

I remember it was Tanabata. I think I was thirteen? Aunt Natsume had taken me to a local park—she didn't really do festivities like that, but I'd told her I wanted to. "Just be sure," she'd said, "to wish for something that might practically come true."

The sun was setting by the time I'd gotten to it, so a bit of light was glinting off my glasses as I said, with a little laugh, "Come on! What's the fun in that?"

I said that, but I was a bit stuck for what I wanted to wish for. *Tanzaku* aren't very big, so I'd have to make sure to write small if I wanted to wish for anything complicated. I'd managed to convince Aunt Natsume to write one too, and I caught a glimpse--'Ensure next year's fiscal reports are sufficient to maintain grants.'

Aunt Natsume looked over when I started laughing and snorting about it. She raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Sorry, sorry," I said, waving my hand, "it's just, that's such a you wish. Usually people wish for stuff that's more abstract, you know?"

"I have very little interest in the abstract," she said back, walking over and sticking her wish to the bamboo, "but money speaks. If this does reach some entity or another, ensuring the well-being of my financial prospects is what I would want."

I laughed again, and Aunt Natsume started to frown. Then she saw me smiling, though, and she smiled back. "But you are a child, I suppose," she said, "and you wouldn't know much about that, would you."

"Hey, I know plenty! I'm just more emotionally literate," I said.

"You will have to share some of that literacy with me," Aunt Natsume said as she sat back down next to me. "I'm direly lacking in the skill."

--That was when I finally managed to figure out my wish. Not that there was any kind of eureka moment or anything, it's just that's when it happened. I wrote it down, squinting and making sure I wrote real clearly, and stood up myself.

Please give me someone my own age who'll want to spend time with me. I want to make a friend.

I wonder sometimes whether someone heard that wish. I know gods exist now, so I guess it's not out of the picture. But, when I looked up at the stars that night as I headed home—not to the Akaneno house, but to the Hikasa manor—I didn't realize how true that wish would come.

As odd as it was given the state of the landscape outside, there was something awfully nostalgic about riding in a bullet train. “Bullet” kind of implied it was going faster than it was, though—we didn't have the luxury of actually having the thing powered normally, so the two-and-a-half-hour trip to Himeji was taking closer to four hours.

It was Koron's friend Chelsea who was actually piloting the train. After everything was cleared from fighting Niara, we'd had a chat with Kirino about needing to take Koron to Tottori. You can probably imagine, but he kinda balked at first until we told him it was either that or she was going to die. I remember his eyes went all bugged-out, and he was like, “Wait, you mean you can save her life and you guys didn't tell me?!”

On the condition that this was the last time that she did anything psychic before whatever her other friend had planned, Koron was helping power the train, so that left the rest of us to sorta just while away the time. We'd all come along... well, for one thing in case there were monsters that needed clearing.

Youka had managed to crash to sleep on her seat, in that way that only someone who'd just killed a god a few days ago could manage. Richter had brought a few novels, and Sumie had actually had the foresight *and* opportunity to charge her Switch, so she was gaming. She didn't swear often, but lemme tell you, that girl could get *mad* at a horse.

Huh? Oh, the horse slows down time. You have to fight it in this gladiator arena, it slows down time and throws spears at you like it's Dio, but it's also charging you at the same time. You have to use your guns a lot because it's hard to hit. She always told me it was her least favorite boss in the game. Let's see, what did she say about it?

Right, right. “Stupid piss-ass horse wasting my time when I just wanna get to Vergil 2! Fucking horse! Ugh!” It *did* take a while, that was true. You get the power to slow time yourself after you beat it, but until the Switch version you had to not use any of your other Styles to do that, it kinda blew.

I stood up from where I'd been writing, and Richter looked up at me when I did. “Something wrong, Mio?” he asked.

“Well, y'know,” I said, shrugging. I pointed my thumb toward the door to the next car over, and Richter nodded and let out a little 'ah'.

Out the windows, Japan was pretty much unrecognizable. While the Imperial Dragons had been centralized on Tokyo—Kirino and his bunch theorized it may have been because that was where Niara had roosted—the landscape had been plenty ruined by the swarms of normal dragons. Everywhere you looked, there were upturned cars, or uprooted trees, or pavement wrecked... I mean, honestly, it was a miracle this whole line was still standing to drive along.

Well, Chelsea had mentioned that she and some friends had tried their best to maintain it as a sort of supply line for refugees. But the fact that they could do that? That's a miracle, too.

I stepped through the door to the next car over, and I found it empty. I sighed, really deeply, and walked back through this next car to where a certain someone had moved to. Chisa was staring out the window, this glazed-over look in her eyes, all slumped over in herself. She was always kind of an open

book, but when she had that look in her eyes it was hard to tell what exactly was going on in there.

“Hey,” I said, going over and sitting next to her. There was something beautiful about the view from the train, even if it was also pretty horrible. “Why'd you come back here?” Chisa didn't respond. “Let me guess. You thought you didn't deserve to be close to me?”

“Basically,” Chisa said back.

“Well, I'm here now and you can't do anything about that, so there,” and I huffed a little at her.

We were both quiet for a bit before she said anything. “All this. It's all my fault.” She slumped over a little further, looking down at her hands. When she's really emotional, her hair gets all Sadako-y, and that's a lot easier to read. “All this destruction. All these dead.”

“Ehhhh,” I said, shaking my head, “that guy seemed like he was the type to hold a grudge anyway. You really think he wouldn't have come back to try and take revenge on Earth without you here?”

Chisa was quiet for a bit, and then said, “Well, no...”

“See? Exactly,” I said. I put my hand on her shoulder and leaned in closer to try and establish eye contact. “So—”

“But—”

“But what?” I asked.

“But—well—you know—”

And that's when she finally looked up at me, and that glassy look in her eyes wasn't there anymore. So, that's when I knew what she was thinking. It was something along the lines of, 'I'm the concept these dragons were all trying to reach, so this is all my fault as an evolutionary imperative anyhow', or something.

“Will you please just come here?” I said, and wrapped her in a hug. I'm told, not to toot my own horn, but I'm told that I'm a pretty good hugger. “Damn, girl, check out this physical body you got.”

“Wha—huh?!” Chisa launched out of my arms and jumped up.

I continued, wiggling my eyebrows at her. “Man, that body. It really exists in physical space as a manifestation of a concept and not the concept itself.”

Chisa started blushing furiously, and looked away from me. “Y-you can't just say that, Mio.”

That's when I blinked. “Wha—that's not *actually* flustering you, is it?”

Eventually, I managed to get her to sink into my arms, and we sat there looking out the train's window for a while until the train finally stopped. Amazingly, the intercom came on. “This is your captain speaking. We will now be transferring to the Himeji-Tottori line. Please ensure all possessions

are off the train.”

“What the hell are you doing?” That was Koron, also over the intercom.

“You can't ruin my dreams,” Chelsea said.

It took us about an hour and a half longer to get to Tottori. “His clinic was much closer to the border with Shimane,” Chelsea explained, “but he moved to serve as a point on a line for refugees.”

“Why out here, anyhow?” Koron asked, as we all stepped off the platform.

“The surgeon he studied under lives right near the border, on the Shimane side,” Chelsea said.

I wasn't really an expert in navigating rubble, but everyone else was. Koron had the address, and it wasn't very far from the train station—the clinic was right next to a fairly untouched city park. A hastily made “Weber Clinic” sign hung over the storefront, which it looked like had previously been something else.

At the door, Koron started to go to knock, but she grimaced and looked away. Sumie came up behind her and patted her on the shoulders a few times. “You got this! Let's positive thinking!”

“I-I know I should, but...” Koron stammered for a bit before continuing. “It's just... awkward.”

“Since when are you worried about being awkward?” Youka said, before going up in front and opening the door herself. “Yo!”

“Wha—*Youka!*” Koron yelled, gritting her teeth and following right behind, throwing her hands around as she did. The bell inside the door rang as she passed under. “What the fuck?! Not gonna let me take a fucking second, huh?!”

Sumie walked in, and the bell rang a second time, at which point a young man's voice from the back said, “Just a minute!”

“Apologies for the noise!” That was Richter, and the bell didn't ring for him. Chelsea walked under, and the bell rang for her. Then I walked through the door, and the bell rang.

It was a pretty small front room—I think I learned at some point that it used to be a retail shoe store? Lots of shelves, and there were things like magazines, dolls, books, and stuff along them. The decoration of the place was pretty thorough in making a kinda soft, unthreatening atmosphere. There were some candles burning on a fixture above for light.

Then, there was a little bit of taking from the back. It went something like this: “Nanako, please go look.” “What? But I'm the tall one!” “I can reach this shelf without your help! There are at least four people out there!” “Say please!” “Please go look, I swear I can... get up there...!”

That's when, from a door behind what was presumably the old sale shelf, a girl popped her head out, slid out from behind the door, and stood at the counter. I'd kind of expected all of Koron's friends to be tiny, so this girl—a tall, kinda heavy-set brunette—was way bigger than I expected. She had her

hair up in a ponytail, and was in an improvised nurse's uniform that had some scribbles on it.

“Hi hi!” Her eyes were closed for the sake of proper greeting, her arms out at this perfect forty-five degree angle. “Welcome to the Weber Clinic, how can I—” Then she opened her eyes, and saw the blank stare that Koron was giving her. “Wha.”

There was this pretty long silence where the two of them just stared at each other, before Sumie cleared her throat and said, “So, uh, you wanna introduce me?”

“*Where the hell have you been?!*” the brunette yelled, literally leaping out from behind the counter to forcefully grab Koron's face and shake her a bit. “Where do you get off leaving me hanging like that, huh?! You and your flair for dramatics, one of these days it's gonna get you killed! I'm *really happy you aren't dead!* You big dumb *idiot*, oh my god.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Koron yelped while being shaken, “le-lemme go, let me go! Hands—hands off the merchandise!”

“I'll put my hands all over this damn merchandise if I want, woman!” Koron's friend here was very animated. She actually had kinda similar mannerisms to Sumie in a lot of ways, which is funny because it told us a lot about Koron's type. “Five years I've had to just wonder if you were gonna keel over and die before I ever even got the chance to respond to that *bombshell* you left me with! What is wrong with you?! Just saying all this dramatic stuff and then just leaving people with it, like some kinda—what do you think you are, some kinda tragic anime hero?!”

Sumie, Richter, Youka, and I had all formed a united front of just watching this happen, and I think it was Youka who nodded and said, “Wow, yeah, no, you're definitely friends with Koron.”

“Very true,” Richter said. “You have her foibles down to a T.”

“She definitely deserves this,” Sumie agreed.

“Wha—hey!” Koron said, attempting frantically to escape the brunette's shaking grasp and grunting loudly at Sumie. “You're supposed to be on my side here, if anyone is!”

“Oh sure, gimme about five more seconds,” Sumie said. One, two, three, four, five, and then Sumie swiftly dodged in, broke the grasp, slid back, and extended her hand for a handshake. “Howdy! Sumie Kazuki. I'm with her. Nice to be here.”

The brunette, similarly, got right back to her regular beats for a handshake. “Nanako Hashizawa, hi! It's a pleasure. How do you know Koron?”

“Oh, we're all part of this like, secret government strike team is all,” Sumie said with a sly little grin, “nothing big. We just saved the world by killing a dragon god is all.”

As Koron was recovering, she still found the time to wheeze and say, “He was a wyvern.”

“Fine, fine, a Dragon god,” Sumie said with a wink.

It's... Okay, you need to understand something. I can't really replicate Sumie's whole... caps...

thing. I don't think anyone but Sumie can. It's some sort of inexplicable talent she has that everyone around her just sort of understands what it means when she does this... thing. It's definitely some kind of minor psychic power, but like, I don't know *what* it is. It's like some kind of super weird, narrow form of the Red Truth from Umineko, except it's this really hard-to-quantify concept of... verbal emphasis on...

So, the point was, the joke here is that the first time, she said 'dragon', like the common noun, quadripedal two wings, you've got that part, but the second time she said 'Dragon' with a capital D, like the proper noun. So Niara was a Dragon, but he wasn't a dragon.

Anyway, at this point, the last of Koron's friends came out from behind the counter. He looked about thirteen, to my eyes, he was this kid with white hair and red eyes, really pale. He had this pure white lab coat on, and it was a little big for him. This guy was actually twenty years old, mind, but I've still got like, five years on him and he's got this ruffleable hair. It's really hard to resist.

Now, this guy—the eponymous Dr. Weber, first name Pavel according to his ID card stuck to his label—came out with a narrow look in his eyes, giving the four of us this *look*. “Associates of Natsume Hikasa's, I suppose. Part of her organization.” Richter raised his hand. “Yes, you with the scarf?”

“Actually, as of roughly two weeks ago, leadership has been transferred to her second-in-command, Kirino Ayafumi,” Richter said. Dr. Weber raised his eyebrow. “Ah, you see, Ms. Hikasa used a database of draconic information in order to attain her own draconic form. It came to blows. She is currently dead.” (I sighed, but quietly, since I didn't wanna kill the moment.)

Dr. Weber's eyes opened wide, and his mouth gaped for a bit before he actually properly jumped back and yelled, “Wait, she's *dead*?” His mood shifted on a dime, and he gave this big smile. This is when I found out he didn't have fangs. “Awesome! The world is a better place for it. Who do I have to thank for the deed?”

Koron had finally recovered from Nanako's vigorous shaking, and she dusted herself off and took a look around before everyone looked just outside the store. A certain someone was still standing outside, looking awkwardly at the door. “That one,” Koron said, before turning her head back to Pavel, “though for your information I was also on the front line for that one. Are you going to shake me, too?”

“I'm going to have to do much worse to you in a bit here, so you can have this for the moment,” Pavel said. He called out to Chisa. “Ma'am, please, come in! I swear I don't bite.”

“...But—”

“Oh my god,” Youka said, throwing her hands up before stomping over, “get in here.”

When Youka dragged Chisa through the door, the bell rang at such an intense speed that it actually audibly cracked, and Pavel looked up and grimaced. “Ohhh, I'm, uh, I'm gonna have to get that replaced.”

There wasn't much of a conference room to speak of, so we all took what seats we could in the front room. Unit 13 sat on one side, and Koron's friends the other. We sat down and explained the events of the last six months or so, and how we'd wound up... well, killing Aunt Natsume, for one thing.

After she hadn't said anything for about half an hour, I spoke up and asked Chelsea something. "Why were *you* in Murakumo, anyway?"

"It's convenient as a way to direct resources where they needed to go and ensure tabs could be kept on who they needed to be," Chelsea said, and that was that.

"Still, to think you'd go on to literally save the world... I'm really glad you couldn't actually shoot lightning the last time we met, I've got to admit!" Pavel said with a laugh, crossing his arms.

"Oh, come on. I wouldn't have actually killed you, I would've just singed you a bit," and Koron gave him this knowing, smug grin.

"I'm sure remission from whatever you've got here will take me quite some time, but for the time being I'm still solidly the Vice-Captain of Murakumo Unit 13," Koron explained. "And we are, so to speak, the face of Murakumo, an agency that previously lacked one. I have no doubt that any remaining who think Hikasa had the right idea within the organization will be hesitant to do anything with us around. And Kirino's a good man. Not to mention several of Hikasa's other experimental subjects have been accounted for somehow or another."

"Cool, cool," Nanako said, giving this stern nod before immediately turning around and grinning widely, "but tell me about your friends!"

"I told you about them," Chelsea said, "in my reports?"

"Oh I didn't read those," Nanako said with a little scoff, "I wanted to be surprised about what kind of company she's keeping now!"

Chelsea didn't look very impressed, but Koron shrugged with a sigh and said, "If you insist. The one with the scarf and the beret is Richter. He's an expert in using the Universal Hacking Interface, does really fascinating stuff with it. Also surprisingly adept in the use of throwing weapons. He's... a bug enthusiast, he keeps an ant farm. Very good dancer, though he hasn't gotten much chance to show it off in the past month or so."

"I'm very heartened you remember!" Richter said, and god, I just wanted to pinch his cheeks when he smiled like that.

"The human tank over there is Youka. She's a local legend over in Yotsuya for a startlingly powerful work ethic and her superhuman physical capabilities. Legally, she's considered a bioweapon. She has this problem where she insists on attempting to insert herself as a mother figure into the lives of pretty much any misfit children she meets that aren't already spoken for—"

"Excuse you!" Youka said, scoffing aloud. "I do not have a *problem*. I like to think I'm more of a solution than anything."

“The otaku with the guitar case is Mio,” Koron continued without responding, “and she's our archivist. She's a Vocaloid composer, a mangaka, really a millennium girl par excellence. She works far harder than you'd expect your average otaku to—”

“Hey, excuse you,” I said, putting my hands on my hips, “why does all that sound so sarcastic coming from you?”

“—very *emotionally literate*, which is an awfully useful skill when you're around people like me all day, it's probably because of her mother—”

“And now you're psychoanalyzing me!” I said, throwing up my hands and grimacing.

“—most important duty is most likely as an emotional anchor for our dear captain, who is the sadsack behind her trying to look like she's not there,” Koron concluded.

Chisa made this noise that was kinda halfway between a 'geh!' and a 'blurgh!' before continuing to hide further behind me. “Is she okay?” Nanako asked.

“No,” all of us said in unison. “She's going through a lot right now,” I continued.

“Is it something physical?” Pavel asked, tilting his head. “With an informational field strong enough to bust the bell, I have to imagine—”

Thankfully, at this point, Chelsea (who was already familiar) nudged Pavel in the arm and told him, “Perhaps later.”

“And, uh...” This is when Koron started blushing. She jabbed a thumb in Sumie's direction. “This is Sumie. She's our recon and toxin specialist, a parkourist, a damn good shot with a gun, and... well...” She cleared her throat, and lemme tell you, Sumie had the biggest grin on her face at that moment. “Well, she's... you know...”

“what's wrong koron” Sumie said, slowly sliding in closer. “what is wrong koron.”

“Look, it's hard, okay?!” Koron snapped back. “It's fine if it's just one person, but it happens to be these two specific people! You don't understand how hard this is for me, Sumie!”

“is someone being a little edgy” Sumie asked, sidling ever closer. “does someone not wanna let her palz see her vulnerable”

“As though you have any room to talk! You were the one sputtering at me when it happened!” Koron said, and her face was turning red.

“does someone feel her perceived dominance over the situation *swipping*” Yeah, I think by now you know what face Sumie was making.

“E-excuse you?! This is—I'm not—you—argh!”

“Ohhhh!” said Nanako, and her ahoge, it did this thing where it pointed up straight. “Wait, you

actually got a girlfriend?!”

“I didn't think it could actually be true,” Pavel said, his eyes wide and his voice quiet. “I thought Chelsea had to be exaggerating. But... you were right, Chelsea. This is disgusting. Where do these people get off being this sappy in my clinic?”

As Sumie put her hands on Koron's shoulder, nuzzling in with just the most contented look on her face, while Koron's face crinked up into this awfully tsundere vision of displeasure, Chelsea said, “Yes. It's hideous, isn't it?”

With a wistful little sigh, Nanako put her head in her hands and said, “Ohhh, I hope I get someone to act tsundere at me one of these days!”

“See, now this is a girl who gets it,” Sumie said, pivoting off of Koron to gesture at Nanako and look back at Koron. “This is a girl who gets it! She understands what a catch you are!” Then she turned her head to Nanako. “So what'd she do?”

“Confessed her love to me right after I found out I was a robot and had been lied to my entire life, then ran out of my life for five years intending to get herself killed in combat,” Nanako said, very... very matter-of-factly.

That bit actually even managed to get Chisa to turn her head to look blankly at Koron. “Wait wait wait wait wait. You confessed your love to this girl immediately before you went to go do all that?” Youka asked, and I saw Koron fuming.

“It—it was a hard situation! I just—look, Youka, I—is anyone judging you for what you did when you were a teenager?!” Koron spat back.

“Yes,” Youka said.

There was a moment of silence before Koron said, “Oh, uh. Right. Sorry.”

I saw this like, look on Nanako's face, and I pre-empted it by saying, “I'm gonna be real with you here, you aren't even the only surprise gynoid we've known this year.”

For space reasons, Chisa, Richter, and Youka were looking in from the window in the door. Sumie and I had come into the room with Koron.

“So,” Pavel said, as he was clearing off his operation table, “I do have something, but it's very much in the... I'll be blunt, Koron, this might as well be a beta test. I haven't managed to figure out how to make this procedure, or something like it, possible for anyone who isn't me. I know it's possible, I just don't know how yet.”

“Run me through it,” Koron said, keeping a straight face.

“The problem is that, as an Akaneno's patient, your body wasn't originally created to use this sort of power,” Pavel said, pacing around and cleaning the room itself off as he did. “Natural psychics have biological adaptations that allow their manifestations of the Psy-Gene to simply be part of their regular bodily functions. I've gotten to do a lot of study—you'd be surprised how many corpses down at the morgue have some minor psychic ability they never realized—so I have a picture of what sort of biological adaptations occur for various sorts of abilities. Kinetic abilities, sensory abilities, oddball ones like mine, the works.”

“...Uh-huh,” Koron said, raising an eyebrow.

“Let me be frank,” and Pavel turned and clasped his hands together to give Koron a direct statement. “Essentially, what I'm going to do—with your consent, of course—is reorganize your bodily chemistry such that it resembles that of a natural psychic.”

“You can do that?!” I exclaimed.

Pavel raised a finger, and I was shushed. “It's going to be a very invasive procedure, and at the end of it I give you an optimistic remission period of at least eight months before you can even start using your abilities again, let alone to the level you've been doing.”

Eight months was a long time in this kind of landscape, but Koron kept a straight face. “I see. What do I need to do?”

Breathing through his teeth, Pavel said, “The procedure will, based on the strength of your abilities and the size of your body, take about fifteen minutes. You're... going to need to be awake for it.”

There was a little sweat drop on Koron's forehead. “Really.”

“Yes. If I'm reorganizing your body to such a degree, I need your self-image present during the procedure to ensure it doesn't go awry—to ensure that your body retains its shape. This is why I haven't gotten much testing—doing it on corpses isn't much good,” Pavel said.

“So I'm going to need to be awake and alert,” Koron repeated, “for fifteen minutes, as you go inside and forcibly rearrange my bodily chemistry.” She snorted. “I don't suppose there's any chance of a painkiller.”

“Do you want to risk having your body's nerves not working properly when you're maintaining

your own shape?” Pavel asked.

“Yeah, I didn't think so,” Koron said. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath in, and then said, “Well, it beats dying. When do we start?”

“Can I—I mean, is it—uh?” Sumie chirped up.

“You won't actually see anything from an outside perspective,” Pavel said to Sumie, “so if you'd like to sit in for emotional support that's completely fine. I would just ensure you're capable of taking it, is all. It likely won't be pretty.”

“What do you take me for?” Koron snorted, taking her opportunity to take off her cape and hat and let her hair down. She smiled at Sumie. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“...You just wanna get right to it, huh?” Pavel said, before looking in a cabinet for a bottle of water. He lifted it up and drained it all in one fell swoop. “Okay then. I'm going to need to ask everyone else to leave the room.”

I had a watch that I'd managed to get working, so I can tell you that it did last fifteen minutes... and eight seconds. Everyone else was sat outside of the operating theater, just sorta... waiting. Pavel worked quietly.

According to Sumie, for the first bit after Pavel started working, Koron immediately broke out sweating, but she did her best to keep her breathing even. It took about a minute and a half, by my measure, for her to start actually gripping Sumie's hand. Her eyes closed, and she was sweating profusely, but she kept her teeth gritted.

It was four minutes, twelve seconds, that I first heard Koron scream. It wasn't the kind of scream I normally heard from her, it was this... this guttural, animal howl of agony, the kind someone all erudite and hoity-toity like Koron would never give. It lasted for a few seconds, this awful sound wrenching itself from her throat, and I'm pretty sure everyone in the room couldn't help but grimace and clench their teeth at it.

There was about a minute and ten seconds of silence after that, then...

“[Ffffuck!! *Shit!* God... *damn* it!!]”

It was almost kind of funny. Koron actually started swearing in English. The paucity of swear words in Japanese was bad enough she had to start swearing in English.

“[Motherfucker! God damn it!] *Fine, keep it going!* I can take more!”

Since I didn't hear Pavel speak, I can only assume Koron was arguing with herself here. We'd all signed up for this by staying around, but it was still... it still wasn't fun. She started muttering out these sorts of mixed-language swears under her breath at this point that I couldn't quite make out.

That lasted for about two and a half minutes, I think. Then there was silence until ten minutes, fifteen seconds. She screamed again at that point, but the howling lasted longer. There were three or

four successive screams, like all the air in her lungs was being squeezed out in these instinctive, horrific howls.

Then she started talking again, but... it wasn't really in any language anyone knew. Koron called it a bout of 'glossolalia', where she was saying things that sounded like words, yelling them really, really emphatically, but they didn't mean anything to anyone... not even her. I don't even know how to replicate the noises she started making. That lasted about forty-five seconds, until there was this switch where suddenly she wasn't speaking in tongues anymore, she was just gibbering.

It was about thirteen minutes, thirty seconds, where I finally heard Koron break and start crying... and it wasn't a pretty sound, and I'm not even sure it was 'sad' so much. Well, there was sorrow in it, but it was really just this painfully tired sound. Koron didn't cry often, but I could hear in her voice that she was really, really, really well past her limit, and the only thing that was keeping her going was sheer adrenaline.

It took about a minute for Koron to stop crying, and then it was just dead silent again. There wasn't even the slightest bit of noise... just the ticking of my watch.

And then—

“It's *done!*” Pavel exclaimed, letting out a massive breath of his own. “It's... *done*. Operation complete!”

As Sumie tells it, the instant Pavel said those words, Koron passed out. I could hardly blame her for that.

We got a stretcher to take her back in. There wasn't really room at the Weber Clinic to keep her overnight as things stood, so we all worked together to bring our passed-out friend on her stretcher onto the train. It was gonna take longer than the way there to get home, so Sumie took the front car with Koron and curled up on the floor. I saw a few tear stains on her face, so I gave her a little pet on the head. That made her smile.

I was exhausted myself just from being near that, but I felt like I couldn't go to sleep until I got a certain someone to sleep first. She was back to slumped, hollow, on the train seat, and she had that glassy look on her face again as she stared down at her hands.

“Chisa—”

“All of that,” she whispered under her breath. “All... all my fault. All that agony...”

“What? Come on. No, it's not,” I said, sidling up close to her.

“I'm the direct cause of Akaneno's Syndrome,” Chisa muttered, and her hair was getting a little too unkempt for my liking. “I'm the reason Koron had to go through that. It's all my fault. If it weren't for me, she could've just lived normally.”

“No—no, you are not,” I said, snorting and trying to turn her to look at me. “If anyone's at fault, it's my mom. And—and the dragons. Not you.”

“I *am* a dragon,” Chisa said back.

“You know what I mean! It's not like you wanted this. You didn't hurt her. The world—I mean, life hurt her, you know?” I said, patting her shoulders again. “Come on, please—”

“Everyone would be better off if I was dead,” Chisa said.

“***Look at me!***”

Chisa looked at me. She wasn't even crying, there was just nothing in her voice. “What?”

“Say that again. Look me in the eyes as you do,” I said.

“Everyone... would be better off, if...”

—And yup, there were the tears starting to form. “It's all my fault... I don't know how to live with this. I don't know how to... I don't... I just don't know, Mio. I don't... I don't know. I don't know!”

“Please come here,” I said, and I leaned in and wrapped her in another hug.

“Everything around me... I don't know how to live with it! I don't know how to live with this! I don't know anything, I just want it all to stop, I just... I just, I just want, I just want... I don't know! I don't know what I want!”

“I know,” I said. I gently guided her down onto her side. “Let's just... sleep. Okay?”

“I’ll... I’ll try,” Chisa said, shivering under my arms. “I’ll try. Please... please don't let me go.”

It wasn't really unusual at the moment for me to have to hold her. Sometimes, it felt... it felt like I'd gone back in time. Like we'd both gone back in time. But, I thought to myself, I'd just make sure she knew it wasn't her fault, for as long as it took.

...After all, if I did that, I didn't have to blame myself, either.

It was four weeks—not quite a month—after the end of the war that this occurred. Koron was in remission and would be for quite some time to come, and Sumie was currently being tasked with caring for her. Youka, for her part, was assisting in reconstruction—so it was left to Richter and Mio to investigate the independent electrical signals we'd located in the remainder of Tokyo.

...And I had come along, of course. Tomoegozen in hand, I effortlessly split in twain a Murderbear that had reared its ugly head from Daiba, its body falling to the ground in two even pieces. A brief spurt of blood blasted onto my face, but while I swung Tomoegozen to clean it, I did nothing to clean my own face. The rain pouring down from the clouds that day would do the job for me.

“It's clear,” I said.

Richter had been ready to assist, but he hadn't needed to. Mio was keeping up the rear—she didn't have the ability to fight, but she could remain as lookout. “Chisa, I—”

When Richter started speaking, I sheathed my sword again and said, “You don't need to worry about me.”

—I didn't look at him, of course. I didn't want to make eye contact. Recently, I had been having quite a lot of trouble with eye contact—or rather, some part of me had been intentionally avoiding it, even with Mio. I had the bad habit of breaking down or starting to cry when I was made to make eye contact since the end of the war, and the last thing I wanted at that moment was to break down. If I broke down, I wasn't useful—I wasn't doing the only thing I was good for.

That bear hadn't been alone—we were in Ota City, following the Tokaido-Sanyo line to the southernmost ends of Tokyo and toward the border to Kanagawa. Due to proximity to Tokyo Bay, and thus Daiba, several members of the VenusFort fauna had reared their ugly heads. To my sides lay the pierced bodies of several of the flying fish, a few Rabis that had begun to adapt to the area, and—

“Whoa, watch out!” Mio called out from behind me, right as I noticed one last straggler—an oversized crab. Since Tomoegozen was still sheathed, I took it, sheath and all, and rammed the hilt into the crab's carapace. The force of the blow crushed it, and in an instant it died a brutal death. “Oh, uh, w-whoa,” Mio said, coming up from behind and balancing across a few pieces of rubble, “guess you had it handled.”

It had taken a way's walk from the nearest relay point, but we reached the Ontakesan station, the closest point to our destination. Richter got to work setting up a relay point as Mio looked down to confirm the signal. “Once we leave here,” she said, “it'll be... about a kilometer and a half until we reach Tamagawadai Park, and it should be one of the buildings bordering it.”

We'd been able to locate a number of survivors through locating independent electrical signals—oftentimes they were indicative of some manner of shelter that was still running, even if just slightly. This was admittedly my first time personally going on such an operation, but we were short-staffed, and I couldn't bear the idea of Mio going out with only Richter for protection. (No offense to him, of course, but... you know what I mean.)

The route took us through the Den-en-Chofu area of Ota City, one of the richest neighborhoods in all of Tokyo. Large houses, rich sights... I'd been taken here once when I was younger, when the

Inomikos were considering possibly branching out into a summer home. Bitter as that memory was, though, I still remember how awestruck I was by Tamagawadai Park—cherry blossoms and hydrangeas as far as the eye could see, the sort of sight that made me want to draw the instant I saw it.

Of course, it was a shell of its former self now, and I hadn't drawn anything in a month. It was a lonely, quiet walk for us to the building in question—a surprisingly modest-looking building. 'Ayana' was listed on the front, which gave the impression that it was a residence—but this was not a home so much as it was simply a *building*, and one that looked abandoned at that. “If you'll excuse me,” Richter said, walking up and knocking on the door. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

Mio poked her head over his shoulder and looked down beside the door. “Why don't you try the doorbell? The power's on, isn't it?”

“Ah, good point,” Richter said. It was almost amusing how unfamiliar the idea of a doorbell had become, but ring it Richter did. Five seconds passed, then ten—the rain continued to fall. Fifteen, twenty, and then there was a quiet sound, sounding like someone running up a stairwell—

The door opened wide open. Richter and Mio had to jump back from the speed of it—the young man in the doorway's eyes were wide open in shock. “Oh man, no way! Someone actually came to visit!”

This young man who lived here was rather short—shorter than any of us, to be sure. He had a short, but messy and fluffy head of black hair, and he wore a stylish blue scarf that had become ragged and worn with the events of the year, no doubt. Despite that, though, his smooth, boyish features hadn't taken a hit—not a scar or blemish in sight, nothing to block his wide, violet eyes.

What I'm saying is, while the rest of his attire was simply seasonally-appropriate dark wear, I couldn't help but feel that Richter had found one of his own sort here. It was probably the scarf. I saw Mio blinking, in her case like she was trying to place where she'd seen him before.

“C'mon in if you want, it's raining cats and dogs out there!” the boy said, before turning around and running in, not waiting for a response. All three of us made to follow, following him inside. There was a stairwell down to a basement level right next to the entrance, but his living area was on this level, and as muted as I felt I couldn't help but feel rather impressed.

The young man had managed to create a small garden of his own by constructing an agricultural system along the ceiling of this former office space, likely with resources from outside in the park. Several vegetables were being grown right in the space of his home, and using holes in the wall from decay and wreckage, rainwater ran through to filter into both agricultural use and for drinking purposes (using an office-standard water cooler for storage).

He'd also constructed his own fireplace in the more stable part of the room, with a chair constructed from miscellaneous materials and an archive of books in the corner. With a rug, shields to prevent the open rainwater or elements from entering the active living space made out of office partitions, a complete radio set, exercise equipment, and even a self-made stove, this living space would be the envy of anyone in City Hall.

The owner grabbed some plastic chairs from the corner and placed them down along the rug. “You guys can sit if you're tired, I don't mind. I've got water, obviously, but I can also make tea, and if

you want I could experiment with this coffee maker I've been working on.”

At this point, Mio finally regained enough brainpower to whistle. “Daaang, nice place. How much of this did you build yourself?”

“About half, ish?” There was the final touch, then, as the young man started up a record player in the corner. The croaking notes of what I'm told is American jazz artist “Fats” Waller started emanating around the room, with a pleasant echo, and the owner sat back down in his chair. Richter and Mio took seats, and after a look from Mio, I did, too. “So what brings you to this part of town? Looking for a place to stay?”

“I'm surprised you let us in so easily,” Richter said, first off. “We could have been looking to rob you.”

“Nahhh,” the boy said, winking. “Love the beret, by the way. Scarf too, real unique pattern. Anyhow, you rang the doorbell, so that means you know I've got power, and it's not like I advertise that. The power's only actually on for the basement. That means you're probably not people from around here trying to make do, right?”

“Very canny, sir,” Richter said with a smile. “My name is Richter Esslinger, and these are my associates, Chisa Inomiko and Mio Akaneno. We're members of Unit 13 of Murakumo, an organization in league with the Japanese government. We've set up a residential base in Tokyo City Hall, and we've been inspecting independent electrical signals to locate survivors outside of the reach we had while the Dragons were still about.”

The owner's eyes widened, and he put his chin in one hand. “Oh, those things. What did happen to those? Not that I'm complaining, but I am curious.”

“We defeated their leader, and as such they were no longer able to continue terraforming our planet,” Richter said. “Our designation is the Dragon-Elimination Strike Team, you see.”

“Well, thank you very much!” The boy bowed his head. “My name's Kyosuke Ayana. I don't think I really need rescuing, per se, but I'm glad to know other people are still alive!”

That's when Mio stood up out of her chair like a rocket. “Wait, wha—like, *the?! The Kyosuke Ayana?*”

Kyosuke rubbed the back of his head and chuckled awkwardly. “Aw, gee. I still have fans after the apocalypse? Lucky me!”

“I'm sorry,” Richter said, turning his head to Mio, “I'm not familiar?”

“He's, uh... he was a famous opera singer,” Mio said, sitting back down with an awkward blush on her face. “I mean, I—I know—y'know.”

“I didn't take you for an opera fan!” Richter said, never dropping his smile.

“She keeps quiet about it because she thinks it's outside of her image,” I added, “but she got big into it when she was eighteen.”

“I actually got to go to a few of your shows live,” Mio said, an excited smile on her face. “Like the second run you did of *Ulrich and Royston*! That was great!”

“Oh, yeah! That one was great!” Kyosuke said with a clap, leaning forward with a glint in his eyes. “Even now, Fuyutsuki-senpai's the only one I can ever see in the role of Ulrich, you know? It'd feel weird if I ever had to do that one with anyone else.”

—Kyosuke Ayana. Twenty-six. He'd become an opera singer when he was seventeen, hailed as a young prodigy in the field. He was known for his high voice, unusual for a male singer, which allowed him to play roles of either gender convincingly. However, it seemed he also possessed quite the talent for survival. That was the second thing I said during the conversation, once we'd all been presented with a drink. “How did you manage all of this?”

“Oh, my house?” Kyosuke said, looking around at it all to punctuate it. “Ah, see, my older sister's a huge survivalist. Taught me a lot. I just put what she taught me to good use.”

There was a pause before Richter asked, “And she—?”

Kyosuke shook his head. “Protected me when they came from the sky.” There was a moment's silence. “So, hey. What's with that thing on your arm?” We were all confused for a moment before Kyosuke clarified by pointing at Richter's Gauntlet. “That one.”

Mio blinked a few times before saying, “Sometimes I forget he can take it off.”

“Ah, this? It's my Gauntlet. I work in manipulation of infophysics through using the Universal Hacking Interface—I could show you if you wanted,” Richter said.

“Infophysics, huh?” Kyosuke said, cradling his chin again. “...Sorry to impose, but you guys mind coming downstairs with me? If you're a programmer, I could use an expert opinion.”

The basement of Kyosuke's residence was wholly unlike his living space—where he'd managed to live a largely self-sufficient, off-the-grid lifestyle above, downstairs was a mess of cords and computer screens humming with life. Three terminals sat in the front of this fluorescent-lit, white-tiled room, behind which, in a thorny tangle of cords, lay two pods—glass covers showed inside to empty spaces roughly large enough to hold a human being.

I was just surprised, but Richter was stunned. “What on Earth is this?”

“My sister and I lived in Kanagawa,” Kyosuke explained, taking careful steps deeper into the room and urging Richter to follow, “and this was sort of her secret lab. Nagisa always...” He sighed, put his hands on his waist, and turned his head. “You promise you won't think I'm crazy?”

“Sir?” Richter said, and Kyosuke raised an eyebrow. “With all due respect, in the past six months, I have seen zombies, ghosts, a factory that produces mechanical dragons through combustion energy, aliens, and at least two gynoids.”

“Right, okay, great,” Kyosuke said with another clap before turning around. “So, Nagisa always had this sorta... see, she was really incredible. It felt like she could pick up skills so fast—like, she always covered a lot of the left half of her face for personal reasons but she just wound up becoming really skilled with a bow and arrow anyway? But she actually *worked* as a therapist. She really wanted to help people. And when infophysics and all that started becoming public, she got this idea in her head that she worked on for years.”

Richter sat down at one of the terminals and began scanning the data on it. “Let me see... ah, I should tell you, much of this data isn't exactly the same style as the type I use. I don't know entirely how salient my analysis will be—I'm not truly an expert.”

“That's fine,” Kyosuke said. “I've been keeping it running and trying to figure out what I could, but I'm really only good with the hardware. Basically, the idea here is—”

That's when Richter sputtered aloud. “Oh! Oh, I-I see! I see the idea!” He stood up from the chair in front of the terminal. “This—it's not altogether dissimilar to the processes used by the Imperial Dragons, in fact!”

I started to attention at that point, and stepped over to see what Richter was reading. While the specifics were beyond me, using my eyes to read text wasn't the only way I could digest it. “This machine attempts to create a virtual environment through use of the human brainspace, then,” I said.

“Yeah, exactly,” Kyosuke said with a nod. “Nagisa thought that if she could use virtual reality technology to create a space in which emotional problems could be talked about and dealt with by using the mental framework of the subject and the therapist, she could do so much more in her line of work. Like, dealing with patients who can't speak from shock, or finding a way to represent issues that are too complicated to put into words.”

“Like a collective dream,” I said.

The more Richter read through the data, the more stunned his expression became. “Several of these equations and commands—I don't know entirely how they work. Ah, do you—?”

“She tried for years on it,” Kyosuke said, joining the huddle more directly. “A few times, she'd try one method to get something to work, and it wouldn't work... and later, months later, she'd try it and it just worked this time. She said it was like the rules were changing on her, but she didn't stop. And I know—I know a lot of it's sound, right?”

“Yes, doubtless,” Richter said with a fervent nod. “Much of this does work. I've... but to use YUUHI-language infophysical manipulation along with analog programming in such a manner, it's truly a marvel, but you see... well, I think I see the issue, actually. One, at least.” Richter turned his head to me. “Chisa. Do you have any insight?”

...It was, frankly, rather like asking a fortune-teller for advice on the subject. However, through my understanding of the flow of information, I did have an idea. “I would say this system is incapable, by itself, of having a framework of what sort of output it's meant to have.”

“Exactly my thought,” Richter said with a furrowed brow, steeping his fingers onto the desk. “Would I be incorrect in assuming that many of your sister's tests were performed using herself as the subject?”

“No, that was pretty much it,” Kyosuke said. “I helped sometimes, but even if we were both in there, nothing worked.”

“I *believe* that in order to be operable, what your system needs is a base framework for how to interpret the mental input into an environment into which cognition can be placed,” Richter said. “However, I... don't believe such a thing is currently possible simply through technology. You would need to have an initial subject who... could...”

The room went quiet, save for the hum of the electricity, as Richter lowered his hands and his eyes widened. Then—“Can I give it a try?”

All three of us turned our heads to look at Mio, chiming in from by the stairwell. “Not that I really wanna interrupt or anything, but if you want a subject—”

“That's *perfect!*” Richter said, standing up. Beaming, he turned to Kyosuke, who looked a bit befuddled at the sudden outburst. “Mr. Ayana, I believe Mio might be just the initial subject you need. Do you know enough to handle basic operations if I assist?”

“Oh, sure,” Kyosuke said, blinking in bewilderment. When he realized what was happening, though, a wide, toothy grin came over his face. “Yeah, of course I can! Thanks a bunch!”

And so it was that Mio put herself inside the left pod. I stared blankly at the goings-on as Richter let loose a ramble of technical jargon at Kyosuke, who seemed to catch enough of it to give a thumbs-up at the terminal on the left—the one connected to Mio's pod. “Neural scanners online,” Richter said, “ready to go in three... two... one!”

A loud whirring came from the equipment lining the room as the machine roared to life, and I saw Mio pass out for a moment inside the pod. Lights along the side of the pod lit up, and reams of data began to scroll across the left terminal. Kyosuke stood up and took a few paces back, his eyes wide in disbelief. “That's—whoa! It just—it just keeps going! What's with her brain?”

“I'm not wholly sure,” Richter said, “but I have theories. Is this output close to what your sister expected a successful—?”

“Yes! Yes, yes! Just like this!” Kyosuke said, pumping his fists in glee. “Okay, then—”

The sound of the machine ceasing its work cut Kyosuke off, as the pod opened and Mio started back awake. Richter and Kyosuke both blinked. “Okay, should work,” Mio said, “but it is gonna need two people at this point.”

Richter's jaw dropped, just slightly. “You had such a clear picture of the framework that it finished *that quickly*?”

“Course,” Mio said, resting on her elbows to stand up out of the pod. “As soon as you told me what it was supposed to do, I already knew what it was.”

Let me tell you something about how this looked from my perspective. The central computer tower between the two pods, the machine meant to actually create this framework, was suddenly no longer just an *object*. In the moment Mio was used as a subject, it entered a state of superposition, having a place within...

Ugh. How do I explain Grateful Seventh? I have a degree in literature, not infophysics. Let's see, uh...

Consider the state of a black hole. Information regarding the space absorbed by a black hole can be understood through the parameters of its surface area—a flat plane that radiates, albeit quite slowly. The “event horizon” is that flat plane, a sort of wall around the hole from which objects (though not information) cannot exit once they have entered. Because of the density of the black hole, we as humans cannot witness the interior of the black hole, but nevertheless we can scientifically determine its properties.

Grateful Seventh—the realm in which I, as VFD, originate—is something akin to that event horizon. When unobserved, it is essentially a flat plane, but it is a flat plane in which a vast, untold amount of information is stored. A 'concept' here is defined as information entered into this database that serves as a sort of blueprint from which a physical object can then be read and constructed—this is the principle behind the reconstitution of Dragons, such as Niara's eventual revival after his first attack on Earth. Only a properly sentient consciousness can define Grateful Seventh enough to actually travel within it, and that definition will be both fundamentally temporary and based around that consciousness's experiences and memories.

All beings that possess the capacity to create and digest information have some manner of concept within the grand database that is Grateful Seventh, but the Dragons are its primary race—the informational beings that call it home. My unusual existence was such that I was at least somewhat beholden to my own concept within Grateful Seventh even while in a physical form—I exist in a sort of superposition where I simultaneously command space within the physical realm and the informational realm. Conflict between these two aspects of my existence were how I was able to live as a human without having full understanding of my draconic aspects.

However, what's important to understand the change that Nagisa Ayana's system went through

is the definition. Obviously, making a physical excursion into a realm of information is difficult, to say the least. On the other hand, if you were to have the ability to impose a sort of 'bubble' of information from your own consciousness—

Oh, wait! This already came up! I talked about Koron's 'Reality Marble', right? That thing she does where she superimposes a zone of her own internal logic onto the physical world? That's not dissimilar to what the Imperial Dragons, or the True Dragons, do to create their domains. The gravitational well that created the Ikebukuro Railcage, for instance, or the eternal night in Yotsuya, those are all parts of the 'concepts' of those dragons.

The process I'm describing here is that, but in reverse. Rather than imposing information onto form, you construct form for information. The computer tower had gained the connection to the grander informational field that formed Grateful Seventh in such a way that it was capable of taking its input and creating an input of a physical space with its own rules and properties within a realm of pure information. Since Grateful Seventh doesn't have an actual 'presence' within the physical realm, the consciousness doesn't have to 'move' to enter it—thus, virtual reality can be created simply through having a connection to this cosmic database, which the system obtained through connecting to someone who was capable of this sort of infophysical exchange.

...Oh, god. I wish Richter were here. He could explain this just fine, I'm sure. He probably would've at the time if he actually understood the intricacies of how this all worked.

The point was, I was downright flabbergasted. My own jaw had dropped as I stared at the central system, and I turned my head to look at Mio and spit out a, “What... what did you just *do*?”

“Aw, c'mon,” Mio said with a wink. “You should know, right? A therapeutic VR environment made from human consciousness? I mean, there was only one thing I could think of.”

I blinked. To be frank, I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. If it had been a month ago or so, I would've known immediately, but thinking about *enjoyable media* was so far from my brain at that point that it was like she was speaking Afrikaans. “What?”

Mio sighed, shrugged, and shook her head before walking over to the terminals where Richter and Kyosuke were digesting the data. “So, the system isn't gonna work with just one person. You're gonna need at least two, and it's probably better to test it with just two right now so you can make sure it works. I feel like it'll probably work eventually for like a bigger group, or an actual collective brainspace or something, but—well, you know.”

“Sure, that's fine,” Kyosuke said. He was back to smiling, laughing a little under his breath. “Okay, so how does it work right now?”

“Basically, one person will enter a layer of someone else's brain. On the first layer it's basically the conscious mind, but from there it'll be sort of personified aspects of the personality in fantasy scenarios the person going in can work through with them. Lots of metaphor, you dig?” Mio said, and she had this big grin on her face like she was excited beyond belief.

“So it's like a game,” Kyosuke said, nodding his head. “It almost sounds more suited to couples than a professional therapist!”

“Hey, figuring out how to wrangle it into being publicly viable is *your* job,” Mio said with a wink.

“It's not like I'm a technician, y'know,” Kyosuke said with a shrug.

“I do know one,” Richter said. “A specialist in analog programming, I mean. Perhaps if... Ah, well, I don't know that she would be up to that, but... well...”

—To make a long story short, for the time being, a test needed to be done to ensure the continued viability; since Richter and Kyosuke needed to monitor the system, and Mio was the only one who innately understood how to work within this system as an operator, I was forced to become the subject of the initial test.

“This isn't a good idea,” I said, though I didn't have the force to fight back as Mio took my hand and put me into the pod. “Why are you doing this?”

“What? Worst comes to worst, you're still conscious and we can work in the Binary Field or something,” Mio said. She had a look in her eyes like she wasn't taking no for an answer—it was a look she only got for me when she was doing something she thought was in my best interest, in my experience.

“No, Mio... Using my mind as the input for this might have unforeseen consequences,” I said, still finding myself unable to physically fight back. “What if we accidentally cause some manner of—”

“We won't,” Mio said, closing the lid over me. “Do you trust me?”

...One thing I knew very well from experience was that underestimating humanity, especially those humans close to me, was folly. No matter how much my own understanding of these matters told me not to do this, I couldn't deny that these people had a way of defying expectations... and none moreso than the girl in front of me.

“I... do,” I said, closing my eyes so I didn't have to look at her. I didn't trust myself, was the truth of it, but she wouldn't hear anything of that. I supposed Mio's belief in me was stronger than my doubt.

I still didn't know entirely what she was talking about, but it wouldn't be long before I found out. As the system began its work, I fell into a deep sleep, and began to dream.

The first thing I saw when I landed was a rock floor. I didn't exactly make a classy landing. I didn't think I'd be making a landing at all, to be honest—I sort of expected I'd just be in there, but maybe the targeting was a bit off or something.

I stood up and dusted myself off, and looked around me. This place here was a rock formation, with a cobbled stone floor and a bunch of pillars lining it. You know Stonehenge, in England? It's kinda like that—and it's also called Stonehenge, too.

In this particular Stonehenge, there were a bunch of braziers giving light to a dark environment, so I was able to reach down and touch the center of the ring of stones—there was this mechanical piece in it that looked like it connected into the rocks through wires, but its surface was made out of a smooth metal that was cold to the touch.

When I felt it, I started laughing to myself. “No way,” I said. “No way! It's actually Stonehenge!”

I stood up and I laughed harder into the darkness. “No way! Oh my gosh, I'm actually inside a Cosmosphere! This is really real! Or, well I guess it's virtual, but.”

Then I clapped and spun around, puffing out my cheeks. The darkness was pretty thick around Stonehenge, but I poked into it to find it was sort of like a bubble. My finger went through the darkness, and on the outside—

“G-gah!” I recoiled, and held my finger in the palm of my other hand, clutching it tight. It was *cold* out there. I mean, it was freaking freezing. I think literally freezing, actually. I had my shawl on, sure, but I wasn't really dressed for temperatures that low.

It took me a second to pump myself up, but I muttered to myself, “Shut up. Shut up. If I wanna understand her, I've gotta—”

What? Yeah, I talk to myself when I'm alone. Do you not? Oh, well, I guess you might not. See, that's why I have Otacon, my guitar case. If I act like I'm talking to Otacon, it helps me externalize my thoughts. I always have to have something along in case I'm alone. If I get left alone with my thoughts, sometimes things get messy.

As I was saying, “If I wanna understand her, I've gotta get out there. I can't help her if I don't go out there.” The braziers were stuck to the ground, and obviously my smartphone wasn't gonna turn on inside of a virtual reality, so I took a deep breath, then stepped outside of the bubble.

It was like...nothing I'd ever seen, honestly. Sometimes I still don't know if I can fully describe it. It's like... even though I could see in front of me alright, and make out some of the distance, there was this oppressive darkness all around that seemed like it was going to come in and choke me at any time. And the cold was horrible. There wasn't any wind or snow, just *ice* as far as the eye could see, this still, stagnant chill.

There was an edge to the landscape far in the distance, and Stonehenge was kept in this bubble on top of a slight hill with a path down. Right smack dab in the middle of the landscape, there was... it was almost like a bridge, like this huge, technicolor disc was bending off of the landscape up into the

sky. There were lines of hard light running between them, sparkling like nebulas in the sky, but at a certain point they just... stopped. If I squinted really, really hard, I felt like I could see something way out in the darkness past that, but I couldn't make anything out exactly.

I started stepping down the hill. The layer of ice over the ground was so thick I couldn't make out much detail of what exactly it was that was frozen over, but the steps constructed from the ice weren't slippery, luckily for me. The hill wasn't too tall, and when I passed down the stairs—

“The end has come.”

“Huh?” I blinked, looking around. There wasn't anyone around at first glance, though the bottom of the hill looked like it was designed for *someone* to meet me. It took a bit for me to notice an unusual object near a frozen-over torch—a pitch-black, frostbitten suit of armor without a head, sitting forlornly under the torch.

“The end has come,” said the voice within the armor. “Surely it's obvious if you look around. No life remains in this wasteland.”

I had to crouch down in front of the suit of armor, but when I did, I gasped, and stood back up to jump back in shock. “Wait a minute. You're—you're *Yorick!*”

The Edelweiss family's loyal servant, a headless suit of pitch-black armor animated by a spirit from ages past who remained a stalwart ally of the family's wayward young lady even after her departure from the family—that was Yorick. I was speaking to a character I'd made, in the... well, 'flesh' is kinda the wrong word.

“...It's been a long time since anyone called me by that name,” Yorick said. “It's been a long time since anyone spoke to me at all.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” I said, crouching back down to get on... 'eye' level. “But, still. It's really nice to see you! Even, uh, in the circumstances. It's good to see someone familiar.” Then I paused. “Wait. Do you know who *I* am?”

“In my current state, I can only hazard a guess or two,” Yorick said. “But that I am known in this dark hour is... heartening. I can no longer move, burdened by the ice as I have become, so your recognition is all the warmth I am offered.”

I started laughing, and said, “Oh my gosh, it really is you. You really do talk like that!”

“...What is your purpose in this land? Have you... come to reconstruct the Horizon?” Yorick asked. I gave—

Oh, wait. Right. So technically this is like, spoilers for... what, Chapter 72 of *KyuuKare*? Is that fine? ...Okay, so they call the spirit in the suit Yorick, and everyone sort of assumes Yorick is a guy, and she doesn't remember her human life so it's not like she thinks differently at all until she remembers it later.

Anyway, so I gave her a confused look, and the frozen, creaky gauntlet pointed over to that big technicolor disc. “The Horizon,” she said. “It was the bridge that connected the realm of humans to this

inhuman realm of oddities. But now it stands broken, shattered to pieces, this forsaken land left to wither, alone, amidst this bitter cold.”

“Ah,” I said, “I get it.” I stood up and nodded, trying to sound cool even though my teeth were chattering. “Yeah, I am. I wanna fix it. How do I fix it?”

“I... do not know,” Yorick said, “but I was granted an object key to your quest, I believe. Reach inside of my armor, if you would.”

Well, that was cold as heck, but I'm sure you know that. Once I got deep enough into it, though, I felt something warm, and lemme tell you, I grabbed onto it faster than anything. As I plucked it out, it felt like a bit of the chill around my body seemed to dissipate. It was—well, it looked kind of like a fancy flashlight. It was kind of a modern thing to yank out of a suit of armor, but it had a little switch to turn on and off the light, and the bottom of it was pleasantly warm.

“If you would save this world, I hope this is of use,” Yorick said. “Good... luck, fair maiden.”

Then—well, the suit froze over in a second, and Yorick was quiet. I nodded, and got to walking.

Once I got onto the ground, there wasn't a set path to follow, but having the flashlight to turn on and off at least let me start seeing details in the landscape. There were cracks in the ground like something had erupted out, that had been frozen over by the ice. I still took extra care on those cracks, though. I started walking over hills, nearly running into dead trees that stood as pillars of ice that I could only see with the flashlight...

I was wandering aimlessly for a while. I don't know how long. I was warmer with the flashlight, but I wasn't *warm*, and that darkness... it had a way of sort of seeping into the corners of my vision, making me doubt myself. When that started happening, I decided to head toward the Horizon, to see if I could find anything that way.

I nearly tripped over the thing I wound up finding—an edge of a pit, with stairs down, just below the Horizon's Edge. This world was deathly silent, but going down those stairs into that pit, I could swear I heard some kind of low, ominous growling. I went down, and down, and down, deep into this huge hollow under the Horizon. When I flashed the flashlight along the walls, I saw deep claw marks etched into the earth beneath the ice all over the place. And then, at the bottom—

It was the largest door I'd ever seen in my life. A colossal slab of rock slotted into this enormous frame, with chains and ropes and binding locking it so thoroughly nothing could escape. In particular, the door was bound by *shimenawa*—length after length of the stuff binding the door like it was the ground for some kind of ritual.

...It reminded me of Aunt Natsume's Tokyo Tower a little, honestly.

Even though this door was so large, there was a much smaller cutout in it right near to the ground, locked with a single keyhole. I reached out to touch the keyhole, to feel the freezing metal under my fingers, and then there was this *shaking* in my vision—

I got blown back, landing butt-first on the ground. I knew what that sensation was. I was still here, but Chisa's subconscious mind had just tried to forcibly eject me—to keep me from going inside.

She didn't want me to see what was in that door.

“...You know... you know I love you, don't you?” I said, craning my head up to look at the whole door. “You know I'll love you no matter what. I swear.” The door didn't budge, of course. So I took a deep breath in through my nose, and said, “Fine. Then I'll get some help.”

See, in a Cosmosphere, there's almost always something called a Mind Guardian. It's this one specific entity that's part of the psyche, but is manifest in a Cosmosphere to protect it. Like, a sentimental item from when you were a kid, that gets its own personality... or something like that.

I guess I didn't know Chisa's Mind Guardian would help me, but I had to believe they would, and I had a decent guess where I'd find them. So I got started climbing up the stairs, going up, up, up. I ran out of breath a few times and had to stop to rest—which kinda sucked, considering I was in a virtual world, but the mind makes it real, I guess. But, still—

“Left at the ever-dead tree,” I muttered to myself. “Walk thirty paces, then follow the fluttering of the bats. You'll come to a river, but do not cross it. Instead, take a right to find a bridge. Cross that bridge, then venture into the fog. Say, 'I am friend to Leon Nivale' within the fog—declare it to the sky, with all your heart.”

When I found the frozen tree, I took a left. I walked thirty paces, and then, from a small cave to the side—the shrieking, the calls of the bats. Their wings fluttered.

“...come to a river, but do not cross it. Instead, take a right to find a bridge,” I was still muttering. The river was still flowing, so fast that it didn't have time to freeze. I took a right to the bridge, and crossed it to the other side of the frozen landscape. Slowly but surely, as I continued to walk along, a thick fog came in from the river and enveloped me.

“I am friend to Leon Nivale!” I shouted to the sky. I really belted it—I mean, my throat hurt a little afterward. And, sure enough, as I continued to walk along, the fog parted, and along a winding road paved into the ice, I saw it—an old, decrepit mansion within the dead trees, which had managed to avoid being frozen over. Naturally, I knew this was because it was enchanted. Looking at all the spooky gravestones and the stained glass on the front was enough to give it *that* vibe, right?

It was constructed back in the 1600s by the family's forefathers, really gothic, spooky place. See, the family had always been in this sort of dispute slash war with this other family over the actions of—

Look, it's a long story. The point was, I walked up and grabbed the knob on the ostentatious double doors, then pushed inward. The mansion's inside had seen better days, with the foyer's stairs upwards being blocked by rubble, doors inward covered by more cobwebs than they usually were...

Then I looked in the middle of the room to see the coffin I'd been looking for. I stepped through the doorframe properly and let go of the knob, then said, “Hey, can I see the lady of the house for a second?”

Right as I said that, the doors swung shut behind me, and like clapping on a light, the rubble started to clear itself, and lights that were halfway between will-o-wisps and colored spotlights, placed at strategic points on the structural pillars of the room, began to switch on. They all started pointing

their differently-colored lights to a space above the coffin, all forming together into by far the brightest thing I'd seen the whole time I'd been here. The coffin's lid shook, and then—

“*Who dares call upon the queen of the night so brazenly?!?*” With a small explosion, the coffin's lid blasted into the wall, as the coffin's occupant flipped into the air to strike a dramatic, dynamic pose in midair that looked really, really good when it was a manga panel.

She was blonde, natch, with a sorta spread, pointy bangs, and her pale skin and long, red nails lent her a sort of femme fatale vibe she personally really enjoyed going for. The bright red eyes and fangs'd tell you right off what sort of oddity she was, but Raquel Edelweiss was—at least in this point in her character arc—a real vampire's vampire. At this point, the design had her in this off-the-shoulder black-and-red dress with a skirt a lot longer in the back than it was in the front. The outer layer was black with a diamond-pattern sewn in, and the outer bodice and interior of the sleeves and skirt were crimson—and she'd also picked up this cyan *obi* from somewhere that she tied on the waist for a bit of color.

When she floated down from her pose, she did so using her signature parasol—black with a red underside, and white spokes on the rims to make it look like the maw of some beast. (A bunch of background vocals started clapping and going 'Hey! Hey! Hey!' along to some beat I couldn't hear.) She was about the same height as me, but she was wearing these crimson heels, which went well with her spiderweb-pattern stockings—

What? I'm allowed to talk about the character design. I like the character design. Sure, this specific outfit wasn't me, but the base of the character design was mine back when I did some concept art myself.

Anyway, Raquel Edelweiss, protagonist of my manga, landed at the foot of her coffin in front of me, and then, with her parasol in one hand, she pointed a finger at me with a cocked eyebrow and a loud shout of, “You've got a lot of nerve, you know that?!”

“What for?” I asked.

Raquel scoffed at me, leaning back onto the rim of her coffin with an exaggerated slump that looked like something out of a crime drama (which, by the way, she's a big fan of.) “What for', she asks me. You're the one who roped Chisa in here in the first place, and now you're here asking for me?”

“I mean, yeah,” I said with a shrug. “It's kinda your job to show up at the front to greet me, at least. There's not even a sun for you to get burnt by.”

With an even louder scoff, Raquel un-slumped, and started pacing around her coffin, grumbling something or another. Then she actually spoke back to me. “Well, maybe if you'd given her more time to prepare for what you were roping her into, I would've had more time to get there instead of being thrust in unawares!” By the time she finished, she was where she'd started, and took a step forward toward me, leaning forward with her arms crossed.

That was actually a good point, so I didn't have a witty retort. “Well, uh,” I started mumbling, “you know, I... I didn't think she'd agree if I told her *exactly* what I was doing...”

“Well!” Raquel huffed, standing straight with her arms still crossed. “Be that as it may, it's still

awfully presumptuous of you to do this in the first place.” She brought up one thumb to gnaw on it, and turned her head to the side. “To think I'd call such a woman one of my mothers. A presumptuous woman who believes she knows best—were your actions not born from genuine concern, and were you not specifically yourself, Mio Akaneno, be aware I would crush you underfoot!”

“Look, I just want to fix the Horizon, okay?” I said, with my head slumped. “I need your help, please. Chisa won't let me into the hollow under it and I feel like I need to see inside there.”

All of a sudden, Raquel was hardly a centimeter away from me, staring me right in the eyes. “And are you prepared for such an action? Do you seriously believe yourself capable of righting a wrong such as this?”

“I...”

Tears started coming to my eyes, and I started balling my fists and biting my lip to try and hold them back. I wanted to yell, well, no, obviously, but if I don't try, who else is ever going to have the chance? That yeah, I was a stupid girl who couldn't do anything right, who'd ruined everything by existing, and that I owed it to the girl I loved to try to make amends for the horrible, horrible things I did to her.

But then I bottled it up. I steadied my breathing and I just stuffed all those feelings inside a little box, and I shoved it with all the other little boxes, inside a little mental closet that had boxes decades old inside it. I shut the door and then the boxes were gone, in a place they couldn't touch me. It was fine. I was fine. I was okay. I wasn't crying. Crying wasn't going to help anyone. It was just going to make things worse.

...Raquel could probably tell that I was on the verge of tears, though, because she started stammering and waving her hands around. “Oh. Oh, gosh, I-I didn't mean it like that. It's not like I wanted you to cry, come on!”

“I'm *not* crying,” I said, loudly sniffing to get everything back inside my head. “I really don't know. I have no idea. I don't know if I can. But if I just sit there and wait, nothing's going to change. I don't want to just sit and wait and hope she'll get better. I've done *enough* of that.”

“Well, fair enough,” Raquel said with a shrug. She jumped into the air and then compressed about seventy percent into a much smaller, cuter form more befitting of a Mind Guardian (she sprouted little bat wings, too.) “If you're that sure. I'd like it if she got better, too.”

“Right!” With a wink and a spin, I pumped my fists. “Let's get out there.”

With someone else by my side, it was a lot less tiring to make the walk back to the hollow below the Horizon. Raquel spent a fair amount of time complaining about the cold, but I kind of expected that—I knew better than anyone that she was a bit prissy about that kind of thing. The walk still took a while, but just having one person by your side does a lot to make it feel less lonely, you know?

Down, down, down we went again, until we reached the colossal door and the lock. “I can unlock this, but you're still responsible for any rejection you may face,” Raquel said, floating over and casually producing a key to unlock it from nowhere. The padlock clattered and fell to the ground.

“You're aware of that, right?”

“Of course I do,” I said, putting my hand forward to push it open. Sure enough, I felt that reaction come again, but I gritted my teeth and just pushed forward—

and then I was on my face in the room beyond. “Oh, wow, you made it,” Raquel said. “Nice job.”

There was a cold mist in the air in there, coming up from the ground—the ice was thinner than anywhere else. The hollow beneath the Horizon was pretty darn big, but a lot of it was empty—just a lot of spacious cavern until you looked up.

When you looked up, though, there was an icicle, a huge one, hanging from the ceiling. I mean, it was *enormous*—and when I flashed my flashlight up at it, I could see there was something inside, this big, black thing curled up on itself. When I looked at it, I felt this sort of pressure enter the room, and I could swear that growling got louder.

I took a deep breath in, and walked closer, to right under the icicle. When I pointed my flashlight there, a little stand appeared before me, three-pointed and with a holding catch just large enough for my flashlight. So, I put it in, light up, and just like that, I started feeling droplets of water come down from above me.

“You may want to—”

Before Raquel could finish, I dived out of the way as the icicle *burst* above me, sending a combination of heavy water and sharp shards of ice right where I'd been standing. I landed on the ground and slid a bit on the now-slick ice, and then I only had time to look up at where the icicle was and register that whatever was inside wasn't anymore before—

well, there was a claw around my neck.

The first thing I saw were its eyes. I'd seen those eyes before—once when I was younger, and once just a few weeks before. I recognized that mess of pitch-black hair, with one red swoop, falling over its face, leaving only the eyes visible. The color of the skin of the claw around my neck barely resembled a human's, being stretched so thin and pallid. The thing holding me was covered in a raggedy grey cloak, so I could see its feet, similarly stretched and clawed to its hands.

It was her. VFD, the 7th True Dragon, was gripping me tightly. Not so tightly I couldn't breathe, but tight enough that it hurt, that I couldn't escape. She had me pinned to the ground like she'd had her last prey, but her beady eyes were scanning me over, rather than immediately going for the kill.

Why... you?

She hadn't really 'spoken', but I understand that that was what the growling in the cavern meant, all of a sudden.

What... are you here for?

“You,” I gasped out. “I'm here... for you.” That got a tightening of the grip.

That's a lie.

“No... no, it's not...!”

You're looking for something that no longer exists. You are not here for me.

“Why won't... you listen to me?!” I'd started squirming, trying to pry her grip off. “If you don't... if you don't listen, I can't prove you wrong!”

You're looking for that boy.

She'd gotten in closer, and I could start to feel bits of her breath through the hair covering her mouth as she stared down at me.

I know you. You're just looking for that boy. You aren't here for me.

“What... what do I have to say to prove you wrong?!” I choked out.

Why... are you trying to escape from me?

If the room could get colder, it did at that moment. The pressure in the room shifted. Instead of an assault, it was a genuine question.

'Speaking'. 'Listening'. What... do those words mean to you? I don't need to hear your words to know how you feel. You're afraid of me.

I stopped moving. “I...”

You've always been afraid of me. You want that boy back because you weren't afraid of him.

“I didn't want to hurt you—!”

Just an excuse. You're afraid of me. You're afraid of having to love me differently than that boy.

“What the hell does that even mean?!”

You fear that if you say the wrong thing, I'll break. So you don't say the wrong thing. You don't say anything. Not really.

I didn't... say anything. I couldn't. She let go of me, and stood up into a tired slouch, both of her claws hanging limply by her side.

“It's not your fault.” “It's going to be okay.” Do you know how many times I've heard those words in my life as a human? Those cheap, worthless platitudes? You couldn't even begin to understand how I really feel. Not you. You don't want to.

“Of course *I want to!*” Something about that got me going, and I stood up, and before I even realized I'd done it, I'd... slapped VFD across the face. She just stood there and took it, quietly. I

gaspd, and said, "I'm. I'm, I'm sorry, I—"

You... hit me?

"I'm really sorry! I didn't... I didn't mean to, I—"

...you really... do want to? Enough to get angry enough to hit me?

"Of course I do, god damn it!" I roared again. My shock at hitting her had evaporated with another flare-up of my temper. "What the hell makes you think I don't want to?! Of course I want to! I want to—I want—What I want—!"

Then I slumped onto my knees, and I pounded the ground, sniffing to keep the tears in my head. "It makes me so furious that I can't. That I'm... That I'm..."

Worthless. A piece of human garbage. Everyone would've been better off if I'd never been born. I can't even make one person's life better. And yet—And yet I get that sick satisfaction out of getting relied on. Out of people valuing me, like I'm a narcissist. Like I'm my mother.

But those words didn't come out of my mouth. The words about how sick it made me feel that I couldn't say anything real to my own girlfriend. That all I had were these platitudes because it was so hard for me to find the right thing to say. That I didn't know what the right thing to say was.

That she was probably right. That I was just using Chisa for my own satisfaction. That I didn't love her. That I didn't love anyone but myself, just like my mother. That I was a monster. That I should just die. That I should... finish the job I started when I was fourteen—

I vomited.

It came suddenly and without warning. I was in a virtual world, so I shouldn't have even been able to vomit, but I vomited up a burning hot sludge of stomach acid and bile. My whole body shook, with this awful, clammy feeling all over me. My skin felt flushed and sore, while my throat burned. I coughed a few times.

Mio!

No. No, this wasn't right. Why was I doing this? Why wasn't I being a good girl, the good girlfriend I needed to be? She needed me, didn't she? Did she need me? Did she need me because of the ways I hurt her into needing me, or was I just deluding myself? She didn't need to see these gross feelings, did she?

...If... maybe if I'd taken the time to unpack a few of those feelings at the time, I'd have figured out answers to those questions. But at the time, concern took over VFD's face, and she came in to hold me in her arms.

You're... sick.

"I'm *fine*," I coughed. "I'm fine. I'm always fine. I'm not sick. I just. I just."

...Did I... do this to you?

“No! No, you didn’t—no, it’s, it wasn’t, I swear it wasn’t you—!”

The sudden attack left me exhausted, and all I could do, really, was slump over in her arms. I wasn’t sure how to read her feelings, but she picked me up, and started walking out of the hollow. I felt... vulnerable in her arms, knowing she had the strength to crush me, but it was also kind of comforting.

“Where are we... going?”

...It's... 'Stonehenge'. Isn't it?

“Wha? There?” I sputtered as best I could. “But... but what have I done? I haven’t done anything to cause a Paradigm Shift, have I? I—”

Quit struggling. You're sick.

“I’m *not sick*. I’m *fine*. I’m perfectly healthy!” I protested.

Then why aren't you trying to leave my arms?

It took her mentioning it for me to realize I wasn’t struggling anymore, and I thought for a second about the answer. “It’s... nice, having you holding me like this. The conscious you can’t, so...”

You... think it's nice?

“Yeah. It’s the arms of the girl I love. Why wouldn’t I? They’re the best arms in the world, claws and all,” I said. I couldn’t help but smile a bit, even as I tried to wipe off the sweat on my brow.

Then—

It was croaky, raspy, but I heard something. “...Mi...o.”

After a second, I realized what it was. She’d actually used her mouth to speak, instead of just having me intuit the words from the atmosphere or whatever. I smiled. “Yeah. Mio. That’s me.”

“Mi...o.”

“And you, you’re...” I paused. “I know you’re not Raven, and I don’t think you’re Chisa either. I’ll still call the conscious you that until you come up with something, but... I know you’re someone else. And VFD is kinda...” She nodded, so she got it. “Hm. Would just ‘Vee’ be fine?”

She—or rather, Vee—nodded. I figured the noise she made was probably happy.

When we reached the foot of the hill at Stonehenge, I got out of her arms, then turned to Vee to smile at her. “Sorry I... you know. The truth is, I’m... kinda bad at expressing my feelings. Always have been.”

Really?

Her eyes were always beady, but... well, they looked surprised, you'll have to trust me on that. "Yeah. I'm... kind of a mess." I gestured for her to walk up the steps with me. "I've always kind of... had a lot going on. Ever since I was a kid. So even though the feelings I do say are true, they're not the... whole truth. Does that make sense?"

It took her a second, but Vee nodded.

You're... complicated. I've always known that.

"You have?"

Yes. But you've never seemed like you wanted me to ask.

"Could've fooled me," I said with a laugh. "But... well, it's not just you that's conscious, I suppose, so... I know it's more complicated than that. Thank you, Vee. I want to talk to you more."

You... really aren't afraid of me?

"I know you'd never hurt me. I know you're... you might be a beast, but you aren't a monster. Does that make sense?" I asked, tilting my head. Vee shook her head. "I'll figure out some other way to say it soon."

When progressing through the layers of a Cosmosphere causes some shift in the personality of its owner, even a minor one, you complete the layer with what's called a Paradigm Shift. Both the Diver and the owner head to Stonehenge together. It's like... a sort of permission to go deeper. Normally it's visible, this big pillar of light, but with Stonehenge blocked off by the darkness you could only see it from up close.

"...So what happened here?" I asked, as we entered Stonehenge proper. "Is... this even your layer of the Cosmosphere?" Vee shook her head.

It's not... supposed to be like this. The one who was here isn't, anymore.

I nodded. "That doesn't surprise me, really... Not with what happened. I guess we can try and find out together, though, right?" She nodded, and I was struck with the inexplicable urge to reach over and pet her head a bit. So I did. She briefly flinched, but once I did it for a second, ruffling the slick surface of her hair, her eyes lit up, and she leaned into it. I felt like if she had a dog's tail, it would've been wagging a bunch. "Aww. You're adorable!"

That got Vee to look away a little awkwardly, but she didn't stop letting me pet her. It was kinda fulfilling, just having this moment.

We set up a relay point at Den-en-Chofu that was pretty close to Kyosuke's place with the promise that I'd be back again soon, and headed on home. I won't bore you with the details of us reporting in to Kirino or anything, but later that evening, Chisa and I were sitting on the roof when she suddenly spoke up.

“So... seriously? A *Dive*?” she asked, giving me a cocked eyebrow. “You entered my *Cosmosphere*?”

“What? It's a romantic couples' thing to do, innit?” I gave her a wink back.

“Oh my god,” Chisa said, shaking her head while holding her forehead in between her index finger and her thumb. “I swear you're just the absolute most sometimes.”

“Ah, don't act like you don't like it,” I said, shooting her a toothy little grin. “You like me like this.”

“Sure, yeah,” Chisa said with a shrug and a little chuckle. “You're given the chance to mess around with some of the most impressive technology the world's ever seen and you use it for your own otaku whims.”

Oh, one last thing. The owner of the *Cosmosphere* isn't actually consciously aware of what happens in the *Cosmosphere*. So, she wasn't really aware of what I'd done in there, and what had... well, what had happened between me and Vee. Still...

“Oh, come on. Don't act like you're any better!” I said, playfully giving her a shove on the shoulder. “You'd do it too.”

“I would not!” Chisa protested, pushing me back. Then we both started laughing for a bit.

No matter how little time it lasted, I was happy that moments like these weren't gone from my life. They'd been... really thin on the ground for a long time. It made me wonder if I really did have some hope after all.