

Cyberpunk Hero

Novus Peregrine

Chapter 1: Exam

Kira Nakamura snorted at the last question on the exam. She was amused how many people were likely to get it wrong simply because no one in Neo Tokyo actually called Whims by their proper name. Half the people taking this test were likely to stare at the term ‘Parastable Irregular Genetic Anomaly’ and go blank. No one but the most dedicated science types called superpowers by that name, not even back when they first started appearing nearly a hundred and fifty years ago now.

Not everyone called them Whims, of course. That particular colloquialism had started in Japan, before half the island sank due to knock on effects of environmental collapse. Now, it was the most common term for the phenomenon anywhere with Asian influence. Which just so happened to include Neo Tokyo. It might be a Luna colony and fairly cosmopolitan these days, but it had originally been a *Japanese* lunar colony, and that ancestry still showed. In other parts of the world or on other colonies, ‘Parastable Irregular Genetic Anomalies’ were called Meta abilities, Para powers, Mutations, Gifts, and a dozen other things.

They all referred to the same phenomenon, though. To this day, no one could prove one way or another what had caused them. What *was* known, and what Kira jotted down in answer to the question on the exam, was that they had started popping up virtually everywhere around the world within a span of less than three months. Some thought it had been an illness, others the natural evolution of humankind. Proof that Darwin hadn’t been the idiot many thought him to be when he claimed that mass populations of a species could make random, collective leaps forward.

The majority of people honestly figured it was a Corp that had done it. Which made a certain amount of sense, given that the 2050s were when the various old Mega Corporations had really started their push for open power. Personally, Kira had her doubts. Why would some Corp with global reach have just...released powers into the wild *everywhere*, after all? Even an experiment that broke containment should have been more localized, at least at first. That it hadn’t been made the Corp theory a lot less viable to her, even if it was generally accepted by everyone else as the most likely answer.

Well, whatever. The exam question had only cared that she knew the rough facts. It hadn’t asked for speculation. Finishing her answer, Kira went back and started to double check the rest of the exam, flying through it with ease despite its thick 300 question length. Given how fast she was able to do the double-check, she did a triple check just for good

measure. Then, she marked it as complete and flicked the file toward the proctor at the front of the room.

Stretching as she stood, she gathered herself with a yawn, then moved toward said proctor. He was the only person in the small room with her, a room she knew full well was a complex faraday cage with a dozen other forms of signal blocked built in. All in an attempt to limit cheating by those with NeuralDrives or other net-capable implants. It didn't prevent internal memory storage, of course, but that was the reason most questions had been in essay or 'state in your own words' form. Simple regurgitation of facts wouldn't help much with the test, which was as more about critical thinking and ability to *apply* your knowledge than anything else.

Her Proctor was quite recognizable, even going on seventy. Given that he looked to be in his early thirties by the standards of yesteryear, that wasn't too much of a shock. General anti-aging treatments had expanded natural lifespans to 200 years or so...at least for those rich enough to afford them. The ultra-rich could expect that to be more like 300, in theory. Stream King, a Hero whose Whim increased his physical power with the more people that were watching him, was certainly someone who could afford even the cutting edge treatments. The man, still sporting the mohawk that he'd virtually single-handedly brought back as a hairstyle a year ago, lifted an amused eyebrow in her direction as she approached.

"Alright, follower! If you're done, you're done! The headmaster warned me you'd probably finish quick! You've got a good hour before your practical is scheduled, even so, and that's slotting you in as the very first finisher! Got any questions for the channel?"

Suppressing a snort, since this is one of the few places on the planet he *couldn't* stream from, Kira considered the question. Humming for a moment, she nodded, and asked the most important question she had for the infamous Stream King.

"How the hell do you get your hair to stay that way, even in combat? I'm a *shapeshifter* and I can't pull it off. I'd love to switch up my style more often, but I can't get it to stay in anything fancy while I'm fighting."

Stream King blinked, then *laughed*. Kira grinned at having caught him off guard, though she was also pleased when he actually answered. She really *would* like to occasionally try something more exotic.

"There's a super-secret hair wax just for Heroes! Well, not so much *secret*, honestly. The stuff is expensive and hideously overkill for anyone not as active as a Hero or Shade, though. And most Shades don't give enough of a damn about *presentation* to shell out for the stuff."

Stream King smiled, but that smile turned to a slight smirk a moment later.

“Unfortunately, if your Whim works the way your mom’s does, the stuff won’t work for you. She gets *aggravated* if you bring it up, since she’d love it if it worked too. But I happen to know from talking to her during a stakeout once that, if she shifts with it in, it clumps together as goop during the shift and doesn’t spread back out with the new style. Same problem as makeup, apparently.”

Kira huffed a half-laugh, half-sigh. That absolutely sounded like something her mom would rant about if it came up. It also, unfortunately, meant he was right and it wouldn’t work for her.

“Ah, well. Win some, lose some. Not *needing* makeup is awesome enough to put up with slightly more boring hair than I could have if your hair wax stuff worked.”

Stream King grinned again, nodding, and Kira considered if she had anything else she needed to ask. Well, she supposed there was the obvious.

“Any restrictions on where I can go while I wait? Aside from not leaving the main building, of course.”

Her WATCH Entrance Exam Proctor shook his head no but also clarified.

“Anywhere that your visitor’s pass allows you to go is fine. Stay away from any marked restricted areas, but your pass will beep a warning if you try to go anywhere you aren’t supposed to. Otherwise, have at it. There’s free food and drinks in the cafeteria for the testers if you want it, good stuff made from Whim grown, in-house organics. Though I wouldn’t eat too much before you run the practical unless you need it for your Whim.”

Kira nodded. That was a nice touch, honestly. Sure, WATCH was a premium Hero Institution, so it wasn’t too out there. But somewhere like Neo Tokyo, or Neon Tokyo as the massive domed colony was referred to just as often, no one would have blamed them for letting Corp mentality color their culture a bit. The fact that hadn’t seeped in was a good sign that its reputation was honestly earned. She hadn’t *really* thought otherwise, given her mother had attended here. But anyone who wasn’t a bit of a skeptic and a cynic in the half-dystopian world they lived in was also likely a sucker that would be fleeced by the Corps every day of their life.

“Thanks. I might grab something small, or at least a drink. Don’t think I really have any other questions. The guide packet they sent out is pretty damn comprehensive.”

Stream King chuckled.

“Yep. WATCH has been around for a long time and has this whole procedure properly perfected. You’d be surprised how many followers don’t actually read the packet, though. I’m sure you caught the questions about it in the test, right?”

She had. It was honestly a clever little test-within-a-test. Anyone who hadn’t properly done their prep work for the WATCH entrance exam by fully reading the packet the institution sent out would be tripped up by the seemingly random questions. Ones related to anecdotes within that packet which had stood out as weirdly out of place with how dry the rest of it had been. She imagined anyone that failed to answer those questions was likely failed out of the exam instantly, since it proved they weren’t serious and didn’t possess the right mindset. Heroes couldn’t afford to miss little details just because the paperwork involved was boring.

“Yeah. Was that one about Moonlight true? I mean, I know her first costume was scandalous enough they asked her to at least add panties, but an orgy right under her target’s nose? Really?”

Stream King grinned, and they fell into chatting for a few minutes, before Kira thanked him for the chat and headed out. She’d at least grab some TripleFil or something, even if she didn’t strictly need it. Assuming they had it on offer, of course. Pure water, filtered of all industrial reprocessing chemicals, wasn’t cheap in this city...

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Even after grabbing a quick snack, drink (they *did* have TripleFil!), and rubbernecking at the WATCH public spaces a bit, Kira had plenty of time to kill once she got to the single-person locker space she’d been assigned for the testing. So, once she stripped down, she amused herself by stepping in front of the mirror and eyeing her current ‘default’ body, deciding once again that she quite liked the look.

The first thing most people would think when they saw her current form was *blue*. Or so she had been told by the a few experts in certain fields of misdirection. Her skin was a dusky, twilight blue. Significantly darker at her eyes, lips, and nipples of course. One might have thought, at a glance, that the first two were makeup, but ‘one’ would have been entirely wrong. They might have thought the same of the brighter blue of her hair, perhaps thinking it was dyed. Though there were enough weird hair and skin colors out there these days that they might not have, too. Almost 30% of the population had Whims by now, and the more physical Whims often came with such distinctions.

Kira didn’t need makeup or hair dye, though.

She had something much better.

Even if it couldn't make her hair stay in place like Stream King's super-secret wax!

Grinning, she mentally accessed her Whim. When she described it to other people, she did so in visual terms, calling it 'sliders like a video game character creation screen.' That, however, wasn't truly accurate. There was no visual feedback, just an instinctive feel, though it *did* work a lot like she described. It's just that she didn't *need* a visual indicator as her Whim was more low-level than that. Mostly instinctive, even if her brain likened the instincts to sliders, switches, buttons and dials to better make sense of it.

For the moment, she bumped up the 'breast' slider. Which was, really, a whole series of sliders, even if it was easier to describe to others as just one. She watched with good humor as her gloriously blue boobs expanded from the modest D-cups she used as a default, into a ludicrous pair of JJ-cups. She posed, then laughed as the top-heavy setup nearly caused her to unbalance.

Quickly reducing them back to her current default, she looked herself over again. Hmm, should probably do away with the giant cock for the duration of the practical. Her girlfriend loved it and Kira was rather fond of it too, but it was a bit of a liability in most forms of exercise. Nodding, she shifted focus to that particular mental widget, this one feeling more like a switch than slider, and watched as her package shrunk and vanished. The darker hues of her lower lips, no longer concealed behind her pornstar-grade swinging pendulum, now greeted her in the mirror.

Kira was a rarity even for this era, in that she'd been born with the shapeshifting portion of her Whim fully active. No one, not even the pre-natal docs, had a true clue what her original gender had been. Not that it honestly mattered, most of the time. She only kept a mostly female form due to growing up with two moms, really. One of whom just happened to have a similar, though lesser, version of Kira's own Whim. No prizes for guessing just how 'mom' had gotten her 'mother' pregnant. At least it hadn't been an accident. Just like Kira, her 'mom' could easily control her own fertility. Though, unlike Kira, her mom couldn't fully shift her gender.

Kira's Whim had been a *big* step up from her mom's.

Partly, that was simply as expected. Whims tended to grow in strength with each successive generation, after all. Sometimes only a little, sometimes a lot. In Kira's case, though, the scale of the boost was more the result of her mom getting together with her mother. Both had strong Whims, which had ended up combining with each other. That wasn't always the case. In fact, many powered individuals specifically sought out *unpowered* spouses, as there was a significant chance a Whim would vanish from the next

generation if both parents had one. Any given child might well only inherit one or the other, and Whim carriers often had rougher pregnancies than typical for a wide variety of reasons.

Kira had half-lucked into the combination option, thankfully. Mom's own shifter-class Whim was insanely good for undercover work, scouting, and more. She could shift to virtually any female-presenting body with just a few moments of thought. What it *didn't* do was provide a whole lot in the way of added combat power. For the most part, her mom was exactly as strong as a 210cm amazon woman as she was as a 152 cm petite waif.

That, of course, could have its own advantages. Those advantages were mostly in the form of surprise or being a smaller target, though. Not in the form of actual enhancement. Moreover, just like Kira, her shapeshifting meant her mom couldn't really use cybernetics or body augments to get a power boost. Very, very, few bits of 'netics were rated for shifters. Even the handful of nanite-based options that were out there tended to be *expensive* and mostly utilitarian.

Like the nanite-based contact shard that both Kira and her mom used. High-quality and able to do anything a normal shard could, such as make calls or act as a digital wallet. But their nanite-shards were nothing special beyond their ability to not kill or seriously fuck them up when they shifted with the minor implant.

Back on point...Kira's Whim did a metric fuck ton more than her mom's. Which was entirely due to her mother. Her mother's Whim was an energy/emission hybrid type, and a darn powerful one. It allowed her mother to absorb any of dozens of energy types, then spit them back out as attacks later. Depending on the energy type, it might be as simple as lightning in, lightning out. With things like, say, *neon light*, though? That she could warp and shift into hardlight constructs.

Likewise with other types of energy. Each of the more exotic flavors tended to have unique advantages that her mother made full and excellent use of in her own Hero career. It was an extremely potent, versatile Whim, even if she was slightly limited by not being able to generate her own energy. She could only use what she'd absorbed.

Kira's Whim was the result of practically winning the Whim lottery a dozen times over when the two merged, as her mom was prone to saying. Something that was only *partially* the result of chance, given that said mom had done her research in depth and used her shapeshifted bits to generate sperm super loaded with her own Whim's potential. A feat that still left Kira in a little bit of awe, honestly, since her mom didn't have anything boosting her natural intelligence.

First, and perhaps most usefully out of all the changes, her shapeshifting ability had gotten a hell of an upgrade over her mom's. In addition to being more comprehensive,

allowing her to completely gender shift, it *also* justified Kira's explaining it to others in video game terms in another important way. Specifically, that she had something very much like 'stats.' Whereas her mom was locked into one set of base statistics, no matter what the form she took looked like, *Kira* could use another set of mental sliders and widgets to *shift* her stats around. She could freely take, say, her 'intelligence score' and shift a significant amount of it to 'physical strength.'

Better, those stats could grow far beyond natural limits, and she *absolutely could and did* abuse the fuck out of that fact.

If she reduced her physical strength down to 'dude who failed his fifth pushup' levels, while shunting the stats to brainpower? Then it was *easy* to make quick gains by doing a handful of pushups. The new strength added to her total 'stat pool' in a way that most certainly wasn't limited to baseline human, too. At eighteen and with a lot of effort put in, if Kira just leveled out all of her stats at an even keel, she was both a genius *and* could deadlift close to 7 tons.

Well, sort of a genius.

'Intelligence' really governed something more akin to processing power, rather than making the sort of intuitive leaps that could cure an incurable disease with ease. If she cranked her 'Int' up, she could out number crunch most computers. But she wasn't going to discover the secrets to time travel or reinvent the lost recipe to Coca-Cola from scratch without having ever even tasted it. Or any other cartoon super genius bullshit like that. Thankfully, she'd inherited her mom's basic intelligence for the stuff beyond her stats, so it wasn't a huge bummer.

Snorting, Kira focused on the here and now and stopped playing, focusing instead on redistributing her stats for the upcoming practical. She'd cranked up her more intellect-oriented sliders at the cost of physical power and agility for the duration of the written tests, which is how she'd powered through it so insanely fast. Now, she went the other way, tweaking her stats to a set she considered one of her 'combat presets.'

The 'preset' in question was a nice balance of strength, agility, reflexes, and processing power. She didn't make herself an idiot by dropping some of the extra processing. It didn't work that way. But it *did* lower her ability to crunch quantum mechanics formula at a reasonable speed. That wasn't something most people needed when going in combat, though, which is why she tweaked it downward in favor of more physical boosts. Pity she couldn't use a NeuralDrive, really. Combat hacking would have been a nice use for boosted Int.

Despite her stat tweaking, her physical appearance didn't shift much. Her muscles got a bit bigger, demanding more mass past a certain amount of boosting no matter how much she focused on density over bulk. If she'd been standing on a scale, someone would have noted her weight increasing, too. Stronger bones weighed more, and Whims were bullshit enough that the conservation of mass was a very loose concept these days. It probably *did* apply to her, in some fashion, but the ways it did so with Whims were often novel and hard to map. Barely anyone bothered even trying these days.

Satisfied that she'd optimized her combat ability without knowing more about her upcoming task, Kira went to the room's single locker and retrieved a standard WATCH bodysuit in her size. As she got dressed in the form-fitting attire, her mind once more lingered on a single mental dial. The 'dial' that was the *real* reason her mom had called her Whim 'winning the Whim lottery a dozen times over.' The boost to shapeshifting hadn't been a huge shock. The way that her *mother's* Whim had fit into the overall pictures sure as fuck had been though. A shock that they'd intentionally kept out of any official records.

Smiling, she shook her head and left that 'dial' set where it was. A smart girl kept a few things in reserve, just in case. Cryokinesis would be more than enough for the practical, and it was the emission/generator ability that showed up on her official registry. Not to mention the one she had the most practice with. All of the other types of neat energy she could dial into instead would just have to wait until she needed an ace in the hole to surprise everyone...

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Kira tapped her foot. Not restlessly, but in a rhythm she often used as a mnemonic mental switch. Strictly speaking, she didn't *need* it, but it helped her focus when she was about to perform some sort of combat exercise. Even her current, lowered 'processing power' was still well above human norm. Which, sadly, came with a downside in the form of a sort of artificial ADHD.

If she'd have had ADHD organically, she didn't know. But she certainly had a form of it now, her speed of thought making it entirely too easy to spiral down a dozen different mental paths that had nothing to do with her current task. While she'd long since trained to make the mnemonic focusing trick redundant, she still used it from time to time to reinforce her focus.

If there was ever a time to do that, it was now.

She was in a small room, almost more of a pod really, from which she would enter the gauntlet that WATCH used for its practical exams. The door had already sealed behind her, and a countdown was spiraling down on a screen projected onto the door in front of

her. Just as she finished her mnemonic motion, the time hit one minute...and additional instructions appeared. She'd known they would. Every student got slightly different details and goals for their run, and they were never allowed more than a minute of mental prep to read and solidify them in their mind.

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Objectives:

- Reach far end of Gauntlet: Required for Pass
- Disable as many GREEN turrets as possible: 1 Point Each
- Disable as many PURPLE robots as possible: 2 Points Each
- Protect as many ORANGE robots until they reach cover as possible: 3 Points Each
- Disable the Shade: 15 Points
- Points will be deducted for incorrectly disabled targets, or failures to protect designated civilians.

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Kira rapidly memorized and prioritized. Likely, there would be more than the colors she was told to hit. Meaning she needed to rapidly identify and take appropriate action for each type and color *without* hitting the wrong colors. All while protecting herself and moving towards a target. A comprehensive test, particularly when added to the low prep time to simulate stumbling onto a real-world situation with the action already in-progress.

She could respect that.

She made a single quick adjustment, sacrificing a mild amount of physical augmentation for a renewed boost in processing speed. This was going to demand more processing power than she'd set up for as default. That adjustment was absolutely all she had time for before the timer hit zero, a buzzer sounded, and the door shot up into the ceiling.

She didn't hesitate.

Hesitation was death.

Kira used her augmented strength to burst out of the door at an angle, focusing ahead of her and summoning a spiked shield of ice. Two shots from a turret, Red not Green, flashed out and missed her, but the Turret tracked fast. Her movement took her behind the spiked shield she'd formed just as an entirely Purple bot, only vaguely humanoid, opened fire as well. The shield took the hits as she slid to a stop behind it and reinforced it with a moment's concentration. Then, she punched out.

That punch didn't actually touch the shield, instead being the trigger movement for her cryokinetic power to launch the spikes she'd formed on the outer layer of the ice. They lashed out toward the bot, the super-condensed and razor-sharp ice shards impacting with more than enough force to turn it to Swiss cheese. At the same time, she stamped on the ground, forming an ice pillar under her even as she commanded the ice shield to go *up* and *split*.

It broke into three parts, each growing under the influence of her power, and she sent two parts darting off. One, she planted into the ground right in front of the Red Turret. Just because she couldn't disable Red ones, didn't mean she had to keep taking fire from them. Let it deal with being physically blocked. The second shield she sent forward and to the right, just barely getting it into place in time to stop a Green turret from gunning down a pair of Orange 'civilian' bots.

Forming skate blades out of ice on the soles of her boots, she created an ice slide at an angle that crossed the gauntlet's width while progressing forward along it. Pushing off, she accelerated down the slide without hesitation, her remaining shield out in front even as she directly punching out, firing fist-sized ice spikes at the Green turret and another Purple bot, one that was not-so-incidentally trying to impale another Orange civilian bot.

Using the ice of the slide behind her, she rapidly created a series of shields out of the existing ice, something much easier to do than forming it from scratch. Letting some of the new set trail behind her, covering her from another Red turret, she sent five zooming to interpose themselves between Orange bots and attacks or turret blasts. More ice spikes at more targets, then another ice pillar to pull her up and out of the line of fire as her forward shield failed.

Not bothering with another slide, she jumped, tumbling through the air. She formed half a dozen tiny ice platforms mid-air to jump off of again and again as she launched a fusillade of ice shards, letting her acrobatics generate misses instead of attempting to shield again. Turrets and bots alike went down, her remaining shields from the previous batch rushing to protect other bots even as she progressed rapidly down the gauntlet.

Then, at the halfway point, she lost an Orange bot for the first time as a massive beast of a Borg Bot burst from cover and pumped a shotgun round into the bot's torso. Cursing, she sent the last of her current barrage of shards at the 'Shade,' growling against as he sped up in imitation of having mid-level accelware. Shades, individuals with Heroic levels of Quirk training or cybernetic augmentation, were the primary bane of Heroes. While a few were outright independent villains, and more belonged to the bigger gangs that held

territory, the majority of Shades belonged to Corps. ‘Deniable’ assets that got involved in industrial warfare between various big names.

Shattering her own shields, she sent the resulting shards as area denial, forcing the fake ‘Shade’ to miss his next target. At the same time, she formed and pushed off a much stronger mid-air platform, accelerating to match his speed and drawing the only non-Whim weapon she carried.

Every potential student was allowed just one weapon for the gauntlet. Either a personal weapon from outside pre-checked by the staff, or something from the standard WATCH Armory. Kira had brought in an outside weapon, her personal Katana. The sword was considerably heavier than a standard blade, but used that weight to support an internal system that generated an honest-to-God plasma edge. Doubly useful as the edge *under* that blade wasn’t sharp. Meaning it did double duty as a non-lethal and *hideously lethal* weapon.

In this case, she didn’t hesitate to flick the plasma blade on, meeting the Shade-bot head on in close combat. She deflected a shotgun blast with a hasty shield, and the bot tried to fade away from here with its accelware. Pity for it that Kira didn’t *need* speed-boosting cybernetics like that to keep up. Her pure physical stats were enough, at least for this mid-level cyberware replication. She removed one arm with her first strike, the bot just barely able to dodge a lethal blow.

It fired again, this time Kira using her own speed and the precision tracking she’d been doing of the shotgun’s barrel alignment to simply sidestep the shot. That put her inside the Bot’s guard, and this time it couldn’t dodge. Despite being made of some solid alloys, her plasma-edged blade carved right through its torso like a hot knife going through butter. A moment later, she whipped it back around in a backhand to remove the bot’s head. Just to be sure.

Pushing down her satisfaction, she forced herself to move on, letting the bot fall.

It was a good thing she did, as she just *barely* managed to shield another Orange bot...and it looked like she’d lost two civilians to a pair of pop-up turrets while she’d been busy focusing on the Shade bot. Damn. No perfect run for her. Not that she’d heard of *anyone* managing a perfect run of a WATCH exam gauntlet before. But it still galled her. Gritting her teeth, she doubled down on her focus and pushed forward...

Chapter 2: Celebration

“Kira!”

Kira spun, reacting just in time as her girlfriend launched herself into her arms. Oofing theatrically, despite not really feeling the weight, she spun a bit to bleed the momentum that had at least slightly destabilized her footing. Even if the weight wasn't much, physics regarding an object in motion were still a bitch.

“How did you do! Was it easy? Do you want to celebrate kicking the gauntlet's ass?”

Kira laughed, grinning down at the shorter girl who was smiling up at her, clearly having full confidence that Kira had nailed the exam. Not that Kira had doubted it either, really. Not with the benefits she'd had from training by her moms. But Min's faith in her was still pleasing. Leaning down, she pecked her girlfriend on the lips, delighting in the light blush that still formed on that beautiful face. Her girl wasn't really *against* PDA, soaking up any attention from Kira happily, but she was always lightly embarrassed by it. Adorable, really, and Kira hoped it never changed.

“96 total points, but I obviously don't know what the deduction scheme is like. I nailed at least one incorrect turret and lost three of the civilian bots I was supposed to protect.”

Min nodded, her purple locks swaying a bit as she finally pulled back from her tackle-hug of Kira.

“87 for me, but I lost 5 civilian bots and hit at least 3 incorrect targets. Backsplash from ones I was supposed to hit, so I'm not sure how that counts.”

Kira hummed and nodded. Min didn't have an easy defensive option like Kira's shields, but she was even more of a whirling dervish of death in close combat *and* had taken the hand-canon she dared to call a pistol into the gauntlet. Add in her wrist-mounted mono-wire and built in sonic canon, both of which were 'netics and thus didn't count against her weapon choice, and she was an offensive monster that Kira couldn't match. Not when she was slotted with cryo as her energy option, at least. Still, she used cryo as her default precisely because it was *insanely* versatile, allowing her to control the battlefield to a level Min couldn't.

“Then I'm sure the cutoff is a lot lower, given you're already better than a lot of rookie Heroes! Come on, Min. I booked up a by-the-hour hotel room for the *fun* kinda of celebration~.”

This time, it was an excited flush, not a blush, that turned her girlfriend's face red. It was just as adorable, and convinced Kira to pick her up and teasingly sling her over one shoulder. Much to Min's happy embarrassment...

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It was two hours later that Kira lay with a snoozing Min in the suite of the local Lusty Maiden. The Love Hotel chain was one of the oldest Corps on Luna, having run their very first 'by-the-hour' accommodations out of an industrial pre-fab for the workers that built Neo Tokyo's dome. Now, they were widely regarded as one of the *very few* 'mostly harmless' Corps. One with a reputation for slightly expensive 'services.' But also *clean rooms*, equipped as well as you could afford. Clean not just physically, but of any sort of surveillance or spyware.

Kira could afford the premium option, and they *had* worked their way through some of the fun options the room came with before she wore Min out.

Now, she let her girlfriend snuggle into her, despite her own insane physical stats meaning she wasn't particularly tired. Min was a pleasant warmth against her as Kira stroked the sleepy girl's head, appreciating the curves that weren't covered by a stitch at the moment. Neo Tokyo, like most colonies on Luna, ran a bit on the warm side during the day, so a sheet was hardly needed...particularly given the amount of augmentation Min had. Not that her augmentation was obvious, beyond a too-perfect appearance you knew couldn't quite be real.

Not that that perfect appearance had exactly been Min's choice.

Her girlfriend was a rescue.

Kira didn't like putting it that way and would punch anyone else who said it somewhere unpleasant, if they were lucky. But that didn't stop it from being true. Min had originally been the daughter of a pair of decently talented set musicians. The sort who had never made it big on their own, but who had been constantly in demand as backing musicians for studio recordings and the like.

Both of them had been born with Whims that had made them *immensely* good at picking up the individual stylings of various bands or single artists. Which meant they could fill the role of practically any musician someone needed for a crisp studio recording, if a band didn't have the right members for a song they wanted to perform. Given that the 'real' sound of actual players was valued highly in the music scene after centuries of creeping AI-generated trash, it had been reasonably lucrative. Better yet, it had been non-threatening to the big names, as they'd never aspired to be stars in their own right. The husband-wife duo had been easy going and well liked, possessing virtually no enemies and a lot of contacts.

Unfortunately, their daughter had been born far more talented.

The misfortune hadn't come from the parents. Both of them had been loving and true, having adored their daughter and given her all the love Min could have ever wanted.

They'd been supportive, helped her develop her talents, and made use of their connections in the music industry to get her started in a solo career. Min had been an amazingly promising rising talent, who'd been featured in tracks by some pretty well-known artists, and well on her way to being a huge success on her own.

Sadly, all of that had attracted attention that the elder members of the Takao family were ill equipped to handle.

Someone who had seen a budding teenage star and fallen in love with her amazing voice had been the *exact* wrong sort of person to have take notice of you. Faced with the interest of a major corpo sleezebag, the Takaos had been utterly out of their league when, without any warning at all, a black bag team had smashed into their middle-class apartment. Both elder Takaos had been killed and Min had been kidnaped, taken to a black site that specialized in a certain type of job...and chipped.

Specifically, she'd been fitted with a black-market Puppet Chip.

It hadn't been her only modification. Not even close. Min wasn't a full-body conversion, but her mods were unquestionably *extensive*, and the original set had made it painfully clear what fate she'd been headed for. The sleezy fuck that had 'fallen in love' with her had wanted her as a plaything, and had possessed the lack of morality and abundance of money necessary to make it happen. The type of Puppet Chip she'd been fitted with was particularly nasty, and very illegal, as it was intended to permanently alter a personality over time. Not just once, but however often the new 'owner' wanted to make changes. The depth of modification also made it dangerous as hell to put in...and doubly dangerous to remove.

It had been blind luck that Min hadn't reached her intended client.

Kira had been using a location near the black-market 'netics shop that had worked on her now-girlfriend as an urban training ground. Practicing parkour and urban movement was best done *in an urban environment*, a real one, instead of a simulation. Thus Kira had been doing just that in the relatively run down, but generally not unsafe, area that the black-market doc had been set up in.

She'd also, as a way to optimize training, been regularly doing so with her stats shifted to *mental* ones, rather than physical ones. A way to easily earn more 'points' in the most efficient way possible. The gains had been fantastic for the her of the time, so she'd been coming there every day, and over the course of several days her cranked up mental stats had alerted her to something very wrong going on at the location of the doc's little 'clinic.' Being of a generally heroic nature, she'd investigated...just in time to intervene when Min was being moved.

Kira was already enough of a monster at that point that, when the dots had connected and her body had moved almost on its own to *act*, the handful of guards hadn't had a chance in hell of stopping her. Only one had been a proper Shade, and a mid-level one at best. The rest of the 'team' had just been regular thugs with weak Whims and minimal augments. She'd ripped through the black-market clinic like a whirlwind as a result, becoming increasingly enraged the more she'd figured out what was going on. In the end, she'd rescued several girls and two boys that hadn't been fully processed yet...and Min Takao.

If Kira wasn't, herself, from a hero family with a significant amount of weight to throw around, things might have gotten ugly even after that. As it was, it was the corpo who'd ended up bent over and fucked by the legal system. In part because he wasn't *quite* important enough, or high ranking enough. So his Corp had cut him loose rather than try to salvage him. Kira had gotten no more than a slap on the wrist in the form of a few dozen community service hours for not contacting the PD or heroes and going in herself. Which, given that she *already* put in voluntary service hours anyway, had been a bit of a wink-wink, nudge-nudge sort of 'punishment.'

Min Takao, however, had been left in a bit of limbo.

She'd not only had no remaining relatives left alive, but had possessed a dangerous black-market Puppet Chip and a metric ton of other high-end mods intended to turn her into a living sex toy. *Extensive* and *expensive* mods that wouldn't grow with her for her remaining years of natural growth, and would therefore require upgrades as she went. What to do with her had been a grim prospect...right up until Kira's moms proved they were every bit the awesome heroes they claimed to be by stepping in and offering to adopt her, paying for all the treatments, therapy, and eventual upgrades needed.

The PD had been relieved as fuck. They hadn't said it, but Min's situation had made her the exact sort of victim that would have ended up 'disappearing' into the system. Most likely to end up right back into the same fucked up scenario she'd been headed for originally. Not because the PD was corrupt by most standards, Neo cities cops were actually decent for the most part, but because *they* wouldn't have been the ones to hold onto her.

The sheer value of Min's mods would have made any normal orphanage or foster family a giant fuck-off target. Nor would those sorts of places have been able to do more than the absolute minimum to keep her alive by changing out her mods for lesser versions as she grew. Turning her over to the Nakamuras instead had given her much better odds of

not just making a recovery, but living until she could protect herself. Odds that had worked out when Kira's parents had proven their integrity every step of the way.

Puppet Chip's like Min's couldn't really be *undone*. Surviving the install was miracle enough, pulling it back out would have been unacceptably dangerous. But they could be *mitigated*. Made to effectively act more as a learning tool instead of a personality modifier and encrypted so that they could only be interacted with by someone with a high-security, double-code key. One key of which they'd encoded so that only Min herself could use it, the other of which they'd locked up in a high-security safe so she couldn't be pressured into using her own code easily.

They'd minimized its possible impact, then gotten Min the absolute best psychologists that they could lay hands on.

Over the course of the three years since then, Min had bounced back *amazingly* well. She'd also, however, developed a hell of a crush on her personal hero in Kira...as well as a desire and drive to be like her amazing new adoptive family and save others. Something that had been made very possible by the fact the Puppet Chip *could* help her learn. What had started with self-defense uploads that helped her rapidly learn to look after herself, had quickly turned into hero-related skill packs that let her catch up with Kira's years of instruction.

They'd trained together, and Min had slowly been allowed to swap out many of her cybernetics for combat models instead of *entertainment* models. Now, while still heavily cyberized and still quietly sporting a few modifications much like the original set, she also had Hero Grade combat enchantments. Ones that were customized to work with her Whim. Which, as it happened, was one that allowed her to produce and control soundwaves. Perfect for vibrating a melee weapon at high frequency or empowering a sonic cannon.

She'd also finally convinced both Kira and the shrinks that she was mentally healthy enough to date. Six months ago, they'd gotten involved. Two months ago Min had turned eighteen, and mischievously transferred the other half of her Puppet Chip key to Kira's ownership instead of the safe. Which really just meant a *different* safe, most of the time, admittedly. Kira couldn't make any changes without Min's half of the key, after all. But the symbolism hadn't been lost on her. Nor had the potential for certain types of fun which, surprisingly enough given what had once almost happened to her, Min had been interested in exploring.

A little bit.

Slowly.

Which was fun and fine with Kira. Sue her, she was a horny teenager who could fully control her own fun bits even more easily and completely than Min could. *Of course* she wanted to explore all sorts of things. Though her best friend and now girlfriend's mental health was infinitely more important...

Chapter 3: First Day

Kira scanned the classroom. She only gave it a good once over, but with her mental stats cranked up, that was more than enough to memorize everyone present and quickly run them against a mental index of notables. Ryo Mori was the first she identified. The latest second son of that family to end up attending WATCH. The Mori-Haten Corp was only middling in size, as Corps went, but that still made it powerful enough to have its own internal Shade team.

First sons, or daughters in some cases, always went to the skycar manufacturer's internal team. But second children, assuming they had any talent, were sent to WATCH. Part of the reason Mori-Haten *was* a middling Corp in size is that they were a fairly honest one, as Corps went. Which is why WATCH accepted those second sons and daughters despite carefully curating their applicants. WATCH was famous because it produced virtually *incorruptible* Heroes, compared to other Hero Academies, many of which suffered regular scandals.

In some ways, the carefully curation made the next person she IDed even more of a standout than a member of the Mori family. Ash Aslin was the *heir* of one of the richest Corps in Neo Tokyo, after all. Sakalen was larger and richer, as were one or two others, but Yaotuan International was routinely in the top five. The oddity there, of course, was the fact that Yaotuan Industries focused almost entirely on the Hero Industry.

They had some crossover with the police, but no military contracts and very minimal civilian dealings. It meant that any Hero coming out of that particular family would be expected to stay squeaky clean if they didn't want to be cut off as a liability. Notably, they also *very rarely* went into Heroics directly. More normally, they went into support engineering, so the current heir being here was more than a mere oddity. If that was a good or bad oddity would be something to figure out. Someone to keep a careful eye on, for certain.

Katsuki Choi. That one Kira was surprised to see, as her mental file on him was due to a minor *modeling* career. Child of an ex-model and major fashion designer. Not someone she'd expected to see at WATCH, which meant her information on the admittedly

handsome blonde was minimal. She also dismissed him almost immediately when the *next* face registered.

Hana Ito was none other than the current heiress of Lust Corp, the very same Corp that owned the Lusty Maiden Love Hotels. Along with quite a few other 'entertainment' venues. Her presence here was *very* out of place for the normally extremely-neutral Corp, making Kira's eyebrow arch. The Ravenette was predictably *gorgeous*, and Kira suppressed a grin as she saw Min get caught for a moment on the girl's looks. That would be fun to tease her girlfriend about later...

Akio Len, like Katsuki, was another student she was able to put a name to only by chance. One of the few holders of a Sentient Whim on all of Luna, his name was on a few research lists as a result. He was on still *more* because that Whim was capable of accessing the Net entirely on its own, bypassing all but the best protections in the process. That he'd somehow survived death by the *numerous* assassination attempts by various Corps to this point said a lot about both his talent, and his possible connections. Someone to keep an eye on.

If his Whim tried to hack Min, no one would find Len's body.

Dismissing that entirely-reasonable thought, she continued processing the rest of the group.

Neito Lefèvre. Smarmy half-French asshole she'd met before and had been deliberately trying to ignore thinking about. Which is exactly what she'd keep doing, thank you very much. Akane Yanagi, daughter of a wealthy socialite. Her mother was well-connected mostly because she was gorgeous and went through men on a monthly basis, somehow without making enemies in the process.

Yuga Hansen, not native to Luna. Directly related to the Greater North European Ambassador, heavy cyberization and...Whimless. Rarer in a Hero these days, with that being far more common for Shades. Yet hardly unheard of. It was a bit interesting that he was here. From what she was picking up about his cybernetics, he had more than enough military-grade hardware that the lack of Whim was irrelevant...but that level of combat 'netics from an *Ambassador's* son stood out.

WATCH was technically an International Academy, of course, but most of its students were at least from Luna. Most people from Earth were from the arcologies too, where he notably *wasn't*. His family rich enough to have an independent holding of recovered land that they managed for the GNE.

There were more students, of course. This was a full class of twenty. Those were the only ones she could put names and details to so far, though. Eight knowns she could at least start a basic mental file, plus herself and Min of course. So ten more in total that she had no information at all on just yet. Not unexpected. WATCH was well known for recruiting the majority of its graduates from more mundane backgrounds.

The security their families would already be getting, and the lack of outside loyalties, was part of what made WATCH work as well as it did. Honestly, it was legitimately more surprising she'd been able to ID as many faces as she had. While she was certain there were other second-gen Hero kids scattered through the intake, WATCH kept class sizes small and did their best to mix those second-gens in with others. Sensible, as they were often already partially trained in Heroics and served as valuable examples for those who weren't.

Well, she would get to know the rest of these people if they kept making the cut. Normally, WATCH only had around a thirty percent graduation rate, so she'd hold off caring too much for now. Instead, she focused her attention on picking out a pair of seats with good sightlines, and wondering who their instructor would be. Stream King was hardly the only veteran Hero who had a teaching role here at WATCH...

... ..

More than one student tensed, and two actually sent Whim-generated attacks, when the doors to the classroom burst open and a wall of black and red fire rushed in. The attacks, a purple beam of some sort and a burst of electricity, didn't do a damn thing to the rolling mass of fire...which flowed to a stop at the front of the room and shifted into the form of a beautiful woman.

A shock of multicolor hair was the first thing that drew the eye. It started white at the roots despite framing a youthful face, shifted to black midway, then faded to a vibrant red at the tips, longer in front than back and no more than chin length at the swept-forward bangs. The style framed a classically beautiful face with red eyes and a mischievous grin. A tightly-clinging, black-and-red pantsuit with a plunging neckline didn't even *attempt* to hide that the woman had a 'generous' figure. Though with biosculpt being so common these days it was always had to tell if that was natural or not.

More to the point for Kira, she recognized the smirking woman.

Shadowflame. A well-known heroine who'd been named far more for the effects of her Whim, which they'd just witnessed, than her personality. Something she proved as she spoke up with a grin, pointing a finger between the two students that had fired shots at her.

“Good reflexes! Excellent accuracy! But if you want to be a Hero, you’ll need to moderate the instinct to shoot first and ask questions never just a bit! Which, aside from looking *awesome*, is why I always make a scary show of my first appearance! It tells me which of you have zilch trigger discipline, so I can help you work on that!”

Yep. The famous, highly ranked, half-goth looking heroine with the edgelord name...was infamously high energy and happy-go-lucky. Which absolutely was *not* a good reason to underestimate her. Shadowflame, real name Recca Alecko, was one of the top A-Ranker Heroes in Neo Tokyo. One with a terrifying habit of cackling like a happy loon while she blitzed through entire teams of elites Shades, seemingly untouchable. She’d also joined the staff at WATCH just two years ago, being almost as young as she looked at only 27.

Honestly, Kira was pleased. While many would likely have preferred one of the older and more veteran teachers of WATCH, she personally felt someone like Shadowflame was a better pull as an instructor. Most of the older WATCH members were half-retired from actual heroing, generally only taking part in PR events and raids they were specifically called in for. Stream King, just as one example, almost never actively patrolled the city. Instead, he spent his time either teaching, running his Stream, or participating in rare high-profile raids.

Shadowflame was another beast entirely, still *actively* performing Hero work day-to-day. To the point that, despite being a part-time teacher at WATCH for the last couple of years, her number of kills and arrests had barely dipped. Something enabled by the fact that, much like Kira herself, the woman’s Whim apparently kept her from needing as much sleep as a baseline human.

“Right! For those of you who *somehow* don’t know who the fuck I am, my heroine name is Shadowflame! I’ll answer to either that or Miss Alecko if you need to address me!”

The instructor snapped her fingers and a ball of that same black-red flame sparked into life above her palm.

“My Whim is considered among the most powerful currently in the city, taking the form of flames I can control and, as you saw when I arrived, *turn into*. They only burn what I want them to burn, and can farther become solid constructs if I will them too.”

She demonstrated that fact by having the ball of flame grow and shift, turning into a wakizashi which she thunked down into a sheet of metal that had been lying on a table at the front of the room. Dispelling the sword, she got a low whistle from somewhere in the room as she lifted the plate of steel to show a hole punched right through it.

“Now, you’re all going to go around and give a *basic* explanation of your abilities. No, I don’t fucking want to know every detail. I fully expect you to keep something back for emergencies. But we’re all going to be training together, so we need at least a *basic* idea what you can do. After that, we’re going to all suffer some boring safety lessons. I *expect you to pay attention*. If we can get through all the safety stuff today, than *tomorrow* we can dive right into combat sims to see where you all currently stand.”

Virtually the entire class stiffened at that, suddenly *very* interested. None of them had expected to be able to dive right in so fast.

“WATCH gives me a *lot* of leeway in how I teach my minions how to be heroes! Which means a lot of *hands-on* training, since I believe it’s the best way to learn. Keep up or get dropped from my class! Now, let’s talk about the boring world of rules that are designed to keep you idiots from all killing each other!”

Oh yes, Kira was *very* happy with the instructor she’d gotten. As, she suspected from the intent way the rest of the class dug into an extremely boring topic, were the rest of this group. Who knows, maybe some of them would even survive the experience. Kira, for one, was intent on being one of those who did. An intent she was very sure Min shared, even if her girlfriend was having a *slightly* difficult time keeping her eyes above their instructor’s chest.

Truly, that plunging neckline and the complete lack of a shirt under the jacket the woman wore was a deadly distraction...

<<End of Teaser>>