashizawa pulled off her glasses and started trying to clean them. "It's just—well, you know, I've thought it would be nice too, for a while now..."

"...And you haven't done something about it... why, exactly?" Koron asked.

“...The primary shareholder is really scary!” Dr. Hashizawa squeaked. “It's hard for me to get a word in edgewise, so I—well, I—I can't exactly—”

“Then let me do it,” Koron said.

“Eh?” Dr. Hashizawa blinked.

~12. The Hermit's Petition~

“Dr. Hashizawa, you had best have a good reason for this. I have important work to be doing,” said the primary shareholder, as she opened the door to Koron's office.

—Her name was Natsume Hikasa, Koron had been told, and while Koron had been told she'd just crossed the boundary into middle-age, she was the sort who didn't look it, though whether through effort or genetics Koron wasn't sure. Unlike the doctors who worked here, she wore only the most professional suit and pants, dark-colored but with a view into her imposingly deep cleavage. Tied with a string around her front was a purple cape, and a long, embroidered ribbon tied an old-fashioned brown ponytail. Koron had no doubt this woman was old money, and for that matter, no doubt she had supreme confidence in herself.

...That, and she was a tall, shapely, chesty woman with an imposing demeanor, which meant that, yes, someone so weak-willed as Dr. Hashizawa likely wasn't going to get a word in edgewise.

Natsume immediately took notice that the person in Dr. Hashizawa's chair, sitting at her desk amidst her scattered texts and tools, was very much *not* Rin Hashizawa, who gave an awkward wave from the corner. Instead, there was a thirteen-year-old girl there. She raised an eyebrow. “Very well. I'll bite. Why has a patient called me into your office?”

“Er, well, you see—” Dr. Hashizawa mumbled.

Koron leaned forward, steepling her hands and staring right into Natsume's much taller eyes. “My name is Koron Nagataka. I'm in Room 304. I'd like to speak with you about the two people quarantined in the M-1 Ward.”

“Ah,” Natsume said. “I recognize your name. You're one of our S-Class patients, as I recall—the pyrokinetic. Did you threaten Hashizawa for access, then?”

“No,” Koron said, “until I met Mr. Weber and Chelsea I fully intended it to be a wholly stealthy nighttime adventure. However, I felt as though I should petition the person in charge to allow those two to leave the M-1 Ward, at the very least. So much isolation isn't good for the mind, you know.”

Natsume raised an eyebrow, pulled up a chair, and sat across from Koron at the desk. “Are you aware of what Mr. Weber is capable of, then?”

“Perfectly. I was told, and I witnessed a demonstration,” Koron said. “However, unless you intend for the creation of some manner of bioweapon out of him, leaving him utterly isolated is simply a rather boneheaded move for medical treatment. Frankly, I have no doubt that I could outdo him in destructive capability, and I'm free enough to start going back to school in a week or two.”

There was a fairly long pause as Natsume, behind an impassive expression, thought and thought over what Koron had just said. “You're a brave one,” she finally said. “You're only thirteen years and you mean to question the authority of an adult like myself. And if I did have malicious intent—say, to use the boy as some manner of bioweapon—what would stop me from silencing you?”

“I'm capable of creating fire with my mind,” Koron said. “Even if you did manage to take me down, I'd try my damndest to take you down with me.”

“For two people you've only just met?” Natsume asked.

“Principles aren't principles if we only extend them to those we know and love. Am I meant to condemn those I don't know to fates I would object to were I to have known them?” Koron said.

In response, Natsume shook her head and laughed. “To think such a girl had entered this hospital without my knowing. You're quite something, young lady. Very well—I'll accept your offer without further deliberation.”

“I'll be satisfied with that, then,” Koron said. “In the event I have reason to speak with you again, I hope that it will be this cordial again.”

“Of course,” Natsume said.

—The question of who the hell this woman was, exactly, did linger in Koron's mind, but from the physical and mental exertion of the night, it wasn't long after that that exhaustion caught up with Koron, and she just about passed out right there. She was only awoken by rays of sunlight blaring down on her, and this time, when she lurched out of bed and opened her eyes, she saw *two* people staring back at her.

“Shove off!” Koron grumbled, planting her hands on both Nanako's forehead and Pavel's, pushing them back as best she could. She had a headache. “Which girl do you think keeps giving you permission to crowd around her bed? Because it certainly isn't me.”

“Ah, I'm sorry,” said Pavel. “It's just I haven't gotten to say thank you yet, so I thought that I should. Should I not?”

“Just give me a second,” Koron grumbled, grabbing at the glass of water that was always kept at her bedside and slugging it down. There was a visitor access keycard on her bedside now,

too, for the M-1 Ward.

“I haven't gotten to see the rest of the hospital before,” Pavel said, sitting on Nanako's bed on the other side of the room. “It's brighter than the M-1 Ward, at least—ah, but look!” Out of a pocket on his hospital gown, he pulled out a pair of sunglasses. “I've gotten myself a pair of snazzy sunnies for protection! ...Chelsea?”

“My understanding,” said Chelsea, who was standing at the door as she did, “is that nobody says 'snazzy sunnies', no.”

“Aww, darn. Do I sound like a dweeb? I do, don't I?” Pavel said, twiddling his fingers.

“Hey, it's cool, eh, pal?” Nanako said, putting her arm around Pavel and yanking him down to where she'd started work on a block of wood. “I do too! Like, all the time!”

So long as Chelsea accompanied him, it appeared that Pavel was clear to wander the hospital, and now Koron and Nanako were free to visit the M-1 Ward for the purpose of visiting his room. Koron wasn't sure what she'd expected, but she supposed that was a good enough result.

“—and so, the existence of ghosts remains unproven,” Koron said, smirking as she made a wide gesture towards the new arrivals to the psychic patients social area, “but the boy from the M Ward is very real.”

The group of younger children who'd had the discussion in the first place were to a one flabbergasted by Koron's ability to mystery-solve. Pavel was sat down amidst children who immediately set to bombarding him with questions, and when Chelsea attempted to assist him, she was dragged in, too. 'Is your hair natural? Why did they have you locked up in there? Are you really a ghost? Why are you dressed like that, miss? How do you keep your hair that long?' ...If it had been up to Koron, she likely would've attempted to help Chelsea blend in a bit more, but thus was life.

A few other patients had gone within the past week, so those who were staying full-time were no doubt glad to have new, interesting people to interact with. Pavel, for his part, after a moment of culture shock, took right to it, animatedly discussing media he'd no doubt never had the chance to with children who were the right age to appreciate them.

Chelsea, meanwhile, slumped onto the table where Koron sat reading as Nanako had started chasing Pavel and some of the kids around the track, intentionally slowing herself so as not to make it too easy. “Not the social sort?” Koron asked.

“This is difficult,” Chelsea said. “How do you manage it?”

“Mostly I don't,” Koron said with a shrug. “But I find so long as you look confident and intelligent, people will treat you with the respect you deserve. I suppose I didn't ask as to whether either of you actually wanted to be let out—”

“Please do not worry,” Chelsea said, her posture straightening. “Much as I might find myself with difficulties interacting with people, I do not find myself put out by your efforts. Rather, I am somewhat flattered.”

“There is one thing I am wondering,” Koron said, “about your ability to interface with the materials in the walls and whatnot. To me, it rather resembled a psychic ability in its own right. Can gynoids possess psychic abilities?”

“My understanding is limited,” Chelsea admitted, “but it would appear that way. I believe that part of my purpose is to determine whether psychic abilities can be induced in artificial life, as I have some awareness of such a project.”

“Right, I see,” Koron said. She took a moment to mull this over, and then started laughing. “What a world I find myself in. What a world, where madness has become commonplace. ...And I'm meant to go back to school and act as though nothing's happened, am I?” Shaking her head, she concluded, “Well, nothing to do but accept it, one supposes.” She took a moment, and then added, “...but do find a chair or something if you come up to our room again. Having you just standing by the door is unsettling.”

“Understood,” Chelsea said.

~13. The Hermit, Between~

“Y'know, Naga-chan,” Ageha said, one day, as she walked with Koron toward the hospital (which, it should be noted, was *not* the same direction as their homes,) “you've looked happier lately.”

“Have I.” Koron raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, yeah, duh. Sure you still aren't smiling, but you seem less angry,” Ageha explained. She'd grown another few centimeters. Koron still hadn't. Ageha gave a coy little wink, and said, “Guess having friends who aren't me is helping you, huh?”

“Perhaps,” Koron said, reading an old, classic Descartes text to have something to focus on as she walked. “I suppose having some manner of social life would help most people.” She didn't see it, herself, but she supposed Ageha was allowed to think whatever she wanted.

—It had been some time since Koron's manic habits had flared up, though. Not since the incident that had landed her in Okitama in the first place, in fact—while she was still part of the in-patient program, she was allowed to spend weekends at home if she wanted to. She'd been offered a reduced curriculum during her stay at Okitama, but she'd refused—the idea of taking on less intellectual work bothered some part of her, even if a lot of it was no doubt going to be rote memorization.

“And, like...” Ageha scrunched up her face. “Uhhh, what's the way to say this.” She

nibbled at the painted nail of her thumb, which Koron knew from a bit of experience when she was younger had to taste *terrible*, and she had no idea how Ageha managed it.

Koron stopped, and then tapped her foot a few times. “Yes?”

“Huh! There! That!” Ageha pointed at Koron's foot. “That! You're tapping your foot again!”

Blink. “Excuse me?”

“You always used to do that thing where you'd tap your foot, but then you stopped doing it after the whole eyes incident,” Ageha said, and Koron blinked again. “And now you're doing it again! It's like...”

“Ageha,” Koron said, “you're seeing patterns where there are none.”

“I am *not*! Come *onnn*, don't dismiss me out of hand!” Ageha threw her hands up, wriggling her fingers, as the two continued walking. “It's not all, uh... confir-mation bias!”

The two approached closer to the hospital. The sun was still high in the sky, and the cicadas chirped in the summer heat. “Still,” Ageha said, “it's like, you were into this kinda stuff before that all happened, so were you always like this and I just didn't know it?”

“I seriously doubt that,” Koron said. She idly flipped a page. “It wasn't as though I came home and simply started talking like this.”

The fact of Koron's mannerisms—erudite, but with those traits of masculine sentence construction—had been one that sparked a sort of confusion after the incident, but Koron simply found herself unable to speak any other way. It was yet another thing she found fascinating about the hodgepodge of 'self' that inhabited her body.

“The talking is one thing, Naga-chan, this is another!” Ageha said. “I—”

By the psychic patients' entrance of the hospital stood one Miss Chelsea, her posture utterly still, her head bowed. Koron raised her hand in greeting, and so did Ageha. The two let out a simultaneous “Yo, Chelsea.”

“Miss Koron, Miss Ageha, good afternoon,” Chelsea said. She lifted her head. “Shall I take your bags, Koron?”

—It wasn't as though Koron found it satisfying to foist effort off on someone else, but there was a clear satisfaction of some sort that Chelsea got from Koron acquiescing. Something about her glowed as she got to take Koron's school bags, and Koron shook her head.

Nanako and Pavel waited inside the doors to the entrance hall, behind the barriers past which full-time inpatients were not allowed to pass. Nanako was intently focusing on explaining

the intricacies of some manner of bizarre figurine she'd made, Pavel nodding along and making understanding noises, but both jumped to their feet upon Koron's arrival. "Hey hey hey!" Nanako said, as since she'd jumped up faster, she had greeting privileges. "You have a good day, buddy?"

"It was about the same as usual," Koron said.

"You call *that*," Ageha said, slumping over and narrowing her eyes at Koron, "the same as usual? I didn't understand *anything* on that math test!"

"Well, Ageha," Koron said, turning her head and smirking, "she asked about *my* day, not yours. For me, it *was* the same as usual."

Pavel raised his hand, and Ageha pointed at him to call on him. "I'm pretty good at math! If they ever let me have a cell phone, I could try and teach you!"

"Aww, aren't you sweet," Ageha said, reaching over and ruffling Pavel's hair. He blushed. (Don't worry, she'd already disinfected her hands.) "But no, my parents would *freak* if they knew a boy was calling me at night."

"You could lie and say he's a girl!" Nanako said, raising her hand but not waiting to be called on. "I'm also pretty good at math, believe it or not, but I also don't own a phone!"

"Okay, him I understand," Ageha said, her eyes narrowing as she bent over to look at Nanako's big, wide-eyed grin, "but your mom like, works here. Come on, you've never thought about just turning on the puppy dog eyes and asking for one?"

"Kojiro's suggested it a few times," Nanako said, "but if you're saying it, maybe I should—"

The teddy bear in question was in fact on that set of seats next to Pavel, and an intense aura of raw displeasure blasted the room, causing Koron, Pavel, Ageha, and even Chelsea, still skulking in the back, to grimace. "Because," Nanako said, turning her head and puckering her lips at her little buddy, "you just want the phone so that you can prank call people and send Nagamimi threatening but vaguely romantic texts."

The aura of displeasure instantly shifted to a flustered bewilderment, and Koron sensed Nagamimi cackling. "Whoa, Kojiro," Ageha said, also turning her head to the teddy bear and grinning with a cocked eyebrow, "I didn't know you were a *ladies' man*."

"Oh! Romantic text messages are a good skill to have, right?" Pavel pumped his fists. "That'll help me connect with my peers! You have to teach me, Kojiro!"

Chelsea slid into frame to shake her head. "No, I assure you, there's little you could learn from Kojiro on that subject. He lacks the tact and skill to be a proper teacher." Kojiro didn't move, but Chelsea said, "I am aware. Even to me, it is clear you lack that tact. However, you *are* better-mannered than Nagamimi."

Everyone turned their heads to Nagamimi, and by proxy, Koron. The rabbit doll sat in Koron's arms stared ahead. "No, you're right," Koron said. "She's foul-mouthed and endlessly rude."

"Ah, but wait," Pavel said, turning his head and beginning to pace, "maybe I should find someone to make a romantic connection with before I write any romantic text messages. That's the order of these things."

There was a moment of silence before Ageha said, "You know, come to think of it—and I'm counting myself here, y'know—you're a guy whose entire friend group is girls. That's like, the plot to a billion different anime."

"Not true! There's usually at least one or two same-gender friends in those sorts of stories!" Pavel said, huffing. "Like in the *Tokimeki Memorial* series! It's the same way in the *Girl's Side* installments, you know."

Koron knew well that Ageha had played quite a bit of said series, but Ageha kept silent and nodded, going, "Yeah, you're right."

"What does that have to do with romantic connections, though?" Nanako said, tilting her head. Ageha sputtered aloud. "What?"

"Generally," Koron said, "in those sorts of stories, the idea is that all of the girls are falling over the bland, faceless male protagonist, who is meant to serve as a self-insert for the lonely morons who indulge in that sort of storytelling. Taken as intended, the purpose is a sort of vicarious enjoyment for people who don't interact with the opposite gender often."

Nanako blinked a few more times, and tilted her head a bit further, before her ahoge did a 360-degree spin and stood straight up. "Ohhh!" Nanako said, nodding. "Oh, okay, now I get it, it's because the boys want to date the girls!" Pause. "But what if I think the girls would go better together? Can I put them together?"

"Not usually," Pavel said.

"Why not?" Nanako asked. Pause. "Oh, but what if I'm a girl, and I want to date the same-gender friend? Can I do that?"

"Not usually," Pavel said.

"Why not?" Nanako asked.

Before Pavel could say anything, Ageha leaned over and put her hands on Nanako's shoulders, tears streaming down her made-up face. "Sister... I know your pain! I *know your pain!* Mizuki! Mizukiiii!" Her teeth were gritted.

—This was about how coming here after school went. Ageha was, in Koron's understanding, a naturally sociable person, so after having had the situation explained she had immediately hit it off with Koron's new group of followers. Koron couldn't much complain. Even if it was only for a short while each day, having some continuity between the two halves of her life was pleasant.

“So, is it true that your eyes are made of glass?” Pavel asked, later that same day as the two sat together in the psychic social area. In response, Koron removed an eye from her socket. “Oh, wow! But you can still see, that's incredible!”

“It is rather fascinating,” Koron said, popping her eye back in, “you are right about that.”

“Still, I wonder if that means...” Pavel mumbled to himself for a moment. “I wonder if I could make you new eyes?”

Koron raised her hands up. “I'm fine without fleshy eyes. I get by just fine.”

“Yes, yes, but I can't help but wonder. If you could find a way to transfer that to other people, too, then—I mean, nobody would ever need glasses again, or go blind again!” Pavel's fists were tightening on the table as he started spouting off. “That's just fascinating! Isn't it?”

“It is, it is,” Koron said, chuckling to herself, putting her hands on Pavel's to calm him down.

—The boy, Koron came to learn, had quite the desire to help others. It had only been a few months since he'd first arrived, but already the younger children at the hospital, psychic or not, had come to see the sweet young lad with the white hair as a sort of older brother figure. He would often do his best to assist anyone who needed help or accidentally got hurt. Right into action, that Mr. Weber.

Why, just in the time it had taken to have that thought, Pavel had stood up and begun applying first aid and soothing reassurance to a child whose ankle had twisted. He always looked his brightest when people were looking up to him—Koron understood the feeling, she thought. It was nice to be relied on.

—Oh, what the hell was she thinking? Koron scoffed to herself. That was entirely too touchy-feely of a feeling for her.

“Hey, Koron,” Pavel said one night, as they sat about in his room in the M-1 Ward, “what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Blink. “Huh?”

“Well, it's just,” Pavel said, as Nanako and Chelsea had it out in a surprisingly close game of *Itadaki Street* behind him, “I think about it a lot. Do you think about it a lot?”

Growing up, huh? “No, I don't,” Koron said. “To be honest, I don't take it as a presupposition that I'll be allowed to. Having expectations would make it all the more crushing if they're broken.”

“Ah,” Pavel said. There was a brief pause. “I want to be a doctor, and help people!”

“I know,” Koron didn't say to Pavel's bright-eyed, wide smile.

“I just, you know, if I can cure people, then people won't have to be so afraid of dying. They won't have to go through so much pain. I... I just don't want other people to go through...” Pavel looked away, but Koron understood the end of the sentence.

“When I grow up,” Nanako said, craning her head, “I wanna make stuff out of wood!”

“We know,” Koron and Pavel said.

“So, I know a lot about you, at this point,” Pavel said, “but I don't really know what kind of person you *want* to be. Do... you know?” He'd adapted the head-tilt from Nanako, but his neck didn't tilt as far.

Koron laid back on Pavel's bed, staring up at the ceiling with her hands on her stomach. “Can anyone really know that? I don't even know who I am now.”

“You are Koron Nagataka,” Chelsea said, successfully taxing Nanako for an unfortunate amount of money.

“But what does that mean, really?” Koron asked. “Am I truly contiguous with all instances of 'Koron Nagataka' such that I can consider that statement to constitute a genuine identity? What traits are inherent to 'Koron Nagataka'? I—”

“One moment, Nanako,” Chelsea said, putting down her controller.

“Oh, yeah, take your time, pal,” Nanako said, slowly working through her turn.

Chelsea hastily stepped over to the bed and grabbed Koron's arms, pinning her to the bed. Blue eyes met red eyes. “I am pinning you, as my judgment has dictated to me that you sound as though you are about to enter a malignant state of altered consciousness.”

The surprise of this jolted something in Koron's brain, and she sputtered. “What—what the hell are you talking about? Get off me.” This response appeared to satisfy Chelsea, who did so, and walked back to see that her financial lead was still solidly maintained. Koron sat up, her jaw gaping. “What the hell was that?”

“Nice hustle,” Nanako said, fist-bumping Chelsea as she continued to lose money. Chelsea returned the gesture.

“That is true,” Pavel said, hopping up on the bed next to Koron. Now they could both properly watch Nanako lose at managing money. “You get into those odd states where you worry about your identity. I don't know if it matters. Don't most people change as their life goes on?”

“I... suppose,” Koron said, looking away.

—Of course, it didn't seem that Pavel had experienced *that*. That cracking sensation, that loss of continuity of thought, which still returned to haunt Koron in her nightmares. That idea that maybe, perhaps, Koron Nagataka had died, and she was some manner of alien thought that had simply taken the body as a puppet. No matter the insistence from outside sources, she could never be completely sure. It was a thoroughly outlandish, unfalsifiable, and deeply unsettling idea.

—“Oh, um, by the way,” said Dr. Hashizawa, her pen poking at her notepad during one discussion after a bit of regular bloodwork was done, “how did you know—um, when you and Nanako broke into the M Wards—how did you know where my tea was in my office?”

“Nanako told me,” Koron said. “Why?”

There was a momentary glance away, a flash of something that Koron couldn't read. “Oh, I see,” Dr. Hashizawa said. “I was just wondering, is all.”

~14. The Hermit's Birthday~

“...eh?”

Koron found herself with a few fragments of confetti in her hair, staring blankly at the inside of Room 403. She'd been planning to start packing up to return home for the weekend, but now here she was, wordlessly plucking a piece of confetti out of her hair.

Somehow, and Koron didn't know how, Ageha had managed to sneak a party popper into the hospital. The sound of all four of Koron's friends shouting, “*Happy Birthday!*” barely even registered from the shock.

“...wha?” Koron muttered.

—Well, that wasn't true. Chelsea never really 'shouted' much of anything unless she was in the middle of losing a fight, but the part of Koron that could take these things as they went knew that the pitch of her voice had in fact raised a bit.

Nanako, ever the helpful friend, picked Koron up by the shoulders before she could comprehend what she'd seen and placed her down on the seat of her bed, whereas Pavel produced a small cake on a bed. “Ageha said you didn't have many opinions about cake,” Pavel said, “so I just made you something rather plain.”

“O-oh,” Koron said, staring down at it. “Um. Thank you.”

—A number of questions raced through Koron's mind. How had they managed to sneak these things in? How was Ageha here past visiting hours? Wha—what? Huh?

“I'm very sneaky,” Ageha said, leaning into Koron's line of sight, “and I'm very sneaky.”

“I—” Koron sputtered, and then looked away.

“Awww, is my little Naga-chan blushing?” Ageha said, sidling a bit closer and rubbing Koron's shoulders a bit. “My little Naga-chan is blushing, you guys.”

“A-Ageha! Don't—!” Koron's head whipped around to glare at her. “Shut up!”

Business-like in all things, Chelsea cleared her throat and elaborated. “Ageha collectively informed us that festivities such as these are new to you. I used my personal judgment to decide that bending the rules was necessary in this instance to grant you, and by proxy, the rest of your friend group, this novel experience.”

“Ah, so your 'personal judgment' is good for deciding to embarrass me, is it?” Koron grumbled, picking up a plastic fork to take a bite of her cake. The truth is that she did actually have something of a preference for cake, but only her parents were privy to that information. That said... “It's good,” she said. Pavel fistpumped, beginning to pace in circles about the room.

Nanako was sneaking by the bedside, but her ahoge, bouncing conspiratorially, gave her away. She leapt up, and Koron was all surprised out, but here was another. “I made you this!” Nanako presented Koron with a small wooden stand, on which stood four little dolls. The detail was quite fine, and the dolls were small, but based on the colors, it was easy enough for Koron to tell that it was meant to be her, Nanako, Pavel, and Chelsea, standing together and holding hands.

“I—Nanako...” Koron said, holding it gently in her hands.

“I decided that since I must've forgotten a lot of people, I should make things to commemorate people I don't wanna forget. So this is for you! So that even when you leave the hospital, you don't forget us,” Nanako said. Her eyes were so bright that Koron—

Koron... didn't say anything, at first. She sat it down on her bed, and took a deep breath in before saying, her voice quiet, “Thank... thank you.”

“Oh, you really got her,” Ageha faux-whispered into Nanako's ear with a snort. “She is *terrible* at getting gifts.”

“I think it's great! I'm very happy with the results, actually!” Nanako said, with that same smile. She was very close, and she leaned in to grab Koron's hand, clutching it in both of hers. She was warm.

Shaking her head, Koron said, “I... I have to—I have to—home. Weekend. Dad waiting.

Lobby. Go. Have to.”

Chelsea bowed her head and said, “I took the liberty of informing your father of the events. However, you should go before it gets too dark.”

“Yes. Okay,” Koron said, mumbling and stumbling over herself as she clumsily shoved things into bags. “Right, yes.”

“Wow,” Ageha said. She turned her head to Nanako again and said, “Okay, this is new. She's bright red.”

“It's like her hair,” Pavel said, clapping his hands together and staring in fascination. “Has she ever been flustered like this?”

“Okay, she's been flustered on like, a similar level?” Ageha said, as Koron stumbled and bumbled around some more. “But not like, *like* this, you know?”

“Koron?” Nanako said. “Are you—”

“Yes! I'm fine! Thank you!” Koron squawked, picking up her bags and putting them on her back. (She would later learn that Chelsea had specifically *not* done so for her so she could enjoy the spectacle a bit more.) “I will! I'll see you—uh, Monday! I'll see you Monday!” She let out a salute, and then dashed out of the door, letting out a heavy breath as it closed.

Koron then jogged to the elevator, careful not to incite any conversation on the way, until she reached the lobby. It was easy to pick her father out of a crowd because he was the one wearing a gaudy beret. “Hey, honey! How was it?” he said with a wink.

Grabbing her father's shoulder, Koron said, “Car. Now. Please. Go.”

Step step step step *whoosh* step tap tap tap tap open toss close step open sit close buckle stare tap tap tap tap and there was her father.

“Okay, shoot,” Mr. Nagataka said.

“Dad?” Koron stammered. “How did you realize you were gay?”

Her father whistled as he turned on the car and said, “Now isn't that a loaded question. Is it the brunette with the figurines?” Koron nodded. “Ah, see, I knew it, I thought to myself a few times—that's the sort of girl that's Koron's type if she likes girls.”

“What. What does that mean,” Koron said.

“You know, spontaneous, energetic, a bit naive, kinda broad. The sort of girl who's canny enough to mess with you a bit sometimes, but also, totally willing to just listen to you talk and talk and let you feel as smart as you are. Earthy! She likes wood, right? Earthy!” He was

grinning.

“Huh—I—” Koron stammered. Of course, that part of her brain that was totally logical understood that it made perfect sense, considering she'd never even been so much as the slightest bit interested in men, but on the other hand—“I, I, uh. You didn't, uh, answer my question?”

“We can talk about *my* sordid backstory another time, Koron, I'm here answering the questions you're *really* asking,” Mr. Nagataka said, and Koron bit the nail of her thumb, grumpily having to admit that he was right. “So—”

“I'd felt her hands before, but all of a sudden after she gave me my birthday present they just, felt, *more?*!” Koron squeaked. “I felt like I was seeing stars, and suddenly my heart was racing and my face turned all bright red and—” Her hands spun about in the air, attempting to will the words out of her. “Well, you know, she's, ah, she's a good-looking girl! Just, uh, speaking in an evaluation sense, she—she's pleasant to look at—”

“Koron.”

“—and it's not as though I've suddenly started thinking about her like those gutter perverts who hit on girls on the street without any thought for their respect, no, it's just that suddenly my heart was racing and it was impossible to look at her without my heart racing more because nobody's ever—”

“Koron?”

“—you and Ageha and Mom have all said that you love me but nobody's ever said they wouldn't *forget* me before and nobody's ever made something like that that was supposed to be me and all of a sudden I can look at something and just feel like it's me and she *gave* me it, she showed me that this is *me*, and—!”

The car stopped. Mr. Nagataka leaned over to hug his daughter. She was crying. These glass eyes didn't become moist in the same manner as 'true' eyes, but nevertheless tears were falling from Koron's eyes, leaving her cheeks red as she sniffled and sobbed. “It's okay,” he said, “let it all out, honey. Take as long as you need.”

—So Koron cried and cried and cried into her father's shoulders. She cried, and cried, and cried. That night, she put her birthday present right where she could see at her bedside, and though she did not notice, for just a moment, Koron Nagataka smiled.

~16. The Hermit's Incarceration~

By January, Nanako was the oldest patient in the psychic program that still remained. Those older than her had slowly vanished, gradually dwindling the numbers until Koron and her group were the eldest present. Pavel took to the role with gusto, of course, but Koron couldn't help but find something unsettling about that fact. It's not as though they would've suddenly stopped being psychic. Either they ceased needing care, or—

Well, that was a grisly thought. Koron was good at those, but it wasn't as though she enjoyed having them. So, she pushed it back until one day, after school, she overheard a phone call from a passing Dr. Hashizawa, pacing by the social area, probably assuming nobody was paying attention. (This was, of course, a dangerous assumption with Koron Nagataka around.)

“—No, Mrs. Toranosuke, I swear—y-your daughter's fine! It's just that for research reasons, we'd like to ask you to extend Airi's full-time stay for a few—”

“What do you suppose that was about?” Koron asked Nanako, who'd come over to sit by her. Nanako's ahoge twisted into a question mark. “Your mother.”

“Oh, yeah, Mom makes phone calls a lot that I don't really understand,” Nanako admitted. “Why?”

Koron sighed, crossing her arms. “I'm suspicious, is all,” she said.

Nanako raised her finger with a gasp, and then grinned, showing her teeth. “That sounds like Conspiracy Koron showing up again! Is this Conspiracy Koron? Do you wanna do a sweet break-in again?”

“...How is 'Conspiracy Koron' any different from regular Koron?” Koron scoffed, grimacing to repel the energies of Nanako's grin. “At any rate, no. I don't have enough evidence to suggest anything odd is going on.”

—But she would certainly get that evidence. It was in the form of a meeting—a sudden intruder to the regular flow of Room 403 during a routine visit by Koron's mother. Natsume Hikasa, as it turned out, was a fan of wardrobe consistency—she was just as out-of-place now as she was beforehand. Nanako was out of the room for a bit of testing of her own, so it was just the Nagatakas.

Koron's mother looked Natsume up and down as she walked up, brandishing a clipboard with some manner of forms on it. “Uh, hello, have we met?” Mrs. Nagataka asked.

“*We* have not,” Natsume said, “but I am acquainted with your daughter. Good day, Ms. Nagataka.”

“Hikasa,” Koron said with a curt nod.

“Dr. Hashizawa gets awfully tongue-tied at times like these, you see,” Natsume said, “so I thought it more apropos to come speak with you myself. I'm the hospital's primary shareholder and director of the M Wards, Natsume Hikasa.” She presented Mrs. Nagataka with this clipboard as Mrs. Nagataka blankly nodded. “I'd like to request your consent to two months of full in-patient treatment for Koron. Our research into the Psy-Gene is at a breaking point, you see—we require as many patients as possible on hand so that we can ensure the maximum possible sample size.”

—Koron raised an eyebrow. “Wholly for our benefit, of course.”

“Naturally,” Natsume said, mimicking the raised eyebrow.

Mrs. Nagataka read the forms up and down, up and down, and then turned to Koron, asking, “Are... you alright with this, honey?”

On the one hand, to Koron, this seemed obviously suspicious. She had a bad feeling she couldn't quite place, and it only intensified looking at Hikasa. On the other hand, if she disagreed, she lost her chance to influence events and discover the truth, and who knew what would happen if she did that?

“Go ahead,” Koron said, before picking up a pen handed to her and levying it at Natsume with her fingers, “but I reserve the right to revoke my participation if you're not genuinely assisting me in any way.”

“Naturally,” Natsume said, staring at the pen.

—The day after the order came into effect, a *hush* came over the hospital. Where before, you would occasionally hear the noises of passing patients, staff rushing about, now it was just doctors and nurses walking about, gossiping and working in equal measure. The psychic social area was unchanged, mind, but outside of that—

Koron downed a third glass of water in the row. “More, please,” she said to Pavel, who hurried to the sink for her, as the fluorescent lights worsened her headache. There were bags under her eyes. “God damn it.”

“Are you sure you're okay?” Pavel said, bringing her her fourth glass of water. “I could try and, you know, look at you—”

“No!” Koron said, and slugged the water back again, downing the glass in one long chug. Her headache finally started to abate. “God. I'll be *fine*.”

Shortly after eating, Koron slumped back to Room 403 and crashed down onto her bed. The last of the headache was abating now, but it had left her horribly tired. The rays of sun through the window seemed to mock her, somehow, as did the sound of the door opening behind her until she realized that that was what it was.

Another body came to sit on the bed. “Hey, do you need anything?” Nanako.

“Quiet. I need quiet,” Koron said. “Please.”

“Okay. I can be quiet,” Nanako said, and reached over to give her a hug. Koron would never say it out loud, but of course that made her rather happy. Nanako's arms were large and warm, and something about being held by someone else, but especially her, calmed Koron's

nerves significantly. She dreamed of very little as she fell to sleep, but—

—“Wake up, please. Wake up, Koron.”

Those were not Nanako's hands. Koron's eyelids fluttered open, and she turned onto her side. The sun had set, but it was a cloudless night, so moonlight streamed in through the window now. “Ugh. What,” Koron grumbled, sitting up.

Chelsea retracted her hands, and puckered her lips. Nanako and Pavel, both sitting on Nanako's bed, were both also look at Chelsea, visibly bewildered. Chelsea's fists were balled, and her eyes looked at the floor. Her face was stoic as ever, but a small twitch betrayed... guilt?

“I'm sorry,” Chelsea said. “Now that you are awake. I'm sorry. Once—once, seeing you in that sort of agony once—I could not stand it. I should have said something sooner. My personal judgment—”

Koron shook the sleep from her head as she yawned. “What are you talking about?”

From her sleeves, Chelsea produced a tablet. “I am part of hospital staff, and moreover, report directly to Director Hikasa. As such, I am privy to some amount of the purpose of experiments in the M Ward. While I am not granted full authorization to view Director Hikasa's intent, last night I was privy to the beginning of the Okitama Children's Hospital M Ward plan's final phase for the purposes of recording the experiment.”

Koron's breath—caught in her throat. Nanako gasped, too. “Wait,” Pavel said, “what experiment is this?”

Flicking about on her tablet, Chelsea, by the sound, had just found a video file. “It would be unethical of me to not present you with this evidence, Koron,” Chelsea said, “but nevertheless I must warn you you may find it... unsettling.”

—Nanako and Pavel crowded around Koron for Chelsea to present the video. Koron gulped. “Go on, then,” Koron said. “Play it.”

~17. The Hermit's Second Leg - Burning Claw~

The length of this video file is eight minutes, seventeen seconds, and thirty-two milliseconds. Its recording begins with the device, visible at just above Chelsea's height—most likely a head-mounted camera of some sort—flickering to life. Natsume Hikasa stands alone in a dark, metallic room, overseeing a chamber below through a great glass window.

“Experiment log PSIK-13-A-I,” Natsume said. “In the interest of defeating Dr. Akaneno's so-called 'hero', investigations have continued into use of the newly-isolated 'Psy-Gene'.”

The camera, a slight bit of static omnipresent in its footage, moves forward to beside Natsume. It looks down, into the chamber below. It is white and stark, its walls padded but its

floor bare. A girl with red hair is slumped against the wall.

“A unique specimen was placed into my purview when I met a patient named Koron Nagataka—an S-Class psychic with the ability to manipulate cellular motion. While she specializes in pyrokinesis, all indications are such that she is capable of arbitrary cellular motion with enough force and exertion,” Natsume continued. “In addition, Nagataka's psyche is in a unique state. While the development of her Rapid-Onset Psychokinesis included a sensory aspect—the development of thermal vision—she does not visibly show signs of Cognitive Parallel Processing. However, upon further investigation, when Nagataka removed her own eyes midway through developing this sense, it left her mind only partially fractured.”

There is a minor shift in the alignment of the camera—however, it quickly stills itself. “As such,” Natsume explains, “while she outwardly appears to possess only one persona, in truth, the persona she displays is a communal effort between three partially-manifested 'cores'. For the purposes of testing the limits of Nagataka's psychic abilities, I have medically induced a state wherein the partially-manifested cores may take control.”

At one minute, thirty-two seconds, and ten milliseconds, Natsume presses a button on a remote. The girl with red hair, in the chamber, awakens, and quickly starts to attention. She shivers, looking about—she is a small girl, and looks very frail in the hospital gown she wears, as though she could snap at any moment. “H-huh? Where, where am I?” she asks. “Where...? M-Mom? Dad? Ageha?”

“Miss Nagataka,” Natsume says. There is a loudspeaker that projects her voice into the chamber as the girl with red hair backs against the wall, her body quivering in terror. “The purpose of this test is to gauge your psychic abilities. Several targets will be presented to you. The goal of this test is for you to incinerate them. Are you ready to begin?”

“B-but I can't...” The girl with red hair sits down and curls into a ball. “I can't! Where am I?!” She yells toward the ceiling. She cannot, it seems, see Natsume. “P-please, I'm—I'm scared! I wanna go home!”

“The consent forms were already signed,” Natsume says. “Are you ready to begin?”

The camera steps slightly forward, and one of Chelsea's hands places itself on the window. “Please, I don't know who you are, but please, I just—I'll give you anything you want, I swear, I—!” The girl cries.

Natsume presses a button, and then explains. “Core #1, 'Koron Nagataka'. Psychologically, she represents the state of mind the subject had before the development of Rapid-Onset Psychokinesis. Her combat ability is lacking, as she possesses little control of her psychic abilities on her own, and her unstable nature makes her unsuitable for experimentation.”

The button is re-pressed. “I am not asking,” Natsume says. “Begin.”

A series of wooden targets appears, all about the chamber, at various heights and

distances. The girl in the chamber looks about, gasping as she sees them. “I can't! I can't do that!” As she says this, a timer appears on the wall.

“You will not be leaving until the test has been completed, Miss Nagataka,” Natsume says. It is then that a change comes over the girl with red hair. Where before, she was curling up into a ball, shuddering in terror, now her bangs fall to cover her face as she stands up, her posture having gone limp. Her face is not visible. “Proceed with the—”

“Shut the *HELL UP!*” The girl with the red hair roars. Flames erupt on her fingers that give the impression of claws, and her hair flies to the side as a bolt of fire launches from her mouth, incinerating the highest target on the wall. “Piece of shit, you really love the sound of your own voice, huh?”

From here, it appears as though the girl's teeth have sharpened just slightly, but it is possible that that is merely perception. “Miss Nagataka—”

“Miss Nagataka *this*, Miss Nagataka *that!*” With each syllable, a burst of flame appears and incinerates one of the targets. By the end of this exclamation, scorch marks are beginning to appear on the padded walls. It is at four minutes, twenty-one seconds, and ninety milliseconds that the timer on the wall erupts into an explosion, being rendered inoperable as it crashes to the floor with a great sound. “I'll kill you when I see you, bitch!” The girl roars, another fleck of fire coming from her mouth.

The button is pressed once more. “Core #2, code-named “Ryuko Nagataka,”” Natsume explains. Ryuko does not hear this—her flaming claws are slashing at the walls with wild abandon. “Within the gestalt persona of the subject, this core functions primarily to produce proper self-defense instincts and govern distaste and rage. However, let free in her partially-formed state, this persona represents the internal drive of the subject's pyrokinesis—she is destructive and easily enraged, but the pyrokinetic powers she possesses are—”

The padding on the furthest wall is entirely incinerated, leaving only a blank wall. There are more scorch marks on the floor than clean floor. “—very, very impressive.”

When flying targets are sent into the room using drones, they last mere moments before a thought from Ryuko incinerates them. One falls to the ground, and Ryuko detonates it with a glare. The whole salvo is finished at six minutes, seventeen seconds, sixty-four milliseconds.

“However, the primary issue are the deleterious effects on the subject's body. Prolonged use results in severe physical maladies—IVs will be used after the experiment. Ryuko Nagataka will serve as my 'model'. Having had much time to study the mental landscape of the subject, isolating the instincts that govern this explosive control over pyrokinesis—”

At seven minutes, twelve seconds, and six milliseconds, a jet of flame bursts out of Ryuko's foot, and she grabs onto the wall in front of the mirror using her claws. The camera leaps back. “You're here, aren't you?” Ryuko hisses. A distortion from the flames gives the impression that her eyes have narrowed to slits. “Bitch! Get out here so I can kill you!” She

pounds on the wall repeatedly, but it does not break. “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! I’ll... k-kill you.”

The flames begin to peter out as exhaustion takes Ryuko at an incredible rate. A small platform is raised out of the wall for her to land on with a flick of a lever by Natsume. Ryuko slumps to the ground, unconscious.

After it is ensured that she is properly unconscious, Natsume says, “Due to the medically-induced dissociative state, the memories of this test are incapable of reaching active recall. As such, the patient will not remember this in the morning. Ideally, the entire experiment will conclude before the subject catches on—the gestalt subject, Koron Nagataka, is quite keen, another factor I would ideally like to mimic.”

The devastation below has rendered the previously stark white chamber a scorched mess, resembling a bombed-out battlefield more than solitary confinement. “Ending experiment log PSIK-13-A-I. For confidentiality purposes, consider this log maximum security.”

“...Yes, Director Hikasa,” Chelsea says.

The camera is shut off with one last click.