

~1. A Shy Girl's Beginnings~

One learns that a hot stove is hot by touching it. When one touches the hot stove, it burns one's hand, and one learns not to do that. Fire, itself, is a source of both beauty and danger—its destructive power is near-unparalleled on the planet Earth, and yet it also fascinates the eye.

However, a fire can only come when proper kindling is sparked. So, the flame within the girl's palm was as of yet small, only a spark of what would come.

Class had just gotten out at an elementary school in Akasaka, Tokyo—a segment of the Minato ward, as opposed to the young lady's Shibuya. It was larger, but had fewer people—however, it was home to many foreign embassies, so the shy girl was often able to see foreigners out and about. She had never been the strongest girl, but occasionally she would dream of travel. It was a humble dream for a girl from a region with Tokyo's tallest high-rise complex, which would often glint sunlight into her eyes as she walked by, piercing her long bangs.

The only sound that came from her was a small tapping of the foot. She sat in the back corner of the classroom—she was, after all, a shy girl. With her hair long and her bangs shaggy and long enough to cover her eyes, her classmates did not often see Koron Nagataka's eyes. Her hair was the girl's only real standout feature, in fact—she was small, but not abnormally so, and thin, but not abnormally so.

Her deep red hair, though, was abnormal—quite an uncommon color of hair for any girl, especially one of her ethnic group. So it was that Koron Nagataka had one noteworthy feature.

“Hey, Naga-chan! Whatcha doin'?”

Another girl slid up to her side now that classes had ended—a showy girl, a bit taller than Koron and with dyed blonde hair, who wore a sweater that was a bit too large for her such that her fingers would pop out of the sleeves. This girl—a girl named Ageha Yamazaki—was Koron's only real friend. Ageha grinned a great, wide, pearly grin at Koron, and Koron, though her eyes only showed slightly through her bangs, smiled back.

“Oh, um,” Koron said, pushing back her bangs a little to let her eyes meet Ageha's, “just thinking about this, is all. I think it's gotten a little bigger.”

—Koron Nagataka was something of a bookworm, and not particularly social, but not because she was an unkind girl. Rather, it was simply that she had trouble speaking to most people. Having a friend who could drive a conversation was helpful for her, and for that, she was grateful.

However, the unremarkable red-headed bookworm had just recently obtained one more standout feature.

“Oh, yeah, totally,” Ageha said, leaning in to the small flame emanating from Koron's palm. “You test it on anything?”

“What?” Koron said, dispersing the flame and waving her hands about. “Of course not! I—I would never! What if someone got hurt?”

“You could do it on a little sheet of paper and then put it out afterwards or something,” Ageha said. “Heck, I could see if I could sneak you a little room to do it at my place?”

“No, no, please, I don't want to intrude. It's okay,” Koron said.

—Some few months ago, something odd had happened to Koron Nagataka. One day, she had been up late when she'd been knocked unconscious by a sudden whooshing noise. Something odd had happened to her then, but she hadn't been able to place it until a few days before now—when she'd snapped her fingers at home, and sparks had flown.

She'd hurried to tell her parents, but took a day or two more to actually replicate it. By now, it was becoming clear—she was developing some manner of pyrokinesis. Her palms were generating some kind of heat through the movement of her mind.

Still, walking amidst the crowds on their way out of school, you would hardly think that this schoolgirl was one grappling with such an unbelievable development. As she looked up at the sky, Koron looked just like any other. “Ageha,” she said, “do you think that there are other people who can do things like this?”

“Probably,” Ageha said, shrugging her shoulders, “if you can, right? Ooh, maybe I'll learn how to fly next!”

Koron giggled a bit under her breath, then looked down at her hand again, hiding a small flame in plain sight amidst the crowd. It was hot—it generated heat like any real flame. There was a degree of fascination to it as she willed it to bend and waver in her hands.

Her parents had meant to name her 'Ryuko', initially, written with characters for 'child' and 'dragon'. However, a clerical error had resulted in the two characters being reversed, and her parents had opted for the much more unusual name of 'Koron' as a result. It was not an unheard of name, but Koron Nagataka had never met another Koron.

This was, in fact, the reason that Ageha referred to her as 'Naga-chan'. The two had been friends for several years now, but Koron had initially been embarrassed by her odd name, and so Ageha had given her a nickname based on her surname.

—Koron Nagataka was a girl with an unusual name, unusual hair, and now, an unusual power. If the planet truly did choose her for a greater purpose, it was done being subtle. But that was for the future—the shy girl had no idea what awaited her.

English was her best subject, this shy girl; Koron Nagataka was a literature girl at heart. Were she given the chance, she likely would have joined the school's literature club. She had, however, not yet gotten to middle school to properly socialize (or so she told herself,) and had

not yet worked through her anxiety before a certain malady took her.

“Why fire?” Koron muttered to herself one morning. She had gained the fine control over the flame to burn a single strand of her bangs, and that confirmed to her very well that the flame was in fact completely genuine flame. She wiped some sweat away from her brow which arrived in place of the burnt strand of hair, and then stood up, shaking away a bit of lightheadedness.

When she came into school that day, people jostled her on her way to class, and she found herself inwardly wishing they wouldn't—after all, her head was swimming, and she did not feel well. It was a sudden malady, or else she might have asked to stay home—but then, she had very good attendance.

It was not until she had sat down, awaiting class's beginning, that Koron realized what was odd with her head. There was a sort of *redness* to her vision. A red tinge had been blanketed over everything she saw, and her eyes felt like they were jittering about, trying to adjust to this tinge. The tapping of her foot had started increasing in its pace. It was starting to develop into a headache.

“Hweh?” Ageha made a funny noise, as she came over to Koron's desk—a normal occurrence that Koron hardly noticed. Ageha poked Koron in the temple. “Naga-chan, are you okay?”

“...Huh?” Koron muttered. She gritted her teeth. “I... I don't think so...? I...”

Ageha, too, was bathed in that red tinge. It hurt Koron to look at. Having her eyes open itself hurt her—but her eyes didn't hurt, no, it was some kind of pain inside of her head. Before she realized it, she was in the hallway again, being supported on Ageha's shoulder. “Age...ha?”

“Hey, c'mon, don't scare me like this. You're pale as a sheet,” Ageha said. “What's going on?”

“Everything's... red,” Koron mumbled, feeling some sort of burning inside of her chest. “It's... red... everything's...”

—H,

—hhhgrffhk,

—haa, “h, hHHKKGH—!”

There were a scant few students who had poked their heads out of their classrooms to see what was going on. Ageha was barely able to avoid being burnt, as her poor, sick friend vomited the contents of her stomach into a flaming puddle of bile on the floor. The traces of saliva on Koron's chin themselves were sizzling, ready to be lit aflame.

Ageha stepped back, guiding Koron along, but Koron, in one last flash of consciousness,

hacked out a weak, hollow “Get... away!” before pushing Ageha to the side—

—as Koron collapsed backwards onto a row of lockers, falling unconscious just as her right hand entirely burst into a glowing, orange flame.

~2. A Shy Girl's Diagnosis~

An ambulance was called, and the next few hours passed for the girl in a haze, swimming in and out of consciousness. Her eyes were closed the whole way through, but she heard cries. Confused, terrified cries, the horror evident in the voices of adults she recognized. She lacked the energy to move or open her eyes at all. It was all just pain—a pain in her bones, and a pain somewhere deep inside her skull.

“...recently-identified condition,” an older male voice said. “Rapid-Onset Psychokinesis Syndrome. We call it Akaneno's for short. It was only isolated just earlier this year, but based on mental readings, we think your daughter might be the most severe case yet on record.”

“Rapid-Onset...” That mumble was Koron's father, without a doubt. She could tell from a small lisp in his voice—he'd always tried to hide it before his divorce earlier this year, but these days he didn't bother. “So, you're saying she's psychic?”

“Essentially,” the presumably-doctor said. “Based on the severity of the case, we've actually called in the woman who discovered the condition—er, you've probably heard of her. She'll likely be able to tell us more, but what we know for the moment is that your daughter has suddenly developed what appear to be pyrokinetic abilities. This attack is likely—”

A door slammed open, and a woman's voice called out, “Okaaaay, lemme see those charts, Hoss!” Shuffling of feet—there were four pairs of feet in the room now. If she focused, Koron could hear heavy, teary breathing—likely her mother, if she had to guess. The new woman whistled aloud. “Yeah, wow, okay. So, basically, your daughter—”

“They're the parents, Dr. Akaneno,” the male doctor said. “I, ah, work here.”

'Dr. Akaneno' spun on her feet. “So, basically, your daughter's fire powers are cannibalizing a bunch of resources her body normally uses for upkeep and puberty right now to develop themselves. It's a lot more gradual in people who are born with psychic powers, but your little girl here has a world-class brain that she wasn't born with, so she's gonna need to stay at the hospital for a while so we can make sure her body doesn't kill itself trying to support this new power.”

“*Cannibalizing—?*” Koron's mother sputtered.

“You know,” Dr. Akaneno said, “like the stuff in her bone marrow, hydration—ooh yeah, lots of hydration—look, I'm saying that your kid's probably not gonna be the healthiest for a while. Her life isn't in danger if she's taken care of, and I'll compensate you for the stay. Don't worry, I'm besties with the primary shareholder—”

There was something piercing about this 'Dr. Akaneno' and her voice. She wasn't doing much to reassure her parents, and Koron didn't appreciate her fate being treated so casually. So, she thought to herself—

Shut up. Your voice is obnoxious.

“—and I mean, sure I don't like seeing a kid sick but I wanna at least give you some compensation for needing to take down her data as aaaaaAAA—”

A wash of heat came as Koron finally managed to open one of her eyes—and she was met with a wash of red. A slight red tinge fell over most of the room, but the people there were bright red, and this Dr. Akaneno woman's labcoat—well, the fringes of it had been lit aflame, and she was panicking trying to put the flame out. Koron closed her eyes and willed the fire to stop, and it stopped.

Without opening her eyes, Koron coughed and said, “Quit scaring my parents. Just say I'll be alright and leave i...”

She hadn't been finished, but she'd rapidly run out of breath. Her parents ran over to her bedside (and she was in a hospital bed, she'd seen that much,) and Koron's mother called out her name. “Don't strain your voice,” the male doctor said, “your lungs have taken a bit of a hit from the process, too.”

Koron took a deep breath, and sure enough, it didn't feel as though she could take a truly refreshing breath—shallow gasps through the nose were all she could manage. “Well,” Dr. Akaneno said, “I mean, what's your definition of 'alright', kiddo?”

Didn't he just say I shouldn't talk? Koron inwardly scoffed. Despite her not being a robust girl, Koron had never actually been very sick that she could remember. She was fairly certain this was the absolute worst she had ever felt, and this woman was not helping.

“It's...” Koron took a deep breath in before speaking, and spoke slowly. “...being able... to live... decently. Go... to school... walk.”

“Oh. Yeah, you should be able to do that stuff in... a while,” Dr. Akaneno said in a noncommittal shrug of a tone. “I... huh. Hey, Hoss, what's this supposed to be?”

“That? We're not sure about that reading,” the male doctor said. “Mr. and Mrs. Nagataka, please just make sure she doesn't get out of bed. You can adjust her bed upwards, but she shouldn't be moving much.”

...Her sympathies, Koron supposed. She had already come to the conclusion that this Dr. Akaneno woman was a deeply unfortunate woman to work with. The door shut, and the room was much quieter for it. “Hey,” Koron's mother said, “you feeling alive, kiddo?”

“Barely,” Koron muttered. “My... head... is pounding... and my bones... feel hollow. Water,” she sputtered out.

She hadn't the strength to lift her head, so her father helpfully poured it into her mouth. A bit of water in her system let Koron start to breathe a little more. “Thanks—”

Koron had opened her eyes to look at her parents, but immediately flinched from the pain. Her father's face, his hands, he was a horrible gradient of searing red in her eyes. But... at the same time, she'd caught a snapshot in her mind's eye of his concerned, slowly-aging face. How was such a thing possible?

“Hey, c'mon, sweetie, it's okay,” her father said. Koron opened her eyes again—

She *saw* red. But her mind captured that normal shot, anyhow. And it hurt. It hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt. Having her eyes open hurt. Seeing things hurt. She couldn't handle that. Her breath began to quicken. What was this? How could having her eyes open be doing this to her? What was going on? Was she going blind? Was she, was she—?

“Am I...” Koron muttered. “...going to die...?”

Her mother gave her a hug. “I won't let you,” she said. “We're going to make sure you get the help you need, okay, sweetie? Just sit tight. If your eyes are hurting, just keep them closed.”

Even the darkness inside of her eyes was just that bit more red. “Okay,” Koron said. It came out as little more than a whimper, and some part of her felt she should be crying, but that wasn't happening right now.

~3. A Shy Girl's Death~

“Fascinating,” the girl in the bed said. It was night now, and her parents had been given permission to stay in rooms at this hospital's visitor's ward because of the importance of Koron's treatment. However, she was alone in the room now.

Her eyes—were wide open.

The searing pain in her skull hadn't abated, but something had taken her over. She needed to know what was happening to her eyes, and so she'd opened them. She was a smart young lady, so it came to her quickly—

The physical images being captured by her eyes were the same as they were before. However, the red tinge having been lessened during the colder night told this girl that the red tinge itself was a sort of gradient of cell movement. It was simple and obvious—since she had the ability to alter cell movement, her eyes had adjusted to allow her to see thermographically.

She giggled to herself, excited at the prospects. What an amazing thing! She'd already determined that it wasn't impossible for her to slow cell movement, either—she'd managed to cool a bit of the air. Her brain was better suited to speeding up particles, but altering temperature itself appeared to be well within her purview.

Ahhh, she thought. How blissful. How wonderful. She was in heaven. Nothing could possibly make her happier—

“What the hell am I doing?!” The girl roared at herself, closing her eyes and clutching her head. “That fucking hurts!”

She hissed to herself, gripping the bedside railing and gritting her teeth. She slammed down a glass of water she'd been left with, and instinctively evaporated some remaining drops of condensation on the glass's rim. “Shit. Shit! That fucking hurt!”

A rage was boiling inside the girl, a raw destructive urge. She wanted to burn something. There was something cathartic and calming about burning things, an instinct she couldn't quite quantify but knew she needed to satisfy—

“—A-a-aaaah—?!”

Koron clutched her head again, but this time, the wail wasn't for the pain so much as it was sheer terror. *Something* had just happened inside her mind. For a second, her thoughts had shifted in a manner she wasn't sure of. Not only was her mind changing, not only were her eyes shifting into something inhuman, now something strange was happening to her thoughts, too—?!

And then,

there was a hideously loud

CRACK

inside her skull.

There was a mirror across from the bed, and when the girl opened her eyes, she saw that that mirror had a great *crack* in its center. All the glass remained inside the pane, but it was shattered into near-uselessness. But at the same time, her mind registered that the glass was perfectly fine.

—The girl named Koron Nagataka would later learn that patients with her condition would frequently develop a secondary mental condition called 'Cognitive Parallel Processing'. In short, it was a sort of mental plurality condition wherein an excess of sensory information resulted in the human mind splitting into multiple 'cores' so as to handle it all. It was not universal, but the *crack* of the internal mirror was a common appearance in descriptions of the case's beginnings from those who later reported on their experiences.

A human's mind can only handle so much information. Past that, it cannot function. The pain inside Koron's skull was a testament to that.

“No,

no, no, no, no, no, stop it, stop it, stop it,” Koron begged, clutching her head, bending over and causing an IV stuck into her arm to come loose as she bent inward, eventually curling over on the bed. “Stop it. Stop it!”

For many, it was painless, the sort of experience they only realized in hindsight—but at the same time, many natural psychics who developed into CPP systems realized it had begun at a moment of intense trauma, and supposed that that may have disguised a pain.

But for Koron—

“Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it!” Koron begged her own mind. “Stop it!”

“*Fuck off!*” She roared at herself. “Fuck off! Leave me the hell alone! Don't bother me!”

“But I need to know—I need to know what this means!” She pleaded with herself. “I need to—!”

“I don't want this, I don't—!”

Koron's eyes opened, and the red began again to assault her—that hideous thermal vision that she had never asked for tinged the tears she cried the color of blood.

—There was nothing else to focus on. Nothing, other than this foreign condition forcing its way into her skull and attempting to break her. Nothing, save for her own thoughts beginning to betray her and become alien.

She looked at the shattered (whole) mirror, and saw herself. And for just a moment, she could not recognize the girl in the mirror. Her mind denied that image.

Please! I'm begging you to stop! I just want to go home! I want my parents!

What the hell are they going to do for me?! Shoot me?!

If I looked closer at them, I could learn more about the limitations and function of these eyes!

That oppressive red haze wouldn't stop as Koron tumbled from her bed, her frail body screaming at her to please, please rest. She felt a pain in her fingers that she could only barely tell was from her nails cracking against the floor panels as she desperately clawed, trying to escape the room. She—she was Koron Nagataka. She needed someone to tell her she was Koron Nagataka. With all these thoughts she didn't recognize inside of her head—

No, wait. How could she even know... that she was Koron Nagataka? What if she was just another errant line of thought? What if she was just—?

Koron gripped the mirror with her bloody hands, and now, the illusion was gone. She saw the whole mirror. She saw herself. She saw the girl in the mirror. And she saw her eyes.

She knew, somewhere deep inside,

“Just

how to make the pain

leave me

go away.

ALOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONE!”

A girl named Koron Nagataka awoke two days later. There were a row of bandages

across her eye sockets, and yet she was perfectly aware—her eyes had opened. She turned her head to her mother, who seemed to not believe her own eyes.

There was no redness. After all, there were no eyes to see it with.

“Ah,” Koron said, her voice dry and raspy. “There's your face, Mom. I'm glad I finally get to see it.”

~4. The Hermit and the Rabbit Doll~

Whatever she had done to necessitate the removal of her eyes, Koron couldn't deny her own fine control. There had been no real damage to anything except her eyes. Still, it was a bit annoying having to explain to every nurse who came in that yes, she could still read just fine.

It wasn't that much of a surprise, she supposed. After all, people typically relied on their eyes to see. She had, too, until just a day or two ago. She, as of yet, had little explanation for how on Earth she could see.

"I can't explain it," she said one day to the same doctor who had spoken to her parents before she'd lost her eyes. "Isn't that your job as the medical professional?" He'd looked a bit flabbergasted.

—It was useless to expect things of these people, apparently. How else was she supposed to feel, if she was being afflicted with a malady that had apparently just *suddenly appeared* not even just a year ago? That psychic powers had apparently always existed, but simply never been credibly proven to exist?

What a joke. It was like something out of a trashy anime. Even as miserably exhausted as she felt, tethered to this sack of flesh which was now inexorably betraying her, she couldn't help but laugh at how dumb it all felt.

That was funny, too. She could swear she'd just been a much less cynical girl just a week or so ago, by this point. Perhaps this was what trauma did to someone—or perhaps she'd died. That was a theory she came to. She voiced it, one day, to her only real friend, a girl who came to visit her.

"Ageha," Koron said, "do you believe in ego death?"

Ageha was a simple sixth grader, so she was only able to blink, befuddled. "Ego what?"

"Ego death. The complete loss of subjective self-identity. In Jungian psychology, the term 'psychic death' is used to describe a fundamental change of the psyche. Have you ever heard of a man called Phineas Gage, Ageha?" Koron asked. Ageha hadn't, by the look on her face. "He was a construction worker in America whose head was impaled by a massive iron rod, obliterating much of his left frontal lobe. He survived the incident, and his memory and general intelligence were unaltered, but his personality drastically shifted—while he did eventually undergo significant social recovery, for much of his early years afterwards he was hardly recognizable."

There was a moment of silence, after which Ageha asked, "Uh, why do you know that?"

"Oh," Koron said, snorting, "I read about it last year. I don't tend to tell you about these subjects I research—up until now I've figured you'd find them boring, but I'm bored out of my skull in here and have absolutely no restraint. I find psychology a fascinating subject, you know, always have, but having undergone such a significant amount of mental strain I find myself

considering the subject.”

“Huh. Cool,” Ageha said. “I—”

“It makes me wonder,” Koron continued, heedlessly interrupting her best friend, “what actually constitutes the self. If I can see without the use of my eyes, what does that imply about the brain's use as an organ? My eyes before the incident and my mind now interpret the same images—you look the same, after all. Obviously, my brain is the center of my body's function, it stores my cognitive functions and all—but if my brain has fundamentally been altered and I can still recognize continuity, does that mean I'm still Koron Nagataka?”

There was a moment of silence, after which Ageha said, “I'm eleven.”

“And I'm ten,” Koron said, “but that's fair. I wouldn't expect you to—”

Ageha reached out and put her hands on Koron's shoulders, her own shoulders slumping. “Please don't dump all this stuff that's way too complicated on me right after I thought you might've burnt yourself to death!”

“What?” Koron would've blinked if she had eyes. “But it's interesting, isn't it? The nature of the self is something philosophers have been trying to figure out for years. And I—?”

“Do you want me to bring you some manga or something?” Ageha asked with pleading eyes. Koron shrugged and mumbled a noncommittal 'sure, I guess'.

—Her parents were both relieved to have Koron back. There was something, she supposed, that must've been intangible that she possessed that made her Koron Nagataka, or else they wouldn't have recognized her. Buddha knew, she wryly thought, it wasn't her personality that was recognizable.

The first day she was allowed to return home was two months later, after she'd gotten into a livable physical state. Glass eyes were to be made for her, but she returned to her room, relatively sparse as it was with many of her possessions having been brought to her in the hospital, and dug into a chest in her dresser.

A small rabbit doll sat within. She had a flat head and wore a little top-hat, with beady, black eyes and long, floppy ears. Her small body was awfully charming, Koron had always thought, as was her cross-shaped mouth.

“Nagamimi,” Koron said, “it's been a long time.”

She'd managed to squirrel away a small sewing kit into her room, and it was time for it to come in handy. Koron internally apologized to Nagamimi, but something inside her told her she needed to do this.

Over the next half an hour, Koron sewed and stitched with a surprisingly deft hand. She

wasn't usually all that good at this, but she knew what she was doing and she managed alright. The beady black eyes of her favorite doll now sat at the bottom of that chest, and big purple buttons had replaced her eyes.

“There we are,” Koron said. “Nagamimi. Please always remind me. If I look at you, I can see myself even if a mirror finds itself breaking.”

Nagamimi said nothing in return. When Koron's mother came to the room to see her, the sewing needle was halfway inside of Koron's arm from an apathetic curiosity.

~5. The Hermit's Flames~

*Living is easy with eyes closed,
misunderstanding all you see
It's getting hard to be someone, but it all works out
It doesn't matter much to me*

“...a-chan...”

*Let me take you down,
cause I'm going to...
Strawberry fields
Nothing is real
And nothing to get hung about,*

strawberry fields forever...

“Naga-chan!”

The hermit's long head of hair made it easy to disguise her earbuds, but she was able to recognize the nickname well enough to remove one and say, “Yes?”

Koron was thirteen now, and she'd gotten somewhat taller, but not by much. Ageha was starting to dwarf her, getting flashier by the day. “Class is over, dummy,” Ageha said with a sigh, tapping her forehead. It was doubtless, Koron thought, that she didn't recognize the small sounds coming from Koron's earbuds. “C'monnnn, you've gotta pay more attention.”

“Our final period of the day,” Koron said, “has little to offer me. I've studied more complex literature than any they would deign to throw at me. Thank you for informing me, though.”

—Her pale skin and scarlet eyes and hair meant that other students who were milling about, ready to go home or to their respective clubs, already knew well who Koron was. She had developed a touch of a reputation, and Ageha, who was well-liked outside of this, also received some of their stares. It was simple enough—Ageha would be better off if she did not spend time with Koron.

...This bit of social malarkey was of little import to Koron, however. The two walked home together from school, as they had always lived near each other. “I was listening to the Beatles,” Koron said. “The British rock band?”

“I know who the Beatles are, c'mon,” Ageha scoffed, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “My parents love them. I don't really get it, though.”

“The sound was much more revolutionary back in their heyday, but the music itself is still exceedingly well put-together. I find the band's ongoing trend of creating songs with

intentionally nonsensical or in-joke-laden music fascinating—did you know that there are people who still believe that Paul McCartney is dead?”

Koron said that last statement with a completely straight face, but that got Ageha to stop in her tracks for a moment. “...huh?”

“Yes, it's one of the earliest modern conspiracy theories. The theory posits that on the ninth of November, 1966, Paul had it out with his bandmates, left on a car trip, and was killed in a car crash. Then, to spare the public, they replaced him with a lookalike, a 'William Shears Campbell', but the guilt of hiding their friend's death caused them to place esoteric clues in their music and album art,” Koron said.

Ageha was walking beside her as they stepped off of the campus of their school, but by the look of things she found herself befuddled. “...Wha.”

“Many of the supposed hints were found through the human brain's ability to become convinced of something through being told to hear it—for instance, in 'Strawberry Fields Forever', a background vocal features Lennon saying 'cranberry sauce', but 'I buried Paul' became the interpretation. The Abbey Road album art also features Paul, barefoot, walking out of step with the rest of the group, with their outfit colors supposedly representing a funeral procession. There's also a white Volkswagen Beetle in the picture with the license plate LMW28IF—'twenty-eight if he were alive', supposing McCartney's age. LMW here perhaps being a reference to his wife Linda weeping, you understand.”

“Uh. No? I don't? What are you talking about?” Ageha said, her eyes wide, and her bag-carrying arm having slumped down to straight at her side.

“I'm talking about Paul Is Dead. They loved backmasking, you know—how on Revolution 9, there's a backmasked segment, and if you reverse it supposedly it sounds like 'turn me on, dead man'. Ever spicy, isn't it, the idea of Lennon professing his attraction to his dead friend? Or the back cover of Sgt. Pepper, where Paul is turned away from the rest of the band—”

“*Paul McCartney isn't dead,*” Ageha said, her jaw open wide.

Koron turned her head to her friend and said, “Well, yes, of course he isn't. He's perfectly alive. But there's something fascinating about the idea of these sorts of suppositions—true science finds evidence and creates a conclusion from there, but pseudoscientific investigation like conspiracy theories or cryptozoology have a conclusion and hunt for any evidence they can use to support it at all. I find it rather interesting, and it's given me a good excuse to listen to a number of old Beatles songs that I hadn't in some time.”

Ageha let out a sigh, and returned to her shoulder-slung posture as the two walked along a quiet city street—the two often took as quiet a way back as possible for Koron's sake. “Whatever makes you happy, Naga-chan. I don't get it at all.”

“Yes, yes,” Koron said, “of course you don't, but you're listening nonetheless. I—”

The sound of a hand on Ageha's shoulder made Koron stop, and her head turned to see that her friend had just been touched by a group of... by the look of things, second-year high school boys, just two grades above them. Koron could understand one thing, at least—with that sweater she liked finally fitting her and covering the uniform, and her being tall for her age, it made sense that these boys didn't understand that they were batting below their own age range.

To a one, they were uniform and dull—Koron hardly had it in her to register any of their standout features. The one who'd touched Ageha said, in a croon that was no doubt meant to sound suave, “Hey there, how's it going, girlie?” Ah—the sort who'd been raised without any respect for women, Koron supposed.

“Huh?” Ageha's nose curled up. “Buzz off, creep,” and she batted his arm away.

“Hey, c'mon now, don't be like that,” this worm said, swiveling around Ageha to stand in front of the two of them. His voice grated on Koron's ears. “C'mon, it's not that late. Wanna hang out? I just got my driver's license, so—”

“No. Buzz off,” Ageha said, and shoved him out of the way—she was, Koron knew, also fairly strong for her age.

Another one of the guys mumbled in the background, “Uh, maybe you should back off and try another girl—”

“No, no, trust me, guys, I totally got this!” The first guy said. They were speaking in hushed whispers, but Koron had good hearing. “Is it your friend here? Or what, is she your little sister? She can come, I've got space in the backseat—”

Koron removed the other earbud from her ear at long last, and quietly tucked her smartphone and earbuds into her purse. “Were you referring to me?” she said, turning her head to this first guy—ah, and now that she had, he was a brunette, short hair. “I certainly wouldn't stop her.”

“Eh—” The guy blinked and flinched backwards.

(It is worth noting here as a curiosity a piece of Japanese conversationalism that does not translate to English. There are a wide array of first-person pronouns one may use that have different social and gendered connotations. Koron Nagataka used the first-person pronoun 'ore', which has connotations of being used by adult men.)

He was roughly fifteen centimeters taller than her, so Koron wasn't at too severe of a disadvantage. She was not particularly emotive when she didn't want to be, so this boy was greeted with her remaining completely stoic as heat began to build on her fingers.

“You should run, boy,” Koron said. “I dislike your sort.”

“Wha, hey—” Ageha threw up her hands. “Naga-chan—”

He didn't run fast enough. From the tips of her fingers, flames burst forth, covering her hand as she pressed her fingers onto the boy's chest. It took him a moment to scream as the flames pressed themselves onto his chest, and the force of it combined with the shock caused him to fall over onto the pavement, scuffing his clothes. The other two boys also screamed and ran away as Koron followed the boy down, her eyes full of a quiet, cold disdain.

Kneeling atop him, Koron said nothing as she took her fingers off of the boy's chest, his uniform singed and smoke coming from where she'd pressed them. Forming her hand into a claw shape, she raised it in preparation to go for his face—

“Hey, *stop!*”

Ageha grabbed her arm, and Koron suddenly realized what it was she was doing. “...Huh?” Koron blinked. The flames stopped, and the boy freed himself and ran away screaming, clutching his chest in pain. Her eyes wide, Koron watched him as he ran away. “Ah...”

With a frustrated sigh, Ageha pressed two fingers into her temple and groaned, “I guess it's back to the hospital with you, huh.”

“I... suppose so,” Koron muttered. “I'm—I'm sorry. I—”

“I mean, I appreciate the help, but...” Ageha groaned again, and picked Koron up properly. “Come on, we've gotta get you home.”

~6. The Hermit's Cell~

“...so, it'll be a different one for the time being,” Mrs. Nagataka said as she drove beside her daughter.

“Oh?” Koron asked, staring out the window as the scenery flew by. “Have I visited the previous hospital too many times? Do I disturb them, perhaps?”

“No, no,” Mrs. Nagataka said, shaking her head and laughing, “but this new one actually has a ward just for psychic kids like you. One of the first ones in the world, they say. And they requested you next time you needed to come in.”

Koron turned her head and raised her eyebrow. “Requested' me?”

“They tell me there's this tiering system for psychic abilities, and they don't get many Akaneno's patients with, uh, possible 'S-Class' abilities or something? The point is, having you to get bloodwork and tests done on and stuff will probably further science.” Mrs. Nagataka stared dead ahead on the road. “Move out of my way, jerk. Come on. This isn't America! Come on!”

“So they want me as chattel,” Koron said.

“I don't know. The point is, it's a nice hospital, I went and looked at the place yesterday, it's well-staffed, a nice place and you might meet some kids who can sympathize,” Mrs. Nagataka said, gritting her teeth and staring at the person driving in front of her.

—Okitama Children's Hospital was not a place that Koron had visited before, but the tall, white, many-windowed building, with a particularly tall front and a block of lower-to-the-ground facilities in the back, certainly looked the part to Koron of a high-grade medical facility.

She'd been pre-registered, and all documents sent over from her prior hospitals, so her journey to Room 304 was a quick one. The bed was *slightly* nicer than she was accustomed to, and nobody felt the need to manhandle Nagamimi.

There were two beds in Room 304, and a large window against the wall. There was not only a pull string for a nurse, but multiple switches against the wall. A note on the front of the bed stated that any requested (and safe) materials could be brought to the room at Koron's leisure.

...Of course, the fact that there was, of all things, a *woodworking* cabinet next to the other bed, inside a heavily locked glass case, with chisels, picks, and blocks of wood, seemed to contradict that.

About half an hour later, a doctor had arrived to start doing tests and drawing blood. “To be honest, Dr. Kawashima is better at this than me—ah, but she's a bit scary, so she doesn't come to meet young kids often.”

This was, as she had introduced herself, Dr. Rin Hashizawa, a... relatively young woman who happened to have the same *natural* eye color as Koron's *glass* eyes. With her cool, pale skin and long, jet-black hair, she frankly looked as though she could fit into a vampire story—however, she was a chubby, top-heavy woman with, to Koron's eyes, a nervous and somewhat sweaty demeanor, who had at least twice already pulled out a fidget toy to play with, so she lacked the inherent charisma.

Fidgeting with her glasses, Dr. Hashizawa said, “Thank you again for coming in, really. We haven't gotten very many patients, you see, and our primary shareholder expects at least a few results in research—she's friends with Homura Akaneno, you see, so I imagine she has high standards? Not to mention, ah—”

...It would have been one thing to say that to Koron's mother, but Dr. Hashizawa was staring directly at Koron as she said so. “While I appreciate the difficulty of your situation,” Koron said, “I *am* thirteen.”

“Oh, haha, yes, I know, of course,” Dr. Hashizawa muttered, “but... well, ah, I prefer to be up-front about these things? Most of our patients stay for quite a while, so I prefer to be honest with them so that I can, um, get along? Better?”

...From the look of her labcoat, Koron presumed that it was instead that Dr. Hashizawa was a bit messy—it was a lived-in coat with a few minor stains from coffee. “Okay, that’s done... now, um, I am going to let you know, both of you—no offense, of course, but your manic habits do mean we are going to have to give you a roommate to help keep an eye on you.”

“We’d gathered,” Koron and her mother said simultaneously.

—“So, it looks like they’re gonna keep you in full-time for a week or two, then you’ll be able to start going to school again—but they’re gonna keep you in and out for a while. You gonna be okay, pumpkin?” Mrs. Nagataka asked, packing up what she’d brought once Koron had gotten settled in.

“It’s not as though this is my first time,” Koron said, having opened up some Nietzsche to occupy herself with. “I’ll be fine. You have work in the morning, so go off, then.”

Worry lines had started to crease themselves into her mother’s forehead. “Alright.” She gave Koron a kiss on the cheek, then said, “I love you, sweetie.”

“Love you, too, Mom,” Koron said.

~7. The Hermit’s Roommate~

For the first night, after a few more tests were done, Koron was left to sleep, an IV left in her to replenish what her previous display of pyrokinetics had taken from her, just in case. She had largely tuned out of paying much attention to proceedings, so when she fell asleep, it was hardly any different from being awake.

—Her circadian rhythm, however, forced her into waking up at her usual eight in the morning. She slowly lurched upward, and opened her eyes—

“Heeeey! G’mooorning!”

...Ah, Koron registered. Based on the hospital gown this girl wore, it appeared she was Koron’s roommate. Koron picked up the book she’d been reading yesterday off the bed and opened it back up, craning her head back down.

“Whatcha reading?” The girl asked, craning her head in to take a look at the cover. She audibly scrunched her eyes up, and hummed. “How do you read this?”

“*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches: Ein Buch für freie Geister*,” Koron said.

“Okay, but what does that mean in Japanese?” The girl asked, making another curious noise.

“...‘Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits!’” Koron said, and raised the book up

just slightly higher to make clearer the fact that she was not in the mood for conversation.

“Who's it by?” “Friedrich Nietzsche.” “What's it about?” “A collection of aphorisms Nietzsche uses to discuss his thoughts on various subjects.” “Like what?” “Metaphysics. The nature of 'genius'. Thoughts prior to his truly vitriolic misogyny.” “Wow. Who's Friedrich Nietzsche?” “A nineteenth century philosopher of some renown, whose works are popular enough to be part of the philosophical zeitgeist of our modern era in at least some fashion.” “What's a 'zeitgeist'?” “A—”

Why the hell was she continuing to talk? Koron put down her book, and finally registered the girl who'd been speaking to her with a confused, wide-eyed stare.

Chestnut hair, and blue eyes. She was round, but in a way that implied she had a strong lower-body core underneath an admittedly charmingly soft top layer. She wore her hair in a ponytail, and her wide eyes and features implied to Koron a sort of innocence she was *not* used to dealing with. She was taller than Koron by a pretty fair margin, and her hands were visibly callused.

Her new roommate put the end of Koron's bed down, and knelt on the ground to put her chin in her hands and her elbows on the bed, her head wobbling around with a smile on her face. “What do you want?” Koron asked.

“Well, y'know,” the girl said, a smile on her face. “I was just curious! I haven't read all that many books. There's this one play I really like reading, though—”

“Reading? A play?” Koron scoffed.

“Sure, sure! It's not like it's Shakespeare or something. I can read the dialogue fine! I'd love to see it done live sometime, though!” ...That was a more nuanced response than Koron was expecting, though admittedly that was a low bar. “It's *The Tragedy of Ulrich and Royston*. Do you know it?”

“I've...heard the name, but I've never experienced it,” Koron said. She blinked, her eyes still wide.

“Well,” the girl said, “see, it's about these two brothers who are both princes—”

Stop.

“Oh, wait, no, hold on, I shouldn't spoil anything! Hold on!” The girl clonked herself on the head with her left hand. “Sorry, sorry! I just haven't gotten to talk about these things very often, but it's like—”

Stop.

It was at this point Koron finally noticed a particular feature of this girl—she had the

most defined ahoge Koron had ever seen in her life, and it was, at the moment, spinning around like the spoke of a satellite. “Hey, what's your name? See, every time I've had to notice you in my internal monologue up to this point it's like, I've had to insert something silly, and these nicknames are getting longer and longer in my brain and it's getting kinda weird, because every sentence I think in my head—”

“It's... Koron,” Koron mumbled. “Koron Nagataka.”

“Huh,” the girl said. “That's kind of a funny name, but don't worry! I've got a funny name too. It's Nanako.” Koron opened her mouth. “I know what you're thinking—but no, it's not written like the normal name, it's literally 'seven-child', you know?”

“...Ah,” Koron mumbled. “I see.”

“Sorry, sorry!” Nanako laughed, standing back up and rubbing the back of her head. “It's just I haven't really talked to like, another human in a while. Except my mom, and she's busy with work most of the time.” There was a pause, and then Nanako's ahoge stood straight up. “So—hey! You're psychic too, right? What can you do?”

Koron blinked. “Is that the sort of thing psychics ask one another?”

“I donno,” Nanako said.

Briefly weighing her options, Koron decided there was little reason to hide it from her new roommate—it was likely to come up anyhow. “I'm a pyrokinetic,” Koron said. “I can generate flame.”

“Ooooooh,” Nanako said, nodding her head. “Cool beans. Well, I guess they're not really 'cool' beans, but—well, anyway! Mom says what I have is called 'psychometry'. I—”

“The act of obtaining information about subjects from objects with associations to that subject,” Koron said. “I'm familiar.”

Nanako blinked, and then gave Koron a shrug and grinned. “Well, I don't know much about that. I mostly use it to talk to Kojiro, see.”

Koron's eyes darted over to Nanako's bed, and she saw, sitting atop it, a pure-white stuffed polar bear. “...Would that be Kojiro, then?” Koron asked.

“Yeah!” Nanako said, her smile doubling in size and her eyes sparkling. “He's kinda like my little brother. I've had him for as long as I can remember. You too?”

Nanako was looking at Nagamimi, sitting by Koron's bedside. Koron shook her head. “No. I received Nagamimi when I was six. She and I have been together ever since, mind... so I would say we have something of a bond.”

—Internally, Koron found herself beginning to wonder about this girl. So, she continued: “Why not try and get something out of her, then?” Koron asked, and Nanako gasped, throwing her hand over her face. “What?”

“Y-you'd let me touch her?” Nanako asked, in a hushed tone.

“...Just do it,” Koron said, narrowing her eyes.

Nanako took a careful pace over to Koron's bedside, before placing her hand on Nagamimi's head and saying, “Hey, how's it going? You doing alright?”

There was a moment of silence.

Turning her head to Koron, Nanako said, “Nagamimi says 'hey, dumbass, what's with letting some random weirdo put her grubby mitts on me? Anesthesia make you go brain dead?' But she said it in a tone that makes it sound like she doesn't really mean that.”

Wide-eyed, Koron dropped her book, and her jaw opened a bit. “I—”

“Huh?” Nanako blinked. “Oh, I can hide the cursing in the future if I've gotta—”

—Well, she'd heard with her own eyes. That was Nagamimi, without a doubt. Nobody would *guess* that she had mannerisms like that... which meant that nobody else had ever seemed to understand Nagamimi at all.

Koron laughed to herself. “Fascinating. In that case, Nagamimi, submit to your use. You are as much a patient here as I am, after all. Perhaps you'll get along with that bear of hers.”

There was a moment's pause, during which Nagamimi certainly said something along the lines of, 'what, that guy?' before Nanako said, “Kojiro says, 'Those two both seem like members of the *intelligentsia*, and if you think I'm gonna let people like that get in the way of my artistic brain, you've got another think coming!’”

—Koron let herself unleash an amused smirk. “Oh, is that right! It seems we're at odds, then, young man.”