

Sometimes, when I had to deal with Homura, I'd think about my mom. I mean, she was my mom, obviously, but... You know what I mean, right? She wasn't the same person as the first one I'd known, not exactly. The first Homura wasn't the same. She didn't wear her hair in that bushy mess, she was ergonomic with things like her labcoat and her glasses... but people fawned over her just the same.

Even though she and Aunt Natsume were supposed to be friends, there was always this tension that I think Homura tried to ignore. It was really obvious when we were all together. "...and I'm just telling this guy, that if he just left it all to me I'd get it done. I'd get it done, right, Nacchan?"

"For better or worse," Aunt Natsume said. I was in the backseat for this conversation. Aunt Natsume was driving.

"I'd get it done! Because I'm Homura fucking Akaneno! It's my technology they're working with, so they should trust me instead of trying to shove me to the side and take my goddamn credit, right?!" Homura was drunk that day. These sorts of drunken car rides felt like they were half the times I saw my mother, as she spat at the window. "My goddamn credit. Mine."

"Is it truly your credit," Aunt Natsume said, "if they're doing things with your base that you didn't expect? This software of yours isn't proprietary, so I don't know what you expected—"

"Nobody's ever gonna fuckin' take credit for my work again," Homura spat at the window. "Hear me? Nobody! Ever!"

Of course, the rest of the time when I'd see her, she'd... well, she'd fawn over me like the Homura now does. She'd see some schoolwork I did and go all, "Oh, of course my daughter would do that." It wasn't new to me, that sort of love. It's not like I suddenly got blindsided by that. All I got blindsided by was my mom's midriff.

Sometimes I thought about that. About Homura swearing that nobody would ever take credit for her work again. I thought about that because the Homura now... she said that a lot more often. 'My' daughter. Or, 'daughters', as the case may be.

I imagine from the outside it seems like a pretty stupid thing to be sad about. I was well-off, my mother was famous, I pretty much had the freedom to do whatever I wanted... I bet a lot of people would've killed to be in my position. But...

...

From the moment I was born... I'm not sure I was a real person.

“...and here comes the train! Ahhh-chugga chugga chugga—!”

“Aww, c'mon, you goofball, you don't have to baby me like that. With company around?”

Of course, it wasn't like Koron was saying no. Sumie had taken to using Koron's current blindness as an excuse to play at babying her. It was, I supposed, something of a new relationship thing.

—Ordinarily, of course, Koron would've lit aflame in an instant at this sort of behavior, but suffice it to say remission for such a procedure was *odd*. Seeing it directly in person like this as we all shared dinner was just the most striking example of it.

Koron's remission process was more drastic than even the ever-present bandages over her eyes might imply. The way it had been described to me, the psychological stress of the process had knocked Koron's brain for a loop. As her brain slowly reconnected to its own abilities, much of her personality was left in a sort of dormant state.

...So, for the time being, we were all forced to experience something deeply bizarre—Koron, without the 'tsun'. Simply 'dere'.

“Sumie, please. I'm begging you,” Mio said with a little grimace. “You're being so cringe right now. She can't even appreciate the artistry in those octopus wieners!”

“Well, I've been trying to explore the texture with my mouth,” Koron said, as Sumie recoiled onto the ground at the horror of being called 'cringe'. “It's the least I can do for a personalized touch like that, right?”

“What if I wanna be cringe, huh?!” Sumie bounced back to shout. “Being cringe is my right! I'm graduating to normie-hood in an utter lack of style!”

It had been two months now since the end of the first war, and construction into residential wards for the citizens of City Hall was proceeding apace. Sumie and Koron had been given a place ASAP for Koron's recovery process, since it was largely psychological, and Sumie wasn't about to let Koron go alone.

Mio and I had commandeered a small place in Shibuya, by the way. Youka was nominally still staying in City Hall, but was doing most of her lodging either in her old apartment (which had remained startlingly well-preserved) or near us in Shibuya, and Richter...

I actually don't remember where Richter was staying at the time. I mean, Kirino wouldn't have been forward enough to invite him to stay together that early, right? You know how Richter is, he sort of popped up whenever he was needed. Do you remember, Mio? ...Right, yeah, I didn't think so.

“Trust me,” Youka said, leaning back in her seat, kicking her feet up on the table now that she was done eating, “you aren't gonna stop her. This whole honeymoon period is sickening.”

Youka was grimacing, but Koron said, “Then why do you sound so happy about it, Youka?”

Scoffing, Youka sat up properly, leaning in a bit closer and saying through gritted teeth, “Hey,

draw your own damn conclusions, kid.” She turned her head to Richter, who was still poking at his bento. “You okay? You're being awful quiet?”

“Huh?” Richter started. His beret jostled a little on his head. “Oh. Yes, of course. I'm alright. I just, ah...” He pursed his lips, and then trailed off. “Oh, argh. I'm going to need to find someone else for this. I'm simply too polite, I think?”

“Probably,” I said. “What's the issue?”

“Ah, well... You know, it's...” Richter opened and closed his mouth a few more times. “I'm not certain it's polite dinner table conversation?” Everyone present who had eyes fixed him with a blank stare. “...Yes, right, of course. What do you all suppose I should do if I need to tell someone that we've actually *found* a dead relative of theirs?”

That was actually a question that didn't come up all that often. Unsurprisingly, many more people had simply 'gone missing' than were confirmed dead. It was much rarer to actually find a corpse, and even rarer still an identifiable one. Dragons were ravenous creatures, after all.

I can tell you that whatever conclusion Richter came to—I recall that conversation ending without actually coming to one—it was likely delivered with more grace than what happened four days later. I was sitting, slumped over, in the living room of our home, when a loud knock-knock-knock came from the door. “Chisa? It's Rin. You in?”

On that day, I was not feeling very up to speaking with anyone, but Mio had had an unfortunately timed visit to our restroom, so I rubbed my hands over my face in an attempt to look less disgruntled at having to have contact with the outside world and slid over to the door. Based on the way Rin's eyes widened when she saw me, my attempt was unsuccessful. I wanted to say, “Couldn't you have emailed me?” but instead said, “Hello.”

“Sorry, did I come at a bad time?” Rin said, rubbing the back of her head with a grimace on her face. “It's not exactly good news. Are... are your eyes okay?”

I didn't say, “What news is good news these days?” Instead, I said, “What's wrong with my eyes? Are there bags or something?”

“No, it's...” Rin gestured at her own eyes, right at the pupil. Oh, I realized. Having it pointed out from an outside perspective was what made me realize that I must've been in a really horrible mood that day. Had something even happened before then? I'm actually not sure if there was any particular reason.

“Oh. No, that just happens sometimes,” I said. Considering I'd spent most of my time at City Hall in uniform, on my best behavior, seeing me so disheveled, and in sleepwear for that matter, was likely rather odd. “What is it?”

“So the fifth platoon were down in Sendagaya,” Rin said, “and in this one mansion lot, uh... Your last name is Inomiko, right? Written, uh...” She pulled up a piece of paper. 生野巫女. I nodded. “Right. We found your parents' bodies.”

I blinked a few times, attempting to process what I'd just heard. “What?”

“Yeah, your family's house is still kinda half-there, but we found about half of your dad. Think he died about a month and a half ago. Found a skeleton in the manor we're pretty sure is your mother, too. Figured you should know,” Rin said. I blinked a few more times. “I'm no good at this sort of thing, but... sorry for your loss.”

“You're fine,” I mumbled. Instead of saying anything further, I nodded, turned back around, and closed the door, eliciting a surprised noise from Rin. I slumped back to the couch, and returned to the exact same state I'd been in before she arrived.

Mio picked that moment to return to the living room, still in the process of putting her hair up into a ponytail. “Who was at the door?”

“Rin,” I said.

“Oh, huh. What about?” Mio asked, sitting next to me. She was much more shocked than I was, so she made up for me.

It was overcast on the day Mio and I went to visit the mass grave. The Inomiko family grave had been ruined beyond repair, so Yuuya and Ikuko Inomiko had been left with near-unmarked segments in a sea of memorials. At first, Mio had tried to stop me, saying it probably wouldn't do me any good, but...

Well, I had to. I had to see it, or it wouldn't feel real—and things feeling real was in short supply for me at that point. So, in this empty plot in Tokyo, we found the single grave where the remains of my parents were buried. It was built into the side of a hill, this mass grave, so it had been a bit of a walk, and we'd passed memorial after memorial, grave after grave, just the same as this one except for a small inscription on the graves themselves. 'Inomiko'.

When we were stood in front of the graves, it took me a few moments to react. At first, I just stood there, staring. I held an umbrella in one hand, in case it started to rain, but I let it droop to my side as I crouched down to stare closer at these plain little things. “Chisa...” Mio said, putting her hand on my shoulder.

“You know,” I said, “when Sumie found her aunt's grave in Yotsuya, she said she didn't feel sad.”

I was down on my knees now, unsure of how to move myself. This was it. This was the end of it. This was the end of all that had happened to me. They were dead, in this unmarked grave, and I was alive.

“I do,” I said, as Mio knelt down beside me. “I... do feel sad.”

The man and woman who had locked me in that hell for three months, who had treated me as less than human, torn me away from anything I'd ever managed to become, were gone. They were gone. They were nothing *but* gone. They were nothing. They had died like all the rest.

A heaving breath started ripping through my chest, but I tried to steady myself. “I feel miserable. I feel horrible.”

I didn't want to cry, because what I felt wasn't the sort of feeling one should cry for. It wasn't some deep sorrow at the loss of family, nothing so pure as that. It was more like...

“What was any of it worth? What was the point of it?” I said, slumping into Mio, unable to carry myself.

There wasn't any point. There never had been. This was all it amounted to—a small piece of a mass grave, almost laughable in its anonymity. The people who had hurt me would never, ever face true justice. I would never obtain any catharsis. This was it. It was over. It had ended, and I was still in pain, and they were just *dead*. They would have died the same way with or without me.

Did I... wish I could've hurt them? That I could've seen them die? That I could've killed them myself? No. No, I didn't. Despite myself, I didn't. Some part of me wanted to see them receive their comeuppance by... by the law. By something higher than me. Justification, I suppose.

“*Shit!*” I barked out, pounding my fists on the ground. “Shit! God damn it! You... you deserved

worse!” My teeth were gritted, and my breath was heavy with the moisture of blocked tears. Of course, was there really anything worse than being eaten alive by an alien monster? I wasn't sure there was, but it felt so easy.

...It feels like I'm running around this over and over, but even now I can't say that I'm fully over it. I don't know if I ever will be over the feelings this inspired in me. I'll just have to live with it, I suppose. That Yuuya and Ikuko Inomiko are dead, and I am alive.

I managed to compose myself enough to return to silently contemplating the graves with Mio for a while. I stood there for... ten, fifteen minutes, not saying a word, just thinking. But that was interrupted when I realized something—there was someone else present nearby. My head whipped around to see someone in a hood, who'd been hidden behind a taller grave, but was now trying to make their escape. “Who's there?”

“Hey, babe, don't bother people, we're all here for—” Mio didn't get to finish, because a gust of wind blew the figure's hood down for a moment, exposing their hair—a spiky mop of chestnut brown. And it was at that moment that I realized something—I recognized the way he ran. Getting a glance at his face, I knew he was a young boy, around eighteen, and with the hair and the way he ran, that full-bodied arm-pumping motion—

I gasped, and started running after him. “Wait! *Wait!*”

He'd gotten a bit taller than me, like I'd predicted all those years ago, but it turns out when you're a trained soldier, you still run faster than a civilian. “I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to disturb—!”

“*Taichi!*”

When I managed to catch up to him, I caught him in what could be described as both a hug and a tackle. I nearly barreled him over, which would've sent us both rolling down the hill, but we managed to steady ourselves after a bit of flailing, both of us squatting and catching our breath. “Sorry, I didn't—hah—realize how fast I was—”

“Oh man. Oh, that would've been really painful,” he said. “I—” That, I think, was the moment he realized I'd actually said his name. His eyes widened, and he stood up straight again. “...W-wha?”

There wasn't a doubt in my mind. It had been a long time since I'd seen him, but I'd recognize Taichi Inomiko anywhere. He honestly didn't look all that different—there was still a boyish charm about his face, that same texture to his hair, and even the same gap between his front teeth. But he was taller, now, and I could tell he hadn't stopped being the scrappy little boy I loved. It was obvious, even in the sort of storm clothes that hid his physique.

I stood up myself, and put my hands on his shoulders before pulling him in for another hug. He came in limply, and the tears that I'd been holding back before started coming out as I whimpered out, “Taichi. It's you. It's really you. You're alive. You're okay.”

There was a bit where I felt Taichi shifting, probably unsure of how to take this, but the first thing he said was, “This... isn't a joke, right? You... you know who I am?”

I squeezed him a bit tighter. “I do, I do, of course I do! I'd recognize you anywhere! You're my

little brother!”

After a moment's hesitation, he whispered out a little, “*Nee-san.*” Then, louder. “*Nee-san!*” And finally he wrapped his arms around me and started squeezing himself. “You're okay! You're okay!” I felt him start crying into the crook of my shoulder himself. “I knew, I knew you were alive, but I didn't know—! It's you! You're okay!”

All of a sudden, no matter how gray and gloomy the day was, in my mind it felt like there wasn't a cloud in the sky. “I missed you,” I said. “I missed you so much. Even when I couldn't—when I couldn't remember you, I knew there was—there was something missing. I—I'm so glad you're here, I missed you so much, I!”

“Don't you ever leave me like that again!” Taichi sobbed into my shoulder. “You're not allowed to leave again, okay?! You're okay, you're—you're okay, you're okay!”

Suffice it to say, we went around in circles like that for a while.

“...and you have no idea how proud I was,” Taichi said, when the two of us had managed to compose ourselves. We'd taken a seat on an unoccupied area of the hill, and Mio had procured us some drinks from somewhere or another. (She was remaining silent to allow the two of us our time, but she was smiling.) Taichi opened the tab of his soda, and there was a pleasant little *click* to accompany the beaming smile on his face. “My big sister, saving the world. Even if I couldn't see you, I just thought that was so amazing.”

“Well, it's not like I did it by myself,” I said with a little laugh. “I think the rest of my unit did more than I did, really. People just decided I was the leader and... that's that, I suppose.”

“Sure, but it was like... I mean, when I heard, it's like... everything was in ruins. The whole world, just done. But then, I heard that there were people saving it, and not just anyone, but my big sister, coming to the rescue. It made me feel like...” Taichi took a drink. “I know a lot of people who can't really process it, who don't know how to connect this world with what was before, but for me I already had it. My big sister was helping me, like she did when I was a kid.”

“*Me helping you?*” I laughed aloud. “Oh, come on. You're the one who helped me. I'm a pretty pathetic excuse for a big sister. I leave you alone for seven years—”

“Sometimes,” Taichi said, looking up at the sky, “I thought I really would never see you again. Mio kept in touch, sure, but there was part of me that thought you just weren't ever gonna recover at all. That you were just... gone. That the person I knew just... wasn't here anymore.” He turned his head to me. “You're here now.”

“Recover', huh...” I mumbled, and averted my eyes to stare off at another bunch of graves. “Don't think I've done much of that. I've just found new and exciting ways to be a train wreck of a human being.”

Taichi looked past me to Mio, and asked, “Is she serious?”

“It's been complicated,” Mio answered. “It's sorta... like, she seems worse on the outside but I think it's actually better for her internally?”

“Oh,” Taichi said. He nodded and took another drink. “So she's stopped being so high-strung and perfect all the time?”

“Basically,” Mio said. “Now we're dealing with a whole new host of issues. It's a really long story.”

“I've got time,” Taichi said.

Taichi and his housemate had managed to make their wrecked-out apartment pretty presentable. I thought it was commendable, the job they'd done, but of course I couldn't help but be proud of Taichi just for being an adult. They had electric lights running, and the sleeping area was clearly demarcated. "Touko?" Taichi called. "You here?"

There was a grinding sound of some sort from inside the restroom, to which Taichi let out a little sigh. "One moment! She's almost done!" a young lady's voice called out. Then—"Ah, yes, looking lovely. I can't complain." That was a little muttering.

As it turned out, she'd been sharpening a katana that hung at her waist. Taichi was rooming with a young lady who was vaguely familiar to me, but that I couldn't quite place. Long, straight, jet-black hair, slim but wiry, wearing the uniform of my old high school, though the blue arm-guard and bright red thigh-highs were... new.

"You sharpened that thing two days ago," Taichi said, running a hand through his hair and grunting. "Did you really need to—"

As Taichi stepped forward into the center of the room, Touko leaned in to point her finger at his face. "A Japanese woman's katana is her soul, young man! Do you want my soul to be dirty? Chipped? *Dull?*"

"Your soul is plenty sharp!" Taichi said. Then, he closed his eyes, and held up five fingers, counting down, four, three, two, one—

Touko let out a colossal gasp before rapidly closing the distance between her and me. "No way. No way! Is this legal now?! *The Chisa Inomiko*, in our apartment?!"

Mio scoffed. "What am I, chopped liver?"

"No offense, Ms. Akaneno," Touko said, quickly whipping her head around for the response, "but you've been coming around for years, and you're also not every young aspiring samurai lady's inspiration, the sort of thing that drives a girl like me to aspire to greatness!" She whipped her head back around to me, and grabbed my hand with both of hers, shaking it with an incredible bout of enthusiasm. "Touko Kujo, ma'am, I'm a huge fan!"

I couldn't deny feeling somewhat... uncomfortable, but I chose instead to focus on her surname. Kujo, Kujo... "Oh!" I said. "You're Tsubaki's little sister!"

"That I am, ma'am!" Touko released my arm, crossed hers, and grinned, something flashing across her teeth. "A prouder Kujo there's never been." And then she was back to grabbing me. "I've always thought you were so cool! I knew that if anyone was going to save the world, it'd probably be you!"

"My unit really..." I trailed off as I was dragged toward the dinner table, and forcibly sat down. "...um...er, how is Tsubaki? I haven't seen her in a long time."

Touko had ran off to the sink and put on an apron by the time I finished saying that, but when I did, the room suddenly went quiet. "She, um... didn't make it," Touko said.

“Oh,” I said. “I... I see.”

—It didn't take long for her to recover, though. Apparently, these two had become fast friends when Touko assisted Taichi in his plan to bust me out of... well, out of our parents' house. When Taichi had been removed from their custody, he would've gone into some manner of foster care had the Kujos not chimed in to say he could stick around for a while. 'A while' turned into 'several years', and as such, these two had been together and survived together during the First Dragon War. Touko's method of fending off monsters was obvious, but Taichi...

“What do you mean you're trained in *polearms*?!” I sputtered aloud. Mio laughed.

“It's not really a big deal,” Taichi said, blushing and looking away, “I just knew I needed to do something, I don't really have the patience for fishing with a rod, so I decided I'd take up spearfishing, and one thing led to another.”

“Martial training is in vogue!” Touko chimed in. “Plus he has a killer jump. Taichi's a bona-fide Dragoon!”

My jaw couldn't help but drop. “My little brother? A Dragoon?”

“It's *really* not a big deal, come on,” Taichi said, grinding his teeth and glowering at Touko. “Compared to what the people in Murakumo can do, I'm super basic. Come on.” Mio mouthed at me that he really wasn't.

A wave of emotion flooded over me, seeing my little brother, so much older, strong enough to have this sort of conversation. He was really so much stronger than I'd ever imagined. To have not only survived, but managed to find such a way to flourish—it almost brought a tear to my eye. I'd missed Taichi horribly. I loved my little brother.

And then—

My stomach lurched, and I slumped over on the table. I'd managed to ignore the elephant in the room until then, but that phrase made it come crashing back in. The wave I was riding on vanished, and I was falling. “Chisa, whoa, are you okay?!” Mio said.

I let out a few shuddering gasps, my forehead sweating profusely. An attempt to steady myself made me fall out of my chair, and I found myself on the ground, panting into the floor. “I shouldn't be here,” I mumbled. “I shouldn't be here.”

“What's wrong?!” Taichi said, hurrying over to crouch by Mio at my side. “What's wrong with her?”

“I shouldn't—It's not—I—aah, aaah,” I wailed, clutching my head.

Who was I to be proud of this boy? What sort of disgusting creature was I to claim I was his *sister*? I wasn't even *human*. I was the creature that had *killed* his sister. Her blood was on my hands. I had stolen the right to his familial love from the girl who truly deserved it. I was a monster in a flimsy human mask desperate for—

“Don't *touch me!*” I yelled, batting away his hand and scurrying over to a wall to sit, curled up in a ball. I panted, and I felt my mouth begin to salivate, desperate for nourishment human food simply could not provide. “Don't touch me. Don't touch me don't look at me like that. I'm not the person you should be looking at like that so don't look at me like that and don't touch me. Run. Run away from me.”

The desperate, helplessly confused look on his face tore me to pieces, but he continued trying to advance. “Please, just take a breath. Did I do something wrong?”

“I'm wrong. My existence is wrong. I shouldn't exist. I'm a monster. I'm not even human, I never was, I'm a monster, I'm a *monster!* I killed your sister!” My breath was so heavy and fast that I felt like I was going to vomit. “I, I can't, I shouldn't be here, it shouldn't be me here, why, why are you looking at me like that get away from me get *away from me before I hurt you*, get away, get away get away get AWAY—!”

I'd had to get pretty practiced at knocking Chisa out when she got like that these days, but this time I had help in bringing her back to our place. On the way there, I did my best to explain to Taichi... well, what had happened to his sister. He took it quietly. Sometimes he'd ask a question, and I'd do my best to explain it. I wasn't able to do it all, of course. Who could?

“So...” Taichi mumbled, as we both sat on the couch after having placed Chisa in bed. “She's both a human and a dragon?” I nodded. “Huh. I... guess that explains a lot.”

Right. We'd both been present when Chisa... when VFD, more like, burst out of the Cold Room and sliced Yuuya's hand off. We both knew what that pressure felt like.

“But...” Taichi shook his head, and looked down at his hands. “I mean, you tell me I had this other sister, this 'real Chisa', but... what does that matter to me, you know? I want *my* sister back.”

“I know,” I said. “I... I think she knows that, too. She just... her head is all messed up now, and she can't really understand these things even if she knows them, since... you know.” I shook my head. “She gets these hunger shakes when she gets stressed out, and she tries to hide them from me. I see them, but I can't do anything about them. I... don't really know yet how to deal with that part of her. It's an important part of her, but I'm... a human, you know?”

“Yeah,” Taichi said. “But she... she wants to be a human, right?”

I thought about it for a second, and then said, “God, I don't think there's anything she wants more. It's... it's crushing her, that she can't do what she was doing before, you know? And I'm really... I'm really trying my best to help. I want to make that connection. I want to make it so that these two halves of who she is don't have to be in this... this awful conflict, I guess?”

We were quiet for a bit longer before Taichi asked, “So... can I come around? I don't have to stay away from her, do I?”

“No! No, no. I think—I mean, I think having you around will... help?” I said, shaking my head. “Even... even if she tries to push you away. I think you should keep coming around. She wants you here, Taichi, I know she does, even if she thinks she shouldn't want that.”

Taichi took a deep breath, then let it out through his nose and said, “Okay. Then I will. I'm gonna go home. See you soon.”

“See you soon, Taichi,” I said.

Another few weeks passed like that. Taichi kept his promise, obviously, and he'd come around. Sometimes, it would go well, and sometimes it would go... like that. As November went on, though, I started getting busier. People began to move out of City Hall in larger numbers, and I had to be on the clock a lot—in particular, assisting the science teams with the logistics of their larger space.

And... well. Babysitting my mother to make sure she didn't blow anything up. Homura had gotten a bit more *erratic* in the time since the war ended, and she was starting to adjust to a really abnormal sleep schedule where she just wouldn't sleep for two or three days at a time. I'd have to make sure she went to sleep, no matter how she resisted.

One day, though, while she was busying herself with some kind of project, looking more haggard than ever, something funny happened. The Lab at City Hall was visited by someone I really hadn't expected to see—a little blonde girl with red eyes and an even redder suit. She had this little grin on her face.

...Yeah, it was Emille. She's pretty unmistakable. I saw Kirino hiding outside the door, sweating buckets. Homura looked like a complete mess, hunched totally over her table fiddling with some gadget, so I had to be the one to greet her. “Oh, uh, hi,” I said, from my seat closer to the entrance. “Emille, right? Aitelle's sister?”

“Of course. And you're Mio Akaneno, the Angel of City Hall. I understand that I have you to thank for a lion's share of the manual labor about here.” Emille tipped her beret. “My apologies for not making your acquaintance earlier. I've been quite busy.”

“How's Aitelle?” I asked.

Emille grunted and gave a disgruntled little shrug. “Aloof as always. It's not as though she's stupid, she just sees fit not to apply herself at times like these. But that's beside the point. That fetid, scraggly hairball over there is your mother, yes?”

The fetid, scraggly hairball in question, having let her lab coat develop at least three new stains since last I'd actually looked, did not respond. “No, no, you can't get her to answer like that,” I said. “You have to address her by her title or she won't respond.”

Emille cocked an eyebrow, crossed her arms, sighed, and then walked over and delivered a full-force kick to Homura's leg. It wasn't very high up, but Homura's loud yelp of pain told me that even those tiny legs had some force in them. “Yeeeeeeowch, what the hell?!”

Homura turned away, scrambling to put some distance between her and this sassy lost child, before she locked eyes with Emille. Despite the pain, she had a smile. “Oh, you,” she said, “you're that little munchkin from a few months ago. Hi! How you doing?” And just like that, Public Personality Homura Akaneno was back.

“Yes, hello,” Emille said. She bowed her head. “Emille. I've been appointed interim head of city planning, as well as consultant strategist for Murakumo affairs and head of Murakumo research in light of Mr. Ayafumi's recent promotion. You'll note my credentials as the late President Muller's aide.”

Kirino was still outside the door, so I darted my eyes over to him. He gave an awkward little

nod to confirm it, and then continued huddling out of sight in preparation of what was about to happen.

“Aw, well hey, good for you, kiddo!” Homura said, leaning over reaaaal far forward since, as far as she knew, she was talking to a child. “And I’m Homura Akaneno. They know about me over in America?”

“I am well aware of who you are,” Emille said, keeping a totally straight face. “You’re Homura Akaneno, *interim* head of research at City Hall, developer of the Universal Hacking Interface, isolator of the Psy-Gene, and all other sorts of accomplishments. A truly star-studded resume.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” Homura said, basking in the praise. “Yeah, that is me! Have you met my daughters? I—”

“With that said,” Emille interrupted, “get out.”

There was a really long pause.

“Huh,” Homura mumbled. She blinked a few times.

“Now that I’ve taken this position, you no longer have credentials as actual Murakumo personnel, or have you forgotten?” Emille said, cocking an eyebrow, her face remaining totally flat. “This organization and this country have no need for a washed-up ‘genius’ whose only claims to fame are irreplicable strokes of luck that she can’t repeatedly manifest. I don’t have time for charity cases who take up entire rooms on nothing because of family drama. If you want back in, you can apply through the proper channels, and maybe you’ll get something on the lower floors.”

“I.” Homura blinked a few more times. “Huh?”

“You are not a genius,” Emille said, “you are a stage magician pretending to be a genius. You haven’t contributed a thing to the development of your own revolutionary technology since its invention even when it was being used to save the world, instead choosing to busy yourself with little trinkets and gadgets that are barely more help in a battlefield than a toaster. Your ‘good name’ is smoke and mirrors. I do not want you here. Get out.”

I think it was *starting* to sink in, but this whole thing was so foreign to Homura that she was still kind of staring at Emille like she was some sort of strange bug. “Wha. Huh?”

“Get *out*,” Emille said, her voice lowering into as scary as a girl as tiny as her could manage, “of my laboratory, you old *hag*. I would prefer to have someone as capable as your daughter not constantly be on the duty of ensuring you don’t self-destruct.”

“I—”

“I have a sword on my waist,” Emille said, and that was I think when we all realized that she did actually have one of those, “and I know how to use it, and if you do not vacate the premises *now* I have no compunctions about ensuring you can never use a work table again.”

There was another, even longer pause.

“Oh,” Homura said. Then she scooted over and poked her head out the door. “Haha, okay, Kirino, you jokester, where's the camera?”

Kirino had been caught before he could flee, and I couldn't blame him for the unflattering noises he made as he turned around. “Well, uh,” he said, fiddling with his glasses, “well, she's not joking. And by extension, I'm... not joking. Please pack your things.”

“You. You wouldn't do this to me, right, Kirino? Buddy? Think of all the fun times we've had, all the things we've, uh—y'know, uh... invented... together?” Homura looked like she'd have one of those big single sweat drops if she were in an anime. “You know, like—”

“That never happened,” Kirino said, “and you mostly just ruined my filing systems.”

“*We're Science Buddies!*”

“We are Science Acquaintances at *best*,” Kirino said, his voice taking on a bit more weight.

“I'm. I'm, I'm Homura Akaneno, man!” Homura had started flailing her arms around, and now she was sweating, her eyes wide. “You can't. You can't seriously get *rid* of me, you know that, right?! I mean, I'm. I'm Japan's most beautiful genius, man! Who knows when my next brilliant moment—!”

“As the leader of Murakumo,” Kirino said, taking a step forward, “I have a choice to make here. I either have you here, or I continue being the best leader I can to my personnel.” And then, he turned his head in the doorway, and looked at me. I froze. “Mio. You're the only member of Unit 13 here right now, and if she's not going to listen to both me and Emille then I'm going to need your input. What is Unit 13's opinion on this?”

I took a moment. Really mulled it over. I mean, I don't know how long I really did it for, but it felt like a pretty long moment. By the time I walked into the hallway to be actually present for this discussion, I was next to Kirino and Emille, facing down Homura. I felt oddly... like, placid about it. Like, I didn't really feel anything.

“Yeah,” I said, blankly staring at my own mother. “Yeah, I mean. Unit 13's behind this, I think.”

“Wha—?!” If the rejection by Kirino sent her sweating, me saying that looked like I'd actually punched Homura in the gut. “Muh. Buh. Mio?!”

“I mean. They make good points,” I said. I shrugged. “You have a house you can do these things in, don't you?”

“Buh! Wha!” Homura sputtered. “But I! You! Mio! Huh?!”

I shrugged. “You should probably go before Emille cuts your hands off.”

“It wasn't—you know that wasn't my fault, right?!” Homura said, running her hands through her hair and starting to pace around. “You know that I didn't do that, right?! It's not my fault! *I* didn't do that to her! I didn't—!”

The sword missed Homura by a hair's breadth, and when she looked down at the little girl

who'd swung it, I think Homura really understood what was happening. "Get *out*. Of my *laboratory*. Right now," Emille said.

Blink. Blink, blink. "Okay," Homura mumbled, turning around like she was half-asleep. "Okay. Okay, sure, yeah. Okay."

When I told Youka about this later in the day, while we were chilling in Dogenzaka, she let out this really shrieking laugh. I swear it was loud enough to wake all of Shibuya. "Oh, shit!" she wheezed. "Oh, shit, praise Buddha, god help me, I'm gonna die! Bahahahahaha!" I think she was a little drunk. "Ohhh, shit! Maybe that kid isn't half bad after all."

"She's real forward," I said.

Once Youka caught her breath, though, she put her arm around me. "How're you feeling?"

"I donno," I said. I looked down at my hands. "This hasn't really happened before."

"What?"

"Someone telling my mom off like that," I said. "Aunt Natsume was always more the quietly seething type." I paused. "Well... I guess Dad did when he left. But that was the only time."

There was a moment of quiet as we both stared into the setting sun before Youka said, "What was your dad like?"

"I don't remember him very well. He left when I was pretty young," I said. "He left because he was scared of me, I think. He was scared I'd turn out like her."

Youka scoffed, and said, "What? You?"

"I'm pretty self-absorbed, too," I said, hunching over. "I like people relying on me. I'm kind of an awful person."

"Oh, bullshit," Youka said with a snort. "Like hell. *I* like people relying on me, and you seem to like me plenty."

"It's not just—I want..." I sputtered out, trying to figure a way to talk back. But... instead, here's what I said. "When... when he left. The last thing Dad told me was, 'Don't look at me. I can't be a monster's father.'" Youka's teeth gritted, but I continued. "After they'd been married a few years, I think he realized that Mom wasn't really getting any less... like that. I think he thought she didn't really love him, just the validation he gave her. Like... he could've been anyone. Just another one of her groupies."

"...And what do you think?" Youka asked.

"I think he was right," I said. "I think my mother is someone who probably shouldn't have had a child at all. And... I guess he saw that in me, too."

"My opinion of your mom aside," Youka said, tossing her empty beer can to the side, "*that's* bullshit. You're way more genuine than she could ever hope to be."

Genuine. Now that was a hell of a word. “What part of me is genuine?” I asked.

“You still call her Aunt Natsume,” Youka said.

My fists clenched and unclenched a few times. “Is that what being genuine means?”

Youka opened up another beer and took a swig. “You're honest about your feelings a lot. I mean, it seems to me like you're a complicated kid, but even if you're putting on some of this whole chipper big sister vibe, it seems to me like it's also just who you are. Why do you feel like you *aren't* genuine?”

“If I was genuine,” I said, putting my head in my hands, “Chisa wouldn't be in this situation. Nothing I say ever manages to actually cheer her up. I'm just putting bandaids on her emotions when I manage it.”

“Mm,” Youka said. She took another drink. “Okay. Hold on. And remember, just in case you've forgotten, I don't know shit about romance.” I nodded. “Okay. So let me see if I've got this straight. With that whole business with Chisa's parents, you feel like you've *got* to take care of her. Right? And you want to, but it's this feeling like you *have* to that's the problem.”

“I...” I blinked. “I guess?”

“Okay, here. Let me ask you this,” Youka said, hunching forward and putting her elbows on her knees. “Say you didn't have to be the adult in the room for your mother or for Chisa. What would you *do*?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you think you've gotta walk on eggshells, right?” Youka said. “She's talking to her younger brother again, so that's beside the point *now*, but—y'know. What would you do? Do you know what a 'genuine' you looks like?”

It took me a bit to think about that one, but it lifted me a bit out of being sad about myself into just thinking. “I... don't know,” I said. “But... Huh. I... I think I should think about that, actually. You're right.”

“Broken clock's right twice a day,” Youka said with a little smirk. I punched her in the arm.

“I want to dive back into your Cosmosphere,” I said to Chisa the next day. I hadn't realized Taichi was in the house, so I got to see him come out of our bathroom and then get this really wide-eyed expression. “What are you giving me the googly eyes for?”

“Should I be here for this?” Taichi said, eyeing the door.

Chisa sighed and put her head in her hands. “Oh, god. It's not like that, Taichi. It's a long story. Why?”

“Well.” Okay, how to explain this to her, I thought. “I'm... having a bit of an identity crisis. And I feel like... uh... if I... well, if I try and help you, maybe it'll... help me? I guess?”

The look on Chisa's face was about as baffled as you'd expect. “...What?”

“Look, I know it was kind of weird last time, but it—I mean, it—argh! If I see myself from a different perspective somehow it makes me think I might be able to better get a grasp on how I'm feeling right now!” I clapped and took a deep breath in. “There! Okay, I got it.”

“I—”

I started feeling like the world was spinning around me. “And I guess also, it's a moment to just be with myself and explore in a situation where I'm not bound by the fact that I'm a person that exists in the real world with all the responsibilities that entails, and oh my *god* I need that, this rush of existential stress is really hitting me, I feel like if I don't get a bit where I'm outside of the real world I'm going to literally die! Y'know?!”

“Mio!” Chisa said, raising her hands. “Mio. Take a breath. Please.”

“I think I've been on the verge of a panic attack since yesterday and I don't know what to do,” I said. “Is this what these are like? Is this how you feel? I mean, this isn't usually my kind of mental stress, you know, I'm more about the, uh, you know, other sorts, so the whole active panicking isn't really my—”

Suddenly, Chisa was in front of me, holding my head very close. “Mio. Take a breath.”

In out in out in out in. out. in. out. in. out. “I need help,” I said. “I need help, Chisa. I need help. I really need help.”

Some part of me went, 'well, what if she can't? What if she gets too nervous to?' But then Chisa took a moment, and said, “Okay. That's fine. Do you want to go tomorrow?”

“Wha,” I said, “wha. Really?”

“I don't like seeing you like this,” Chisa said, “and if you think it'll help... Well, it might help both of us. It's worth a try, I guess.”

That was when Taichi, who was still here, let out a loud “Ohhh!” He smiled. “Is this code for couples' therapy?”

“...Soooort of?” I said. “Kinda? The best we can get?”

“Okay, okay,” Taichi said. “Hope it goes well. Touko and I are going to go to Akihabara this week, do you want me to look for anything?”

I don't know if you know this about me, but *that's* something I had no trouble being genuine about. His list was about four pages long by the time I was done.

I won't bore you with all of the 'us intruding on Kyosuke's house again' business. He's a nice guy, so he was glad to accept continued tests of his sister's system. Richter had this friend come over for monitoring of the system, this really short schoolteacher lady. Kiri-something, I think? Babe? ...Right, right, *Kirisame-sensei*, that was it. She seemed nice. I was really more surprised to find out Richter had, like, a *friend* friend in Japan. Probably a story there.

...Well, then you should tell me the story! C'mon! Yes, later, obviously, that's not important right now, but it's Richter! I wanna know more about these wacky misadventures a younger Richter got up to!

Look, the important part is... Okay, no, I can't be smiling thinking about Richter getting up to wacky misadventures. I have to get the right tone for this. Hoo. Hoo.

The second Stonehenge I wound up at was immediately different from the first one for the simple reason that it wasn't dark. That, and a certain vampire was waiting for me, fluttering about the pillars in her boredom.

“Aww, you're here to meet me?” I said with a little wink once I'd landed down. “That's sweet.”

“It's not as though I have much choice,” Raquel shot back, giving me an eyeroll and a snort. “But you are welcome.”

I could see out into the distance here, and it was pretty clear to me that there was a fundamental difference between this area and the last one I'd been in besides the better lighting—surrounding this end of the Horizon was a little human town, like a cut-out chunk of an older Tokyo operating all by itself. There was a cable car running around, though. That was neat.

“Looks like we're at the other end of the Horizon,” I said, staring up into the sky past where the vertical bridge ended... until the sun made me stop. “I guess it's kinda hard to have a linear identity structure when you're having a fundamental identity crisis, huh?”

“Well, what did you expect?” Raquel said, looking away and shaking her head. “It's not as though real people are a video game.”

I placed my hand on my chest in faux offense and said, “Young lady, I brought you into this world! I could very easily unmake you!”

“I'd like to see you try. I've proliferated pretty thoroughly, y'know,” Raquel said with a toothy little grin, baring her fangs. “Even if you properly cancel me, I'll remain within some fragment of the cultural consciousness for years to come.”

“What's that like, anyway?” I asked, hopping down the steps of Stonehenge. “I mean, being both conscious and a fictional character.”

“Must you? Don't you have enough on your plate with *one* identity crisis?” Raquel asked, and I had to admit she had a point.

The roads were packed—not with 'real people' so much as shades you could kind of mistake for real people if you didn't look right at them. There was a din of like, 'crowd noise' on the streets, sort of hanging in the air, ever-present. The local cable car happened to be stopping by when I got there, so I got on.

Finding a seat was a bit hard with how many people there were, and it was kind of uncanny looking at them, but I did manage it, leaning my head back to look out the window. Most of the buildings were low to the ground and there was a fair chunk of open space, so I figured I'd see someone with a 'real' model sooner or later.

It almost passed me by, but in an open-air lecture hall, I saw what I was looking for—a brief hint of a red hair swoop. I got off as soon as I could and headed over the tracks to the back seats of the lecture hall. “Hey, how's it going?” I asked.

There was 'a Chisa' there, of course—she didn't really look like she did as an adult, it was closer to how she looked when she was eighteen or so, still in high school, complete with uniform. “Oh, Mio,” she said, looking up at me, still tapping her pen on her paper. The crowd noise shifted a bit—now it was a sort of 'lecture noise', a single voice muttering on about something. “Is something wrong?”

“You're coming to a lecture in your high school uniform?” I asked, raising my eyebrow and sitting next to her.

That did get a little chuckle out of her. “It's the nicest thing I have,” she said, looking a little bashful. I looked down at her paper, and there were... well, okay, there was this crazy amount of mathematical equations on it that I didn't understand. “Don't worry. I can talk while I study,” she said, continuing to write one of them. I wasn't sure how she could even write that small—the density of math there was kind of mind-boggling.

“Nothing's really wrong,” I said, “I just wasn't really sure where you were.”

“Letting gossip get to your head, aren't you?” Chisa said, raising an eyebrow.

“Huh?”

“Well, I can assure you that if some monster does jump out at me at night, I will have a sword on me to bat it away,” Chisa said with another little chuckle. Then she paused. “What's that look for?”

“What are *you* talking about?” I asked.

“Have you been no-lifing the drafts again?” Chisa asked, and I nodded with a little blush on my face. “It's all people here have been talking about. Some kind of 'monster' showing up once the sun goes down.”

“Ah,” I said, “gotcha.”

Yes, of *course* I thought that. Why would I not think that?

“So, uh,” I said, leaning back in my seat, “what's this lecture for, anyway?”

That got Chisa to stop for a moment, and look down at what she'd been writing. I saw a hint of her shoulders tensing up, but then it was gone, and she shook her head. "I'm not sure, but whatever it is, it's probably useful. It's always good to be more worldly, you know? Maybe it'll look good on my college applications."

"True, true," I said. "Well, I'm gonna bounce. Later, babe! Love you!"

"Love you too," Chisa said.

Stepping back out into the shadowy crowd, I hadn't really had a picture of what I was looking for before, but I had a decent idea now. I hopped on the cable car again. "Hey, Raquel," I said, knowing she'd show up and answer me. "You take that side, I'll take this one. Let me know how many colleges you see."

"Giving me orders? You've got quite a lip on you," Raquel said, poofing out of nowhere, but she did do it.

A full loop took about ten minutes, I think. It was pretty obvious seeing which buildings were colleges—they were the only tall ones. "I counted six," Raquel said.

"Five," I said, "so that's eleven. That's a lot of colleges."

"You don't say?" Raquel said with a little smirk. Oh—by the way, since it was bright she had a big parasol to block the sunlight. I forgot to mention that until now.

"Okay, so it's some kind of metaphor about colleges," I said. I got off the cable car again without any particular picture of where I was going, and kept pacing. "Good to know, good to know. Of course, if she's stuck in there, I'm not really sure what I'm doing for the time being..." I shook my head. "I need a better vantage point."

I started wandering through the small spaces between the buildings to try and get to the Horizon itself. I figured if I could walk up to it, I could get a better picture of whatever was in the city that I hadn't really seen from looking for a specific thing, you know? It wasn't actually that long of a walk—it was mostly just tough making sure I could squeeze through the alleyways. I'm not small, y'know?

Around the Horizon, there was a pretty empty space, so I was able to hop up and start walking onto the broken bridge. Walking onto a surface where gravity changes as you walk along it is pretty disorienting, but I managed to get used to it and start walking upwards into the sky. There was some more standard wood, metal, and brick construction going on at the edge, but right before that, where the original shape of the bridge stopped, there was someone sitting on the edge.

"Uhhh..." I rubbed the back of my head and walked up to the cloaked figure sitting on the rim of the bridge. "You come here often?"

"So this is your doing, then," the cloaked figure said, "this 'realm' within information."

They stood up, and turned around to show off their mask. "Ohhh," I said, "you must be that 'Iod' person. Right?" They nodded. "Hi! Nice to meet you. Yeah, I guess you could say that."

“Curious,” Iod said. “Quite a formidable power you possess for a 'mere' human, then. Not entirely unlike a Dragon—of course, I had some inkling already, but this is on a far greater scale than imitating local invocation rites with 'merch'.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Waiiit a second. Hold on, are you, like, real?”

“It is understandable that you would make that error,” Iod said, “but yes, I am the genuine article. Accessing a realm such as this is within my purview, though you may rest assured none who would destroy it are likely to be able to access it.” They paused, and turned their head to mutter to themselves. “Admittedly, Nodens might, but if she were to, no doubt she would simply find herself enamored by the curiosity...”

“What?”

“Oh,” Iod said, shaking their head, “nothing you should concern yourself with.” They sat back down on the edge of the bridge. “Such a severed identity... Certainly I have not seen its like before. To split the concept and physical form...”

“I mean,” I said, sitting down on the bridge myself, “if you wanna talk about people with 'concepts' that didn't match their physical form, I could introduce you to my friend Sumie?”

I got the feeling that Iod was blinking at me blankly behind their mask. Then they said, “Oh,” nodded, and continued, “yes, well, there is *that*, I suppose. I don't know that that's quite the same, but then I suppose I have yet to see the externalized internal realm of Miss Kazuki—it's entirely possible that it is similar.”

“I was kinda kidding,” I said. “I know this is pretty unique.”

We were quiet for a bit before Iod kept going. “Your mother—not the one you possess now, but the one before her. I cannot help but have a morbid sort of respect for one who so thoroughly clutched the reins of fate, no matter how grim the results.”

“It... is pretty impressive, I guess,” I said.

“A 'True Dragon'—it is not so simple as to call it the strongest of all dragons, you know. Certainly, some may have grown from a simpler draconic concept reaching that peak—but a True Dragon may also be the result of the strongest specimen of a planet achieving a state in which something like a human 'will' is unnecessary,” Iod said. “Through rage, hatred, apathy, or even an overbearing love—it matters not. I find myself wondering as to whether that woman, Homura Akaneno, was not far more akin to a Dragon than her friend Natsume.”

“Isn't that a bit insulting to Dragons?” I asked.

“An empathy that few among the cosmos would give,” Iod said. “You are a curious woman, Mio Akaneno.”

“I am dating one,” I said with a shrug. “But it's not like the Dragons have much of a choice, right? Humans have 'will', we have a choice.”

Iod was quiet for a second before they said, “A good friend of mine once asked me something. He asked me, 'What would happen if a Dragon were to evolve to the point where the evolutionary imperatives of Dragons were unnecessary?' Not simply to achieve VFD, but to find a proof that what Dragons were was not the only path, that another path existed to continue progressing. I did not have an answer for him at the time, and I have spent quite a long time pondering the question since. Before he asked me that, I had simply assumed as much—but it gave me pause.”

“Huh,” I said. “I mean, I guess I'm not too knowledgeable on the subject, but that's an interesting thought.”

“Quite,” Iod said. “To me, he was quite young, and yet his perspective on such matters I had taken to be immutable was novel to me. A change in thought does not come easily to one as old as myself, and yet, with that and... circumstances I would say are also not something you should concern yourself to be considered, I had no choice but to change my thinking.”

“Well, good on you, then!” I said, putting my arm around Iod to clap them on the back. Under the cloak, their body was actually pretty small.

“You are really very oddly accepting of such concepts regarding the fate of a species which destroyed your planet,” Iod said.

“Eh,” I said with a shrug, “last year I watched this anime called *Planet With* and that pretty much primed me for this? Azrabarakura seems like pretty much the same idea, so.”

When I looked down—er, you know, regular down, not sideways gravity down—I saw it was a few hours later, and around the base of the bridge they'd set up what looked like a festival area, with a bunch of booths sitting around and lit up by paper lanterns. “Oh, I should probably get going,” I said. “That might be important.”

“Quite,” Iod said. “Thank you for the conversation. You're a curious woman, Mio Akaneno.”

“See you!” I said, waving and turning around.

As I left, though, I heard them say, quiet enough that I could barely hear, “Hunter, or hunted... Will I ever get to hear your answer, Tyrant? Are you still here for me to hear?”

—Yeah, I didn't turn around. I had more important things to get to, and it seemed like the kind of thing Iod would say I shouldn't concern myself with for my own sake. ...I know, right? It's so weird knowing that kind of person IRL and then they're actually just kinda nice.

Anyway, when I headed down to the festival stalls, I started walking around. It had been a while since I'd been to a proper one, and there was all sorts of stuff to see—I considered buying some takoyaki before I considered the possibility that that might trick my brain into not wanting to eat real food once I got out.

I found Chisa—the high school Chisa—sweating buckets running a goldfish scooping stand. “Hey there, you,” I said with a wave. “You good?”

“Oh! Mio!” Chisa said, panting. “Yeah, I'm fine, it's just...” She trailed off, making motions of managing the stand to some not-people who were passing by. “I'm just—you know.”

“I don't, actually,” I said. “This isn't usually your scene, is it?”

“Sure, sure, but see, the man running this stand needs help, and in about twenty minutes the lady running the taiyaki stand over there will need help, and basically I'm booked for hours? I couldn't really say 'no', since they were so polite about it, and I need workplace experience anyhow—”

I reached my finger over to shush her and said, “Chisa. Would you like some help?”

“Well, I—” Chisa caught herself and sighed. “Yes. Please. I'd really like nothing more. But don't you have things you're busy with?”

“Nothing that I can't wait on a bit,” I said with a wink. “Besides, if you're stuck back here the whole time how are you gonna enjoy yourself? Take a load off.”

Chisa fished around in a purse she had around her waist, then handed me her itinerary, packed full for about four straight hours' worth of work. “Here's my itinerary.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, looking down at it, “tell you what—we'll alternate these shifts, how's that sound? I'll take this one, then when you're done with... uh, the noodle cart, you come find me if I'm not at the yo-yo fishing.”

“Sure, okay,” Chisa said, visibly slumping over. “Good luck.”

So I spent a while doing that. Like I said, I took twenty minutes running a goldfish scooping stand—while I was back there, the shapes of people got a little less uncanny, so I was able to face them with my best customer service face. It seemed like a lot of the stuff here was pretty understaffed, so by the time I was at work at the yo-yo fishing stand, I got a call from somewhere or another to help at something else.

I was full of energy, though, so I just pumped my arms and agreed to it, spending what was meant to be my twenty-minute break helping out. It was funny—eventually, as I kept working at different stalls, going from shift to shift, adding even more stuff onto my plate, I started to be able to make out details of faces, even. It was like the people I was serving became more real the longer I did it. I recognized a few, even, probably faces Chisa remembered particularly well.

By three hours, I was still doing pretty well, running from one request to another on a funny kind of adrenaline. Raquel popped up behind me to say, “I thought you were having *trouble* with having people rely on you? Didn't you get here to avoid this kind of thing?”

“Huh?” I said, flipping some takoyaki. (I couldn't help it, I'd snuck a few for myself.) “Oh, yeah, I guess so, but it's not really a big deal.”

“You've been smiling for ages now. It's weird,” Raquel said, using her tiny form to sit on the stand. “At this point, Chisa hardly has to do anything.”

“I'm having fun, though!” I said with a little laugh. “Got the adrenaline flowing, and it's fun to

get used to a task and do it as best I can in a short period, you know? It's kinda like one of those variety games—and it's not that different from City Hall!”

“You *enjoyed* that?” Raquel said, her jaw dropping a little as she gaped at me.

“Is it that weird?” I said. “I mean, it wasn't like I had to do everything at City Hall. There'd always be people who could help me if I needed it. And here, I'm helping Chisa because she needed the help, but we're nearly done—I know I can count on her to finish it out if I need her to. I—”

When I stopped, I realized I had to mull over what I just said. Thankfully, the twenty minutes passed, so I stepped out from behind the stand and started pacing. “Do I... actually like this? Like, for real?”

“It seems like it to me,” Raquel said.

“Sure, but... I mean, I only really did this kind of thing after the Dragons hit. So why am I so happy?” I asked. “Pretty much the whole human race is miserable, but... I mean, this is a feeling I enjoy. Do I... like this *better*? I'm—”

Out of the corner of my eye, hidden in an alleyway, I saw a red swoop of hair—but a longer one, one I also recognized. My face lit up, and I ran over, waving. “Heeey! Vee!”

Vee's hair was still covering most of her face, but while she'd been staring, fascinated, at all the paper lanterns lighting up the nighttime street, I could tell she turned away awkwardly when I called out to her. She was probably blushing, if I knew that aspect of my girlfriend well enough. I pulled myself between the stalls again to head over to her. “What're you doing back here?” I asked. “Too many people?” Vee shook her head.

That's... not the sort of place I should be going.

“Who's gonna stop you?” I asked. “I mean. I'm not.”

It's just... wrong. I'm not supposed to be in that sort of place.

“If you're not opposed to it because you think you'd be *uncomfortable*, I think there's no real reason not to try,” I said. I reached down and grabbed her hand—the skin of her arm was reddish and leathery, but it was still hers. “C'mon!”

But—

“Ah bup bup bup, no buts,” I said. “Do you trust me?” Vee looked away, but she nodded. “Then c'mon!” I looked down at her feet. “We'll just have to hope nobody bugs you about not wearing shoes,” I said with a wink.

I started dragging her around, and you're gonna be shocked—nobody did. In fact, she seemed to get more into the festivities than anyone, enjoying things like the silly little games and getting to eat human food with this kind of adorable wide-eyed wonder. She started doing this thing where she'd grab my arm and point at something before staring at me, and I figured out pretty quickly it meant she wanted me to explain what it was—despite being part of Chisa, this aspect of her was still a dragon,

and thus didn't really understand such basic human things. Of course, it was a little silly when she'd just reach into a pool of water to grab a goldfish, and stuff like that, but it made me laugh and smile, and after a bit of disappointment she'd done it wrong she usually got the idea pretty quick.

She ate a lot. That's probably not much of a surprise, but she still did. Thankfully nobody was asking for my actual money, but she probably accounted for at least ten percent of all the food eaten there that night. I'd sit down beside her as she scarfed down some bunch of fried food and just laugh and laugh... It was cute!

I think it only lasted a bit under an hour, the time we spent there, and I mostly spent it showing her around or following her on her way to try something new, but I was smiling pretty much the whole time. It was getting well into the night, and the sun had long since set, when we were interrupted by a shout from behind us—"Hey! What are you doing with Mio?!"

Both Vee and I turned around to see the high school Chisa standing not too far away, having recovered from her physical exhaustion. She was glaring daggers at Vee, and the crowd had split to clear the path. I heard Vee growl and grab onto my shoulder, but I raised a hand to stop her. "Oh, she's fine," I said, "I kinda saw her and invited her in. Is that a problem—?"

"Mio, get away from that *thing!*" Chisa spat, drawing a sword (it wasn't Tomoegozen, so I'm not sure which one it was meant to be) from her hip. "It's a problem I have to deal with, okay?"

She was walking closer, her sword out, so I threw my hands up to yell, "Wait, wait, wait! Okay, no, hold on! She's just as much a part of you as you are! I—"

"Mio..." Vee growled from behind me, baring her fangs. That telltale pressure entered the air. "...is *mine!*"

I didn't have time to stop her; the next thing I knew, Vee's claw was clashing with the younger Chisa's blade. "Get out. Get out!" Chisa yelled, trying to continue the swing, but getting her sword caught in Vee's claw. "Nobody's... nobody's going to take me seriously if you're here!"

"Mine!" Vee grunted. "Mio! Is mine!"

"Who can look at someone who acts like a stupid dog?!" Chisa kept slamming her sword into Vee's arms, trying to break through her guard. "Nobody will take me seriously if they see you! They'll all just pity me forever! If *you're* around, I can never be anyone I'm supposed to be!"

I grunted, and decided that if anyone was going to break up this fight, it was going to be me. Reaching underneath the curtain on a nearby food stall, I found a megaphone usually used for... you know, megaphone things. I ran over to both of their sides, then yelled into the megaphone, right next to both of them, "Cut it *ouuuuuuuuuuuuuut!*"

They did, both of them covering their ears for a second to recover from the loud noise. "But I have to..." Chisa gasped. "I have to, but—"

"Is that seriously what you think?" I said, frowning and furrowing my eyebrows at her. "That nobody's going to take you *seriously?*"

“Well, think about it!” Chisa said, giving me this big, bombastic arm gesture. “If you see someone with such animalistic traits, you aren't thinking, 'Oh, look at this fellow human', you're thinking, 'Oh, that person has problems!' If I'm supposed to be a person, then I need to find some way to be like a person, right?! I have to do things the human way, be accepted like a human! Otherwise, I'll never be equal!”

“What, you think that just because she's less human-looking, she doesn't have thoughts and feelings just like you?” I said, crossing my arms and frowning. “Just because she can't speak like we do doesn't mean she can't say plenty if you just listen.”

Chisa's arms dropped, and I think she finally registered what I was saying to her, but she responded, “Why... why are you acting like this? Aren't you scared? That thing's a monster. It might kill you. I mean—I mean, it's—you don't, I mean—” She was breaking out in this obvious cold sweat, and her body was starting to shiver. “No. I mean, that doesn't make sense, does it?”

Then she ran away screaming. “Chisa!” I called out, but she didn't stop. I turned back to Vee, who was still shaking with a bit of possessive anger. “Hey, I'm sorry, but I have to go after her.”

Why?

“Because... she's also you,” I said. “And I love her. If I just let her go like this, that would mean... I guess it would mean that the real you, the conscious you, that I'd be willing to lose parts of that, and I'm not.”

...Okay.

“Thank you!” I said, nodding my head and starting into a run myself. Chisa was always faster on her feet than me, and that was no exception, but I just had to catch up to her enough for her to hear me. I did have a megaphone, after all. I ran back out into the wider streets of this layer, then looked around and started running on the cable car tracks in the same direction as the car.

It went fairly slowly, so I was actually able to catch up with it—and at this hour, I could see there was only one passenger, so I leapt to catch the window and pull myself in. It wasn't exactly *easy*, but I did manage it. I rolled into the cable car and Chisa finally noticed that I was doing something really stupid, so she broke out of this self-hugging, shivering state for a second to go, “What was that supposed to be?!”

“Wasn't gonna stop for a bit here,” I said. “I didn't wanna just let you go, y'know.”

“I-I just don't get it,” she said, going back to shivering. “I mean, with you, you got... you got tricked into dating a monster. She might kill you! How can you not be terrified? How can you treat her like that?”

I shook my head and sat across from her. “I think you're thinking about this the wrong way. I didn't get 'tricked' into dating anyone. If I was really so scared of that aspect of you, I would've dumped you after you cut your father's hand off. Which... was pretty scary, yeah, but... I mean, it's an important part of what makes you you. It's those parts of you I love, not you trying to be someone else.”

“But it's gross. It's animalistic. And... And the people that aren't you, they won't understand,”

she said. She shook her head frantically. “They won't get it. But I... I don't know what I'm supposed to want to be. I don't know what I want, I just know that can't be it.”

“Chisa... what does it matter what other people think of you?” I asked. “You have friends. We made a bunch of friends, together, who know you, who'll accept you. I don't really think the world outside of that has to matter.”

“But being antisocial is...” Chisa trailed off, then let her arms slump. “It's not good for me as... y-your partner. You're extroverted, bright, sunny... Why would you want to be shackled to someone so... dark, and weird, and gross?”

“I mean,” I said, “I don't really have to define my entire life by you to know I love you and want to be with you. Just because the woman I love is kind of afraid of people doesn't mean I have to be, and just because we might spend time apart doesn't mean we aren't each other's most important person. I—”

Then I realized something I really should've figured out a bit ago. This person, here, was Chisa at a younger age. I may not have understood the intricacies of the whole of her internal world, but I did know one thing—I wasn't actually the only person trying to help Chisa, and acting like it probably wasn't going to work.

“Hold on,” I said, “there's someone the cable car has to pick up.”

The trail went on for a while, but now that we were both on it, and I was making sure to think as hard as I could, the track shifted, and started going off into a distance I hadn't seen from the Horizon. Out past the city limits, an old mansion I recognized pretty well came into view. The cable car slowly, but surely, advanced toward the front, and as it came to a stop, a certain young boy with frizzy brown hair and a gap between his front teeth stood up with a backpack on.

In the sky, the sun was starting to rise again as Taichi got onto the cable car. “Finally! I thought this thing was never going to come.”

“Ah—Taichi,” Chisa muttered under her breath. The sweating stopped, and she finally properly stopped shivering. “I...”

“What's wrong with her?” Taichi said, sitting down next to me. “Has she been trying to be too uptight again?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said. “It's a bit of a pattern with her, isn't it? Always trying to shove herself down without realizing how much better she does when she just lets herself be natural.”

“You're telling me,” Taichi said, rolling his eyes. “What am I gonna do with her?”

Chisa stood up, but she wasn't really looking at either of us, instead just staring out the window. “It's... the same,” she said. “It's the same thing, isn't it? I'm always doing that, aren't I? It's just... I'm just doing it to a different part of myself, aren't I? I keep doing that. Why do I keep doing that?”

I didn't say, “Probably your abusive parents,” because I thought that might ruin the moment.

“So, so it's important that I *don't* do that, because those are the circumstances that push the people I love away in favor of placating people who don't really care about me. Am I understanding this correctly?” Chisa said, suddenly whipping her head back around to me. I nodded. “So. So you're right! I shouldn't try to do that, actually! I should just let it be! My desire for external validation is *not* invalidated by *antisocial tendencies!*”

Then all that panic attack anxiety adrenaline wore off and she passed out. That was admittedly a bit worrying, but underneath the rising sun, I saw the telltale beam of light that indicated I'd done enough right to incur a Paradigm Shift. I hopped off the cable car, waving goodbye to Taichi as I did, and started heading on over.

“Did you find what you wanted?” Raquel asked, floating by my side as I made the walk. “I seem to recall you were here for yourself.”

“I think I might've,” I said. “All I can really do is hope that what I feel is right. That it'll help me. That I've made some kind of progress.”

“It seems hard,” Raquel said, “being you.”

As I walked up the steps and said, “I'm not like someone like you or Chisa, so yeah. I can't... there's nothing that can really tell me why I was born. All I can do is try and find what I'm supposed to do now, and hope that it's enough.”

“A troublesome lot, indeed,” Raquel said. As we reached Stonehenge, she snapped her fingers to get the high school Chisa, still passed out, over here, then turned to human size. “Alright. I'll take the left shoulder, you take the right.”

“Aww, thanks!” I said. “I appreciate it. Okay, on three. One, two, *three—!*”

So we had to drag an unconscious high school version of my girlfriend into the Paradigm Shift. But hey, it was better than nothing, right?

The 'Diva Room' hadn't been vacated as of yet. After all, it was basically a single-person apartment—there wasn't really any hurry in getting Miku out. It was pretty late when I wound up coming in, but I found Miku awake anyway—she'd gotten set up with a lamp to read some classic *Detective Galileo* novels. I don't know if she actually needed them, I mean I can't think of any reason why she *would* need them considering, but she had a pair of reading spectacles. It was kinda adorable.

I rapped my hand on a box at the entrance to her living space. “Knock knock. Am I intruding on anything?”

“Ah,” Miku said, looking up from her book. She took a moment to digest who was there, and said, “Hello. What can I do for you?”

“So, I've been doing some thinking,” I said. I sat down on the edge of her stage. “A lot of it, really. You know my mom got fired?”

“I've heard,” Miku said. “Please don't take offense, but it's easy to tell when the loudest person in City Hall isn't here anymore.”

“Oh, none taken. I mean, I helped fire her,” I said. “But the way it happened kinda got me thinking. It was pretty new to me, standing up to her like that, and it kinda... it really sent me spinning emotionally.”

“Mhm,” Miku said, nodding. “I can imagine.”

“It made me realize that I didn't really know what a 'me' that isn't... beholden to her, looks like. I mean, I've been kinda... stapled to her for a lot of my life because she's so famous. The path of my life's just been kinda caught up in her wake. But this whole thing, this apocalypse, I've...” I let out a heavy sigh. “I've... never been freer. I think I'm... I think I'm *happier* now. Is that messed up?”

Miku stood up from her reading spot and sat next to me. “I think everyone has their own way of relating to this sort of thing. I don't think you're messed up, Mio.”

I laughed a little, under my breath. “Thanks, Miku. Yeah, just, the more I... the more Chisa and I adjust, the more things move away from how I was living before all this, the more I realize that I'm just *happier* now. I like feeling able to be relied on, I like doing this work, but with Unit 13, at Murakumo, with the SDF and SKY, somehow I've found myself part of this network that can pick up the slack when I need it picked up, and that's such a relief. And now... and now my mom's gone. And I'm... how do I put this.”

“I think I can take a guess?” Miku asked, and I nodded. “You've never been in a situation where you were more highly valued than her, have you?”

My eyes went wide, and I went quiet. “...Yeah. Yeah, that's... How did you...?”

“I've kind of known you for years,” Miku said with a little smile, “and you and I are friends

now. I like to think I'm fairly good at picking up subtext.”

“Robots these days!” I laughed aloud, and wiped a little tear from my eye. “Yeah. I think that's it. I don't know what that's like. I've always been second fiddle. Even... like, even back in Iorys, I was just me. Nobody there, not even Chisa, they weren't making the choice to value me more *knowing* who my mother was, but... Kirino asked me. He asked me for the final call. I'm valuable here. I'm more valuable than my mother.” I stood up, a weird sort of excitement filling my bones. “I'm... I'm a valued member of Murakumo!”

“You are,” Miku said. “And?”

I turned back around, with a hand to my chest. “I don't want to sit around here. I want to help in a bigger way. And I want to express myself more.” My hand clenched into a fist. “Miku, I don't know what I'm doing here, but I want your help. I want to become an idol. I want to fight *my* fight.”

Miku stood up off the stage, clapped her hand on my shoulder, gave me a thumbs up and a big, goofy grin, and said, “*Nice.*”

And, well, that's how I started on my road to become Japan's top idol.