

I don't know for quite how long we drifted through nothingness in that little bubble, but eventually, we did wind up somewhere. The bubble quietly landed on a dark, flat plain, without even stars to light it in the sky. If I looked up and squinted, I thought I might barely see an icicle—the Horizon wasn't present here at all, so I guessed I must be well below anywhere I'd already been.

All that was here was a small building, where some flickering lights were showing through an open window. And no matter how nice it was being in that bubble, I knew I needed to go there—so when the bubble landed, I stepped through it. It was only impenetrable if I wanted it to be.

The ground didn't really have any texture at all—it wasn't earth, it wasn't water, it was just... a flat plane. I couldn't hear my own footsteps. Nothing around me, nothing behind me... All I could do was walk up to the door.

It was a sliding door, nothing showing on its front. I opened it, and stepped inside. It wasn't dark inside, but... well, the only real light was coming from a screen on the wall. The building itself was... flat, and kind of... It was like in a video game when something isn't textured at all. It was flat and gray and like a model of a building rather than anything else.

That screen I mentioned was in front of me, with a few rows of chairs bolted to the ground. The only color here was one person inside them—another Chisa. It wasn't Vee, or the high school Chisa, or the Snow Queen, or the Chisa I knew, or even Raven.

This one—there wasn't just a red swoop of hair, the red streaks were running all through her hair, which was long enough to pool under her seat. And the eyes weren't Chisa's dark eyes I was used to, they were red, blank and motionless. She wasn't wearing any clothes, but her body didn't have anything that would need covering up. She was thin and frail, her skin pale, her nails sharp and black and longer than any human's, sharp enough to be claws but still attached to human hands.

There were... scars on her back. Big ones. Like someone had torn off a pair of wings, and it had been long enough that the wounds had healed.

“She hasn't moved in a long time.”

I started, hearing another person's voice, before turning around and realizing it was Raquel, who'd taken a seat behind me. “I don't know who this is. This her hasn't really moved in years. She doesn't speak. I don't know what happened to her body, or... why she won't move.”

“...Chisa?” I hesitantly put my hand on her shoulder, but she didn't react. “Raven? ...VFD?”

Nothing. Whoever this was, she wasn't any of those people.

“...How long?” I asked. It was a ridiculous question, I knew, considering that this whole business had only started a few months ago. But... “How long has she been stuck like this?”

“It's gotten worse over time,” Raquel said, “but the first time I noticed she was here... was when Chisa was sixteen. She was on an isolated island, well away from anything else, but not so deep inside. The sun still reached her. The ground hadn't fallen away yet. But then she went deeper, and deeper, everything else piling on top of her... The island broke apart, and now there's just this little building,

down deep inside her heart, deeper than her rage, her hunger, her fear, even that bone-chilling cold. This still, broken little thing that doesn't move, doesn't speak..."

I can't really put words to how it made me feel to look at this person. There wasn't anything I could do to help. There wasn't anything I could do to make her move. Somewhere deep inside the woman I loved was this empty person, this place where everything was *missing*.

"But there is one thing I know," Raquel said. "Look at the pinky finger on her right hand."

I did. And once I looked past her nails, I saw what Raquel meant—a dried, black stain. "...Ink?"

"I've always known," Raquel said, "since the moment that the part of her that I represent came to be, that this woman was the one who brought me to life. ...Not to diminish your role in it, of course, but you understand what I mean."

"Yeah," I said. "Of course I do. It was... *you* were always a team effort. I wrote it, sure, but she'd always have input... and same goes for her art. It was always a team effort. She never wound up having that many things to say about anything we tried making afterwards."

I sat down between Raquel and the still woman. "Any time we'd try again, there was just something missing. Nothing about it felt right. It wasn't really you, or any other character there. It wasn't *right*. It was like we were just trying to finish it for the sake of it, but something that's that important to us deserves something better. It deserved something real, something from both of our hearts. But... I guess the real thing's been buried, huh? Like the real her's lost that way to communicate, or something..."

"That's not a bad way to put it, I suppose," Raquel said. She laughed. "Besides, it's not like I know the reason I was born even within my own fiction. She won't tell me. And whatever answer you have, it isn't real yet."

She was our child. Raquel Edelweiss was the child I had had with the still, quiet woman I'd seen in front of me. And when I thought that, when I really, truly realized it, I finally started crying.

"I'm sorry," I said, putting my face in my hands. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I left you alone. I left you both alone for so long. I left her and I left you."

"...What are you talking about?" Raquel turned her head to ask me. "I'm a fictional character."

I sniffled and shook my head. "No. That's not true. I know it's not. I mean, it is, but... No matter how I thought of this, it's not the same. She's a True Dragon. It's not going to be the same. I think you're alive, Raquel. I know you're a fictional character and that you don't exist in the 'real' world, but looking at you now I can't just assume you're not *real*."

Raquel turned her head away and shrugged. "Perhaps. Maybe if I continue existing for long enough I might eventually become a 'real' person in the fullness of time—or perhaps to begin with I'm not all that dissimilar to something like those multiple cores in a cognitive parallel processor. I wouldn't know—I'm just a teenager."

I nodded, and then continued crying. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry to both of you. I'm so, so sorry."

“Nothing you've done is worth blaming you for,” Raquel said. “But go ahead and cry.”

Crying hurts. It doesn't really necessarily hurt-hurt, but it makes your face sticky, it makes your eyes feel strange, and it hurts to do because it's letting out all these feelings that felt bad in the first place. It's like feeling everything that hurt you all over again. I don't do it often. Everything was quiet and I was in a room that wasn't and all I could focus on was how much I absolutely hated crying.

But then I could speak, and I found myself wondering something. “What... is she watching?”

“Memories,” Raquel said, “filtered through the eyes of her other aspects. Right now, I can only imagine it's a reel full of memories of aspects who simply no longer exist.”

I really, properly looked at the screen, and then—Boom. There I was. A younger me, through someone else's eyes. Through her eyes. The sound was muffled and quiet, but there were subtitles, and some of these moments I recognized.

There was me, caring for her in bed. Me, holding her hand when she couldn't sleep in the dark. Me, taking her along to some place interesting. The memories flashed quickly by, one, two, three, four. After just a few minutes watching, I felt like I'd reviewed over a month from our relationship.

But I wasn't thinking anything about how happy it made me that these were memories she felt were worth saving. I realized something. None of the memories I saw, no matter how long I watched, were memories in which I frowned. I was always protecting her, guiding her along, soothing her. I was always happy, in the memories I saw. I was always... happy.

“I was scared,” I said. “I was always scared. I was scared that if I did something wrong, you'd break. You'd been hurt so bad, so, so bad, and I was scared. I didn't know what to do. You were... you were the first real friend I'd ever had. I was happy when I was with you, but all of a sudden you'd been put in this state where I felt like if I wasn't just like I was when we first met, you'd break.

“That was a lie, too. Or, well... I guess it wasn't really a lie. When I was in Iorys, I was happy, because I wasn't... here, anymore. On Earth, where I felt so alone. Nobody wanted to be friends with me. No matter how much I tried to put on a chipper face, nobody would. Especially not when they knew who my mother was. They expected someone like her and they didn't get it because I just wanted to have friends, at all. I was nerdy. I liked things girls weren't supposed to like. I mean—I mean, come on. All this, it's based on *Ar tonelico*. That series was made for nerdy teenage boys and for some reason I liked it? Even the kind of people who liked the sort of thing I liked didn't want to talk to me. I wasn't 'right'.

“When I said you were the first friend I ever had, I didn't just mean on Iorys. I mean... You were the first person I'd ever met who was a girl who also liked the kind of stuff I did. I mean, I couldn't help but laugh when you admitted you'd like, bought all these nerdy games behind your parents' back. That wasn't Raven. That wasn't anything to do with Raven, that was *you*, before Raven ever even showed up. Even if you weren't Raven—even if you *aren't* Raven—I would've fallen for you either way. All my weird, nerdy aspects, being a huge nerd who liked things for men *and* women, you made it feel okay to be me.

“So I was scared. I thought I'd lost you forever. And I... I blamed myself. I blamed myself for

not noticing. I blamed myself for not saving you. I blamed myself for causing you to be here in the first place. I hated myself even more for it, but I couldn't show you that. I thought that if I showed you that, that might break you, too. I thought... I mean, I felt like if I wasn't the same Mio I presented to you when I was younger, this cool girl Raven liked, what if it wouldn't be enough? What if it would hurt you? And I didn't want that. I never, ever wanted that.

“It's been burning me up inside for so long that I feel like this. It felt like I was going insane. I loved you, and I was happy with you, but there was something wrong, and it shouldn't have been wrong. I was happy, so I shouldn't have been miserable, but I was. And then... And then you *did* break. Then you did break, and you know what? I learned that it really *was* my fault. That I'd been duped into helping cause all of your suffering in the first place. That I was right.

“It feels awful. It feels awful knowing I was right. You say you blame yourself for the Dragons showing up, but if it's your fault, it's my fault, too. And you know, for you, everything sucks there. You'd never have wished for that. But I wished to have a friend, and the world I got out of it is *better for me*. I'm *happier*. This world where everyone is miserable is the happiest place I've ever been! People can support me, but people need me, too! I'm valued, I have friends, people appreciate me... I don't have to hide behind a pseudonym or an exaggerated personality to be who I want to be.

“Everyone in the human race is miserable, but I'm happy. I got happiness out of the worst thing that's ever happened to humanity. And you... You started out afterwards being really broken, but now you're getting better. Even when you're sad, there's something special, something coming back to you that hasn't been there for years. I feel like I'm finally really seeing you again, but what am I even doing to help you? I'm forcing you to help me. I thought it would be a good idea at first, since it was one of those nerdy interests we wound up bonding over and all, but it's wound up this awful, selfish thing I do that just helps me! You're getting better, and I should be happy, and I'm not as happy as I should be because I know I'm using your getting better as a way to satisfy myself.

“I'm... I love you so much. I can't stand the idea of living in a world without you, the *real* you. I'd love you forever. I'd let you take me with you and I'd be happy with it. I'd be perfectly happy if the rest of the world were gone as long as I got to stay with you wherever you went. You made me real. I can only create things because of you. I don't want to stay in some stupid, little kid romance with you where all I say is platitudes. I really, genuinely, love you.

“And I *need* you. I need you to *help* me. I'm scared and I hurt. Even when I'm coming close to being the person I want to be, there's so much, there's so many feelings inside me and I need you to help me. I want to help you and I want you to help me. I need that. I need us to be in a real relationship. I need us to help each other. And I... I...”

My breathing went quiet for a second. I'd been off and on crying through that whole thing, but I went quiet, because I'd realized something.

“Why... can't I say any of this... to *you*?”

I slowly stood up.

“Why can't I say any of these things to the real you? Why do I need to say it to this version of you that doesn't hear me, doesn't see me, can't respond? Why can't I just *say* this to your *face* when I know I need to, when I know it's what I need to tell you more than anything? Why is all of this, all

these feelings, why can't I say them out loud to the person I love?!"

My hands started shaking. I stared down at them.

"Why... am I *like* this?"

I knew why. And when I stood up, the image on the screen paused. She happened to be right there.

"You," I said. "You're the one. You caused this. You're the one who did this."

I walked up to the wall and punched the image. I punched the image of my mother's face.

"It's *you*. Ever since I was born, it's been *you*," I said, running my fingers through my hair. "I've always been having to make excuses for you. Lie down and say you're doing good enough. Nobody would ever believe me if I told them Homura Akaneno wasn't doing enough. Nobody would ever believe me if I told them how bad of a parent she really was."

I punched it again. The 'screen' didn't even flinch. I was punching a wall.

"You. It's you! It's your fault! It's your fault! I can't even look at you without having to run away because I'm scared of what you'll say to me, I'm scared of having to deal with you! I've had to deal with you for so long and... and then you start... you think you have the right to take credit for what I've done? I'm a music producer! I've written successful manga! I'm the best damn relief worker in City Hall and soon I'm going to be an *idol*, and you're just gonna keep saying, 'my daughter, my daughter', like it's something you can take credit for! It's always been *you*!"

I heard Raquel stand up and say something, but I couldn't hear her—I was too busy seeing red.

"You'll take credit for anything! You'll steal away anything someone does as long as you can spin it to be about yourself! You've never changed one bit in your entire life! And you wouldn't even listen if I told you that, would you?! You'd tell me I was wrong! I... You know how I feel about you, Homura Akaneno? I *hate you*!"

My breath was heavy and hot. I was grinding my teeth, and I punched the wall again. "I hate you! I hate you! That's how I feel! I hate you! I hate you and your stupid inventions and that stupid smug look you get on your face! I hate *both of you*! You did this to me, both of you! You're both the same self-absorbed narcissist! You're both the worst! I want you out of my life! I want you out of *our* lives! All you do is make them *worse*!"

There was a flash of light, then. All I heard was Raquel exclaim, "A Paradigm Shift?!" before I was engulfed. Somehow, I'd made that thin, frail woman react, but I couldn't think about that at the time. Everything inside me was crashing out all at once. The closet with all those boxes had been opened.

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The second I got out of the pod, I leapt up and ran out of the room. "Hey, wait," Kyosuke said, "you need to be a bit more careful—"

But I was out by the time he said anything. I hit the relay point and willed myself right to City Hall, stomping through the front and forcing open the doors as fast as I could. There was a temp worker at the front, but nobody was going to stop me from going up the stairs to the second floor.

The previous SDF Barracks had been cleared out, so the room on the far side of the floor was being used for technical testing. Nobody important worked in here, it was all grunts, and at this hour it wasn't going to be very populated. But I knew she'd be there, when I threw open the door.

I knew she'd be there, with that stupid bikini top on. I knew she'd be there, still just as glamorous and trashy as ever. And I knew she'd turn around and go “Oh, hey, daughter, what's good?” like nothing was wrong. “Whoa, hey, what—”

So I punched her. I clocked Homura across the face, my right hand pounding straight into her left cheek. Bits of spit flew out of her mouth as she reached up a hand to feel the area of that sudden pain. “...H...huh?”

“You wanna know why I'm pissed off at you, huh? You wanna know why I'm mad?!” I yelled. There were only two other people in the room, and they were both cowering in the corners. “You think it's because of this Project NEW GAME bullshit?! Like hell! It's because you're the *fucking worst!* It's because you *ruined me!* It's thanks to you I don't have a dad, since you're such a narcissistic, self-absorbed *bitch!* It's thanks to you my mom, my real mom, is dead, because you were such a *shit friend!* It's *thanks to you* that I can never, ever, ever tell anyone how I'm *really FEELING!*”

Homura managed to register what had happened, then threw her arms out at me. “Whadda... what the fuck?!” Homura gasped. “Why are you *hitting me?!!*”

“Ever since I was a kid, I was alone because *you* left me that way! Do you even know what it's like to have you for a mother?! People assume you're a freak because your mother's a freak! *My own father couldn't stand looking at me* and it's all because of *you*, and you have the fucking gall to waltz back into my life and start acting like you deserve a medal for being there at all?!

“I've hated myself since I was little because of you! I could never say anything to improve my situation because *you're Homura Akaneno, the beautiful genius!* How could anything ever be wrong?! Anything I said just sounded ridiculous! Nobody would ever listen to me! My life had to be perfect because I was rich and well-off and had *you, the greatest mother ever!*”

I flailed my arms again and again, panting and heaving. “Nobody would ever look at me! Nobody would ever listen to me! And any time I had someone, *you would ruin it!* It would all be about *you* again! Then you come back in and all of a sudden I have to babysit this *big child* of a mom, I have to make sure she actually does anything like a human! I had to be the adult! I always had to be the adult! The only time you ever came through for anything was when it *wasn't me!*”

“B-but, wait, hold on—”

“And you have the fucking GALL to keep going, oh I love my daughters, my beautiful daughters, *my, my, my daughters!* You didn't raise me! You never raised me! Natsume Hikasa raised me, and she's *dead!* And now because you're such a celebrity, anything I do, anything I ever do, it's always *you taking the credit!* I can't be myself because if I do anything as myself, without a fucking pseudonym, *everyone credits YOU!* And now you're taking the credit for my *girlfriend*, too, acting like

everything she does is because of you, too!”

“But I didn't *do that!*” Homura yelled, throwing her arms up. “I wasn't the person who did that!”

I went quiet for a second, then started trembling. “What.”

“I-I mean, I wasn't, right? I mean, you—I mean sure I wasn't the greatest mother, but the me you're talking about, that's not *me* me, that's the bad me! Why are you taking it out on me?! It's not my fault!”

I'd been planning to come in and just smack her once. I swear I was. But then she said that.

“It's not... your fault? That wasn't *you?*” I whispered, my nails starting to dig into my palms. “That wasn't you? So, what? I'm not your daughter, then?”

“Uh—I mean, that's not what I meant—”

“The instant someone tries to make you culpable, I'm not your daughter anymore? I'm only your daughter when you can take credit for me, huh?” I was really hissing by this point.

“Come on, you know what I mean! I mean, I've been doing my best!” Homura said, leaning forward, pleading with me. “Of course you're my daughter! But—”

She let out this big, hacking wheeze as I drove my knee into her stomach, then took that opportunity to start punching her again as her hands went to cover her stomach.

“I'm not your daughter when I'm a liability, huh?! I'm only your daughter when you can use me, huh?! Use me to make yourself look more impressive, use me for your stupid experiments, you're always, always like that!”

And again. And again. And again. “For the past half a fucking decade I've been forcing myself to be perfect, the perfect daughter, the perfect girlfriend, because your parenting taught me I couldn't say anything else or I'd be worthless! Because it would be *my fault for having issues in the first place*, because how could I possibly have issues when everything around me is so good?! When everyone knows that I have the *perfect MOTHER?!*”

I was kind of amazed that it took me this long to draw blood from her mouth, but there it was, a little bloodstain on the floor.

“Even here, even when I can finally be myself, have people appreciate me for me, you always had to be there to ruin everything! And now I'm breaking down because when Chisa needs me most, I can't say anything, I can't admit that I need help! I need help so fucking bad, Homura, I can't do everything all by myself! I need to be able to rely on someone, and thanks to you I *never, ever, ever, ever, EVER had that!*”

“Stop!” Homura yelled, cowering in fear from me on the floor. “Stop! Mio, please, stop!”

“Why?! Why should I stop!” I yelled. My heart was going a mile a minute in my chest. “Give me one good reason I shouldn't keep beating the shit out of you!”

“Because it *hurts!*”

“*Good!*” There were tears running down my face. I couldn't stop them. “Maybe you can feel what it's like to be me every second of every minute of every hour of every day I have to spend knowing that I can never tell anyone that I'm in pain because you fucked me up! Maybe you can feel what it's like to be broken! I'm a worthless human being thanks to *you!* I'm nothing! I fucked everything up and it's all because of you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you, I hate you!”

“I didn't—but I didn't—”

“Why was I even born?! Why did you have kids?! Why did you have to fuck everything up by having kids?! Why did you have to ruin Chisa's life by having me in the first place?! Why am I alive if I'm only ever an extension of *you?! Why?! Why?! Why?!*”

Before I could kick her again, my arms were caught in a lock from behind. “Mio!” It was Chisa. “Mio, stop! Let's go!”

“No! Let me go!” I struggled against her as best I could. “Let me go! I'm not done with her yet! Let me go! LET ME *GO!*”

“I won't!” Chisa yelled. “I don't want to see you do this! You're better than this!” I kept struggling. “Please, Mio, just *stop!*”

Then, whatever demon possessed me, riled me up, lit me on fire from inside, just sort of... vanished, and all I could really do was cry. “Why?” I sobbed, my tears dripping onto the floor. “Why did you do this to me? Why am I like this? Why am I alive?”

Of course, Homura couldn't respond. Battered and beaten as she was, all she could do was stare at me like the monster I was. All I could do was weep helplessly as Chisa dragged me away.

“When I was fourteen, I tried to kill myself.”

Mio and I were sat down next to each other on our bed, and once she'd stopped crying, that was the first thing she said.

“I just couldn't stand it. Everything felt so hopeless. I felt like I wasn't even really a person, like there was nothing inside me. I didn't have any friends, neither of my parents loved me... I was alone. I tried to drown myself in my sink by knocking myself out with medication, but... before I could, I woke up. It hurt. I had water in my lungs and I felt horrible. Everything was painful, but I knew I wanted to live. I had to be taken to the doctor. Aunt Natsume paid for it. I don't think Homura even knows.”

“Mio...”

“Sometimes I think I should just finish the job,” she said. She laughed this awful, self-loathing chuckle. “I mean... isn't it awful? I'm happier after the apocalypse. I feel more alive, more able to be myself. That's so twisted. I'm the worst kind of person. I always have been. Even... with you.”

Instead of responding, I leaned in and hugged her. “Chisa...?”

“That was never your fault, Mio,” I said. “All you did was be lonely. None of this is your fault. I am not your fault.”

“But I could never help you,” she said, her whole body quivering in my arms. “I could never say anything real. I could never say anything that could really help you. I felt so scared of you, scared that if I showed that vulnerability—”

“That I would break,” I said. “And I... I fell for it. I didn't dig deeper. And I hid myself, too. If you're the worst sort of person, at least you're a person.”

“But that's... not true,” Mio said, nuzzling a bit closer into my hug. “That's not true. Sure, you might be a monster, but... you want to live with people. You shouldn't have to not be yourself to do that. You shouldn't have to be stuck in there, pretending to be someone you're not.”

“Neither should you,” I said. “You want to be relied on, but you also want to be able to rely on people. You can't live without help. You shouldn't have to.”

With just a little distance, both of us gazed into each other's eyes. I can't tell you just how beautiful Mio's eyes were in that moment. I felt like, for the first time ever, I was really, truly looking at the woman I loved. “I, um... I want you to know something,” I said.

“What's that?” Mio asked.

“Well... you know, I know I'm not really supposed to know what happens, but... I. Well, I am a True Dragon, and when I saw you running out in such a huff—”

Mio gulped, and her eyes went wide. “Oh. Oh! Oh, uh—so you—”

“Yeah, I... I do. I do remember all the things you said, there at the end. Obviously it's impossible

for me to actually remember all of it, but I remember what you said there, at least,” I said. I rubbed the back of my head and looked away. “Sorry.”

“No, no, that's...” Mio huffed. “No! That's not good enough! I can't just—I have to... I have to say these sorts of things to your face. I don't want to just be silent.”

“Okay,” I said. “Go ahead.”

Mio took a deep breath, and I waited.

“I love you, Chisa,” Mio said, “but I've been scared for a long time that if I rely on you, it would hurt you. I'm scared of hurting you. You're one of the first things I ever had for myself. But I... I need help. I need you to protect me. I don't...” She sniffled. “I don't want you to try and love me like a human. You're... you're a dragon, Chisa, and that's how I love you best. I love you, the messy you who hates people and goes feral and clutches me tightly and would kill to protect me. I want that. I love that. It makes me feel safe.”

In response, I took my own breath.

“I love you, Mio,” I said, “but I've been scared for a long time that if I let out my beastly instincts, these messy parts of myself, it would scare you away. I'm scared of hurting you. I love you more than anything else in the world. I want to protect you, but I also can't stand the idea of anyone taking you from me. I want you to be *mine*, and nobody else's. And if I can have that, have you be vulnerable, have you rely on me, then I can weather the storm of acting human.”

“Chisa...” A blush came to Mio's face.

I leaned in a bit closer. “Honestly, seeing you cry, seeing these vulnerable looks you don't give anyone else... it's a little intoxicating. This is a Mio only I get to see. I want to see more of you. More than just the facade you put on. More than just that teenage girl Raven fell in love with.” By this point, I'd started unconsciously pushing forward to get some height on Mio. Seeing her flustered, seeing her so happy about me saying these things straight from the possessive, beastly core of my self... It was incredible. I was so, so happy. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world, and you are *mine*, and I will see you be your beautiful self in the truest fashion possible or I will burn down this world that would stifle you.”

“...You promise?” Mio said. The quiver in her voice, that hesitance, that fear... I wanted to rip apart everything that had caused it.

“Always,” I said.

“I love you!” Mio yelped, reaching up to hold me close. The tears returned to her eyes. “I love you. I love you. I'll always love you.”

“Will you help me,” I asked, “if I need to rely on you?” She nodded. “Let's be equals, Mio. I love you, too. More than anything.”

That whole night, we never let go of each other, not even once.

There's only really one other big thing that happened that I think we need to talk about before we skip to the Second Dragon War, I think. It was on a snowy day in early February—I'd been helping Taichi shovel snow out of the Shuto Expressway for a few hours, but other help had arrived to relieve us of our duty, so we were now just walking along through snow at the ground level, taking in the sights of the ruined city.

“Hey, *nee-san*,” Taichi asked me. “Why is it that some areas are back to normal—er, you know, from the dragons—and some aren't?”

“It depends on the dragon,” I said. “The one in Yotsuya, for instance—even though it constructed those walkways, much of its distortion was illusory, so aside from those new structures much of it's the same. But in Ikebukuro, there's not much that can change when all that wood and metal's been twisted. Why?”

“Just curious,” Taichi said. “I mean, I know Tokyo's never really gonna be the same, but are we just gonna have that big factory in Kokubunji as a national landmark from now on? That feels weird.”

“I'd say you should think of it like the crater of a meteor, or something,” I said with a smile. “And, well, maybe it'll—”

I stopped. Taichi took a moment to realize I'd stopped. “What's up?”

“If you're going to sneak up on me,” I said, my hand reaching down to Tomoegozen's hilt, “you could at least do it while I'm alone, Hypnos.”

This was a single road, and we were alone amidst the alleys. Under the snow, no sound, no life, fluttered about in the air... save for the woman behind me, walking toward me with her hand on the hilt of her own blade. She stopped in her tracks when I called out to her.

“I don't often find you alone,” said Emille, woman of Hypnos. “You have many friends, and I'm not going to break into Mio's house to kill you, Dragon.”

“Taichi,” I said, “stand back.”

I turned around to face her, and Emille drew her blade. It wasn't something foreign like Takehaya's blade had been—this was a dueling saber crafted from materials here on Earth. “I am the captain of Unit 13, y'know,” I said. “This won't be a popular move.”

“Do you honestly think that matters to me?” Emille said, a snarl on her face. “No matter what these people think of you, you are a monster. I'm prepared to be despised to rid this planet of you and everything like you.”

“Wait—wait, hold on!” Taichi yelled. “What's going on?”

I cocked my head over my shoulder. “This woman,” I said, “can't stand the fact that I exist. She won't let me leave until one of us is dead. Look away, if you can't stand it.”

“Another one of your pet humans, is he?” Emille asked, cocking her head in Taichi's direction.

“He's my brother,” I said. I raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you want to do this? You couldn't even beat Mizuchi.”

“In this little disguise of yours? Absolutely,” Emille said.

I drew Tomoegozen from her sheath and matched Emille's pointed blade. A chill wind blew, snowflakes driving through the space between us, for one moment, two, three—

The wind halted just for a moment, and Emille closed the distance in just that moment—our blades clashed as I parried her overhead swing, then juked to the side of a stab to my midsection. Sparks flew as our blades clashed, and Emille's small form elegantly spun to the distance to deliver another stab.

I performed my own spin, using the rotational force of my blade to batter her with wind currents—but the only damage she took was a few split hairs, barreling through for a swing aimed at my midsection. I had to spin Tomoegozen into position to block that strike, but I wasn't prepared for Emille to make that swing with only one hand, using the other to strike me in the stomach. No matter how small her hands were, that *hurt*.

She followed up by taking advantage of that moment to attempt to drive her sword straight into my stomach, but I recovered quicker than she expected, leapt back, and sheathed Tomoegozen. As she charged for me once again, I clutched Tomoegozen's hilt, and the swing I let forward was wreathed in flame—it melted the snow on the ground and brought it up into the air as a splash of water, giving me enough time to disorient Emille and go for a slice to her flank. But—

“Ggg...hfff!”

The first blood was spilt, and it wasn't mine—but Emille had mustered all her force to *catch* Tomoegozen in one hand, stopping it before it could cleave her bone. Her face twitched with the no-doubt excruciating pain, but my shock left me open for long enough for her other arm to drive a stab into my right side. “Aaagh!”

“Goddamn... dragon!” Emille let go of Tomoegozen and yanked her sword out of me. She'd missed any vital organs, but it was hardly a glancing blow—she'd hit pretty deep, and I felt the sweat begin to flow from my forehead, feeling like it was nearly freezing right there on my skin. “Go to *hell*—!”

“*Stop!*”

Taichi jumped between us, landing dead center and standing to block Emille, and I panted out a, “W-wait. No, Taichi, please—”

“Get out of my way,” Emille said, the blood from her hand dripping down her blade, “unless you want to die, too.”

“I don't even know who you are,” Taichi said, shaking his head, “and you want to come here and kill my sister and expect me to just stand over there?”

Emille cursed under her breath, then said, “Boy, I don't know how I can make this any clearer than you no doubt already understand. That thing is not your sister. It's not even human. That *thing* is a *Dragon*. The same dragons that destroyed your home.”

“And why should I care?” Taichi asked.

This was most likely not the answer Emille was expecting, as she had to take a moment to stammer. “Wha... what do you mean, *why should you care?*”

Taichi snorted and pulled out a roll of bandages. “Put your sword down so I can at least get that bandaged before we get you to a doctor. It's not like *you're* in danger if you don't attack her.”

Perhaps feeling disarmed by this confusing young boy, Emille did drop her sword, but only to yank her hand away. “Get away from me! Shouldn't you be tending to your 'sister' before—”

“Oh, she's *fine*,” Taichi said, grabbing Emille's arm and yanking it his way. “You aren't.”

...Oh, yes, I was fine. Not even a scar. I have an accelerated healing factor, as it turns out. I have to focus on it a bit, but as long as it's not going to kill me or something I'll probably be fine.

“Anyway, she probably looks to you like she's a cuckoo, right?” Taichi asked.

Emille blinked. “What?”

“A cuckoo bird. A brood parasite,” Taichi said, wrapping around Emille's hand. “You know, one of those breeds of bird, or fish, or insect, or what have you that have another species raise their young for them?”

“This is a recurring problem on your planet?!” Emille sputtered.

“Look, there's lots of reasons for why it's a viable evolutionary path, but that's beside the point,” Taichi snorted. “That's probably how she looks to you. Like she's this evil thing that's been working against us from the moment she was born. But she's not—you're just wrong. Humans don't work like that.” He paused. “I mean, I kind of figured you were probably something pretty close, at least, but if you don't understand that...”

“I've been battling the Dragons since before your race even *existed*, boy,” Emille said, her face twisting again into a snarl—though this time I had to imagine at least part of it was the pain finally kicking in. “Do you know how many planets I've seen them destroy? How many species foolishly thought, time and time again, that they could survive?”

“Well, then I *must* have a point, right?” Taichi asked. “After all, we did survive.”

The snow continued to fall gently. Once Emille's hand had been fully bandaged, she used her other hand to pick up her sword, but didn't yet sheathe it. “I have been made to admit a number of times now that humans are unusual creatures.”

“Then here's something for you,” Taichi said. “Even if Chisa did eat the planet or something, I'd still love her until the moment I died.”

I gasped, under my breath. Emille's eyes went wide, too, and she let out a sputtering laugh. "Are you joking?"

"Nope," Taichi said, shaking his head. "Whatever you are, I think you think you're smarter than us—that we're being tricked and you're the only one who can see it. But I know what my sister is. I've known it long before we had words for it. I've known before anyone else saw it. I knew because I was the one who had to keep her alive when our parents were trying to beat the human out of her. She's something else. She's different from me. But it doesn't matter who or what she is—she's my sister and I love her."

"Wha—"

"The way I see it," Taichi continued, holding up his hand to interrupt Emille, "obviously, it isn't just thinking that makes humans humans. And it's not the ability to reason, either. It's that we have the power to be better than what our birth tells us. We have the power to be more than what, like, 'evolution' tells us we should be. You're Murakumo, right? I see the armband. As far as I'm concerned, that's what 'will' is—the power to *be more*. Chisa isn't a human, but she's a dragon with will—and even if she eventually can't, if she has to let go, I'll love her because she tried."

And in response, Emille—"You... boy. What's your name?"

"I'm Taichi Inomiko," Taichi said. "And you?"

"Emille," Emille said.

"Emille," Taichi said, "if you're going to live among humans, then you be more yourself, got it? And keep that sword away from my sister unless she's actually doing something wrong."

Shaking her head, Emille said, "To think. I hadn't imagined you to be raised with such a sanctimonious boy, VFD."—sheathed her sword.

"He... has a way of coming through when it counts," I said. "He's pretty incredible, isn't he? Quick on the draw, well-spoken... He keeps surprising me." And I sheathed mine, as well.

"Fine. I'll let her go for today," Emille said, turning around. "But you should be aware, Taichi, that I'll be back the instant she needs killing."

"Can you just go to a doctor already?" Taichi snorted. "You caught a katana with your bare hand. I know at least one, if you need a referral or something."

"I'm *fine*!" Emille griped over her shoulder before turning around to walk down this narrow road. "Showing sympathy to a woman who tried to kill your sister, what a sanctimonious boy. This planet's going to the dogs sooner or later, I swear."

We didn't wind up telling Kirino about this. Believe it or not, Taichi had a way of convincing me, too. Of course, Mio was pretty angry when I wound up coming home with a stab wound through my clothes, but... all was well that ended well, right?

I remember I was backstage, just before going out, slugging down so much water I felt like I was going to burst to try and counter how much I was sweating. Even though I'd wanted to do this, I was nervous—is that weird?

“You're going to be perfectly alright,” Miku said, patting me on the head. “There's no need to fret, Mio.”

“I'm not really fretting, exactly?” I said. “I mean, it's just a bigger crowd than I expected. I figured like a few dozen, not—”

“Many people are hungry for a return to performance, I think,” Miku said. “But I believe in you. We all do.” She paused. “Where are the cameras?” Then she stood up. “Kyosuke-*kun*! Where are the cameras, please?”

“The feeds are over here by the lift up to the rafters!” called Kyosuke, who was up affixing the lights.

Miku took me over to the camera feeds showing the audience outside. I wasn't really sure at first what she wanted to show me other than the hundreds of people waiting outside for the performance to start, but then she gestured to a single figure, way on the outside, sitting on the furthest edge of the makeshift stage.

I squinted, but I didn't have to very hard. She has a single swoop of bright red hair, after all. It's pretty hard to miss if you're looking for it. “She's here?” I gasped. “I told her she didn't have to be!”

“But she is here,” Miku said. “Does that make you feel better?”

I took a deep breath in. In, out. Four seconds in, four seconds out. “Yeah,” I said with a smile, “it really does.”

All I had to do was sing to her, really. Everyone else there was just going to hear it. Funny how that works out, huh? Hundreds of people out there, but I could only think about one. Yeah... yeah, I think that's about it. I can't think of anything else before that September.

Oh, the show? Come on now. I said I'd become Japan's top idol. Even if I was the only idol actually playing, I take that kind of promise seriously! Have some faith in me! What, you *want* to hear me being lovey-dovey about it?

Yeah, I thought not. Anyway, so, six months later...