

~18. The Hermit's Second Infiltration~

“And... done!”

The M-2 Ward was locked by RFID. Koron was self-admittedly not familiar with the inner workings of that sort of security system, but when the group had called Ageha the night before to fill her in on the situation, she had declared, no, you can leave that part to me.

Somehow or another, Ageha was capable of obtaining RFID tags, whatever that meant. The object she sent Koron was unassuming, but Ageha assured her that it was capable of being used to unlock any Japanese RFID lock—and when Nanako got her hands on it and started tooling around with it, it turned out it worked.

“So hey,” Nanako said to Chelsea, who was facing down the hallway and trying to look small, “what else is in there? Other than these experiment grounds.”

“I...” Chelsea trailed off. She didn't turn to face Nanako. “I don't know. I was only ever brought in on a specific path. I wasn't allowed to—I'm sorry.” She shook her head, still not facing Nanako. “I'm sorry.”

Nanako sighed, and turned around to face Koron. “Koron, will you please say something? She's not going to stop apologizing until you do.”

“I haven't figured out what to say yet,” Koron said. She, too, was not facing Nanako.

With the infiltration occurring at late night, the group had brought flashlights. Even though the dim light likely didn't actually get darker, the atmosphere of the M-2 Ward was different, *deeper*—the smell of the cold and the anti-septic became slightly stronger, and the darkness became murkier, more liable to be swallowed up.

“So, what should we do if we see someone?” Pavel asked.

“Knee them in the crotch,” Koron said. “It might take them out entirely, or it might just hurt. Decent odds.”

—Through the darkness, as they carefully aimed their flashlights, Koron managed to find another map on the right-hand wall. The M-2 Ward's main hallway was a straight shot to the M-3 Ward, but doors to the side led to... “There's the large chamber,” Koron said. A door on the right-hand side led to the overlook of, and entrances to, the Psychological Isolation Chambers. “But...”

On the other side was the ward's foyer, with noteworthy chambers labeled “Archive”, “Operation Rooms”, and... Nanako gulped. “Doesn't this hospital have a morgue already?”

“It does,” Koron said. Nevertheless, there it was. There was a Morgue in the M-2 Ward.

With cautious steps forward, Koron turned her flashlight to the left-hand wall to find the door to the ward's foyer, and as soon as she saw it, she reached for the door and opened it. “Come on,” she said.

Spare beds littered the M-2 Ward's foyer, and the smell of disinfectant was almost piercing. Double doors to multiple operation rooms lined the wall, but Koron's pace increased as she walked toward the Archive on the far left of the hall. "Hey, wait up!" Pavel called out. "Shouldn't we—?"

"If we're going to learn what exactly I'm meant to be a 'model' of," Koron said, "an 'archive' is the best place for it—"

Rattle.

There was a sound within the Archive, and it stopped the group cold. Footsteps, shuffling... Someone was, without a doubt, inside. Ageha put a finger up in front of her lips to silence the group, and then slowly walked toward the door, putting her hands on the doorknob, twisting...

Creeaaaak.

"W-whoa—?!"

A man's voice cried out from inside the room at the sound of the door opening, and there was a minor crash—the sound of a chair toppling over with someone inside it. Moreover, the light was on inside this room—the rest of the group had to throw up their hands to let their eyes adjust, but Koron took a step past

Green hair, glasses, kind of a reedy frame, official-looking labcoat, a red armband... Immediately it appeared to Koron that this man was in no way a threat, especially having toppled over in his chair as he had. He grunted and stood up, rubbing his head. "Ow. I thought Ms. Hikasa said people didn't generally visit this late at night? I—"

It was then that this man properly realized that four young teenagers had barged into the room, and were most certainly not supposed to be here. His eyes widened. "Whoa—whoa, whoa, whoa, what's. What's going on here? I—?"

Chelsea's eyes widened. "Mr. Kirino?" She shook her head, as though she were seeing things. "I believed you had been banned."

'Kirino' re-adjusted his glasses, supporting himself against a bookcase behind him and still wincing a little in pain. The Archive wasn't a large room, so he didn't have much other space to do it in. "Is that... You're Chelsea, aren't you? Don't tell me Ms. Hikasa has repopulated the first ward." He fussed with his hair a little bit, and then sat back down, putting his head in his hands. "Please don't tell Ms. Hikasa you're here. She's only just allowed me back into her offices, see..."

The table Kirino was sitting at was circular, so there was just enough room for six seats. "And you are?" Koron said, leaning forward onto the table.

"Kirino Ayafumi," he said. "I'm, ah, Ms. Hikasa's personal assistant—though I've been a bit on probation for some time from deep Murakumo operations like these for two years or so."

"What exactly happened, sir?" Chelsea asked.

"I, ah..." Kirino rubbed the back of his head. "Well, may I ask why *you* are all here?"

“My name is Koron Nagataka,” Koron said. “I—”

Kirino's eyes widened, and he leaned forward. “The Rapid-Onset S-class pyrokinetic Ms. Hikasa has been talking about? The one whose theoretical limit for a concentrated firestorm given ideal physical conditions would—” He shook his head. “Sorry.”

“...Yes,” Koron said. “That one. Hikasa's been conducting *experiments*. Something to do with drugging me and...” She gritted her teeth before continuing. “...allowing my mind to split into three personae temporarily to use my unfettered pyrokinesis as a 'model'.”

Kirino took a moment to digest this, fidgeting with the collar of his coat, adjusting his glasses, and then muttering, “Oh, no.” He put his head in his hands. “Not this again, Ms. Hikasa, not again...”

—You are already aware of what occurred in the depths of Murakumo at that earlier time, those atrocities that occurred to the ones who would become SKY. So, with this knowledge, Kirino informed these children, as well, of what happened. “These wards are Ms. Hikasa's test-bed for the creation of artificial talent,” Kirino said, “and if that is the case, I can only assume that you, Ms. Nagataka, are... well, a subject in that sort of experiment.”

“So she wants to... like, duplicate Koron's pyrokinesis?” Nanako asked, tilting her head.

“That... would be my guess, yes.” Kirino sighed, and rapped his knuckles against the table. “Keeping the patients directly in the M Wards presents a security risk, so that may explain why she only kept two patients in the M-1 Ward these days.”

“...Two?” Chelsea asked. “Pavel is the only patient in the M-1 Ward.”

Kirino blinked. “I hadn't been told you'd been moved out?”

There was a moment of silence. Chelsea's lips pursed, and her brow furrowed, but Koron spoke first. “Does she count as a patient? She is a gynoid, no?”

There was another moment of silence. Kirino blinked. “Excuse me? A...” He shook his head. “No. What? Of course not.”

~19. The Hermit and the Kannon Soldier Project~

“—Sir,” Chelsea said, her voice cracking slightly, “with all due respect, please do not make such crass jokes.”

“I'm not joking?” Kirino said with a grimace. “What's with this? I thought you'd been speaking oddly, but who told you that?”

“With *all due respect*,” Chelsea said, standing up and throwing her hands on the table, her... breath clearly uneven, and her body shaking, “please do not make such crass jokes, sir! Of course I am a gynoid. As a high-ranking officer of Murakumo, you should be aware of the nature of your assets!”

“...Chelsea?” Pavel reached over to grab her hand. “Chelsea, are you okay?”

Chelsea pointed a finger at Kirino, then turned her head to Pavel, baring her teeth. “Tell him that I am a gynoid, please!”

And then—Koron stood up. She walked over to the bookshelves, and started flipping through experiment logs. When she looked over her shoulder, Nanako's ahoge was curled into a question mark. “...Ah,” Koron said, “just one moment.”

—C. C. Experiment log PSIC-3-C. Koron opened up the log she found, and read the first page. Then, she walked back over to the table and placed the log on the table. “What is this supposed to be?” Chelsea yelled, before looking at—

Feasibility of Altering Psychic Abilities through Cognitive Restructuring.

“...huh?”

This experiment has been grouped under the 'PSI' grouping of experiments, and as such, subject should be contained to the M Wards.

“...What is this supposed to...?”

Subject is a young A-class psychic, a half-American bastard child named 'Chelsea Darrow'. Subject's psychic ability involves the manipulation of iron within soil to create secondary bodies operated through a psychic link.

“You're lying to me.”

The purpose of this experiment is to determine whether the abilities the subject manifests can be altered through a fundamental alteration of her self-identity. In this case, mental stress through isolation, experimentation, and forced usage of abilities will be levied to make the subject believe that she is the experimental gynoid that is the subject of the larger 'PSI' experiment grouping.

“You're lying to me!”

The hypothetical alteration of manifestation will alter the mechanical abilities of the subject to a more specialized ability to alter metal and technology—for instance, the Murakumo technology within the walls of the M Wards. If experiment is successful, subject will be used as a Murakumo asset to—

“STOP IIIIIIIIIIT!”

“Chelsea—!” Pavel called after his friend as she dashed from the room, and he ran behind her. Koron was quick to follow, as were Nanako and Kirino. “Chelsea, wait!”

“No, no, no, no!” Chelsea shrieked, turning a left into an operation room. “Stop it, stop it, *stop it!*”

—But that was where she stopped. When Koron opened the door behind Pavel to enter the room, she found Chelsea having fallen on the ground, her voice trembling in fear.

This operation room—was far from clean. Dried bloodstains covered the upper walls, and this particular room had the stench of disinfectant far stronger than anything else, causing Koron to break down coughing. Pavel had reached down to cover Chelsea with his arms. “Hey, are you okay?”

“No, no,” Chelsea whimpered. “No, no, no. This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real, stop it, stop it. That didn't happen. That didn't, that didn't happen, that didn't—!”

Kirino, for his part, walked up and put his hands on the operating table. “...Yeah,” he said. “I remember this room. There were kids here back then that Ms. Hikasa wanted to artificially turn into S-Class talents, and... she'd have the actual physical procedures handled in this room.” Tools that Koron didn't have any idea what they were littered the sides of the table. “The project's code name was 'Kannon-hei.' By the time I was banned, she was the only Kannon-hei patient remaining. She had high aptitude because of her young age, and her innate psychic abilities, but that didn't satisfy Ms. Hikasa.”

“Please, stop it, stop it!” Chelsea wept. This was the first time Koron had ever seen her cry. “Stop it, please! Don't, I, d-don't—!”

“And you just *let that happen?*!” Pavel turned his head to roar. “You just let Chelsea and her friends—!”

“Of course not!” Kirino clenched his fists, and turned his head away. “Who do you think let them out in the first place, huh?! I... I tried to get her out too, I did, but—!” Kirino shook his head. “This level of damage, I just never thought—”

Nanako also knelt down to give Chelsea a hug with Pavel. “Hey, hey, shhhh, it's okay,” she said. “It's okay, Chelsea. It's okay.”

—Koron couldn't help but understand. If confronted with such horror, it was easier to accept the lie of being an artificial being only just created. She turned to Kirino and asked, “Why?”

“...Why what?” Kirino said, still unable to look at the teenagers.

“Why would she want something like this? The ability to alter someone's psychic ability through cognitive restructuring,” Koron said. Her voice was... calmer than she'd expected out of herself. “And this 'experimental gynoid'. Do you know what its purpose is?”

Kirino shook his head. “No, I'm sorry. I don't. I knew Ms. Hikasa had gotten an S-class roboticist into her employ, but not that work had started on it, or its purpose.”

“I see,” Koron said. “In that case—”

And then—the dim light was awash with red. Kirino looked up, stunned. “Oh, crap!” he said. “Someone must've noticed you got in—”

Koron walked past him, her legs moving seemingly automatically, and threw open the doors. True to Kirino's word, this foyer was no longer empty—a group of three operatives with his same red armband were filing into the large room. Each wore a black combat suit, but two were helmeted, and wielded machine guns, but the third—

“Ayafumi-senpai,” said a slender young man with short silver hair, slicking his hair back and unsheathing a katana, “two security breaks in a row? I’m really surprised at you. I was hoping you’d be more diligent than that.”

“Kirimaru,” Kirino said. The purple-eyed prettyboy threw up a hand to his squadmates for a moment of negotiation. “It’s just you three? Where’s the rest of Unit 8?”

“There are more central operations for us to be guarding, Senpai,” Kirimaru said. “A patient shouldn’t be in the M-2 Ward—you know that, right?”

“...Mind introducing me?” Koron asked, raising her eyebrow.

“He’s Kirimaru Ayanokoji,” Kirino responded. “Murakumo Unit 8’s ace samurai. Age 16. He’s an honorable young man, I’d say, but no good at looking deeper into things. He is an S-Class combatant, though, and no slouch with that sword.”

Koron snorted. “Just a boy, is it? How curious. Do you bark at the order of your masters, boy?”

“I would point out,” Kirimaru said, “that you appear younger than me.”

“That aside,” Koron said, “surely you can’t be so ignorant as to know at what beck and call you’re serving here. Unless you’re truly so ignorant?”

“Momoko! Nikujaga!” Kirimaru said, looking to the side at his two squadmates. “Do you two have any info here?”

The one to the left—‘Nikujaga’, as he was called?—said, “Near as I can tell, that’s a patient here. Red hair, red eyes, I think it’s the pyrokinetic from the psychic ward—Nagataka.”

“Oh, come on,” said the one to the right. She left her combat stance and shrugged. “She’s just a kid, and it’s just Ayafumi. Are we really going to use force here?”

“Well, work’s work,” Nikujaga said. “Unless the little lady would like to come quietly.”

“No thank you,” Koron said, shaking her head. “I would much prefer to see deeper. You see, I am a horribly curious person, especially when it involves myself.”

“Good thing we’ve got the non-lethal stuff then,” Nikujaga muttered. “Don’t hit her too hard, kid.”

“In that case,” Kirimaru said, entering a combat stance, “both of you prepare for ranged attacks!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Momoko said, waving a hand back and forth. “I—”

—Really, there was nothing to be had but pity for poor punch-clock employees such as these. In such a situation, all they could do was their job, and the information they had about their job was wholly insufficient for the moment when a ball of ice manifested in the air and shot directly into

Momoko's helmet. “Wha—?!” Kirimaru flinched, and leapt away.

The helmet shattered, revealing a green eye and some of Momoko's fashionably pink hair, before a second projectile battered into her stomach, causing her to crumple to the ground. “That's... not what I expected,” she said, before passing out.

“Children,” the girl with red hair said, “you are to be pitied.”

~20. The Hermit's Third Leg – Frozen Curiosity~

Kirimaru rolled to the side as the girl with red hair launched another blast of ice his way. “Nikujaga, report! How is she doing that?”

“Beats me, kid,” Nikujaga said, backflipping behind a spare bed to try and take aim. “Maybe she's more multi-purpose than the dossier reported.”

Taking a step forward to begin swinging, Kirimaru went for an overhead strike to the girl's head, but she looked up at it and, without missing a beat, formed a blade-shaped hunk of ice in the air with which to parry the strike. “A blade made of ice—it's a mystery novel staple, so you know,” she said. Despite her lower strength, the rock-bottom temperature of her blade and its effect on the boy she fought allowed her to easily knock him away, leaving her the victor in that clash. Then—

Rubber riot bullets were a standard of Murakumo armaments to non-lethally take down human opponents. However, they were still bullets, projectiles moving at incredible speeds toward their target, and Nikujaga fired a burst of ten, twelve—no, fourteen, it seemed. The girl registered this fact within just a moment and turned her head toward them—

—and the bullets *bounced away* from her, being repelled off of an invisible shield. She walked through the cloud of bullets, which became encased in mid-air by floating chunks of ice, and swung them in a trail following the motion of her hand as she strolled through a cloud of mist. “...What the hell—” was all Nikujaga could mutter. Then—

All fourteen bullets were lined up in the air, frozen there as they were, as the girl raised her hand to them and snapped her fingers—

Pow! A sudden burst of moisture caused a bursting sound in the air as the projectiles rammed into each other in sequence, all firing into the bed Nikujaga sat behind. Before he had time to react, it fell atop him, pinning him and knocking him on the head. “Ah, shit—!” Nikujaga yelled, in the moment before he was knocked out.

“Senpai!” Kirimaru said, running forward towards the girl with red hair for an underhand swing—

—and the girl *caught it*, one hand encased in ice so cold it stopped the blade dead. Kirimaru's eyes went wide as the girl with red hair clutched his blade and *twisted*, causing the super-chilled blade to shatter in her hands. Kirimaru yelled and fell back onto the ground, clutching the hilt of his blade close. “H-how did—! No! My—my father gave me that blade! It was a family heirloom! How could you?”

The girl turned her head and said, “It was merely self-defense, boy. You should know to respect your elders.”

—Then,

an idea crept across the girl's face as she looked down at Kirimaru, and over at the operating room doors. “So,” she said, “you are what they call a 'talented' individual here? Fascinating. I can't help but wonder what exactly makes you any different from anyone else.”

Despite her small size, the girl, walking toward the prone Kirimaru and pinning his limbs in cuffs of ice, carried the aura of someone much larger, as the teenage security officer began to tremble under her. She got down onto her knees, and stared down at him. “What is your 'talent', young man? Where is it? In your arms? In your legs? In your chest? Where are 'you'? Where is 'Kirimaru'?”

No doubt, both Kirimaru and a stunned Kirino could see a small scalpel of ice being generated in the girl's palm. “I don't know where 'I' am, you see,” she said, “so I appreciate any assistance you can offer.”

“Hey, wait—!” Kirino said.

Then, the double doors opened, and the other three teenagers arrived to the scene. “Koron!” Nanako yelled, running over as fast as she could and putting her arms on the girl's shoulders. “Stop it!”

The girl didn't respond to the name, instead shaking off the hands on her shoulders. “Please. I am attempting to work here. How am I meant to sleep at night with so many questions burning in my mind?” Kirimaru was visibly covered in sweat, shaking his head in terror. “I—”

“*Fuyuko!*” Chelsea cried out.

And at *that* name, she responded. “Yes?” Fuyuko asked. “Is there something bothering you about this?”

“You—I—” Chelsea was still shivering, having to be supported by Pavel, but she said, “No, stop! You can't do that to him! You can't just inflict that kind of pain on another person!”

Fuyuko turned her head to Chelsea and blinked, her expression stoic. “...I don't see why not,” she said. “Isn't it only right? An eye for an eye, as they say.”

“Hurting people *isn't right!*” Nanako said, forcibly turning Fuyuko to look at her. “Please, calm down! I know you're angry, but that doesn't give you an excuse to act like this!”

“...Angry?” Fuyuko tilted her head. “Am I?”

“Of course you're angry! I'm angry! All of you is, er, are? Angry! But you're—you're not thinking straight right now, and you just need to take a second to calm down and get yourself back together. Okay?” Nanako shook Fuyuko's shoulders a little. “Okay?”

“I—er—”

And that was when Koron realized where she was, and what she had just been about to do. The cuffs of ice melted in an instant as Koron stood up and staggered back, shuddering. “No, I—I just—!” Koron stammered.

Jumping to his feet after realizing he wasn't dead, Kirimaru dropped the broken fragments of his sword and screamed as he ran away, his legs taking him as far as they could. “I just, I—” Koron shook her head. “No, that wasn't... I—I don't—I *don't want to hurt people!*”

Koron fell to her knees, shuddering and clutching her own arms, wrapping herself in a hug. Just an instant later, Nanako joined her, but then Koron shook her head and stood back up. “Chelsea! I'm—I'm sorry,” she said, shaking her head and gritting her teeth, grabbing Chelsea by the shoulders just as Nanako had just done to her. “I—I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you, I just—all of a sudden, I—”

It was hugging hour, apparently, as Chelsea leaned in to hug Koron as well. “Please just try to stay calm,” Chelsea said. “I—I don't want that kind of thing inflicted on anyone else, I... please. Let's just—”

“Right. Right,” Koron said, nodding. “Let's just—let's—”

She shook her head, and then said, “Ugh. That Hikasa must've done a real number on me if I'm this unstable. I—Pavel?”

Pavel had apparently grabbed a log from the Archive, and was only just now reading it. His eyes scanned the pages, and his face was uncharacteristically stoic until he looked up. “Oh, uh, yes, sorry?”

“Look, okay,” Nanako said, “we are bringing it in, right now, and we are having a group hug, because that was weird and unsettling and I need a second!”

“Wha—” Being that Nanako was the largest and strongest of the four of them, it was easy for her to wrangle them all into her arms for what was supposedly a group hug, but really was mostly just her. Still... it did feel nice, Koron thought.

“And, uh, you, guy!” Nanako said, clapping her hands and startling awake Kirino, who had likely forgotten he was part of this event from the surprise. “We need to get into the M-3 Ward. Help!”

“Ah—yes, of course!” Kirino said, nodding. “Right.”

~21. The Hermit and the Cognition Test~

Given his credentials, Kirino was able to open the door, and while he did, he explained to the four the purpose of Murakumo—a purpose you are already well aware of, naturally. However, when the heavy metal door to the M-3 Ward opened—

Once again, most of the group threw up their hand in front of their eyes to block the light. Only Koron was immediately able to see the inside, and marvel at just how incongruous it was. “This, uh,” Kirino mumbled, “wasn't how it looked last time.”

The entrance to the M-3 Ward—which, apparently, contained the workshop of Hikasa's roboticist and Hikasa's office herself, as well as top-secret project documentation—had a clean, pleasant carpet as its floor, and lacquered wood paneling. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, and artificial flowerpots sat on stands jutting from the walls. “Your help is appreciated,” Koron said, “but you had best make yourself scarce, sir. I doubt it will help your standing with remaining employed should it become obvious you're a repeat offender.”

“Right,” Kirino said, “yeah. But if worst comes to worst—”

“You seem like a good man,” Koron said. “It would be best not to endanger yourself unduly.”

Kirino looked as though he was going to say something more, but the door automatically closed behind them. Pavel said, “I... hope he isn't harmed for helping us.”

“Mr. Kirino has a way about him,” Chelsea said. “He's... a kind man. He really is.”

There was a door further into the ward, and that was the only way further in. Koron took the lead, looking behind her to ensure all three of her friends were following, then opening the door. Inside was a hallway that was much the same, but this time, there were three doors—one to each side, and then a small stairwell up to what was doubtless Hikasa's office. The doors to the front and right were both barred, no doubt because of the alarm raised earlier by Murakumo Unit 8, but the left door...

“It says 'Cognition Testing',” Pavel said, looking up at the gold plaque on the door. “What do you think that means?”

“Maybe some kind of method to ensure a psychic's brain is working properly?” Nanako suggested. “Do... uh, Chelsea, do you know?”

“...When the term was used in front of me,” Chelsea said, rubbing her wrists, “it was usually synonymous with some kind of trial to ensure proper cognition, yes.”

“Well,” Koron said, “we might as well. It does seem to be our only way forward.”

The door had no knob, as it turned out, but a seven-button relief that looked rather like the buttons on an elevator. Koron opted to randomly press the fifth button from the left, and a small hum rang out for a moment before the door opened automatically.

—Now *this* was an unusual sight. This appeared to be some manner of recreational room—the walls were decorated with all manner of games, like a dartboard to the back, slot machines to the left side, a billiards table in the far right corner... A rack of magazines sat about near the dartboard, and in the far-left corner there sat a lonely-looking jukebox. Finally, there was a small bar with any number of questionable elixirs in its coffer.

The four wandered in, blinking at the walls, before Nanako let out a confused little noise, her ahoge spinning about like it was trying to catch a signal. “What is it?” Pavel asked.

Staring at the pool table, then at the jukebox, Nanako said, “Wait... hold on a sec. Okay, I've definitely never been to this room before, but—”

And with a hydraulic noise, the door shut itself behind them. Koron spun on her heels with the rest to see that there was an unusual locking mechanism to the side of the door, that said 'LOCK' atop it in bright red letters on an LCD screen.

“I knew it!” Nanako said, her ahoge pointing straight up. “This *is* one of Mom's!”

—What? “Excuse me?” Koron sputtered.

“Yeah, this is one of Mom's escape rooms!” Nanako said, pounding her fist into her open palm. “She loves these things. It's how she protects anything that's important, I had to do like a bunch of them to prove I was mentally sound after the amnesia.”

Koron blinked. Pavel took the words out of her mouth—“You had to do *what*?”

“I knew Dr. Hashizawa was eccentric,” Chelsea muttered, “but an escape room architect... That is quite a hobby.”

“Yeah, so we're gonna have to solve puzzles in this room to find the key to unlock the thing and get the door to open back up,” Nanako said. She pumped her arms a few times. “Hoooooooargh! Yeah! Been a bit since I did this, but ya girl's an escape room expert! You guys can help too though, just so we're clear.”

“You have to be joking,” Koron said, groaning. “Your mother crafts *escape rooms in her spare time*? What sort of doctorate does she have that she has the time and energy to do this?”

Nanako paused, and then said, “You know, I have no idea.”

SEEK A WAY OUT!

The obvious first point was the billiards table, so Koron went over to inspect that. She tapped at the balls, only to find that they were actually fixed in place—all nine were solidly affixed to the felt of the table somehow. Nanako, however, let her instincts guide her to the bar, and she sighed and rolled her eyes. “This one again, Mom?”

There were three wine glasses atop the counter, that were connected to what appeared to be a tank of water. To Koron's eyes, it looked as though they were able to be filled automatically by whatever controlled the tank. “Are you familiar with this?” Koron said.

“Yeah, an LCD screen's gonna pop up there,” Nanako said, pointing to a flat space in the bar between the racks of bottles, “with rules for a puzzle, and I already know which puzzle it's gonna be because she's *so proud* of that one.” She knelt down, and tapped a cabinet beneath the water tank to find that it opened—there were three slots for wine bottles underneath. “Ah, I get it. We have to figure out which bottles to put under here somehow.”

Pavel looked over from the dartboard, where he'd grabbed some darts from atop the slot machines and was attempting to aim at the bullseye. “How do you figure that out?”

“There's gonna be some kind of hint somewhere in the room,” Nanako said. Chelsea, meanwhile, was over at the magazines, looking at them, and Koron noticed a moment of confusion. “What's up?” Nanako asked.

“Ah, it's just... most of the pages of these magazines are blank,” Chelsea said. “It's just... ah, how do I put this... tasteful depictions of women in bikinis in alcohol ads?”

Nanako nodded. “Mmhm, mmhm. Yup, that's the kind of magazines Mom reads alright. Lemme see those?” She walked over and took one from Chelsea, looked over it for a bit... “Oh, yeah, she's very pretty, but beside that, you have to notice that the ad here is in space.”

“She's not wearing a space suit,” Chelsea said. “Is that the important part?”

“No, no. Which position was this one in?” Nanako said. There were three columns to the magazine rack, and Chelsea pointed to the leftmost column. “Koron, look for a bottle with something space-y in the name.”

It only took Koron a moment or two. “Macro Cosmos?” she asked, and Nanako gave a thumbs up while digesting more tasteful depictions of women in bikinis in alcohol ads.

“Okay, in this one, she's riding a horse,” Nanako said. Koron guessed that was probably this bottle from 'Stallion Vineyards'. “And in this one...” Nanako audibly squinted, her ahoge curling into a spring-like shape. “What am I meant to take here? Is it that there's a vampire, or that she has a bow and arrow, or that she has angel wings...?”

Koron's best guess was the 'Orion's Bolt' bottle, so she put them in, and a pleasant chirp rang out as, true to Nanako's instincts, the wood paneling slid apart between the bottles to reveal an LCD screen. “Ah, you were right,” Koron said. “Nice work.”

“Yeah, but we can't solve that one yet,” Nanako said.

...well, to Koron's eyes it looked solvable enough. Here is what the screen said, in English:

Present a solution.

*'Fill' fills a cup completely. 'Empty' empties it completely. 'Present' is to check your answer.
'Transfer' two cups to pour water from the first into the second.*

Each glass was now lit up with holographic lights denoting them as measuring cups, relative to their increasing size. The first had a red line—presumably the goal—at '2', and went up to '3'. The second had a line at '4', and went up to '5'. The third had a line at '5', and went up to '7'. The three buttons implied had appeared in front of their stand, and all three glasses were quite affixed.

To ensure she knew how the rules worked, Koron pushed 'Fill' under the smallest glass, and it filled with water up to its top. Then, she pushed 'Transfer' on it, then the largest. Water emptied from the first glass until it was empty, and that same amount of water entered the largest glass, filling it to 3.

Koron began experimenting with different combinations of buttons, water filling and emptying and being poured into different glasses, as the other three ran around in the background. A happy little

chime rang out from the dartboard puzzle as Pavel made the shot he was meant to (apparently there had been a hint in a few more of the magazines as to the logic behind the dartboard's inherent math puzzle), and with that he and Chelsea began inspecting the slot machines more closely. “Koron?” Nanako said. “We can't solve this one yet.”

“Yes, obviously we can,” Koron said, emptying all three glasses and trying again. “This is clearly just a math problem.”

“Oh, I'm good at math!” Pavel said from over at the slot machines. “Would you like my—”

“*We can't solve this one yet,*” Nanako said, “*it's not a math problem.*”

Koron continued pushing buttons furiously, filling and pouring and always just missing the mark. “This—” Koron sputtered. “This has to be possible, doesn't it?! Why would this puzzle exist if it was impossible to solve?!”

Nanako picked Koron up by the shoulders and put her in front of the billiards table. “Okay, in a second, Pavel and Chelsea are gonna figure out the trick to the slot machines, and then we're gonna do this one, okay?” Nanako said to the fuming Koron. “I—”

“Ah,” Chelsea said, “you can insert the darts here, too, look.”

Panels on the front of the slot machine came off while Koron fumed, and in one of them... was a small salt shaker. “Ah, give that here?” Nanako asked, and Chelsea handed it off.

Nanako walked up to the glasses then, filled the middle glass, and poured some of the salt into it. She pushed the 'Present' button, and a happy chirp sang out as a locking mechanism within the billiards table unlocked, freeing the balls to be used properly.

Koron's jaw dropped. “What.”

“It says to 'present a solution',” Nanako explained, “so you pour some salt in so you get some saline solution. She loves this one.”

Koron stared. She was quiet, utterly silent. Chelsea walked up and asked, “Koron?” When that didn't work, she waved her hand in front of Koron's face.

“It makes sense to me,” Pavel said. “I actually think it's rather funny!”

Then, Koron took a deep breath in, centered herself, let out that deep breath, and said, “Say, Chelsea, can't you just mess with the locking mechanism with your psychic abilities and skip these puzzles?”

There was a long, long moment where the only sound in the room was the sound of the slot machines, still left in an ever-running spin, before Chelsea walked over to the lock, touched it, and summoned her blue light. Sure enough, it switched from 'LOCK' to 'OPEN'. “Oh,” she said. “I... I suppose I can, I hadn't been thinking about that.”

YOU FOUND IT!

~22. The Hermit and the Psychic Machine~

The 'elevator' of this system opened the door to a different room than they had entered from. Instead, it was a room underneath that—likely somewhere underground. This was certainly a roboticist's workshop—while Koron knew very little about the creation of androids or gynoids, the amount of mechanical parts scattered about the cluttered, disorganized shelves. In the center was what looked to Koron's eyes to be a workbench, where a machine would be constructed.

Wires ran across the floor, and the dim light cast a grey hue upon the tiling. There looked to be enough room here to live temporarily, with doors to a restroom and a small bathroom—

Only three of them had entered the room properly. Nanako had taken one step in and frozen. Koron turned first, and said, “What is it?”

Nanako looked up, and down, and around the room, taking in all of the sights. “I...” She shook her head. “But that—wait, or could—I...” She shook her head, and then produced Kojiro from a small purse she'd been given to hold the RFID tag. “Am I imagining things?”

—Koron could tell how Kojiro was reacting. The answer was 'no'.

Nanako took another step or two forward, then put her hand on the workbench in the center of the room. “This...” She shook her head. “No, that can't be, right? Can it?”

“Nanako?” Chelsea said. “Are you... alright?”

The taller girl appeared to be curling in on herself. “...But, if that's...”

—Koron walked up to Nanako, and put her hand on her shoulder. “What's wrong, Nanako?” she asked.

“...It's just... this... I think this room is the first thing I remember,” Nanako said. “This bench... I-I remember being on it.” She started gesturing more with her hands, her ahoge curling itself into loops. “It's a dark room, so I don't remember a lot of the details, but I remember being here. But that couldn't be, right? Could it? I mean, it—”

It was at that moment that the gravity of that statement struck Koron. “...Huh?” Pavel muttered. “But that would mean—”

Chelsea gasped, her eyes wide. Her eyes looked as though they were about to give way. “Then... then the gynoid was—?!”

“No!” Nanako shook her head. “I mean, I—but that—that wouldn't—”

A beeping sound came from above the workbench, and a TV screen slid down. The image came to life, and an all-too-familiar voice came from it. “I had supposed that it would be difficult to prevent *any* security breach, but I suppose this is simply the way of things.”

—Hikasa! “You!” Koron roared, baring her teeth. “What the hell is the meaning of this?”

“Judging by the looks on your faces, and the fact that I logged entry into Hashizawa's workshop, I'm sure you understand well enough, but allow me to make it clear for you.” Natsume was riding in a limousine, coddling a glass of wine. “The suspicion I imagine you are holding is correct—Hashizawa's 'daughter' is in fact an experimental gynoid designed to, by proxy with actual psychics, develop genuine psychic abilities.”

Nanako fell to her knees, shuddering. “W-what? B-but. But, no, that...”

“The choice of psychometry was because it was a simple test to make. It simply required that the machine in question possess enough sense of projectable self to get any inclination from objects at all. However, when I learned that it allowed her to perform remote viewing, I was elated, really. Genuine psychic powers from artificial life—can you imagine?” Natsume laughed. “I imagine you can't. You are teenagers, after all.”

The sight of her tormentor had left Chelsea silent, so it was just Koron and Pavel facing the screen now. Pavel balled his fists and yelled, “What's wrong with you?! What's the point of any of this?!”

“Surely you're intelligent enough to figure that out. It was your purpose at first, you know,” Natsume said. “An experiment to create a psychic android, and an experiment to alter a psychic's abilities through experimentation and cognitive restructuring—if those could be achieved, then all we needed was a model to base it off of, and—”

—“You wanted—to *mass-produce pyrokinetic androids?!?*” Koron shouted, a bit of flame flaring up.

“At first, I thought the young man's abilities would be good for disposable weapons, being that he is so multipurpose. However, his temperament was too... even, and his powers simply wouldn't work as designed with machines. You, on the other hand, Miss Nagataka, would be perfect—the destructive force you wield is incredible. The acceleration and deceleration of particles... Why, imagine it. I could deliver Japan an army of moving bombs with the power to detonate into a kilometer-wide firestorm, or serve as a disposable army. The appeal, I should think, is obvious.” Natsume took a sip of her wine.

Pavel's head was down, his teeth gritted, his fists balled tightly. “You... that's all this hospital is to you? All of the kids in here, that's all they are to you?”

“Naturally. What other use do I have for temperamental, disposable children?” Natsume said.

—“Why are you... telling us this?” Koron asked. “What do you get out of it?”

“Simple. You wanted answers, so here they are. Are you satisfied?” Natsume asked. “I would ask that you return to your rooms, in that case.”

“Like *hell!*” Pavel roared, slamming his fist on the workbench with an uncharacteristic rage. “You think we're just going to let you do this?!”

“...Young man,” Natsume said, raising her eyebrow with an amused smirk, “who do you think it

is you're fighting? Do you think me some lone mastermind? I am Natsume Hikasa, head of Murakumo, an agency of the Japanese government. To declare war on me is to declare war on all the Japanese military. Do you really wish that?"

"Y-you—I—!" Pavel sputtered.

Before Koron could say anything, though—

"...Fine," Pavel said. The rage in his voice had seemingly vanished.

—Huh? "What?" Koron said.

"Fine," Pavel said, as he turned and walked toward—not the way they'd come in, but an elevator on the other side of the room. "I understand." He walked in, and before anyone could ask him what he was doing, he pushed a button and headed on up.

"...I see," Natsume said. She laughed, and added, "This will be interesting, won't it." And with that—it was cut off.

It was silent for a moment before Chelsea regained her voice, and said, "...B-but... what do we do?"

"It won't work, you know," Koron said. She was looking down at the workbench. "She has to know that there's no way she'll be able to harness that level of raw destructive energy into a mass-production format."

"...Why not?" Chelsea asked.

"It simply uses too many resources," Koron said. She shook her head. "A mechanical body... No, not with these sorts of resources, not with today's technology."

Then—there was a small spark as some of the wires around the room were unplugged. Nanako was heading around and unplugging them. "We should still try and stop it," Nanako said. Her ahoge was hardly visible from inside of her hair, and her usual exuberance was... simply absent.

"...Nanako," Koron said, "I... I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Nanako said. She let out a little snuffle. "I mean, it's my fault for being trusting, right? Believing something that dumb. I mean..." Snuffle. "I mean, there's just... where do you think Pavel went?"

"Well, he... he seemed like he had some kind of idea," Chelsea said. "Of what he was going to do."

"I mean, yeah," Nanako said, snuffle, "but what's that supposed to do? If you want to stop people from making machines, I—"

"Nanako," Koron asked, "do you have any siblings?"

There was a pause as Nanako thought about it, but then she said, “No, I don't think so. If I do I don't know about them.”

“Kirino mentioned an S-class roboticist,” Koron said, “and that's most likely your mother. And the experiment log mentioned a *singular* gynoid. But if this was easy to perform, why wouldn't they simply make more?” She turned her head to Chelsea. “Any insight?”

“...Well, I would... assume it was because it was difficult to make,” Chelsea said. All three of them were now standing around the workbench.

“Right. So, we can assume that a psychic machine like yourself, Nanako—” When Nanako heard Koron say that, she flinched. “I'm—I'm sorry. But... We can assume that it takes an S-class roboticist to make one.” She paused. “Are there any others?”

There was a moment's silence before all three of them ran into the cognitive test elevator to return to the main hallway, and ran to Hikasa's office. Chelsea gripped the bars and forcibly raised them, and the three entered the room. Her office was meticulously organized, clean, and ergonomic, so it was easy enough to find the log in her files—a log of every S-class operative Murakumo had.

The file was large and deep, but it listed by category, so it was easy to find—technical, roboticist. One entry was listed—Unit 2 operative Rin Hashizawa, S-class roboticist. Natsume's notes: “This one is a once-in-a-generation find.”

Putting down the file, Koron took a deep breath in. “Please—let him not be doing anything rash.”

~23. The Hermit and Peter Pan~

There was a courtyard near the front of the hospital that Dr. Hashizawa walked through on her way home from work, that had an open view of the sky. Even this late at night, it had lights on, ready to illuminate one's path. As such, that was where Koron ran to. Her breath was heavy as she ran.

The hospital's windows—were sealed, some manner of substance preventing them from opening. Staff offices were sealed, seemingly locked from the inside. A sweat came to Koron's face as she clutched her chest, the ice blasts her body had launched finally starting to catch up with her—but when Chelsea tried to catch her, Koron simply kept running. To find—

“Pavel! Pavel, *stop!*” Nanako shouted, as the three reached the courtyard. “That's my *mom!*”

Dr. Hashizawa's bags had fallen to the floor as Pavel pinned her to a wall by the neck, and she squeaked and coughed. Pavel's arm—no, that was no longer an arm. He'd twisted it into simply a *limb*, sinew and muscle and bone twisting it into an endlessly tough rope that left Dr. Hashizawa hanging off of the ground.

Pavel turned his head to look at his friends, and said, “How can you even say that?” He shook his head. “She lied to you for your entire life, Nanako. She only made you as part of an experiment to make weapons. This woman doesn't *love* you. She doesn't deserve to be called your mother.”

Even amidst being choked, Dr. Hashizawa's eyes widened, and she let out something vaguely akin to a gasp. “Na...nako...”

“*Shut up!*” Pavel roared, pushing Dr. Hashizawa into the wall again. Pieces of the wall ever-so-slightly broke, fragments of the wall falling down. “I should've known better than to trust an adult. You're all *liars!* You say everything is going to be okay, but it's not! You say you love your kids, but you *don't!* You don't care about *anyone but yourselves!*”

“*Please, Pavel!*” Nanako ran over and grabbed him to plead with him. “Just let her talk! Please!”

Pavel's body shuddered with a formless, directionless rage. “...And why should I?” he spat. “We'd all be better off if I just killed her, right now—!”

There is a particular odor to sizzling flesh that is hard to describe to one who has not smelt it. It is pungent, rich, almost a sickly-sweet. Pavel yelped in pain as he recalled his makeshift rope-limb, the piece of burnt flesh sloughing off as Dr. Hashizawa fell to the ground, coughing as her body regained its air. “Mom!” Nanako cried.

“N-Nanako...” Dr. Hashizawa hacked. “I'm so—I'm so sorry... I... I never wanted to lie to you, I—I just wanted—I didn't want you to get hurt, I—I just—”

—“Please, save the talk for a moment until you're behind me,” Koron said. Nanako took the cue and lifted her mother to run behind Koron. Chelsea also attempted to help Nanako in performing first aid on Dr. Hashizawa's injuries.

It took Pavel a moment to react, but he turned his head. “...Koron,” he said, “what are you doing.”

“I'm preventing you from killing Dr. Hashizawa,” Koron said. “I should think that should be obvious, Pavel.”

Pavel was a gentle soul by nature—Koron knew this well. She could not deny being a bit unsettled seeing him slouched over like this, his face twisted into the kind of hateful sneer *Koron* was used to giving. “Nanako I can understand,” Pavel said. “But you—you have to understand. I *have* to kill her. It's the only way to save us!” He raised his head and balled his fists. “We're the only people who can protect each other! If I kill her, this experiment of theirs can't go forward!”

“And then what?” Koron asked. “Do you intend to fight Hikasa all on your own?”

“I'll defend this hospital,” Pavel said, putting his hand on his chest. “I can do it! I'm strong enough! I'll beat her, and anyone she throws at me! We can do it *together!* We'll make this hospital a really good place, where those *god damned adults* can't screw things up like they always do!”

“...You believe you can fight the entire Japanese military?” Koron asked, but she knew the answer. This boy—and there was no doubt he was simply a boy—he... “...Do you believe you're some manner of hero out of a fairy tale? You want to turn this hospital into a sort of Neverland, then?”

“I can heal them,” Pavel said, patting his chest. “I—I can heal the sick! You know I can! Not

just psychics—kids who were like me! Kids who are going to die otherwise! I *can*! I'll protect the weak from *everyone*!”

Koron gritted her teeth, and spat onto the ground. “You're a fool. A naive, idiotic fool. The only thing this crusade is going to get you is killed. You can't beat an army, Pavel—”

It began as a growl, but Pavel's voice turned into a roar as he yelled, “*What do you know?!*” and ran towards Koron. Taking a page out of Chelsea's book, Koron lit a localized flame under her feet, detonating it and allowing her to fly out of the range of Pavel's attack—his arm twisted again, but this time the keratin inside of his bones turned his arm into a scythe, a blade of bone curling off of a rope of sinew.

Throwing her hand down to skid to a stop in the grasses of the courtyard, Koron threw her head up to see Pavel's eyes meet hers. With his still-formed arm, he pointed his fingers against Koron and *fired*, not fingernails, but from underneath, small projectiles of his blood. One managed to graze Koron's cheek, drawing blood of her own.

“You see? If every part of me is a weapon, I can win every fight!” Pavel said. Chelsea had erected a wall between the courtyard and the hallways inside, and Pavel no doubt knew that Koron would attack him if he moved any closer—so he crouched down and sprung up into the air with force that belied his small frame, throwing his arms together to form a mace of flesh and bone that he drove down with a two-handed smash into the ground, shattering the earth beneath. Koron leapt back, then bent backwards to dodge a follow-up side-swing that sent Pavel's mace into the wall, making another crack in the hospital.

Spinning into a roll to the side, Koron took the moment of the crash to jump forward and deliver her fist directly into Pavel's face. It stung her, but Pavel staggered back, re-forming his arms and throwing them up with a shout of pain. With a form bolstered by the ignition of flames, she then spun into a roundhouse kick to Pavel's right side, sending him stumbling into a nearby bush, sparks in his gown.

“D-damn it...!” Pavel said through gritted teeth, staggering himself up with one arm as Koron stood above him. “I'm not—I'm not through yet!”

“You don't have what it takes to beat me,” Koron said. “No matter how much you hate them, you aren't a fighter, Pavel. You're no killer. I—”

In response, Pavel reached up to his head and pulled out a few small strands of his hair, which sharpened into a sort of makeshift dart. He threw them toward Koron, and the instinctive defense of her eyes caused them to bury themselves in her arms. Leaping up to his feet, he threw his right arm down, forcing the pieces of his body in Koron's arms to throw her arms down as well, and returned the favor to Koron with a left hook that left her staggered.

“Don't you doubt me!” Pavel said, throwing his right hand forward and twisting it into a rope to stagger Koron by throwing her left leg out from under her, before following up with an uppercut to Koron's chin that sent her falling in the other direction, onto her butt. Her vision began to grow foggy. “Just because you don't trust me, you don't think I can do it, *doesn't mean I can't*! I'm strong enough!”

There—were tears in Pavel's eyes. “I can help them! I can help *you*! I can save you! *Why won't*

you just trust me?!?”

“What the hell...” Koron said, staggering to her feet, “...does that even mean?”

“You know what it means!” Pavel said, throwing his arms wide. A bit of blood was trickling from Koron's mouth now, and there were several small cuts along her arms and her chin. “Why wouldn't you ever let me heal you? Why didn't you ever tell me?!”

—“...Oh?” Koron said, with a smirk and a grin. “And what is it I haven't told you, Pavel?”

Pavel roared again, and thrust his hand forward into the same rope that had nearly strangled Dr. Hashizawa. He thrust Koron forward, and sent her back several feet, pinning her to the wall of the courtyard.

“You never let me heal you! Not once! Because you knew that if I did, I'd know—you're—” Pavel was crying, now, tears running down his face. “You knew that I'd know that you're going to die *just like I was!*”

There were gasps from behind. It seemed that Nanako and Chelsea were still listening, having formed a hole in the wall to listen in, but Nanako forced her way through to run into the courtyard. Koron saw her over Pavel's shoulder, her face hollow and ragged with fear. “Koron—he's—he's not serious, is he?” But with that in the air, Koron had no strength to reply. Her hair fell over her eyes.

“Why do you think we're the oldest patients in the psychic ward now?” Pavel asked. “It's because high-level Rapid-Onset psychics—S-class psychics like me and Koron—they *die* by the time they're twenty! Their bodies can't handle it! One way or another, they die! The kids who were older than us, *they're* who are in that morgue now!” Every sentence was louder, pounding deeper into Koron's ears. “And Koron *knew* that! They'd already told her! She kept it from us! She was just going to let herself *die!* *I'm* the one who's going to live now! *My* body's the one that can handle it! *Isn't that just hilarious?! Doesn't that make you want to laugh?!*”

“K-Koron...” Nanako whimpered, falling to her knees. “You can't... right? He's lying, right?!”

—Koron—could say nothing—

~15. The Hermit's First Leg – Ticking Clock~

“Oh, hey, Koron,” Nanako said one day, toiling away on a new wood carving, “Mom wanted to see you today about something.”

Koron had been transfixed by watching Nanako work, watching the pure, tranquil happiness of her roommate doing what she lived. As a result, she started back to consciousness, saying, “Oh, uh, what? Dr. Hashizawa does?”

“Yeah,” Nanako said, “said you should come to her office.”

Well, Koron wasn't going to doff that, but she couldn't help but be a bit nervous as she walked. She had to imagine her crush on Nanako was pretty obvious, and while Dr. Hashizawa was an intensely

nervous and wilting person, there was a fear in Koron's mind that perhaps she was the sort who was very serious about people having feelings for their children. At the very least, Nanako only had one parent, but it was likely not going to be any easier if that was the case.

Her cheeks had to be getting redder by the minute. She'd talked with her parents about it by this point, worked through the beginnings of these feelings—she obviously counted herself blessed to have understanding parents, as plenty of people didn't. That put a smile on her face. She hugged Nagamimi to herself, and then remembered she was flustered and nervous, and then remembered she was happy again. It was probably a rather silly sight.

“O-oh, Koron,” Dr. Hashizawa said when Koron let herself in. She didn't look angry-serious, at least; actually, she looked rather sad. “Please... um, sit down.”

Koron took a seat, and looked up. “Is there something I can do for you, Doctor?”

“No, it's...” Dr. Hashizawa—or, no, in a conversation like this, she was Rin. The two were going to converse by themselves. “...Um, how have you been getting along with Nanako?”

“Uh—great!” Koron couldn't help stammering a little. “Great. She's a really lovely girl. A bit odd, obviously, but there's nothing wrong with that. So am I.”

“That's great!” Rin clapped her hands together. “It's just... I've always been worried about her, whether she'll be able to get along with kids her own age, and... whether she'll be able to live properly when she gets back out into the wider world. Which—I really do want her to! If Ms. Hikasa hadn't—well, wanted her for research, like you, I... I probably would've already taken her out—”

“Why do you work for her, anyhow?” Koron asked.

“...Uh... well, you know...” Rin looked away. “...Promise to keep quiet?” Koron nodded. “Well... to tell you the truth, she was the only person who'd ever employ me. My, ah... My mother—my mother was a famous actress, but when I was a girl, she got embroiled in this horrible scandal. It ruined her, and... well, a lot of things happened, but the reputation of being her daughter never really... got away from me? Even as an academic, you know, I... Word gets around, and people talk, and...”

“...I'm very sorry,” Koron said.

Rin pushed back her hair. “It's just, she gave me a place. She saw I was good at something and let me do it, without that judgment. I'd... never gotten that before. I don't... I'm very scared of her, and I don't always agree with what she does, or has me do, but... it's a place. And I hope that Nanako can grow up without having that sort of trouble. That's what I'd like for her.”

Smiling, Koron nodded. “Yes, that would be nice.”

“Ah, but—I'm sorry,” Rin said, looking away. “I'm... I'm stalling. I'm sorry. Koron... I called you here to talk about you, actually. About... well, your body.”

—“I'm listening.”

“It's just, well... we've done some research, and... you know that you're what's called an 'S-

Class' psychic, right?" Rin asked, and Koron nodded. "Well... your pyrokinetic power, it's going to continue developing as you get older. When you use it, you use resources from inside your body, and it's going to... divert resources away from things like your natural growth. And as your power develops, it's going to take more, and—"

"What are you saying?" Koron said. A lump began to appear in her stomach.

"...Koron... I need you to listen very carefully," Rin said. "I don't... want to be the person to tell you. But there's a very good chance that you're... not going to be able to live a full lifespan."

—

"You're... already rather frail. And it's going to get worse as you get older. Your immune system is going to get weaker, and you're going to become more vulnerable to disease. Your body will be easier to break, and... eventually, you just might not be able to support yourself—"

"Why?"

"Huh?" Rin raised her head.

"Why... me? Aren't there older psychics?" Koron asked.

"Yes, but... it's because of the Akaneno's," Rin explained. "Your body wasn't born with this ability. It was sort of... shoved in there, using resources that weren't meant for it. So, unless we can find a way to remove your pyrokinesis from you entirely..."

—Then, it was the obvious question. "How long?" Koron asked. She couldn't look at Rin. "How long do I have?"

"...I don't know," Rin said, "but... The oldest an S-Class Psychic has lived to was twenty years old."

—So, six years at the most. Likely fewer. That was all Koron had left. That was all that Koron... had left. That happiness, that trying to become at peace with herself, all the time she had to enjoy it—it would have to be within six years at most.

Koron began to laugh. It was a low, pained laugh. "You've got to be kidding me," she said. Of course, it was obvious. This sort of power—the sort of power that caused her so much pain she had to remove her own eyes—the sort of power that drove her insane—it wasn't going to let her live. She laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

And then—she stopped. "Don't tell my parents," she said. "Please."

"What?" Rin's eyes widened.

"Don't tell my parents. Or Nanako, or Pavel, or Chelsea, or Ageha. Don't tell anyone. It's mine to tell them." Koron shook her head. "I don't want them to treat me differently. That's all."

"Koron..." Rin said, tears in her eyes. "We'll... I don't know very much about the process. But, I

really will—we'll try our best to—”

“No, Doctor. Thank you,” Koron said. “It's good that I know now. I'll prepare for the worst. That's all,” she said, and stood up. She turned around, and walked back to her room, taking the elevator in complete silence. Then—

“Hey,” Nanako said, waving. “What was up?”

“Nothing important,” Koron said.

—Living a regular life wasn't something you could do if someone you loved was going to burn out so soon. So it would be best if Koron simply stifled that. How bittersweet, she mused, was first love.

~24. The Three-Legged Crow~

“You don't get a *goddamned thing!*”

Within the mental landscape, another battle waged. The furious dragon child's claws dug into the ground, skidding back, chipping the scales on her hands and feet, but she sprung back into action her mouth blasting a fireball at her opponent.

“Oh?” said the icy witch, tall, imperious, and clad in her frozen dress. She casually countered this fireball again with a wall of ice. “Please. I am busy here, you know.”

The two had the same face, the same hair, and the same eyes, but there was a world of difference between them. The horned, scaled firebrand Ryuko, bestial and winged and horrible, and the imperious, endlessly curious woman Fuyuko—they could never see eye to eye. There was not a moment that they had in the three years their battle had gone on.

But tonight, as Ryuko took wing on a draft to strike again, the third voice in this mental landscape rung out. “Will you two just *stop it?!!*”

That—managed to stop both of them. The two looked up at the third girl who had their same face and same hair—a shy girl who had never been able to speak up properly, even before her mind had become an endless battlefield.

“I can't stand this,” Koron Nagataka said, shaking her head. “I can't stand it! You two are still fighting when *we're* in a fight for our lives!”

“Yes,” Fuyuko said, leaning back in her throne and raising an eyebrow, “that's what we're fighting about. It's not as though I want to kill the poor boy, you know—”

“But what the hell else are we going to do?!” Ryuko yelled. She landed on the ground, her clawed feet crashing to the earth with a loud *thud*. “He's not *listening* to words! He's not listening to *sense*! And before long, that bitch is gonna be here, and he'll die anyway! They might all die!”

“I'm *aware!*” Fuyuko said, slamming her fist on the arm of her throne. “But what can we do?”

“...We need to be honest,” Koron said, and that stopped both of the warring selves in their tracks. “We need to be honest... and we need to realize what's most important.”

“...Yeah?” Ryuko asked.

“What's most important is them,” Koron said. “Nanako, Pavel, Chelsea... they all have the chance to live full lives. We don't. We're going to die. And now they know that.”

“...If Pavel used his mind properly, levied those abilities of his,” Fuyuko said with a wring of her wrist, “I imagine that if *anyone* could prevent others of our sort from falling to this condition, it would be him. And, personally, I would bet on that chance.”

“Their lives've all been fucking ruined,” Ryuko said, hissing under her breath. “We're the only one who can change that. Right?”

“Yeah,” Koron said with a nod. “So... you both understand. You get it. Right?”

—They both did understand. Both of them knew. All three of the hermit's selves understood what she needed to do—her final petition. “Shit,” Ryuko said, “this puts a bad taste in my mouth.”

Standing up, it was obvious how much taller Fuyuko was than the other two—after all, they were children, and on some level, she was a grown woman. But then, did that truly matter if she had never been given the chance to express that? ...She shook her head, and sighed. “She's correct,” she said. “Even this fight of ours—had things gone differently, perhaps it would not have happened. Perhaps we could have coexisted, and been our own people, rather than this mess of an underpinning psyche.”

“Yeah,” Koron said. “But... we'll get to make our own choice, and go out on our own terms. All of us, together. Okay?”

With the nod of the two warring selves, a quiet came over the mental landscape of the hermit. Suddenly, the war stopped. A moment of perfect clarity came over her.

All three of us, together.

Even if we die...

I will be remembered.

I won't die in vain—!!

—“*I won't let you—!!*”

And then—reality snapped back in. Koron Nagataka—the whole Koron Nagataka—moved her body again in resistance. Pavel briefly started at her revival, but moroso once the flesh on his arm began to freeze before his eyes, before the frozen segment of his limb *shattered* from an explosion of heat.

Koron landed on the ground, clean on her feet, amidst the falling, frozen fragments, and looked up at Pavel, who'd quickly sealed up the wound and reshaped his arm. "You don't have the power—to solve what's wrong with me," Koron said, staring him dead in the eyes. "Nobody does, but least of all you, Pavel Weber. And do you want to know why?"

Pavel staggered back, but then threw a few more darts of hair. This time, however, Koron burnt them to cinders in the air in front of her, causing his eyes to widen, and for him to gasp. "Wha—?!"

"I won't let you do this," Koron said, taking one step forward, then two, then three. She raised her head, and glared right at Pavel. "If I have to burn you to cinders to stop you from this idiotic crusade, I *will*!"

With a wave of her hand to the side, and then a swing upwards, Koron sent a wave of fire through the plants of the courtyard right at Pavel, who desperately dodged to the side. "My body cannot live. This power makes it cannibalize itself. And you—You want to be a doctor? A healer? Do you think that an untrained boy has the strength to give a human body the fortitude to not *eat itself*?"

—But he wasn't fast enough to escape. With a tap of her foot, Koron launched forward on a makeshift platform of ice, flash-freezing vapor in the air to shoot right for him. "Power," Koron yelled, leaping off the car at her friend and running right for him, "comes from the self—!"

Smack!

It wasn't a punch, this time; Koron slapped Pavel across the face, causing his spittle to careen onto the ground. "This twisting of the form—this isn't what your power comes from! You—are a *kind person*—!" Again, she slapped him.

This time, Pavel recoiled, then came back, attempting to tackle Koron—but she thrust her hand forward into his chest, and he went rigid, a *zap* and a sudden smoke coming from the moment of contact. Koron gritted her teeth, and followed up on the electricity she'd conjured to backhand Pavel to the ground again.

"You're a kind boy. You want to protect people. You have a kind power, that can heal people," Koron said, wringing her hand of the stinging from her strikes. "All I have to look at to know that is to see how happy you are when you heal someone's wounds. You're a kind person, no matter how much your anger wants you to force yourself to be otherwise. You have a kind power. I will *not* let you become a weapon!"

"Why?!" Pavel pounded his fists onto the ground, then stood back up, limp and bloody. "Why?!"

"You can't cure me, Pavel," Koron said. "Any cure you would put forth—would simply be a stave-off. I would be shackled to you just the same way anyone else would be shackled to a hospital bed. You would tear yourself apart to cure me, but all it would do would be burning you, too, the flame inside me."

Tears running down his face, Pavel audibly sobbed, then roared one last time, only able to turn his hands into claws to rush at Koron. "You're *wrong*! I'll heal you! I can heal you! *I can save you*—!"

And in response, Koron—simply walked out of the way. She took a step to the left, and the momentum caused Pavel to crash to the ground. He had no more fight, no more rage, only tears.

Nanako, Chelsea, and Dr. Hashizawa returned, through the open-again doorway, to the courtyard. But Koron did not turn to face them. Instead, she turned to the other entrance of the courtyard, to the woman who stood in the dim light.

“...Are you satisfied?” Koron asked.

Walking into the light to reveal herself, Natsume Hikasa began to clap. “An incredible show, really,” she said. “Using talents I hadn't even imagined—the generation of electricity is further than I ever thought you would be able to go.” She shook her head. “But, of course, all good things must come to an end.” Natsume pulled a cell phone from her pocket, and—

Koron raised her hand. “Wait!” Natsume raised her eyebrow. “Haven't you gathered? I haven't finished. I'm the one in charge of this situation, Natsume Hikasa.”

“Tell me how,” Natsume said.

“Naturally, you have your own strike teams on call. A single call will result in all of us being taken in. You'll silence us somehow, and attempt to continue on in this project—but you know very well it's not going to work. I just showed you it won't,” Koron said. “You know very well that even Hashizawa can't harness that kind of power into a machine. I'm one of a kind.”

“...An interesting thing to say, but I will admit you have a point,” Natsume said, holding her right elbow in her left hand and letting her right hand's fingers twiddle around.

“You're a proud woman, Hikasa. You want to succeed. You want to be the best. Right? That's the read I get of you,” Koron said. “So, I have a proposal for you. The terms are simple—The events of this are wiped clean, and my friends are free to go. Our infiltration of government property, Pavel's assault of Dr. Hashizawa, that little incident with your flunkies—all of that's wiped clean, and these three are freed of any ties to this hospital. They go free.”

“I see,” Natsume said. “Quite an ask. And in return?”

“You get me,” Koron said. “You want your disposable soldier—well, here she is.”

All of Koron's friends shouted at her in the background. Pavel coughed a bit, but Nanako and Chelsea were clear as day. “Stop!” Chelsea pleaded. “Koron, you're making a mistake—!”

“I'll work for you in whatever context you deem necessary. You can use me in whatever conflict you're imagining—and I'll die in your service. This experiment will get you one singular success—the most powerful pyrokinetic in the world, willing to die for you at any moment,” Koron said.

Natsume laughed. She laughed, and laughed, and laughed. It looked for a moment like she was going to bend over, but no—she returned to her regular posture. “And if I refuse?”

“Then I blow myself up right here,” Koron said. “This entire hospital and everyone in it burns—you included. There's nothing you can do to stop me.”

Raising an eyebrow, Natsume said, “Bold.”

“Try me,” Koron said with a smirk.

There was a moment, one piercingly long moment of silence, before Natsume laughed again. “Ahh... well, I suppose in business one must know when to fold. You win, Ms. Nagataka. The rest of you are free to go. But you—come with me.” And Natsume Hikasa turned and walked away.

Koron took a step forward, but in the end it was Nanako who reached her to grab her shoulder and try to stop her. “Koron! No, stop it!” Nanako shook her head furiously, tears in her eyes. “No, please! Stop! I don't want you to die like that!”

But Koron—did not turn her head. “Pavel has kind powers, powers that can heal the weak. All three of you deserve to live good lives—and I hope that soon, Pavel finds this cure he's certain he can do.”

“K-Koron...” Pavel wheezed.

“Do it for the poor souls who'll be snuffed out. And if you can manage it before I die, heh... maybe you might prove me wrong,” Koron said. “But I won't get my hopes up. Empathetic powers, kind powers... That's a world I don't live in.”

“You see, I'm the one who should be a weapon. *I'm* the killer. After all,

my powers can only destroy,” Koron said.

“No! Koron! Please, *don't go*—!”

“Nanako. All I can ask is that you don't forget me. After all,”

and Koron turned her head one last time, and said,

“I want my first love to remember me.”

And she shook Nanako's hand from her shoulder, before walking into the darkness with a wave goodbye.

~25. Unit 13's Psychic~

“...and so this is, ah, Koron Nagataka,” Kirino said.

Meeting a new coworker amidst the apocalypse was definitely new for Koron, but to be fair, she'd also never had a coworker before. The young man she met was German. She had a hard time pinning down exactly what the man's aesthetic was, but she had to admit he had style.

“Richter Esslinger,” he said, reaching over to shake her hand. “It's nice to meet you, Miss Nagataka.”

“Right. You too,” Koron said. “So, I imagine this job will be dealing with those flying monstrosities that are attacking the town?”

“The dragons, yes,” Kirino said, fussing about with some papers or another. “The—”

“Most of those aren't dragons,” Koron said. Both Kirino and Richter went silent before Koron continued, “A dragon has four limbs and two wings. The ones with only wings and legs are wyverns. If they have four limbs and no wings, it's a drake. No legs or wings is a wyrm. Need I go on?”

“...right, yes, the dragons,” Kirino said, and that got Koron to grumble. “Once she wakes up, you two will be under the command of Captain Chisa Inomiko, forming the Dragon-Elimination Strike Team, Unit 13. Hopefully it won't just be the three of you, but I won't hold my breath as far as finding anyone else. And, uh... I'm sorry we had to meet again like this, Koron.”

Koron nodded. “As am I. My apologies, Mr. Esslinger, but what is it you can do in a fight?”

“Oh, my contributions will be meager, really,” Richter said, raising his hands up in a defensive gesture. “I'm skilled with throwing weapons, but my primary skillset is in informational energy manipulation through the use of the Universal Hacking Interface, or YUUHI, if you're familiar?”

“...Huh,” Koron said with a blink. “Well, I can light things on fire with my mind, so I imagine we'll do reasonably well for ourselves.”

—After Koron left the meeting room, it was only about an hour before she saw Richter Esslinger again. He came up behind her as she read a book with Nagamimi, leaning against the wall, and said, “Miss Nagataka, may I have a moment?”

“Yes?” Koron said.

“It's just—well, ah, until now I hadn't... been aware of your physical condition,” Richter said. “And—well, I've expressed this doubt to Mr. Ayafumi, but I'm not sure how I feel about the prospect of bringing a woman in such dire straits—”

Koron levied a glare right at Richter's face. “Shut up.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Richter said, looking an awful lot like a kicked puppy.

“I'll die soon either way. I'm running out of time. I want to die knowing I lived to my fullest. This fight is how I'm going to do it,” Koron said, turning to face him directly. He was taller than her by a fair amount, but she could see it in his eyes—despite his concerns, this man would treat her like an equal. “So don't tell this captain of ours, or any of our other squadmates if we find any. I don't want anyone treating me differently. I'm a soldier like any other. I want to live my life.”

It took a moment for Richter to process this, but eventually, he nodded. “I understand. You're... very strong.”

“Yes, I am,” Koron said with a smirk. “Please inform me when we have an excursion to make. I'll assist you.”

“...Right,” Richter said with a nod. “If I can find you, of course. And... in that case, I’ll be glad to work with you, Miss Nagataka.”

“And I you, Mr. Esslinger,” Koron said.

“Ah, one last question—your doll. I’m told it’s your psychic focus. Does it have a name?” Richter asked.

“Nagamimi,” Koron said. “She’s a girl. And she’s very quick to anger, so I recommend you memorize it.”

“Understood,” Richter said, beginning to rev up a jog. “Okay, I must be off. Many tasks!”

—This Captain Inomiko slept, but she did not sleep peacefully. She muttered in her sleep. She had apparently been asleep for several days now—but she was sure to wake up soon. Something in Koron could tell that this woman would not sleep through this hell.

She sat on a bed next to this woman she would serve under, and looked at her. This woman, with her odd red hair swoop—apparently, it was perfectly natural—she was beautiful, picturesque. Having not properly met her, some small part of Koron couldn’t help but feel a bit envious. And yet, they were both soldiers, amidst a conflict no man could imagine.

“...I wonder what sort of person you are, Chisa Inomiko?” Koron asked. Amidst the cries of others in this room full of stretchers, this was a silent moment for only one. “I wonder what sort of person you are—what manner of comrade you’ll be.” She laughed. “Despite myself, I hope we get along.”

At the gates to the Shelter, in an instant where soldiers hurried out, Koron looked up into the red sky. Monsters roamed the city, and those orange flowers, the Bloom, had taken over the streets. This was where a person like Koron belonged, she supposed, in this world of chaos.

As she looked into the sky, a flood of memories filled Koron. But she had forgotten how to cry, and how to smile. So, instead, she simply hoped—that her father, and the friends that she loved so much, were alive.

*There are places I'll remember
All my life though some have changed
Some forever, not for better
Some have gone and some remain*

*All these places have their moments
With lovers and friends I still can recall
Some are dead and some are living
In my life I've loved them all*

*But of all these friends and lovers
There is no one compares with you*

*And these memories lose their meaning
When I think of love as something new*

*Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before
I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more*

-Fin.