# Prologue

### Date: March 20, 2068

### Time: 11:37 Pm

### Location: Sapporo, Japan

### Operation: Ghostcrawler

“Get away! Get away!”

“What is that thing?!”

“Unit 42 is gone! They’re just gone!”

“Pull back! We can’t – aaagh!”

Police officers and civilians both scattered in the wake of an attack by a huge beast the likes of which they’d never seen. The thing had black skin that seemed impervious to their bullets, four long clawed reptilian arms that were tearing people and buildings apart, and a long neck ending in an eyeless head with huge jaws. It was five stories tall and carving a swath of destruction through the city block.

They’d set up a blockade on a suspension bridge hoping to stop the demon’s path of destruction, but they weren’t going to hold out long. The police had no idea what they were dealing with. Anyone close was torn apart while those out of reach of the arms found themselves scrambling for cover from the acid-like saliva the monster spit out at them, melting metal and bone alike.

A captain stood nearby calling for an evacuation and assistance in a panic. “Nothing we do phases this thing! What the hell is it?! Get a military group out here, we need better hardware! We’re getting slaughtered!” He watched in fear as the beast came closer. Monsters didn’t exist, but how could he deny what was in front of his eyes? His radio hung loosely from his hand as he gave up calling in. He couldn’t imagine any assistance that could come help them with this.

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“SIN 2, you’re clear to enter Zone 1.”

“About time!” A man with ragged brown hair, shades rather than goggles and an inappropriately casual Hawaiian shirt pulled on the throttle of the hyper-advanced black helicopter he was piloting, soaring between skyscrapers towards the location on his Heads-Up Display. “You hear that, Captain? We’re going in!”

Behind him sat a woman looking out the open side of the helicopter. Cigarette smoke surrounded her, lit faintly by the embers on the end of the small white cylinder. Purple-painted lips held the object carelessly as, a few inches higher, lavender colored eyes scanned the city calmly. Delicate fingers lifted to brush violet curls of hair from one of her eyes as she turned to regard the man. “Understood, Reno. Take us in high and give me a good spot.”

Reno gave her a thumbs-up and her attention went to the rifle at her side, longer than the average human was tall. Her hand re-checked it out of practice, loading the chamber and switching off the safety in instinctual movements. She lifted one hand to her ear. “Sano, we’re heading for a rooftop view. Take the low road and get the civvies out of there.”

“Yes, sir. On it already.”

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“Get away from the bank, it’s collapsing!” The police captain was shouting orders into his radio as if it would help, but truth be told he didn’t know what else do to. The creature picked up one of his men and tore the man in half, flinging the pieces at others. It was chaos, violent chaos.

He blinked in surprise as black-clad soldiers rushed past him, setting up a line and lifting strange rifles. The captain jumped as a hand fell on his shoulder, turning to see a younger man with spiked back crimson hair, brown eyes and handsome features. The man was wearing a suit as casually as one could be worn, with the jacket open, no tie and the top couple buttons of his white shirt undone.

“We’ll take it from here.” He walked past the officer, moving towards the black-armored soldiers. “Fire!”

“Who are you people?!” The officer yelled. “You don’t have jurisdiction here! I can’t just let anyone-“

He was cut off by the high-pitched whine that emitted from all the soldiers’ rifles as they unleashed what looked like blue tracer rounds. The monster roared, turning its attention to them. The red-haired man looked back and pointed behind the officer. “Get your men and the civilians out of the area! You can’t do anything more here!” He turned back and drew a large pistol with blue-lit lines on it, firing at the creature.

The officer decided to take the advice, calling on his radio for his men to pull out and evacuate the block.

Kurasano made sure the officer was following his directions before putting a hand to his ear. “Captain? I’ve got a little issue here,” he said as he watched the beast roar in pain and make its way towards them.

A woman’s voice replied in his ear after a few seconds, “What’s the problem, Sano? You can’t take a Class-C by yourself?”

Sano ordered his men to back up, walking backwards himself. “Well I mean, I could, but then you’d feel left out.”

“You’re so sweet.”

Sano grinned. “What are friends for?”

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Up above the city, Katsumi Samakura stretched out, having been sitting in the same position for far too long. She slung her rifle over her shoulder and stepped up to the edge, looking down on the fires and chaos caused by the creature in the center. She stepped out and dropped through the air; wind rushed past her and whipped her shoulder-length violet curls across her face and neck.

She flipped at the last second and hit the roof of a building with a crack, landing on her feet in a run to the edge of the rooftop. She dropped to a prone position and set her rifle on the edge, getting a view on the chaos below. A small whine emitted from her left eye as a targeting reticule appeared only to her in front of her iris, scanning the street below and giving her angles and distance estimations.

Her vision zoomed in on the beast before she switched it off and put her eye to the scope of her rifle, taking aim as her finger rested on the trigger. She fired and the shot rang out over the city, the rifle kicking back viciously as a blue shot streaked down through the air and through the creature. It roared in pain as the bullet went clear through, putting a hole at the base of its neck on both sides.

Katsumi began reloading as the creature turned its attention to her, leaping onto the side of the skyscraper she was on and climbing quickly. Sano’s voice flared up in her ear. “Looks like you’ve got a guest, Captain Sama.”

“Yes, but I can take a demon myself.”

“Fine, so you’re better than me.”

“Don’t forget it.” Katsumi stood and stepped up to the edge, firing straight down. This shot went through the demon’s head and its entire body, eliciting another roar, but it kept climbing, shaking the building as it did. Katsumi growled and steadied her footing. “Reno, I’m gonna need a pick-up in twenty-four seconds.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Hurry.”

“Patience is a virtue, Captain Sama.”

“Spare me the platitudes and get over here Reno.”

“Fine, fine. On my way.”

Katsumi fired again and this time the demon responded by unleashing acidic spit in her direction. She dodged to the side but the demon was doing more than that, shaking the building and smashing his head inside to spit on the supports. The building’s integrity was rapidly dropping, and it wouldn’t be standing for much longer. “Reno…”

“Almost there.”

The demon was closer now, only a couple stories below the roof, and the groaning of the building’s metal supports was louder.

“Reno!”

“Can’t make it go faster by yelling!”

The creature reached the roof and opened its jaws, forming a warped ball of acid and flame in its mouth that increased in size before it shot towards her. She sprinted a few steps and dived out of the way of the explosion, cursing as her cigarettes fell from her pocket during her roll. She wisely decided to leave them to the expanding wave of fire and leapt from the roof of the building, spinning in midair and firing a final shot that caught the creature in the middle of the chest.

The special round burned through its center and the demon gave an odd sound, staggering back and forth before falling and crashing through the roof into the floor below. The impact was enough to start the building’s collapse.

Katsumi slung her rifle onto her back and turned to face down, falling faster every second. The chopper suddenly caught up to her mid-fall and she spun, catching the edge of the open doorway and pulling herself in as the chopper pulled out of the dive. Reno looked back and waved at her. “Told you I’d pick you up. You worry too much.”

Samakura pushed herself up and turned to sit with her legs out the side. “I hate you, Reno.”

“I just saved your ass. You should be kissing my feet! Or just kissing me.”

Captain Sama tilted her head. “You know, maybe it’s time to throw you out the side of this thing and invest in an AI to pilot this for me…”

Reno waved his hand. “Shutting up now.”

“You sure? We’re high up enough you probably wouldn’t even feel anything on impact.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I don’t care either, as long as hitting the pavement shuts you up.”

“So violent…”

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“Hey, Captain?” Sano was looking upwards, staring at the building that was starting to collapse. “It wasn’t very nice of you to drop a building on me…”

Samakura’s reply came back promptly, which he was glad to hear since she’d been on top of that building. “It’s not my fault you couldn’t bring it down yourself.”

“I’m going to blame you anyway.” Sano backed up, looking around. He was the only one left on the bridge. “You could at least give me an exit strategy. Do you have a lock on my location?”

“Don’t I always? Why don’t you just jump off the bridge?”

“If you want me dead just say it, Captain,” Sano grinned, looking back to the building as metal snapped and collapsed in on itself.

“Just trust me. Leap of Faith.”

“Indiana Jones style?”

“You have a choice?”

Sano dodged as a huge piece of concrete slammed into the ground near him. “Nope.” He turned and dashed for the edge of the bridge, dodging debris and leaping over the edge as the building collapsed onto the area behind him. There were a few seconds of weightlessness before gravity took over to drag him towards the coast below. Fortunately, he only fell a few meters before a strong grip caught his wrist.

He looked up to see Samakura hanging out the edge of their chopper, smiling at him. “Nice exit. Next time try not to be so clumsy.”

“Conversations are better inside helicopters than hanging from them, Captain!”

She laughed and pulled him up as Reno looked back at them. “Careful, she’s threatening to throw people out of this thing.”

“Again?” Sano brushed some bits of debris from his hair before sitting down with a relieved sigh.

“Yep, she must be PM-“

“If you finish that sentence I’ll feed you feet first through the rotor blades, Reno.”

“Yes, ma’am, sorry, ma’am.”

Sano shook his head. “Learn to keep your mouth shut, man.”

Captain Samakura glanced at Sano as she pulled the chopper’s door closed. “You don’t look too bad in a suit, Sano. Maybe you should wear them more often.”

“Huh?” He glanced down at himself and then nodded in agreement. “Yeah, it’s not too shabby. Thanks.” He looked back up, automatically returning the compliment. “And your outfit looks…” He paused because, while his commander’s attractive features - especially her curly light-violet back-length hair and lavender eyes - were easy to compliment, the skin-tight gray-and-black combat outfit currently wrapped around her form was probably not the most appropriate thing to comment on. “Uh…”

Reno snickered. “Now who’s the one with his foot in his mouth?”

Samakura rolled her eyes, taking one of the seats. “Focus on flying us back to headquarters.”

“Right, victory flight commencing.”

# Chapter 1: Silence

*From: H.*

*To: R.*

*Subject: Monthly Global Status Update*

*Date: March 21, 2068*

*Current Global Status:*

*NATIONAL: Nations continue to merge and combine, losing individual definition but gaining stability (stagnation?). African Unification Project moving forward but slowed by terrorist activities.*

*MILITARY: National militaries continuing to be dissolved. Private Corporation Militaries continue to grow in demand, size and power. Forces including Police, Security, Military, Special Task Force, Intelligence, and Counter-Terrorism are now 83% privately owned corporations. Remaining 17% national forces expected to decline to less than 1% in the next decade.*

*TOP SECRET: Supernatural Invasion Null Units that were created to combat increasing number of paranormal entities have proven highly successful. Recommend continuation.*

*TECHNOLOGY: “Cyberization” proving increasingly popular and profitable. The average citizen is estimated to have a Cyber Percentage (CP) of 4%, with military members having an average of 15%. Average Human Lifespan due to Cybernetics and Medicinal advances is now 120 years; youth continues to be extended, with age 30 bearing little difference to age 20 and age 40 now what age 30 was in the early 2000’s. Immortality remains out of reach, but our private researchers estimate it being attainable within 20 years. Artificial Intelligence is moving towards “perfection” ever since creativity and “thought” were achieved three years ago.*

*Hello, R. The information for this month is, as usual, mostly redundant, but I find it helps me focus on our company’s best interests. To that end I’ve a question I’d like to pose to you.*

*You see, I’ve spoken to some of the other board members and while we’re happy with the direction the company is currently heading in, we aren’t quite sure about the future. A crew doesn’t trust their captain simply because the ship’s heading the right way at the moment, right? You have to consider the skill of the captain in more than direction. There are storms to consider, which must be weathered. Rocky shores that must be avoided. Pirates that must be fought off.*

*I’ll get to the point as we’re both busy men. I want to test this company with a storm. It’s not that I distrust G and the way he runs things, but we haven’t seen how he handles the real waves. Let me know your thoughts and if you’re in. Our providers and clients would be much more comfortable if they had proof that this company won’t sink.*

*H.*

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### Date: March 21, 2068

### Time: 3:08 AM

### Location: Aegis Corporation Japan

### Division Headquarters, Tokyo

### Operation: Ghostcrawler (Debriefing)

As the hangar doors closed, Katsumi Samakura stepped out of the helicopter and waved over her shoulder to her two team members as she headed into the main building. The Aegis Corporation building was massive but she knew her way around, which allowed her to think as she walked through the clinical white hallways. Intel had dropped the ball; that much was obvious, or at least it was her conclusion. They’d been expecting Class-E or D at most, which slowed their response time when it became clear it was a Class-B demon. Hopefully answers would be available. Or someone to blame and kick through a window. Katsumi wasn’t picky, she’d take either at the moment.

She reached a large office several floors up, ignoring the secretary that stood to greet her and entering the office beyond. It was a large room, the kind of office you could enter and instantly know how successful the owner of it was. The walls had a warm beige color instead of the sterile white of the building’s hallways. More color was added by a couple ferns and an attractive red lamp on the large desk in the center. Katsumi didn’t notice these details anymore, having been in the room many times. Instead she closed the door behind her to shut out the protests of the secretary and looked at the only other person in the room.

It was a man standing with his back to her and his gaze out the window, with his hands clasped behind his back. He wore a long black trench coat with a matching hat that was similar to the old fedora hats often seen in black-and-white movies. The hair beneath was a stark white, though the man only seemed to be in his thirties or forties. His eyes were obscured by small circular sunglasses that glinted in the office’s warm lights as he looked over his shoulder with a highly amused smile, speaking in a voice that held a strange quality, like he was simply an observer of the world with nothing to fear from anything within it.

“You really should stop avoiding the secretary; it’s her job to question and announce you.”

Samakura folded her arms and leaned back against the door. “It’s not my job to be delayed and annoyed. Or to get torn apart.”

The man’s smile widened as he shifted his stance so he could look at her. “Yes, I recall reading something about a little collateral damage during your mission.”

“A little collateral damage? I had to dive off an eighty-story building while avoiding giant claws and acid.”

“Hardly anything new.”

“Not new, but not expected either, M. You wanna tell me why Intel mentioned nothing about the giant Class-B Kilk’tal that nearly killed me and a member of my team?”

M chuckled. “Don’t be dramatic.”

Katsumi sighed. “Fine, but it was still a nasty surprise.”

He shrugged. “We didn’t have all the information. It’s unfortunate, but you can’t always expect to know everything.”

“You’re saying no one’s to blame?”

His smile returned. “Looking for someone to hurt? I’d appreciate if you let it go. Our Intelligence division isn’t up to your unit’s level yet and sometimes they miss things.”

“You giving me an order?” Samakura grumbled.

“No, Captain Samakura, I’m not. Speak to them if you wish. However, we have more important things to focus on.”

She perked up, pulling out the disc Sano had recovered on the mission he’d been on before they’d been forced to respond to the demon’s attack. “Right, this.” She turned it in her hand. “Looks a lot more important than I’d expect from something in the hands of petty business criminals.”

M took it as she handed it to him. “People like moving up in the world. Petty criminals never remain petty; either they have the skill to move up or they’re used by those that do.”

“What you’re saying is,” Katsumi continued, folding her arms, “this isn’t theirs.”

“Of course not. They aren’t fit for the big game but they don’t know that. What they do have is money to fund a big player.”

“So which big player does this belong to, and what exactly is it?”

“Those are questions we hope this little artifact will answer.” M set it on his desk. “I appreciate your reliability once again, Samakura. You and your team get a few days off as our people look this over. I’ll let you know what we decide to do with it.”

“Great…” She sighed. “At least Reno will be happy. I’ll let him know he can spend some time with his family.”

“Yes, personal time is important to take every so often. Perhaps you should think about that yourself.”

Katsumi waved her hand dismissively as she opened the door. “Not interested.” She left the office, receiving a dirty look from the secretary and heading back down the hallway towards the building exit nearest the train station. With her eyes on the ground she nearly ran into a large form in her path, which startled her for a second before she recognized the 7’1’’ muscular form in her way and smiled. “Hello, Law.”

The dark-skinned member of her team that stood before her was unbothered, as it was hard to bother a 285-pound giant by bumping into him. He ran a hand over his bald head, looking at his leader through his dark shades. “Captain Sama. I heard you were back, and about what happened. Uninjured?”

Samakura smiled at his concern. “I’m fine. Dodging acid and leaping from buildings is in the job description. Only real loss is that I dropped my cigs before I jumped.”

Samuel Lawrence chuckled, reaching into a pocket of the open tan military jacket he wore (the sleeves were ripped off for mercenary flavor and worn over a dark green shirt to complete the Vietnam War-style look). He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, offering one to her.

“Wanna replacement? Only one now, I’m not careless enough to lose all mine.”

Katsumi snagged one before he could change his mind. “Sorry if I preferred to leave them behind instead of lighting them with a shrapnel-spewing nuclear fireball.”

“Pussy.”

“Watch your language in front of a lady.”

“I don’t think the secretary back there can hear us.”

“You’re just asking for me to break some bones, aren’t you?”

Samuel laughed and shook his head, offering her a light. “I’m always honest, ma’am. So what’s next on the team agenda? Hopefully I’m on the next assignment.”

Katsumi drew in a slow breath, blowing out smoke with her eyes closed. When they opened they were looking at him as she nodded her head down the hallway. “Walk with me, Law.” As he fell into step beside her she held her cigarette between two fingers, speaking around it. “Can’t say I know what the next mission’ll be, or who’ll be on it. Sano got what we were sent for before we were called to respond to the demon, but M’s people need to look it over before they know what to do with it so we get time off.”

Law had to hide a smile at the near-disgust in Samakura’s voice and on her face at the last two words. “Might not be too bad, Captain.”

“I’m only happy when I’m doing something, you know that.”

“Then think of something to do for yourself.”

“If a third person suggests that I’m shooting them right in the head. I have no desire to take time for myself or sit around in my apartment doing nothing.”

“So you’ll check for an individual job to do in the meantime? You know I’d go with you.”

She smiled. “Yeah, I know. Maybe I will see a two-person job. We’ll see. Might just need a personal challenge.”

“Understandable. I’ll be around either way.”

“No plans yourself?”

The large man shook his head. “Nothing exciting as a job.”

“Nothing requiring explosions, you mean,” she corrected dryly.

“Excitement and explosions are interchangeable, ma’am.”

“Demo guys are so one-dimensional. Anyway, I’d better go catch the train. I’ll see you, Law.”

Samuel nodded. “Take care Captain Sama.”

“Of what?” she added under her breath, exiting the building and heading towards the train station. Apparently it’d started raining while she’d been inside. It looked like it’d be a gray, dreary and overcast morning, which she found acceptable as it seemed to fit her mood. With a glance down she realized she’d forgotten to change, but she couldn’t summon the effort to go back inside. It was something like five AM but she had somewhere important to be in a few hours. She acted like she hated time off, and she truly did, but there was a part of it she loved that she never spoke about.

The train station was mostly empty, as was the train that was already there, since it was too early for most people to be heading to work. The only people on the train were night owls like her who hadn’t yet been to sleep, and the kind of people she automatically assumed were creeps and avoided. The train was soon rushing along the tracks, allowing her to lean back in her seat and look to the side out the window at the buildings rushing by. The pistol on her hip aided her by making others leave her alone, so she was left to her thoughts once again.

*Last night was a small job.* She leaned her head back against the glass, closing her eyes and drawing deeply from the cigarette. *It’ll probably lead to bigger ones, but I don’t know what kind. That’s exciting… but waiting isn’t.* She sighed, running a hand through her hair. *How long is this gonna take, a few days, a week? A week to sit around and think. I don’t do well when I’m not moving. Focusing on the future is all that keeps me from drifting back to the past.*

Katsumi let out a breath of smoke, looking to the side as the train slowed down. Apparently the half-hour had passed already. She headed for the doors and went through the second they opened enough, taking the stairs to street level and walking down the street ignoring the looks she got mostly due to her clothing; skin-tight combat suits tended to stand out. She reached the South Ashfield hospital around six, about an hour too early, but she could wait. One of the nurses smiled at her as she entered the third floor. “Good morning, Miss Samakura. You’re here a little early aren’t you?”

“Well, I came when I got off work,” Katsumi smiled a bit shyly. “I don’t mind waiting until she’s awake.”

“Of course,” the woman smiled kindly. “You can take a seat in her room if you like.”

“Thank you.” Katsumi nodded gratefully. She entered Room 302 quietly, smiling at the woman asleep in the bed. She took a seat in the chair beside the bed and studied her, trying to see if there were any changes in her condition.

The woman in the bed shared many similarities in appearance with Katsumi, most notably the non-standard hair color; hers was a very pale blue that was longer than Katsumi’s violet, falling to her waist. She was three years younger than Katsumi but looked far younger than her due to the fact that she had a soft, youthful appearance as opposed to Katsumi’s harder and sharper one. Katsumi reached over to gently take her hand and she blinked awake, her intense blue eyes focusing on Katsumi. She smiled brightly and sat up. “Katsumi! Shouldn’t you be chasing a ghost or something right now?”

“I’d appreciate you keeping your voice down seeing as how that’s supposed to be extremely top-secret.”

“Oh please, it’s not like anyone would believe I was serious if they heard.”

Katsumi grinned at her. “They might move you to the psych ward.”

The younger woman pouted. “Big sisters are supposed to be protective, not condemning! Did you come here and wake me up just to be mean?”

“Of course not.” Katsumi reached up to brush some hair from her sister’s eyes. “Speaking of waking you up, I didn’t intend to. You should go back to sleep, Ayane. You need rest.”

“All I get is rest.” Ayane smiled. “Besides, you know I wake up with too much energy to go back to sleep.”

“You never try.”

“That can’t be proven. Anyway, you’re rarely here at this hour. You have the day off?”

Katsumi’s smile faded into a frown. “A few days off until they figure out what we’re needed for.”

Ayane grinned. “You must be going crazy.”

“Not yet, but I might,” Katsumi said with a smirk. “Ask me again in a couple days. Can I just stay with you until the next job?”

“I would *love* that,” Ayane laughed, “but you’d go even crazier here; you know how you are about hospitals. Hey, maybe a big demon will attack and give you something to do!”

“Already happened,” Katsumi sighed. “Few hours ago. Short distraction.”

“Maybe there’ll be a bigger one.”

“Maybe there’ll be a whole swarm of them.”

“Or a swarm of them joining together into a giant one!” Ayane smiled at her older sister’s laugh. “Either way, I’ll annoy you more through the cyber link for the next few days. That should keep you sane.”

“Or drive me insane more quickly,” Katsumi said dryly.

Ayane gave her a petulant smile. “Depending on my mood, yes.”

Cyber links were expensive and dangerous implants available for anyone with a high enough CP and endurance to handle the implanting process. They allowed for one to contact someone else they shared a link with by transmitting directed thought. Normally they were reserved for special military operatives or covert spies, but Katsumi and Ayane had had them and shared a link for almost twenty years; they were far more used to using them than most people that had one, and they used it far more often. In recent years they’d come to appreciate it even more with Ayane stuck in the hospital and Katsumi in a demanding and dangerous job.

“How have you been feeling?” Katsumi looked over her sister, trying to gauge her condition.

“I’ve been alright. Fighting it as always.” Ayane eyed Katsumi. “What about you, Sumi?”

The elder sister looked away. “You know the answer to that as well as I do.”

Ayane’s eyes saddened. “I worry about you a lot. You know how dangerous it is, doing what you do. I always worry it will hit while you’re in the middle of something insane.”

Katsumi smiled softly at her. “I’ll be fine. I have a great team, they can cover for me if it does happen.”

“But none of them would expect it. They have no idea.”

“Just… Let me do things my way, okay?”

Ayane sighed. “Alright, Sumi. Just remember, since I can’t kill you if you die on me, I’ll speak at your funeral and tell everyone every story I have about you.”

“You know I’ll haunt you.”

“I enjoy your visits.”

“You’re a pain, Aya, you know that?”

“We both know I’m immune and an exception to your whole ‘RRRGH I’m tough and cold FEAR ME’ thing, so don’t even try it!”

Katsumi chuckled. “Fine. I *will* be careful, but only for you. I’ll get out of the situation if I feel it coming on, okay?”

“Thank you. You have no idea how much better that makes me feel.”

“It better.”

“You act like taking care of yourself is such a big problem.”

“There are more important things to take care of.” Katsumi smiled at her.

After another two hours of talking the nurse seemed to get a bit impatient with them, obviously wanting her patient to get back to sleep. Katsumi stood and kissed her sister’s forehead. “I’ll visit you again tomorrow, since I have the day off.”

“Wow, more than your usual twice a week? You’re really spoiling me, Katsumi.” Ayane smiled.

Katsumi returned the smile and squeezed her hand. “I’m trying to.”

Katsumi left the hospital and bought cigarettes on her way back to the train station, figuring she’d need them if she was going to survive the next few days. She lit one and stepped onto the train, leaning her head back and closing her eyes for the return trip. As she grew closer to home she let out a breath of smoke, opening her eyes and staring at the ceiling of the train car. The grating of the wheels, the churning of the engines and the rush of air outside all seemed to get louder in her ears as she sat there. She could feel a headache coming on and at the moment she was just grateful no one was there who saw her as a leader. Random people on the train, that was all.

She forced herself up as the train finally came to a stop, focusing on balance as she walked through the car, exiting and heading away from the station and down the street. The edges of her vision were already starting to swim a bit, and by the time she got to her building she’d already lost the cigarette, though she couldn’t remember the specific instance of dropping it. Pain was now rising through her body and drawing her focus inward, preventing her noticing outside details like that.

She pushed through the doors of the Culsor Apartment Building, ignoring the greeting of the attendant at the front desk and moving directly to the elevator. Grateful that the elevator she entered was empty she hit the button for the 67th floor, dropping to sit and not of her own volition. Putting a hand to her forehead Katsumi tried to focus, listening for the ding signifying the elevator’s arrival at her floor. When it came and the doors opened she sat there for a full minute with both vision and sound swimming. *Almost there… C’mon Katsumi, stand the hell up.* After a few seconds she gripped the metal bar inside the elevator, pulling herself up and focusing on moving each foot alternately.

Reaching room 6711, she put her hand on the door and it unlocked, allowing her to stumble in and fall to the floor. She heard the door click shut behind her and decided that making it into the room was good enough. The bed, sitting a few feet away in the very small, shabby and currently unlit apartment, seemed like too far a goal to her at the moment. She couldn’t even be sure which way was up so lying on the floor would have to do. Finally vision and hearing faded completely and she felt lucky as she fell into the darkness, leaving conscious thought behind.