

The funny thing about this whole idol business is that I wound up being able to construct quite the support staff just from people I knew. Miku, obviously, and Kyosuke was a stage presence, so he was pretty excited about the prospect of helping. But aside from those two, there were these two friends of Youka's. We brought up Ms. Botan before, but she has this other friend, Mr. Park, who's a writer from Yotsuya. Sweaty guy with a curly mop of hair, glasses, he wore suspenders and trench coats. Really into magical girls, so she went and told him 'hey, my friend is gonna become an idol and she needs an outfit made', he kinda freaked, I think.

“Alright, Miss Mio,” Mr. Park said, once we'd all managed to find a decent studio to sit down in for him to show me his designs, “you are something of a vampire fanatic, yes? I'm not much of a gothic horror sort myself, but I've studied enough to attempt the basics. Did you play [Idolm@ster](#)?”

“Nah,” I said, shaking my head. “The idol gacha industry actually wasn't really my scene.”

“Well, that's alright. They have this one song, 'Kyun! Vampire Girl', I took some definite inspiration from, you see. Of course, that one is white and red, whereas I took one look at you and thought, 'Purple!' You've got the sort of look that simply screams for the royalty of purples, you see? With the strength of color in the styles of the rest of your unit, you've simply got to *pop*, with a visually striking style that exclaims, 'I am here, bow to your queen of the night!’”

Mr. Park was a pretty enthusiastic guy about women's clothing, is what I'm saying here. He realized the sudden rant he'd gone on, then stopped and muttered, “Sorry. I may have thought about this a bit more than is perhaps... acceptable?”

“What. Are you kidding?” I asked, leaning over to put my arm around him, then throwing my other arm up to the ceiling to show him... possibilities, I guess? “I think you and I are going to go far here, sir!”

Of course, when he got to know we were working with *the* Hatsune Miku on this whole business, he pretty much fainted right then and there. Ms. Botan—they'd been friends for a long time, too—had to take him home. Apparently, when she started showing up in suits and ties to plan PR campaigns, it was surprising enough that Youka actually laughed.

Yeah, no, apparently she's usually pretty skimpy. Or she was, at least. She's pretty cool, though. She has this pink Harley-Davidson motorcycle and a cowboy hat, and I think she's also like, a yakuza princess? Youka knows two of those, I think, there's this other younger cousin of Ms. Botan's she's also friends with.

Youka's social circle is really surprisingly wide, yeah. Oh, the outfit? I've got it in my suitcase if you want me to show you later.

While Mio was busy with work, I was usually on furlough. As the weeks went on, I spent more and more of my free time with Taichi. We'd go fishing, find somewhere clear to race like we used to (I usually won), sometimes we'd just stare up at the sky together. He'd really grown into a great young man—he'd stop time after time for some bit of common charity, helping people out in work he wasn't even related to.

“I don't know how you do that,” I said, one day as we were sitting along the banks of the Edo River. “Poke your nose into other people's business, I mean. I don't have the strength for that.”

Taichi took a second to think about that, then shrugged and said, “It kinda just seems right for me to do, y'know? I admire public workers like you and your unit, so it's just right for me to try and do that.” He shook his head. “Not that I'm trying to rope you into doing that sorta thing, though. Just in general.”

“Oh, no, I understand,” I said. I let out this big, heaving sigh. “You're a good man, Taichi. I don't think I have the strength to be like that anymore.” Then, “Ah, but I don't want to disappoint Sharon, now do I...”

“Sharon? The lady from the front of City Hall, you mean?” Taichi asked. I nodded. “Are you two friends?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I'd say so.” Then, “Come to think of it, I haven't been in quite some time. Would you like to see Murakumo's floors?”

It was only about an hour later that Taichi was running excitedly around Murakumo HQ, looking at file folders like they were secret texts, fascinatedly ooh'ing and aah'ing at every bit of the process of Murakumo HQ. “He's, uh, quite a fan, isn't he?” Kirino asked me, as we'd taken a seat to watch him.

“He tries to keep it muted,” I said, “but yes, yes he is. Have you done something with your hair?”

“Oh, yes,” Kirino said, reaching up to pat his own head. “I thought I'd grow it out a bit. Get a more... you know, mature look for my position?”

There was a moment of silence.

“Are you okay?” Kirino asked. “It's... been a while, and I know you've been...”

“To be honest,” I said, hunching my head over, “It's been very strange. I'm still not wholly used to it. Everyone's been doing their best for me, and somehow I feel like my relationship with Mio has gotten *better*, but even still... I can't shake these feelings. There's a bit of me that hates the idea of leaving the house at all, you know. I haven't really been able to draw anything, for one thing. Any time I do, it comes out terrible.”

“I see,” Kirino said, nodding. “Well, please do take the time you need. We're fending quite alright for ourselves, so only come back to work when you feel capable of it.” He paused, and then, “Er, one other thing. I need to let you know something. It's about Emille.”

“Aitelle's sister?” I said.

“Yes, her. I've appointed her as head of research, but I'm aware she... *isn't fond of you*. Now, you know that old adage, 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer', and while I wouldn't exactly say she's an *enemy* so much...” Kirino trailed off for a second, then raised one finger up and continued talking. “Just—let me know if she tries anything, alright? She's an expert, but I'd really much rather keep you safe if I had to choose.”

I stammered for a moment at his show of concern. “Er. I. Thank you. Where is this coming from?”

“We're friends, aren't we?” Kirino asked. “It's... normal to be concerned about your friends. Isn't it?”

“But I'm a—!” I held up my hands. “I'm sorry. That's an automatic reaction, I haven't gotten it out yet.”

“You're alright,” Kirino said, steepling his hands. “How do I put this... I feel as though you, among others, have been more than anything victimized by scientists like myself. If I'm going to surpass Miss Hikasa, expressing my feelings is an important part of it—so I want you to know that no matter if I think you're scientifically fascinating, which I do, or if I think you're useful to have around, which I do, even if neither of those things were true, I would still be concerned for your well-being as your friend. Does that make sense? Am I making sense?”

My eyes were wide, and I went silent for a good few moments. My mouth moved around words, but none came out until I managed, “Oh. I... that's... very kind of you.”

“Oh, good,” Kirino said, collapsing onto the table and letting out a breath, “I was worried I'd put my foot in my mouth again. I—”

That was when Miroku came into the room with an apple juice he was holding like it was a well-worn beer, took a seat, and said, “Kids these days!”

Both Kirino and I stopped dead for a moment before I said, “Um... have I missed something?”

“This guy comes into our office all, 'Oh, wow! Look at all this!' and suddenly he's asking a billion questions, and Jeanne doesn't have a problem with it but I'm in the middle of something here, and this guy can't read the room! Ugh!” Miroku took a spiteful swig of his apple juice. “Who let a civilian in here?” I quietly raised my hand. “Why?!”

“He's my brother,” I said, “and he's a big fan.” This got Miroku to quietly grumble and accept the family excuse.

We'd managed to get a limited phone network working, and our home was one of the homes with a phone. Our number was private for personal reasons, but even besides that, it was usually Mio who picked up the phone. Just before Christmas, though, the phone rang, and only I was home to pick it up—Mio was at work. I inwardly battled with myself over the idea of speaking to someone, but managed to stuff down the antisocial part of my brain enough to pick it up. “Hello—?”

“Heeeeeeeeeeeey, daughtersssssssssss, it's ya girllllllllll!”

She was drunk. Horrifically drunk. I could tell that from the first syllable. But it was Homura. As I clutched the phone, my pulse quickened, and I started to breathe heavier. “I've been, I've been hitting the bricks lately tryna, tryna figure out what that brat wants from me so I can get back in there, and I'd ask you two but you two *haaate* me now or something so I can't but I still wanna call and hear your voicesss. Can you talk to meeee. C'monnn.”

“Ah—” I was cold. I was so cold.

“But you aren't *gonna* because even though I've been trying... t-trying my best this whole time to be a good mother all of a sudden you two hate me for something I didn't even *do*, and now all I can do is cry because you won't return my calls, and, and, Nacchan's dead and she hated me for some reason too, and I don't *get it* I don't get it why won't you just *tell* me what's wrong why don't you ever talk to me or explain these things??? Come on, I'm your mooom, come on come on come on we're family so you're supposed to talk about these things, right?”

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't speak. I felt like the floor was falling out from under me.

“I didn't!! I didn't do anything wrong!! But now everyone HATES me and you won't even give your dear ol' mom a call, or even say anything! Say something!! Just say something!!!”

“Leave me alone,” I said, my voice shaky and quiet. “I don't want this. I can't take this.”

“And all I ever did was try and help, all I ever did, 'sall, all I ever did! I was just helping—!”

“Leave me *alone!*” I shouted into the receiver. “**LEAVE ME ALONE!**”

I slammed the phone down, ending the call, then sat down on the ground in a ball, clutching myself to try and keep out the cold. My whole body was shivering, and I rocked back and forth, letting out little noises. I don't know how long I was like that, completely incapable of communication, but the first thing I remember after that—

is the hunger.

It had started creeping in when I was emotionally disturbed, this hunger. It was the same hunger I'd felt when I'd tried to eat Mizuchi, an *otherworldly* hunger. It wasn't as though my stomach was empty, no, it was something else entirely. It was a hunger human food couldn't sate. Most of the time I'd simply done my best to stave it off, to wait until it passed, but sooner or later, I would break. And at that moment, I broke.

I stood up and walked out the door, the landscape of Shibuya whirling by me in an

incomprehensible torrent. It was all just sounds, and shapes, not what I needed. I *sniffed*, and I smelt the scent of what I needed, something small and weak but undoubtedly sentient. My legs shuffled forward, dodging by the sounds and shapes.

The scent came from atop one of the twisted trees created by the Sleepy Hollow's domain, so I found the nearest root, grabbed it, and hurled myself upward into the air, catching a branch. My target was there—a little Rabi, hiding in the branches from a larger predator below. At first, it seemed to think I was simply a human, so it made to square up to attack before looking at my eyes and feeling in its bones that I was no such thing.

Fearing for its life, the little creature leapt from the branches, dodging well past whatever predator it had initially been hiding from, and began to run away. However, I had hunted the peak of this sort of rodent already, and learned how to kill it, so something this small was nothing to me. With all four limbs, I leapt out of the tree, landing on the ground in front of it, baring my fangs and growling. My mouth salivated at the sight of its reaction, of its obvious terror.

This sort had a thick tail it used for smacking, so it turned around and attempted to hit me. However, my hand was large enough to grab its midsection and stop it. I lifted it into the air and slammed it down on the ground, hearing its bones crack. Before it died, though, I had to eat it, so I opened my mouth and bit down on the little creature's neck.

God, the sensation was unparalleled. Feeling the information that made up the consciousness of a sentient being rush into me as its life flickered out was... intoxicating, in how well it made to satiate me. It was light compared to a human, since it was just vermin, but the taste of a living being rushing into me was so incredible I barely even noticed the actual physical bits I was chewing.

I ate the head first, then started going down. Though I'd already taken its life, the feeding frenzy I was in wouldn't let me stop until I'd consumed the whole body. Chewing bones was pitifully easy for me—in the partly-Dragon state I entered here, the power of my jaws was far too much for the weak resistance of a small rodent's bones. My whole being was quivering with delight, feeling this thing that was just before alive slide down my throat. I just had to eat and eat and eat and eat and—

“Uhhh... babe?”

And snap, just like that, I was completely back to normal, keeping the rest of the Rabi that I was in the middle of eating in my mouth, puffed up like a squirrel. I turned around to see Mio, in the process of coming home from work, staring blankly at my blood-soaked hands and mouth. All of my human consciousness flooded back into my head, and I realized exactly what I'd just been seen doing.

What I still had in my mouth hadn't been sufficiently chewed yet, so I just sort of had to let it go onto the ground, cough a few times to get drops of blood out, and say, “U-uh, I can explain.”

“Is... that's a Rabi, right?” Mio asked, and I slowly nodded. “Is... is this a new thing, or...”

Mortified, I had no choice but to tell the truth. “I think this is the eighteenth wild animal I've eaten.”

“Okay!” Mio said, with a little grimace and a clap. “Okay. You wanna talk about this inside?”

“...and I keep worrying about like, what if I go over to Sumie's, something triggers me, and I eat one of her cats?!” I said, running my hands over my head to try and keep down the sweat, having been sat down on our couch. “I mean, I can barely control myself when I get like that, and—and what if I actually hurt someone?! I've tried before! I'm a menace, Mio! I—what are you doing?”

“Calling Kirino,” Mio said, having picked up the phone. I went silent. “Yo, Kirino. It's Mio. Hey, so I've got a question. Chisa's having these like, hunger frenzies when she gets triggered, and she's worried she's gonna eat someone's pet or something. You have any ideas for how to take care of that?” She quietly put him on speaker.

“Well, that's... certainly a question,” Kirino said. “If I had to guess, it's probably her draconic aspects being starved for informational energy... hold on, I have specialists for this.”

He put us on hold. ...Yes, Murakumo does have 'on hold' music. It's not really easy listening, though, it's more... it's more of an, “Arigato gozaimasu!” or a, “Let's *working!*” sort of song. ...Well, I'm not very musically inclined! I don't have the ability to hum things on command. Mio? (“It's like this forty-second loop that goes, buh duh duh dadada duh-duh dadada duh da-duh. When old man Waji isn't on the clock and Reimi's in charge of the store, she has it playing on loop in the background.”) Wait, she does?!

“Come in,” Kirino said. “I have a specialist for this and she wants to see you.”

We came in. The woman in question was one I actually was briefly familiar with—her name was Dr. Hashizawa, apparently a former Murakumo employee who'd left the organization but who'd rejoined once she'd managed to come in from her family's home. I knew the name from two different places. One of which was Koron's friend Nanako, of course, but the other was that some branch of the Hashizawa family or another was among the families the Inomikos did business with.

...Not, of course, that Dr. Hashizawa here was much for business. She was an S-Class Roboticist by trade, so I wasn't certain at first what she wanted with me. Oh—she has black hair which she wears in twintails. She's a pair. Very pale, red eyes. Mio once said to me that she looked downright vampiric herself, but Dr. Hashizawa didn't have the spine for anything like that.

At any rate, we met in the Laboratory at City Hall. Kirino sat in on the discussion while Dr. Hashizawa took some tests, and she spoke while she did. “I'm a roboticist by trade, but that actually involves a lot of working with infophysics for the manifestation of consciousness,” she said. “If I may ask, Miss Inomiko, before I get the results, just to see—do you think you'd need actual conscious informational energy, or would any informational energy you ate be sufficient?”

I blinked. “What?”

“You see,” she said, tapping away at a monitor, “you—you know Nanako, right? My daughter? She wasn't my first gynoid, just the first successful one. When I was attempting prior goes at a properly conscious machine—er... well, okay, this is a bit of a complex concept... Have you ever heard of the 'Voight-Kampff test'?”

I hadn't, but Mio had. “Like... from Blade Runner?”

“Right!” Dr. Hashizawa said, scribbling down some notes and taking a look at my readings as

she did. “This started as in-scene roboticist lingo, but it's useful to understand. The Voight-Kampff test is a test in the movie—oh and the book of course—that's used to determine whether someone is a human or a Replicant through forcing emotional responses by using a series of questions. Obviously, for any roboticist wanting to create true consciousness, the question here is, what actually differentiates a human and an 'unintelligent' machine?”

She paused for a second, and I said, “Um—”

“In my opinion, the answer was never anything about intelligence. Machines are really awfully intelligent. Even simpler machines can think by collating data and deciding on the best outcome. That is, in a sense, thought—*cogito ergo sum*. And yet, the implied meaning behind that phrase is less that the actual process of basic thought proves one's own existence, but the ability to recognize one's own thought and understand the process that leads to that sentience. That's the true difference. If a machine cannot see itself and understand itself, it cannot have 'true' consciousness. I mean, if you just needed to think to be truly conscious, you'd have seen the dragons eating every computer in sight, right?”

There was another pause, and Mio and I looked at each other and shrugged in a moment of 'oh, that does actually make sense.' “Well—”

“When I first started making thinking machines in earnest, they started running into this curious issue where they possessed character, personalities, self-borne characteristics, but *not* that 'consciousness'. A whole person that could not recognize its own identity—those thinking machines possessed a critical flaw. In that state, they could only come to understand themselves by using the information presented to them by the people around them,” Dr. Hashizawa said. “It's a bit like the 'Chinese Room', but with a curious twist.”

“The Chi—”

“The Chinese Room, of course,” Dr. Hashizawa said, “being a thought experiment that was initially meant to disprove strong AI to begin with. It goes like so. Say you have someone inside of a room who does not speak Chinese or read Chinese, and this room possesses sufficient, say, English-to-Chinese dictionaries, as well as pen and paper and all of that, to translate. Chinese people outside of the door are instructed to send messages under a slip in the door. Now, this person does not understand Chinese, but they can use the dictionaries to translate and respond as instructed. They're simply using the information they have, they aren't truly *understanding* what they're saying.”

“Uh-huh,” Mio said, “I played *Virtue's Last Reward*.”

“Oh, those games are wonderful!” Dr. Hashizawa said with a clap. “But that's beside the point. In this case, the person inside the room comes to genuinely believe they *are* someone who can speak Chinese, through these conversations—they lack the ability to determine that they are not the person to whom the people outside the room believe they are speaking to. And so on, it's more than just language proficiency—skills, tastes, behavioral traits, even basic identities, those initial thinking machines possessed these but could have them easily subsumed without existing primarily near people who understood them properly enough. So I had to figure out what made that sort of faux-consciousness different from the consciousness displayed by humans.”

“Uh... huh...” I said. I gave a slow nod. “Okay... but what does this have to do with—”

“Of course, you know that every living being has an 'informational field,’” Dr. Hashizawa said. She still hadn't actually looked directly at me for this entire ramble. “What I discovered was that this sort of faux-consciousness produced a different sort of informational particle, a 'null' informational particle if you will, that possessed the energy that produced thought but not the backing that whipped it into consciousness. So I had to experiment for a while to figure out how to actually produce proper informational particles into a constructed consciousness, which was quite difficult—er, I mean, they'd been made before but those were, say, through re-appropriating pieces of the human brain-map, using informational energy from prematurely deceased cadavers whose bodies had been preserved, and whatnot, whereas I was trying to generate consciousness from within itself, you understand. And—well, I won't bore you with the details of *that* process, but I did manage to do so, and in a manner that allowed myself and others to use the framework to update prior thinking machines to fix that aforementioned issue or... well, you know.”

What I learned from this conversation up to this point was, really, that Richter had no idea how well-socialized he was on a relative sense, and that I couldn't help but long for his concise, easy-to-understand chats about bugs.

“But that also taught me something that I hadn't realized would really come in handy until now—how to generate those sorts of null particles *ad nihilo*. Are you hungry, Miss Inomiko?” Dr. Hashizawa asked, and I had to nod and admit I was—I hadn't managed to fully sate myself with only one Rabi. “Great! We can test this right away, then.”

“Wha—wait, what?” I felt like I'd been in a car crash from the whiplash of that sudden turn.

The way Kirino explained it a bit later, she'd been working with several fabrication machines to create what she pulled out here—a small block of... something. It was a dark grey, and appeared to have something of a *squishy* texture. There were small sparks of light on its surface. Dr. Hashizawa looked awfully proud of herself for this... thing.

“If you would, please chew on this. Don't swallow it, just chew for a bit,” she said, before handing me.

I put it in my hand, and then blinked at it. “It's... chewing gum?”

“Yes.”

I shrugged and popped it in my mouth to start chewing, and I had to admit—while it didn't have the same sort of visceral satiation as cracking open a wild animal, it was *satisfying*. I let out a heavy breath and felt my shoulders slump as I chewed from the feeling of slowly having a burden lifted off my shoulders. My breath became heavy from, in a sense, the exertion of being *full* at long last.

And then I actually tasted it.

“*Hurk—!*” I had to take the gnawed blob of gum out of my mouth the instant its taste actually sank in. I can't really even describe the actual taste of it—it's bitter, like... like coffee rinds poured over the rubber of a tire. “Oh, god. That's horrible.”

“But you feel better, right?” Dr. Hashizawa asked, looking awfully concerned.

I took a deep breath in, and said, “Yes. Yes, I—I do. I do feel better. How the hell did you—Actually, no, you don't have to tell me. I won't question it.”

“Wonderful!” Dr. Hashizawa pumped her fists. “Alright, I'll make you a supply of these, they aren't much work to make, maybe make you some nice little packaging. Oh, maybe I should come up with a catchy name for them—”

“Nope,” Kirino said, raising his hands. “Vetoed. You're not allowed to name anything.”

Dr. Hashizawa let out a heaving sigh, but acquiesced. I asked, “Why?”

“She named her seventh robot 'Nana-ko', Chisa,” Kirino said. No further explanation was needed.

So, yes. I carry around a package of Dr. Hashizawa's Info-Chew—no, she didn't come up with the name—everywhere I go. If I start feeling the draconic hunger, I put one in my mouth and chew until I can taste it. It's a genuine life-saver.

Oh—one other thing. I was explaining this over dinner with the rest of the unit the next day, and Sumie raised her hand. “Hey, can I have one?”

“...Y-you aren't planning on eating one, are you?” Richter said with a grimace.

“No, no, but I was thinking, maybe if it's all info-y it might help kickstart some more of Koron's brain back into working,” Sumie said, reaching over to pat the still-blind Koron on the head. “So give one here?”

“I'm not really sure about this,” Koron said, nervously inching away at the sound of me handing one to Sumie, “but I suppose it's... worth a try?”

So, Sumie put the block of gum in Koron's mouth.

I'd say about four things happened in the next second or two. First, Koron registered the taste in her mouth. Then, Koron's glass eyes—which had been back in her head for a while—started darting around like they were real eyes. Third, Koron spat the block of gum, which she hadn't even chewed, out. And, finally, the block of gum, in the middle of its arc, was lit aflame, and had burnt to nothing before it ever even landed.

“What the *fuck was that?!*” Koron said, gasping and jumping away from it. “You put that in your mouth willingly?! Argh, agh, where's some soda or something, I need this taste out of my mouth!” She hustled over to Sumie's side and grabbed Sumie's drink, taking a swig, then two, then three. The third one caused her to sputter a little bit, but she sighed in relief. “Oh, god. Oh, augh, ugh.” Cough, cough. “Shhhhhhit.”

There was a moment where we all registered this, and then Youka said, “Oh, hey, Koron's back. I guess it worked.”

“A wholly unintended but positive side-effect,” Mio remarked with a nod.

We were planning to have my first actual public show on Valentine's, if we could swing it, and once we were nearing New Years', planning really got into full motion. I'd come in and Botan and Kyosuke were already chatting back and forth about special effects and what was within reason to produce.

“We can't get a fog machine,” for instance, Botan would say. “There aren't enough of those that work, and we have to be concerned about recreational use of electricity.”

“But you can produce electricity, can't you?” Kyosuke would ask. “We could power one.”

“No way! I need to do other things. I'm a manager, not a battery,” Botan would shoot back.

Miku would chime in to say, “We could construct temporary electrical batteries to pre-charge.”

“Okay, decent, decent,” Botan would say, and scribble something down. “But what are we getting to produce the fog? Do we want a hot machine or a cold machine?”

“Definitely cold,” Kyosuke would say. “Dry ice is just right for this sort of thing. She's a vampire, right? So we've gotta go for that spooky look, but not too spooky.”

Then, Botan and Kyosuke would stand up, reach across the table, clasp hands, shout “Dry ice!” and move right on to some other subject. It went like that. I didn't get in much edgewise, but any time they had a solid plan they'd run it by me for aesthetic purposes.

Word about my plans to become an idol was starting to spread, though. One day at work in City Hall, Emille stopped me in the hall by hailing me down. She'd started transition to slightly less harsh oranges in her outfit by this point, but Emille was gonna Emille—this wasn't the first time we'd spoken at all, so I was used to her hailing me down for random questions. “Tell me something,” she said, “what exactly is the purpose of an *idol*?”

“Uhh...” I was carrying boxes through the hall, but I put them down on the ground for the moment. “It's a performance. You know, to give people something to enjoy in hard times. Not that different from a regular performance, really.”

“Do you intend to perform as an idol within your capacity as a member of Unit 13?” Emille asked, and I nodded. “You are aware that Murakumo is an organization that isn't meant to be public, yes?”

“Haven't I been a member of Murakumo longer than you have?” I asked, and Emille cocked an eyebrow. “People know Murakumo exists. I can do performances and stuff without exposing corporate secrets or whatever. The better the opinion of the citizenry, the easier it'll be for wartime effort in the event of an emergency, right?”

“True,” Emille said. Her eyes darted around for a second before she said, “I'm not trying to dissuade you, for the record. I was just curious.”

“Right, yeah, I get it,” I said. “I mean, you seem pretty business-y.” Then I got to thinking, and I asked her, “Hey, why do you talk to me?”

“Because you're a useful employee,” Emille said. “I don't make it a point to be aloof. You do a good job.”

“Sure, but you know that I'm...” I rubbed the back of my head, trying to figure out how to phrase this next bit. “Like... I donno, I'd expect you to be trying to tell me to break up with Chisa or something.”

“I don't begrudge you that bit of poor judgment,” Emille said, “nor do I think I'll be able to convince you that it is poor judgment. Stubbornness is the primary virtue of those with 'will'. You are not a dragon, Mio Akaneno, so I have no problem with you.”

“Cool beans,” I said. “You're awfully lenient for a hate elemental. Oh—one sec. I figured you might not get much, so...” I reached into Otacon real quick to pull out a small box—I'd gotten her a bit of chocolate, since I figured she probably didn't eat many sweets. “Here's a late Christmas gift.”

Emille blinked at the box. “What?”

“Oh, Christmas is this holiday where this guy called Santa—”

“I know who Santa Claus is!” Emille huffed, before taking the box and walking away. “*Thank you.*”

Then, about a week into January, I was sitting at the front of City Hall—Sharon had moved out and was starting up work as a DJ, and Miya... well, was off *building things*—when through the door walked who else but my mother, her labcoat actually buttoned up for once, her hair in a ponytail, carrying a suitcase.

“Okay!” Homura said, shouting it both at me and at the ceiling. “Okay! I'm here! I'm taking this test.”

I looked down at my notes. Yeah, she was on there—taking an admissions test for working with the scientists at City Hall. “Well, it's not for half an hour, so do you mind waiting in here? Hi, by the way. Nice to see you.”

“Did I not say hi?” Homura said, scratching her head. She slammed her hands down on the desk. “Okay, but whatever. If I pass this, I can come back in, right?”

“Yup,” I said. I checked my notes. “Probably on the second or third floor, the testing divisions? Then you can apply for a promotion in a couple of months.”

Homura blinked a few times, then laughed. “Okay, okay. Enough with the joking.”

“I'm not joking,” I said. “That's how it works.”

“Wha—seriously?!” Homura sputtered, turning around and starting to pace. “I have to wait months for a promotion?! That's not seriously a thing, right? She's gotta be joking, right. Playing some kinda funny prank. Months for a promotion! Who does that?”

“A lot of people have to work for years for those in other industries, y'know,” I said.

“You're pulling my leg!” Homura said, coming up and leaning into the desk again. “Nuh uh.”

“...Yuh-huh,” I said.

“Okay okay okay, whatever, anyway, how's it going, huh?” Now she was leaning in, her chin in her hand, grinning on me. “How's my daughter doing? How's Chisa, huh?”

“Doing alright, recently,” I said, pulling open a magazine. “You drunk dialed our house a while back and caused her to freak out and eat a wild animal, but now she has medication for that.”

Blink. “I what?”

“Oh, yeah. I got to hear the recording,” I said. “You were pretty sloshed.”

“Aww, come on! I got to talk to Chisa and I don't even remember it?!” Homura wailed. “Can I talk to her again?!”

“No,” I said.

“Why not?!”

“Because we're still in the process of working out the emotional stresses of her situation, and seeing you is probably going to make them worse. *I know*,” I said, holding up a hand when Homura started to retort, “I know it wasn't you that did that, but that doesn't matter if talking to you isn't what she needs right now.”

“Then why are *you* mad at me about it if you know that?!” Homura asked, wheezing out this desperate little gasp, clenching her hands like she was at her wit's end.

“Why do you think I'm mad at you?” I asked.

“Because you're not talking to me! You're not being my loving daughter, you're—I mean you let me get *fired* and now you're treating me like some random hire!” Homura said, her teeth gritted. “You're giving me this cold shoulder!”

“Mom,” I said, “I'm *busy*. I have *work* to do.”

“What's up with this, huh?! Why are you just leaving me out to dry?! I've been doing my best for you for years! Come on!” Homura griped at me. “I—”

I picked up the phone and dialed HQ. “Kirino,” I said, “I'm sorry, but I need someone else to take over here. I'm going home.”

“Oh. Alright, are you okay?” Kirino asked.

“My mother is here for her tests,” I said, “and apparently,” and I stared right at her, “she's incapable of approaching this like a professional if I'm here, so I'm going home.”

“Right, I’ll get someone down there as soon as I can,” Kirino said. “I’m sorry about this, Mio.”

“It’s fine,” I said, before hanging up, standing, taking my bags, and making to walk out of City Hall.

“Wha—you’re seriously leaving?! You don’t want to talk to me about this at all, you’re just gonna leave?!” Homura tried to chase after me, but I could be pretty fast when I wanted to. “Mio! Mio, you come back here, come on! This is not cool!”

“I’m *leaving*,” I said, walking through the doors. “You have a test to get to, so *wait quietly*.”

She started saying something else, but the door closed in front of her.

The population of monsters had been getting a bit out of hand in Ikebukuro, and Richter, Youka, and Sumie had volunteered to work on clearing them out. I hadn't, and wasn't in a combat role, but was here because... well, Taichi wanted to come along to watch.

As Youka drove a bird into the tracks, causing it to bounce off the rails and fall to its demise, Sumie blasted a few hawks out of the air with pinpoint accuracy. Richter caused one of the magnetic golems in the area to implode on itself, then input a command to restore the vitality of his allies.

Taichi's eyes were aglow with admiration, as he gasped aloud and cheered. "That was *awesome!* You guys are so awesome! That was so cool!"

As Taichi stammered through the various things that were so cool about it, Sumie clonked herself on the head and gave us an awkward little chuckle. "Ehehehe, I'm not used to having a fan."

"Your esteem is appreciated, Taichi," Richter said, quickly swapping through the screens on his holographic readout to ensure our position, "but I'm really only doing my job."

"Well," Youka said, catching a hawk that had been trying to sneak up behind her and hurling it down as well, "if you don't want it, cheer for me, kiddo. I'm used to getting cheered for."

Taichi had offered to help out, but Youka had assured him that wasn't necessary, and he was getting a great view on why that was. While they'd slowed down somewhat from their peak during that horrific August, the three of them were still probably the best fighters Japan had to offer.

As Taichi was pelting my friends with adulation, though, at that moment I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Far below on the tracks, I saw a cloaked shape move by—and began to walk off. "Wha—whoa, wait, *Nee-san*," Taichi said, turning around and yelping in protest, "I still think you're the coolest, you know!"

"No, it's not that," I said. "Keep working. I'll be fine." I did, after all, have Tomoegozen by my side.

After a bit of cajoling, I managed to get them to let me head off, and I ran across the tracks down the split path from the central hub. It was a linear path from there to the terminal below, and I was running faster than the cloaked shape, but in order to catch them I did have to make a few leaps across the lines.

"Wait!" I yelled, finally managing to get close enough to call out. "Iod!"

Iod stopped, no doubt flummoxed at having just barely not managed to escape me. "...Yes?"

"What're you doing here?" I asked, pointing my sword at them. "The war is over. Do you have something else you want?"

"I am, as always, an observer," Iod said, turning to me, still hidden behind their ever-present mask. "I have no desire to harm you or yours."

I gritted my teeth, and pointed Tomoegozen at them. "Don't give me that. I know who you are."

“And I you,” Iod said, “but it is as I said before. I have a vested interest in your survival.”

“As a human,” I asked, “or as a dragon?”

After a moment of silence, Iod sighed and said, “You know well that were it up to me, you would not have learned of that document. I simply wish for you to survive.”

“That's bullshit!” I said, taking a step closer and swinging Tomoegozen in the air. “You think I'm going to buy that?! I'm not doing what I'm 'supposed' to! The world's still here!”

Again, there was that awkward silence, before Iod said, “I believe you are mistaking my priorities.”

“Mistaking your—*You're a goddamned True Dragon!*” I shouted, my free hand clutching into a claw.

“And so are you, yet you do not desire the destruction of this world,” Iod said. They raised a hand, shining and ephemeral, to point to me. “You are correct. I am the First True Dragon, Iod, progenitor of all Dragons. You are the Seventh True Dragon, VFD, culmination of all Dragons. Upon this train track are the beginning and end of the cycle of Dragons, and yet this world continues on—this tale of man and Dragons has not yet reached its end.”

“And I don't want it to!” I shouted.

“To tell true,” Iod said, lowering their hand, “I feel sorrow for you. To be trapped in this liminal existence, beholden to two incompatible evolutionary imperatives... Yours is a hard lot. It has always been my role to observe. But this sorrow, this... responsibility I feel for your lot, it leads me again and again to observe you in particular, since the moment your seeds were planted by that mad woman who would play at godhood.”

Their tone was quiet, almost mournful. Though I couldn't see their face, part of me could at least... assume they were being genuine. I lowered my sword. “Iod...”

“I do not wish for any possible outcome, save an outcome where you are true to your self,” Iod said. “Whether that is the imperatives of a Dragon, or the 'will' of man—it is the lot of those who seek kinship with you to stand beside you nevertheless.”

I shook my head. “There's... no way. That can't be all you want. You can't just be altruistic, that's ridiculous, you're—you're the First True Dragon, you're—”

A monster just like me. A beast that only eats. Something that should be locked away. Hideous. Horrible.

“No!” I yelled, holding my head. “No! No! I'm, I—!” I took a deep breath, one, two, three, four. “I'm not... I don't want to be locked away, I don't—!” I fell to my knees, clutching my head.

“...I am sorry. I know my presence harms you,” Iod said. “I wished again to leave before you saw me.”

“Who am I?” I said, tears welling up in my eyes. “Please just tell me who I am!”

“I...” Iod trailed off before turning around, leaving me staring at the back of their cloak. “I cannot answer that. None can, save yourself.”

I staggered to my feet, only for Iod to vanish before I could say anything more. “Wait—!” My head throbbed, and I was forced to chew on my gum instead of anything else.

“...*Nee-san?*”

Taichi—was behind me. I turned to see him cautiously attempting to come closer. “How, how long were you there?” I said, taking a step back.

“I only just got here, but I heard... a bit,” he said. He took another step forward. “Hey, it’s... it’s okay, you know?”

“What’s okay?” I asked.

“You’re... okay. Nobody’s trying to lock you up again. And I’d... I’d stop them. I would.” Taichi’s right hand clenched into a fist. “I can do that.”

My own fists clenched, and I sheathed Tomoegozen as the tears began to well up in my eyes. “But... Taichi. Why? Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re my sister,” he said. “Because I love you, you idiot.”

“I’m a monster,” I said, shaking my head. “Taichi, I... you were there. You saw it. You saw me... and Father. I haven’t changed. I’m still that monster, deep inside. I don’t deserve to live like this. I don’t deserve to live happily. Good people deserve that.”

“Screw that!” Taichi yelled, swinging his arm and leaning forward. “I don’t care if you’re a good person or a bad person!” A step forward. “I don’t care if you cut off Dad’s arm!” A step forward. “I don’t care if you eat wild animals!” A step forward. “I don’t care if you like killing things!” Another step. “And I sure as hell don’t care if we’re not biologically related, or if there’s some other sister I was ‘supposed’ to have instead of you! I’m not that Taichi! I’m me, and *you! Are! My! **Sister!***”

My fists unclenched, and my arms hung limply by my side as Taichi walked up and hugged me. “Congrats, Chisa,” he said, “you broke your record.”

“My... what?” I mumbled.

“I’ve been keeping track of your number of days without an episode,” Taichi said into my shoulder. “It’s been eleven days. That’s a new record.”

It took a second for that to sink in, but I snorted, then hugged Taichi back and laughed while I did. “You dork. Who does that?”

“I was planning to congratulate you once you hit a month,” Taichi said. “Maybe make you a

cake or something.”

“Do that anyway,” I said, “that sounds nice. How did you even get down here so quickly? And with the monsters?”

“I jumped,” Taichi said, and I nodded, because that made sense. Then I cried.

“Mio,” I said, about a month before her debut. She was in the kitchen making food, but she was good at multi-tasking. “I have... I have problems.”

“Oh yeah?” Mio said, over a steaming pot.

“I mean... you know that. But... I've felt *better* lately, but there's these self-destructive urges inside my head that haven't changed at all.” I squeezed my temples. “I don't know who I am. I feel like I'm... I'm just confused, Mio. There's something messed up inside me that won't let me *not* be confused.”

“It's probably all the trauma,” Mio said. “If I had to guess.”

“I want your help,” I said, turning my head to declare it right at her. “I want you to Dive again. If that's okay. You're—you've got a big moment coming up, and I don't want to be an albatross around your neck when that comes.”

Mio had a few minutes to let things simmer before she had to continue, so she had time to turn around with a downcast expression. “Babe, you're not—”

“Mio, please don't try and say I'm not. I have been. For years. I've been limiting you. I want your help so that I can *stop* limiting you,” I said.

“But what does that mean?” Mio asked. “What do you think stopping limiting me looks like?”

“...Huh?” I tilted my head.

“Chisa, I... I haven't really done anything to help you. It's been Taichi, Kirino, Dr. Hashizawa... I've been pretty much useless. Anything I'm doing is just helping me, not you.” Mio slumped over on the counter a bit, holding her head in her hands. “I—”

I leapt up from the counter and grabbed her hands. “That's *ridiculous*. Do you seriously think that?” My voice was probably angrier than I meant it to come out, given how she looked. “Do you really think I could've even survived that long without you here to have faith in me? Do you really think you haven't been helping me?”

“What do I even have?” Mio said. “All I do is love you. These other people can help you in ways that... help you be more than you were, help you figure out who you are. I'm... useless.”

What was this? I thought. Where was this coming from? This was a side of Mio I could swear I'd never seen before. “Mio... what's wrong?”

“I don't know. I'm sorry. I'll stop,” Mio said, shaking her head. “I'm being a mess. Sorry.”

“No, please,” I said, “I want to help you if I can help you! Mio, I'm your *girlfriend*. Please, tell me if something's wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong!” Mio shouted, throwing her arms to the sides. “Nothing is wrong! I'm *fine*! Work is going great! You're doing great! The rebuilding's going great! There's absolutely no reason I

should feel like a miserable excuse for a human being, so *clearly I don't because that wouldn't make sense!* I *don't* feel useless! I *don't* feel more lost than ever! I *don't* feel like an emotional trainwreck in motion grappling with some inherent deficiency as a person! None of that would make sense, so I don't feel it!"

"M-Mio," I said, my eyes transfixed on the desperate flailing of her arms, the heavy breathing that indicated repressed tears. "Mio. No, this isn't okay. You need to come with me. Last time we did this, you found the strength to become an idol. Come on. We're doing this together."

"That doesn't even make sense!" Mio shouted, balling her fists. "Why should you be trying to help me by getting me to help you?! That doesn't make sense! Why don't you go get someone who makes sense to do it?! I—"

She collapsed to her knees, clutching her chest and desperately trying to catch her breath. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I don't. I don't know what. I'm sorry."

I knelt down next to her and wrapped my arms around her. "Mio. Please. Even if you can't say it out loud, let me try to help you. Please."

Without saying a word, she leaned forward into my chest, gasped, and nodded.

Before we headed in, Kyosuke took me aside to say, "Thank you very much for your help in all this."

I shook my head. "No, if anything I feel as though we're taking advantage of your generosity. I know that this technology is important to you, and we keep using it to work through our own issues."

"You know that's kind of the point of it, right?" Kyosuke asked, tilting his head, before continuing, "Unless I've really misunderstood the point of therapy, I mean. To be fair, I'm not a therapist. All I'm worried about is that *she* keeps going into *you* and not vice-versa. Do you ever get curious? I mean—"

"I do," I said, "but... well, how do I put this... If I force her, it won't help her. Forcing her into things is how this issue started in the first place. I'm not very good with people, but I think what I need to do is give her that space so she can figure out how to talk to me directly."

"Geez. That sounds hard," Kyosuke said. "I'm no good with that kind of thing, but I guess it can be harder sometimes to have a straightforward talk with a person you've known for ages than with someone you barely know, huh?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Sure enough."

“I'm fine,” I muttered to myself as I appeared in Stonehenge. “I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine!”

I just needed to take a second to breathe and remember I wasn't focusing on my problems right now. I was focused on Chisa's. I was going to help her, and not myself. It wasn't about me, so I was fine.

“Those are the words,” said the full-size Raquel, leaning in to stare at me, “of someone who is decidedly not fine.”

“Geh!” I said, jumping back. “W-what's it to you?”

“For all that I might be an aspect of *this* Cosmosphere, I am reasonably concerned for *you* as well, you know,” Raquel said. “The more you pretend to be fine, the more certain I am that you are not in fact fine.”

“Look, I—it's fine. If I just keep going for long enough, it'll go away and I'll really be fine. I won't start being fine until I've gotten through it.” I gritted my teeth, balled my fists, and let out a deep breath through my teeth. “Let's just go.”

“If you insist,” Raquel said, shaking her head with a little sigh. “I know better than to think *I* could stop you. But keep in mind the stairs are a bit slippery.”

It was just after twilight, right after the sun had gone down. This time, the center of this place wasn't the Horizon—it was a castle, built out of that same brick but shimmery and splendid like it was made out of glass, or maybe ice. It wasn't Japanese-style, either—it was definitely a Western-style castle, the sort of thing you'd see in a medieval fantasy. All that was here for me to go to, though, was a bridge—most of the rim of this layer was covered in a frozen-over lake.

I took a deep breath and pumped myself up, then got to walking. Even though it was so obviously cold, the temperature was manageable, and I didn't find myself slipping around at all. The stars had started coming out above my head, and I found myself looking up at them—it wasn't the star field you could see from anywhere I'd ever been. There were stars there I'd definitely never seen in my life.

The front gate, which was a whole lot taller than me, opened with a simple push, and I entered into the lavish, icy-blue palace. High ceilings with many an arch, chandeliers, braziers that didn't seem to disturb the chill at all... There was even a literal red carpet under my feet. “Am I expected?” I asked myself.

Raquel wound up answering. “I have to imagine she's just always expecting visitors.”

Up a stairwell, then forward again through another door. I figured if I kept walking forward I'd find the throne room, and find the throne room I did—it was kind of small given the outside size of the building, but it had things like stained glass windows, yet more chandeliers, and let me be clear it wasn't actually small, I'd just expected bigger. Something like, IDK, the audience chamber in Disney Castle or something, but I found somewhere where I could reach the other end of the room after like ten seconds' walk.

“Oh! Mio!” Naturally, there was a Chisa on the throne—gold rims with a deeper blue on the cushioning. She was lounging onto the arms of her throne before I'd gotten there, but she started up when she heard me come in. She was wearing this kinda slinky, glittery, one-piece ice-blue dress with matching heels, very Elsa from *Frozen* if you catch my drift? But less actual ruler clothing and more out for a very cold night on the town, it wasn't actually very complicated.

“You've got a fashion statement going on,” I said, gesturing kinda... just up. “Even got the building in on it.”

“Well, you know,” Chisa said, getting up off her throne and sliding over next to me, wringing her hands as she did, “a girl's gotta accessorize, right? Statements need to be made such that people understand them. Were you planning on staying? I have at least, like, five rooms for you if you want them.”

I blinked at her, then put my hands on my hips. “What, I can't stay in yours?”

“Well sure, sure, but mine's kind of boring, you know?” Chisa said, putting one cheek in her right hand. “I'd really much rather show you something that's clean, fit for two if need be! I'm a bit low on staff at the moment, but I can get a lot done when I want to.”

Since she seemed so excited about it, I decided to let her drag me around and show me some of the rooms. Most of the actual residential space was to the right from the throne room, but the hallways went on for a while, lots of amenities all dressed up in this icy blue. The rooms weren't bad, there was just a sort of... I got the picture like nobody had ever actually stayed in them. Chisa was pretty enthusiastic about it, though.

“And so over here we have a room I thought I might try and decorate in the style of—”

“What's down that way?” I said, pointing to a small hallway she hadn't taken me down.

“Eh,” Chisa said, “the dungeon. Nothing really important in there. Let me show you this Rococo-style room here, this one might tickle your fancy—”

“Can I go see it?” I asked. “The dungeon, I mean.”

Chisa blinked at me, then narrowed her eyes. “I feel like you're going to go do it no matter what I say, and the more I protest the weirder you're going to get about it.”

“Wow, you know me so well!” I laughed.

“Fine, fine. But you have to be understanding about what you see, alright?” Chisa said, pressing her temples with her index finger and thumb.

The side hallway led to a spiral staircase down, and as I stepped down it I swear the darkness *immediately* set in. One moment it was bright, the next I was stepping into something out of a survival horror. The air was stagnant and cold, and down here the brick and iron bars weren't even the slightest bit pretty.

I only had to take a few steps in to see the prisoner. She was chained against the back wall, but a

slight glint of light off of Vee's claws made it clear to me it was her. I ran up to the bars and grabbed them. "Vee!"

Vee looked up when she saw me, but when the Chisa who owned the castle walked up behind me, Vee roared and started struggling against her binds. "What are you doing?!" I turned my head to say. "She's a part of you just as much as you are!" I leaned in close, balling my fists and gritting my teeth.

"Okay," Chisa said, raising a finger, "yelling at me immediately is not being understanding."

"How could I be understanding about this?!" I shouted.

Chisa pressed her temples again and turned around before starting to wring her hands around. The dungeon hallway was small, but there was room for me to pace. "Okay. See, I know how this probably looks. It's not like I'm stupid—I have known you for, what, a decade, now? You're thinking, 'gosh, how could you possibly chain her up? You're just trying to force yourself down again, aren't you?' Because you probably think that thing is the end-all, be-all of my nature."

"It looks *pretty bad*," I said.

She turned around and had this sort of withering glare on her face. "You really just don't get it, Mio. Listen—this thing needs to be locked up. You might be able to convince someone who's a bit more emotional about these things, but sooner or later, this thing is going to be the death of me."

"I—"

Chisa reached over and grabbed my shoulder (and I again realized that man, she was strong,) then swung her hand and dispelled that thick, stagnant darkness. The cells across the walls were suddenly visible, and I saw—skeletons. Piled upon each other, skeleton after skeleton in each cell, dozens of dead people just *sitting there*.

"This thing needs to be locked up for *my* own good," Chisa said. "Do you think because the conscious Chisa is able to control herself, that that thing can? It's nothing but murderous instinct. I can't let it run rampant through our entire psyche!"

Let me out! Let me out! Mio is mine! I won't let you hurt Mio!

I wasn't really able to say anything to that, and then—*wham*. A non-directional blast of rejection hit me, and all of a sudden I was back at the front gate of the castle.

"It's not as though the Snow Queen here created all this ice," Raquel said, "but she thrives in it a bit, doesn't she?"

Shaking my head, I rubbed my forehead a bit, then said, "Okay. So... what is this? It's not like she's denying she's a dragon, necessarily..." I took a deep breath, then walked back in. There were paths around before I went up the stairwell, but this time I decided to go up, then take the other side from the throne room door. Instead of a hallway, this led to... I guess you'd call it an atrium?

It was almost like a greenhouse, except for the fact that everything was constructed out of ice.

With the little bits of moisture coming off of them as vapor, it gave the place kind of a foggy, ethereal vibe. Flowers, vines, bushes, all in this ornately-crafted, ice sculpture show. It was kind of incredible.

Chisa—the Snow Queen—was there, whistling to herself in the center, spinning around as she watered the plants... for some reason. “Uhh...” I mumbled to myself.

“Oh, Mio!” Chisa said, waving with a big smile on her face. I supposed maybe she'd hit a reset button... or maybe she was just really fast to get back to feeling fine. “What do you think? Is it good?”

The detail on all these sculptures was kind of incredible—I could reach over and feel the divisions between individual petals, small thorns on a rose of ice... “Yeah,” I said. “It's breathtaking.”

“With what I have here, I can't really construct actual life, but I can imitate it! I did my best. I'm really glad you approve,” Chisa said. With that big smile on her face, she walked over and hugged me. She was about the only warm thing here.

“Aww, babe...” I muttered.

“Seriously, though,” Chisa said, letting go of me and going back to pacing around. “It's so... nice, to be able to capture life in motion. Things like me, we usually aren't able to. Creative habits like this—they're something special! Humans are really so wonderful!”

“But...” I mumbled, “Well... I know you're a dragon, but you're a human too, aren't you?”

Chisa got this fearful look on her face, then shook her head frantically. “No! No, no. No, I could never say that. I'm not good enough for all that, haha!” She had a smile on her face still, but it was stiffer. “Well, wait. Do you think I'm a human? Really?” I nodded, and Chisa started tearing up. “Oh my gosh.”

“Wha—” I sputtered, and rubbed the back of my head awkwardly. “Is that really that big of a deal?”

“Of course it is!” Chisa said, running up to me with tears in her eyes and grabbing my hands tightly. “It's the biggest deal of all! Being human, becoming human, that's why I exist!”

“But why?” I asked. “What's so important about being human?”

—All of a sudden, the cold came rushing in, and Chisa's eyes went glassy. “I... don't know,” she said. “Being human... why did I... want that?”

Wham. There I was again. “What the hell is this?” I asked Raquel. “This Chisa's... really strange.”

“How do you mean?” Raquel asked. She was staring up at the night sky.

“It's just...” I shook my head. “It's just weird. It's not like Chisa always had her draconic instincts, right? There was a long time there, over a decade, where she was just a... rrrrelatively average girl. But looking at this Chisa, you'd think she was always a dragon. It's... just weird. I can't quite put my finger on it.”

“It is, after all,” Raquel said, “hard to know the complete depths of any given person. I couldn't tell you the answer.”

I headed back in, and I looked around the left half of the ground floor. I took myself through a bunch of hallways, but many of the doors were either locked or just outright fake. Moonlight streamed through the windows on the walls, lighting up the red carpet, ever-present beneath my feet.

I found a door that was real, and I put my hand on the knob to open it—

*Why? Why can't I be human? Why can't I be human? Why can't I be human? Why can't I be human?
Why can't I be human? Why can't I be human? Why can't I be human? Why can't I be human?*

—and as I did I got blasted—

*What are humans to me? What are they? Why do I want to be a human? What does a human mean?
What makes a human? Someone, please explain it to me! I want to know!*

—with what I can only describe—

*I failed. I need to die. I don't want to die. I need to die. I don't want to die. I need to die. I don't want to die.
I need to die. I don't want to die. I need to die. I don't want to die. I need to die. I don't want to die.
I need to die. I don't want to die. I need to die. I don't want to die. I need to die. I don't want to die. I
need to die. I don't want to die. I need to die. I don't want to die. I need to die. I don't want to die. I
need to die. I don't want to die. Help me. Help me. Help me help me help me help me help me help me*

—as a raw blast of someone else's emotion. It left me reeling, and I found myself on the ground, panting, as Raquel tried to lift me up. “You okay?” she asked.

“I'm... I'm alright,” I panted, staggering up. The room inside was small and square, wooden, lit by only a single lamp. And all across the walls—

*I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm
sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*

*I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't
understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand*

*Who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I
who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I who am I*

—was scribbling in paint red enough to look like blood.

There was a desk on the other side, where the lamp was sat. There was a small diary, and on it was written a single entry. The date was a day I remembered very well.

Today,

*I failed at being a human. I let **that thing** out.*

I was never good enough to be a human after all. I couldn't do it.

I need to do better. I must do better. Otherwise, I can never be human.

I need to do better. I must do better. Otherwise, I can never

What did I want to do

Someone please tell me what I wanted to do

Please tell me what I wanted to do

“It’s the day we rescued her from her parents,” I said. “The day she... cut off her dad’s arm. That was the first day I saw Vee—or something like her, anyway.”

“The human subconscious can be a dark place,” Raquel said, looking over my shoulder. “Even if that human is a dragon—maybe especially so.”

“I just—”

Then when I turned around, *there she was*

“**MSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRYIMSORRY**”

and she was scribbling on the wall with red chalk more of those little scribbles, and then there I was outside again.

—I went another way, and I found a gallery full of drawings. I recognized most of them. They were things Chisa had drawn, landscapes, portraits, panels of manga, all lined up and framed in these glass cases sturdy enough to withstand anything. “I like drawing,” Chisa said when she showed up there, “because I love capturing life. I hate being alone. I love being in this living, breathing world! Existing with everything around me, existing as part of everything around me, it’s so wonderful!”

I went another way, and I found a room with a bunch of doors. When I started knocking on them, since they were locked, suddenly Chisa was next to me, desperately pounding on the doors, screaming to be let out, begging, please, let me out, let me out. “Please! Please give me a chance! I can do it! I know I can be a human! I’m not broken! I’m not! I’m not! I’m not!”

“I’m a human!” “I can be a human!” “I’m not broken!” “I’m not a monster!” “I’m sorry!” “I just want to live!” “Who am I supposed to be?!” “Help me!” “I don’t want to be alone!”

Frantically shaking my head at the gates, I yelled out to the sky, “What the hell am I supposed to do?!”

“Maybe,” Raquel said, sitting and looking morose over the side of the bridge at the frozen lake, “you can’t do anything.”

“This, again?” I asked, walking over and tapping my feet. “I—”

“That's not what I mean,” Raquel said. “You can see there's something wrong, but you can't solve it. There's something deep, deep down and it's not something you can fix, because you aren't her. She has issues you could never have, right? Same with you and her. Maybe this is where you have to get out—a problem that she can only solve by herself, and where your role is to support her.”

“But, but—but then—” My breath got heavy, and I think I started hyperventilating. “No. No, it can't be like that. I have to do something! I can't just keep doing nothing! I can't keep being this useless! I can't just let other people do everything I'm supposed to do! I have to, I have to—!”

Just a bit more. I just want to understand a bit more of her.

I ran in one more time, and I went up the stairs, then turned toward the dungeon. “Hey, wait!” Raquel called after me, floating behind me and then eventually just deciding to run on the ground. “Hold on! This might not be the best idea!”

I grabbed tightly onto the bars and shook them, looking at Vee. “I'm gonna get you out,” I said. “Please. I just need to know! Something's *missing* here!”

Vee looked up at me, her eyes piercing through the darkness, and I grabbed the bars and *yanked*—and I wasn't rejected there. I tore them out of the door frame, and when I did, Vee bore her fangs and tore at the chains keeping her stuck and broke them near-effortlessly, standing up. I ran over and wrapped her in a hug, but I didn't cry. I wasn't going to cry.

Mio. Why?

“Because I love you! I love you and I can't watch this! I can't watch you scratching at the walls desperate for some approval you don't *need*! I want *my* approval to *mean something*! I'm... I'm...”

My breath was heavy, but I wasn't going to cry.

“...N-no—”

I turned around and saw Chisa at the stairs, staggering back, terror in her eyes. “No,” she said, “no, no no no, no, no no no this isn't happening.”

YOU!

I tried to hold Vee back from attacking her, yelling, “Wait! Vee, please! There has to be some way for you two to just coexist, right?”

“No no no no no no no no no no” Chisa whimpered, holding herself and shivering, “No no no no no no no no NO”

She turned around and booked it away, and then *wham*, I was back at the gate. I half expected nothing to be different, but then Chisa swung open the front gate, running away, her eyes wide in terror, sweating, flailing, her heels falling off as she ran.

“I can't I can't I can't!!” Chisa yelled, passing me by. “I can't no I can't no I can't no I can't no I can't no I can't no I can't no”

—And then in the direction she ran, where Stonehenge was *fell away*, and I saw that the stone bridge we were on over this frozen lake had been the Horizon all along, and it was still broken—

“Please! *Let me out let me out!*” Chisa ran as far as she could, then started yelling into the distance. “Someone please help me! I don't know how to get out! I don't know how to find anything else! Where am I?! Help me! HELP ME!”

Then from under the frozen lake there was a *crash*, and a claw far larger than I was used to seeing came out with a bone-chilling, inhuman roar, and then another crash as the *thing* under the lake started climbing out, its maw chomping at the air, its wings flicking off the water to their true, enormous span

“No! No no no no NO NO NO NO NO NO”

W H Y

“Please I don't want this please give me another chance please I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry”

W H Y

“Mom Dad I'm sorry I'm sorry please give me another chance I'm begging you I don't want to hurt anyone I dont”

W H Y

as its jaw opened wide in front of my face, another roar forcing my entire body to the ground, onto my knees,

“LET ME OUT IM SORRY LET ME OUT IM SORRY LET ME OUT IM SORRY IM SORRY”

W H E R E

and I heard its voice echoing through every inch of this realm

as it shut its jaws.

IS THE REAL ME?

When I came to, I was in a bubble of light. That place wasn't visible anymore. I was just floating through darkness. "It'll survive, as always," Raquel said, floating by my shoulder. "It'll go back to normal."

"I... I..."

"You can't solve everything," Raquel said to me, turning to full size and putting her hand on my shoulder. "Some issues can't be solved... not without the rest of her, at least."

"Did I... make a mistake?"

Raquel shook her head. "You're just another person trying to figure yourself out, aren't you? This conflict's played out just like that in here, over and over again. It would've happened with or without you."

"I'm... still sorry."

—That was the last time I Dived into her. But I wasn't quite done yet. I still had to learn where this bubble, gently drifting through space, was going to take me.