Some of Us are Looking at the Stars
by FreezingRayne

Summary

Hundreds of light years from home in a military training facility, Rei must survive aggressive shark boys, terrible food, body augmentation, and a certain overly-affectionate blond who may or may not be a sex android. Cyberpunk/space/dystopia...thing.

Notes

Initially, I had planned on writing a space!AU for my Yuletide assignment--my requester's letter was very inspiring. I wanted it to be quick and fun and silly, and then I started writing, and the fucking thing grew and grew and got to the point that it was going to have to be multi-chaptered and ongoing. So I bowed to the inevitable, wrote something else for Yuletide, and here we are.

So Pear, this is for you, with my compliments!

Expect cyberpunk/dystopia tropes and weird sex.
“We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”
-Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*

Chapter 1

The readout of the placement test results floats in front of me in cool blue italics, and for a moment I am sure it’s a malfunction, or some friend’s idea of a joke. But 3rd generation uplinks don’t get data bugs, and I don’t have any friends. At least, not any who would waste their time on pranks.

I look away, out the bedroom window and down into the vastness of the city—which at this time of night is nothing but a sea of multicolored, undulating lights—but being linked to the net means information is fed right into your optic nerve, so looking away makes no difference. The words just overlay themselves across the window.


I have been so sure of what that last line was going to say, imagined it for so long, that seeing something else is jarring, like drinking from the wrong glass at the dinner table. You expect the sweet, slightly cloying taste of CoCola, and instead get the dry burn of wine.

*Reconnaissance and Espionage.*

Words are repeating in my brain, over and over again, like a mantra: *this is wrong, this is wrong. No, no, no.* I have spent the last four years of my life fighting through Indigo Academy’s gifted program to reach one specific plateau.

And this isn’t it.

“You’re very quiet.”

I pull my eyes up from my dinner: rice and green vegetables, and meat cooked in a sauce so spicy my nose runs.

“I’m sorry, mother,” I say, with a false smile that comes with the ease of long practice. “I’m just tired.”

My mother is a beautiful woman—young, people say, to have a son my age. Tonight she wears pearls and a black dress, hair twisted into a stylish mound on the top of her head, secured with a silver comb. She and my father are on their way to a charity event at HFA headquarters after dinner. My father is nowhere to be seen. He rarely dines with us.

“Are you sure nothing is wrong?” my mother asks.

For a moment I want to tell her everything, I want to rest my head on her shoulder the way I did when I was a child, before the war had even started. *I have shamed you, mother, I have taken all that you and father have given me and I have squandered it. I don’t deserve my Elite status—I don’t deserve anything.*
I take a bite of over-spiced chicken. “I’ll be fine after a good night of sleep.”

My mother’s knuckles are white around the handles of her knife and fork. “Just make sure you’re eating enough.” She smiles at me.

I had to learn that smile somewhere.

The Academy’s buildings are shut and locked for the evening, but the gym is open. I run the track until my lungs burn and sweat drips into my eyes and off the bridge of my nose.

I had flashed a message to the administration five minutes after getting the test results, and Commander Gray had responded within ten. It had been pleasantries and congratulations, and then:

As for your inquiry as to whether or not there could possibly be an error with your placement, the short answer: absolutely not. These decisions are made with extreme care and attention to detail, as it is not simply your future, but the future of the entire empire at stake.

I fly past the starting line, the track and stadium seats blurring together as I pick up speed.

In your flash you asked me for honesty, so I will be frank with you. You are a highly gifted and intelligent young man, Ryugazaki. However, in our evaluation of your assessment and the work you have done over the past years at the Indigo Academy, we have observed that your focus tends to be narrow, and that you lack the lateral thinking required for the development of new technologies. In layman’s terms: you have the form, but lack the inspiration.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears. In the readout in the corner of my vision, the little heart symbol beings to flash, letting me know that at this speed I could easily tear a muscle. I run faster.

This should not happen to someone like me. The whole point of attending an academy like Indigo is so that when you do take the military assessment, you can land in the right place. A place befitting your station. Elites do not get assigned to Recon or Combat. Everyone knows that those divisions are grunts—replaceable cannon fodder.

The shuttle to Platform 6 departs from a Lowland depot, in the undercity. I have never been to any of the lower districts without an escort—very few Elites have. If I had been placed into Research and Development—where I belong—I would be departing from the Regis Aerodrome, Sky City’s biggest docking station. But I am a Recon grunt, and that means descending into the smog-choked cesspool of the lower levels.

The air down here is so thick I can barely see from one end of the platform to the other, and I choke on every breath I take. Figures emerge from the gloom like fuzzy ghosts, all of them ragged and streaked as grey as the atmosphere. Two women and a man pass me on the platform. Most likely they are soldiers on leave, catching a convenient ride back to the Platform, rather than new recruits. As they pass, I am gripped by another cyclone of coughs.

The man sneers. “What’s wrong, Uplander? Can’t handle it down below?” His eyes narrow. “Let’s hope the smoke doesn’t clog your pores, huh?”

My face burns, with embarrassment and anger. Up above, he would never dare say something like that to an Elite. He would be fined, at the very least, possibly jailed if I filed a complaint against him—reported that his words had damaged my composure or state of mind—but now that I have
officially joined the military, he and I are technically the same rank. Words like *Elite* and *Lowlander* are not supposed to mean anything anymore.

In R and D, I would have been among my own—sons and daughters from other Elite families who would know and respect the Ryugazaki name. In Recon, my status paints a bright, blazing target across my back. How long will it be before I am hit with something much more damaging than a sneer?

The shuttle has a grav-drive, so we are permitted to stand on the observation deck and watch as Earth retreats behind us, a murky sphere of grey and white, with the occasional flash of blue. My stomach feels tight, and not just from the fetid lowland air.

*This is wrong, all of this is wrong.*

“Your first time off-world?”

I turn to my left to find a boy with his face nearly pressed against the window. He has a round face and wide, honey-gold eyes. You have to be at least eighteen to join the confederation, but he looks younger than that. His skin is smooth and flawless, and his eye-augment looks expensive. He has the rare, cherubic beauty that can typically only be bought.

*Is he an Elite?!!*

“Of course not,” I respond, unable to suppress a sneer. “We vacation on Aurora.” Aurora—the most exclusive resort planet in the system. I realize a moment later that I should not be so quick to volunteer that information. With the anonymity of the confederation uniform, it may be possible for me to blend in.

*Blend in.* It’s a foreign concept to me. In my class, you are not meant to blend in, you’re meant to stand out.

But if this boy is also an Elite…

“I’ve never even been out of the territory.”

My hopes shrivel up like burning paper.

“You’ve never been out of Sky City? Is that even possible?”

The boy flashes a smile over his shoulder. “I know, right?” he says, like my question was rhetorical.

That makes no sense. Even Lowlanders can get travel passes without much trouble. I try to imagine living your entire life in the smoggy, claustrophobic sprawl of the undercity. How can he look so healthy? How can his skin be so clear?

“S’why I joined the military,” he’s saying, quietly, like he’s talking to himself. “It’s the only way out.” Then he turns back and he is smiling again, and it is such a glowing, manic smile that I find myself smiling back. I force myself to stop.

“I’m Nagisa,” he says, offering his hand.

“Oh.” Elites don’t shake hands, but he probably doesn’t know that. “I’m Rei.” If he is not going to
give me his family name, I won’t give him mine. But I do shake his hand. His skin is very warm, and his smile is warmer. He really is beautiful—like a vid-star.

I hold his hand for too long. Dropping it, I look out at the endless abyss of stars, willing the frozen wasteland of space to cool the flush spreading over my cheeks.

“What’s your berth number?” Nagisa asks.

“Oh…1608.”

His enthusiasm droops a bit. “Aww. Mine’s 2111. We’re not even on the same floor.”

“Too bad,” I say, and the frightening thing is, I mean it.

Platform 6’s docking bay is poorly lit and smells like burning metal. Nagisa and I get separated in the crush of bodies pouring out of the shuttle.

*That’s a good thing*, I tell myself. *You’re not here to make friends.*
Chapter 2

As soon as I step out of the docking bay into the inner hive of Platform 6, I feel the change in atmosphere. It is hard but brittle, as if one good solid kick could shatter it, sending us all spiraling into madness, like oxygen sucked out of an airlock door. I’m not surprised—out here in the Andromeda System we are close to the front, not to mention just a cruiser ride away from Ithaca, that hulking metal monster of a space station. It’s known for being lawless and depraved—one of the few remaining places in the galaxy where humans and Kassadians still interact without bloodshed. Well, without government-sanctioned bloodshed.

The tension is getting to people—the new recruits especially, it seems.

In search of my berth, I turn the corner to find three boys locked in a vicious argument, or rather, two of them are arguing, and the third is attempting to keep them apart.

“Don’t fuck with me, Nanase,” one of them growls. His eyes and hair are the same dark red, features sharp and angled. When he opens his mouth to bare his teeth, those are sharp too—shark teeth. “I don’t have the time to deal with you up here.”

The other boy—Nanase—has dark hair and wide blue eyes. Where the redhead is nearly vibrating with rage, he is calm, almost bored. “Or you’ll cry again?”

The redhead snaps out a curse and lunges, but the third recruit gets between them. He is bigger than both of them, and holds them apart easily. “If the two of you don’t calm down, you’re going to get us thrown in the brig on our first day.” A wide hand tightens on Nanase’s shoulder in a comforting squeeze; it is clear where his loyalties lie. “Rin, you should leave. This isn’t your section.”

Rin yanks his jacket straight. “Like I want to hang out with you Recon pussies anyway.” He shoots Nanase one last glare. “I’ll see you in the water.”

He reels around and nearly crashes into me. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

I think an augment-slave and a drama queen, but with him snarling in my face, my throat goes dry and I can’t form the words. In Sky City, a lowlife like him would have already been hauled away from me, most likely beaten to make an example of. But here, there is no one to rescue me.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

He swaggeres off and I put my head down, walking down the hall to berth 1604. I widen my eyes for the retinal scanner, and a shadow falls over me. I look up to find the peacekeeper standing beside me. He is tall and as handsome as a Lowlander can hope to be. His smile is sheepish.

“Sorry about that. The three of us go back. Rin has some…anger issues.”

I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose. “Clearly.” After a moment, I add, “Can I help you with something?”

The boy shakes his head and laughs. “Sorry. I’m Makoto Tachibana. Your berthmate.”
The room is tiny and spartan, scarcely a meter between the two bunks, with a low set of metal drawers for each of us. White strip-lighting wraps around the ceiling and floor; it can be dimmed or switched to blue from a panel beside the door. Why blue, I wonder? Is it meant to be soothing? Romantic? Mostly, it just makes my eyes hurt.

Most of the necessities are provided for us—clothing, toiletries, weapons and equipment—but we have been permitted to bring along some personal items, provided they are small and pass inspection. Tachibana sets up two photographs beside his bed—a smiling man and woman standing in front of a small country house, and two young children, their eyes the same striking green as his.

“Your family?” I ask.

Tachibana smiles at my interest. “Yeah. They own a bakery in East Hill. My brother and sister just started secondary school last fall.”

I nod politely, turning to begin unpacking my own things. A case for my glasses, a bottle of light blue pills for my migraines, and a sleek new computer. While on the Platform, direct net uplinks are not permitted—the Confederation cannot risk one their soldier’s neural augments being hacked, although in my opinion, if the Kassadians had that kind of technology, they would not have needed to declare war on us in the first place.

“What about your family?” Tachibana asks.

“My—.” I hadn’t brought any photographs. “My parents live in Sky City. I don’t have any siblings.”

“Ah, right, Elite families tend to be small, don’t they?”

“I—yes.” He knows I am an Elite. Is it that obvious?

Of course it is.

I wait for Tachibana to sneer at me or make some sort of threat, but he just nods a little and goes back to unpacking. Perhaps I have been fortunate after all. Tachibana may be a Lowlander, but at least he has a bit of class.

He turns back to me for a moment. “How did you end up in Recon, if you don’t mind me asking? Not many Elites do.”

My stomach curls in on itself, and the room suddenly feels even smaller. “I—I volunteered,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Oh.” Tachibana sounds a little surprised, but he doesn’t press me further.

That night we stand in neat ranks, our sections denoted by our colors—recon is blue and white, combat black and red, grey and purple for starforce. On the upper tiers stand the officers and the research teams.

The Platform commander stands up in front of the new recruits and talks a great deal about duty and valor in combat, about the weak being left behind.

“Until you prove yourselves, you’re all nothing but space junk out here. Serve your planet and
serve your species for long enough, and maybe one day that’ll change!” He snorts, like he finds
this eventuality unlikely.

I listen and I feel cold. I spent time in a military academy—I’ve heard speeches like this before—
but now it’s like I am hearing it from the wrong side. I had been expecting to be standing on that
upper tier, where these sort of words would only serve to boost my confidence, spur me on to
greater heights of achievement. But down here I am lost.

When we are dismissed, I am sore from standing at attention for so long, and coated in a thin,
chilly sweat. My hands shake and my throat burns. Maybe Commander Gray had been right—
maybe I am good for nothing but following orders, thinking inside a very small, uninspired box.

I wander until I find an empty ob deck. Staring out into the endless black of space is good for
neither health nor sanity, but I can’t help myself.

“Hey, Rei!”

I turn to find Nagisa scampering across the deck toward me, golden-blond hair glowing in the
semi-darkness.

“Hello,” I respond, without enthusiasm. I don’t want to talk to anyone right now—I want to feel
sorry for myself.

Nagisa grins. “You move fast. I tried calling for you, but you just took off.”

“I don’t feel well,” I tell him, and any cultured human being would read between the lines and
understand that by that I mean I don’t want to be bothered, but Nagisa just moves closer.

“Oh.” He reaches a hand toward me and I step back. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” My response is automatic, natural. But doing what comes naturally to me here will get
me nowhere. For one deranged moment I consider telling him everything, this strange boy who I
have only known since morning. I could tell him how all I ever wanted to do was work for the
Imperial Laboratories and how, after the war broke out, I convinced my parents to let me train at
the Indigo Academy. Anyone can join the Confederation, but Elites are the only ones who can
afford the schooling to become scientists or strategists. Most Lowlanders don’t even bother taking
the aptitude test—they just enter the confederation as Recon or Combat. The very best of them
might hope to fly a space fighter.

I had the schooling, I took the test, and I still failed. I am worse than a Lowlander, I am nothing.

I could tell Nagisa all of this, but I don’t. Instead I ask, “Why do you care?”

He shrugs. “I like you.”

“Why? We don’t even know each other.”

Nagisa smiles again, and this time it has a new edge to it. “We could fix that.” He takes a step
closer and rests a warm hand on my hip. “My berth mate has guard duty till midnight.”

I realize what he is proposing at about the exact same moment my brain goes into shut-down. “T-
That’s fraternization. It’s…it’s against regulations, isn’t it?”

Nagisa giggles and rolls his eyes. “Like anyone actually obeys those rules.” He grabs a handful of
my jacket, and next moment, he’s kissing me, tongue moving insistently against the seam of my
lips until I open them. His mouth is impossibly warm. The feeling seems to spread through me, heating my skin, until even the cold expanse of space behind me seems to hold no power.

Nagisa’s hand moves from my hip to my stomach, before sliding down to rub across the crotch of my pants. “I want you to fuck me,” he says against my mouth.

Disgust kicks me hard in the stomach, cold and vicious. One moment, my skin is thrumming and hot and I am pushing into Nagisa’s grip, and the next I jerk back, heavy with the clammy chill of rising nausea. I shove him away, and at once the feeling lessens, although I am still dizzy.

Nagisa’s eyes widen, eerily luminescent in the cold light of space. “Rei? What’s wrong?”

I say nothing. I run.

The dizziness persists all the way back to my berth, where I find Tachibana seated on his bunk, wearing sweatpants and no shirt, damp hair combed back from his face, skin flushed pink from the heat of the shower.

“Hey,” he greets me.

I respond tersely. Talking to someone is the exact opposite of what I want to be doing right now. I sit in the center of my bunk and try to force my breathing to slow, convince my heart to stop attempting to beat its way out of my chest.

Clenching my hands into the thin, rough sheets, I stare up at the low ceiling. What had that been, that...feeling? It was foreign, like I was being invaded by reactions that did not belong to me. I had felt flashes of it before—feelings that, in context, made no sense. Happiness tinged by irrational guilt, smug pride overridden by sobering shame. But I had always told myself that emotions were capricious things.

This had been different. This had been new.
Chapter 3

The next morning at 5 a.m. berth 1608 receives a communication, summoning Rei Ryugazaki to the med bay. I have barely slept, and the world around me is fuzzy and unreal. Across the tiny room, Tachibana sits up and blinks. “I’m sure everything is fine,” he says blearily, before falling back down and pulling the blanket over his head.

My hands shake as I pull on my boots.

The medic laughs when she sees me. “Relax—it’s a very simple augment. I don’t even have to cut anything off.” Dr. Amakata has a pretty, heart-shaped face and a calming smile that I am sure she has practiced in a mirror. “Honestly, I’m surprised you haven’t already had it done.”

“My family is…old fashioned,” I say.

Dr. Amakata takes my glasses and sets them on the table. “HFA, are they?”

I nod. There has been disagreement within the Humans First Alliance as to what exactly designates a non-human. Some members claim that if you are born human, you stay human, no matter how many augments you get. Others claim that there is a tipping point, when enough parts of you are no longer organic. I know my father supports a proposal to classify augment-junkies (as he calls them) in the same category as androids, denying them certain human rights. Many of the people who will be effected are ex-military, since it is a rare soldier who does not undergo some sort of upgrade.

I lie in a padded chair, which immediately molds to the counters of my body. A light scanner moves across me in slow pulses. The whole procedure is painless and takes less than five minutes. When the laser is done with my eyes, Dr. Amakata leans over me.

“There’s a block on the language center of your brain. Did you know that?” Her tone is light, the words professional, but there is a tension to her body language that makes me momentarily wary.

“What?” Then I realize what she is talking about and I relax back against the chair. “Oh, yes. I know. It’s to remove objectionable words from the grammar. I’ve had it since I was a child.”

She arches an eyebrow and pulls out of my line of sight, leaving me staring at the ceiling.

“Most Elites have them,” I add.

“Yes,” Dr. Amakata says. “Yes, I know. Would you like me remove it?”

The words hang in the darkness, almost as if they have entered my head via uplink, as if I can see them floating in front of me. “A-Are verbal blocks not allowed?”

“No, they’re allowed,” Dr. Amakata says evenly. “But they’re not required.” After a moment she sighs. “Wouldn’t you like the chance to choose your own words, soldier?”

“Yes,” I say, making up my mind so quickly that I surprise myself. “Take it out.”

Twenty minutes later, I sit up, and Dr. Amakata smiles at me. “How do you feel?”

I push my palm against my eye. “My head hurts.”
She crosses her arms. "How do you feel, exactly?"

I think for a moment. "My head fucking hurts." I laugh. She laughs with me, and here we are, the two of us, giggling over the fact that I can now curse like a Lowlander. My mother would faint.

My elation lasts up until I get a look at myself in the mirror. My vision has been corrected—I will never need to wear glasses again—but that is not the only thing that has changed. My eyes are now a deep purple, and when Dr. Amakata dims the lights, the irises become glowing rings of violet light.

“What—.”

“Night-vision augment,” Dr. Amakata explains. “All recon soldiers have them. And the color change is so the rest of your squad can recognize you in the dark.”

“But why purple?”

Dr. Amakata shrugs. “I perform the procedures, I don’t make the decisions. But if I were to guess, I would say it’s because a member of your squad already has blue eyes.”

Before I leave, Dr. Amakata gives me a shot in my upper arm, along with the order to return that evening for another. When I ask what it’s for, she shakes her head.

“Your squad leader will explain. Dismissed, soldier.” Dr. Amakata turns back to her desk, clearing my records from her wallscreen. When I don’t leave, she looks around.

“I am not sure what makes me ask. “There are other varieties of mental augments aren’t there? Other than linguistic blocks.”

Dr. Amakata takes off her glasses. “Yes, of course. There are neural enhancements—for intelligence, motor skills, sexual appetite.” She smiles briefly.

“And there are blocks as well, for all sorts of behavior. If you have the money, there is virtually no limit to the augments that can be made on the behavioral center of the brain, although too many will, of course, begin to wear on the psyche. Why do you ask?”

The echo of that sick, chilling disgust rolls through me and I shake my head quickly. “Just curious.”

The loss of my glasses is strange, and the knowledge that I am walking around with purple eyes is even stranger. By most augment standards, it is a relatively tame cosmetic change—absolutely nothing on what I would undergo had I been accepted into Research and Development. Attention span upgrades, multi-tasking skills amped up, the number of hours of sleep my body requires artificially lowered. And by the time the vast majority of Elites reach their late teens, they have already had their eyes augmented at least once. My family is an exception in its conservatism.

“It’s fine,” I tell myself. When I had joined the military, I had given up my right to decide what happens to my own body. I had known this going in.

I am so intent on my new augment that I forget to worry about Nagisa, but as soon as we are split into our squads, I hear a familiar voice reverberating in my ear, and a deep, giddy nervousness suffuses me.
“We’re teammates!” He claps his hands together, golden eyes bright. Then he leans in close, and for one terrifying moment, I am certain he is going to kiss me again, right here, in front of the whole of the Recon section, but he just smiles. My stomach tightens and my face heats, and I brace myself for that rush of disgust, but it doesn’t come. I just feel slightly breathless, like the oxygen inside my body has been compressed down into a tiny point, just below my chest. It is not an unpleasant feeling, truly, just unfamiliar.

Nagisa leans in closer, eyes widening. “Wow, your augment is beautiful!”

“Oh.” I reach up to adjust my glasses, which are no longer there. I brush my hair out of my eyes instead. “Thank you. I… didn’t get to choose the color.”

“He’s right—it’s suits you.” Tachibana has arrived, and I suddenly understand why his eyes always look so aggressively green. Behind him is the bored-looking boy from the day before, the one with black hair. He glances at me, and I feel a brief rush of annoyance. Now I know who got the blue eyes.

“This is Haruka Nanase,” Tachibana introduces.

“I’m Nagisa!”

Tachibana shakes Nagisa’s hand. He hesitates for a moment, then he adds, “Hazuki, right?”

Nagisa giggles a little and shrugs. “Yeah. Good guess.”

Hazuki? Is that Nagisa’s family name? Tachibana had recognized it, but why would he? A Lowlander would never be remarkable enough to make it into the tabloids or news. Maybe they came from the same town. Where had Tachibana said he was from? South Hill?

Nanase is ignoring the rest of us, staring out across the crowded hall, frowning. I follow his gaze to a familiar flash of red hair and the glimmer of sharp, silver teeth. Rin, the angry shark-augmenter, is standing with his squad, talking to a short boy with metallic grey hair and an earnest expression. I wonder if he and Nanase are going to start fighting again.

Nagisa gazes across the room, standing on tip-toes to see over the heads of the assembled recruits. “Every other squad has five people.”

“That’s the standard number,” Tachibana says.

“Where’s our fifth?” I ask.

Right on cue, a girl runs up, out of breath, her dark red hair bouncing behind her in a ponytail. She skids to a halt just in time to avoid barreling into Nanase. Leaning over, she braces her hands on her knees. “S-Sorry I’m late,” she pants. “Got—Got lost.”

Nagisa and I exchange a glance. Nanase is still staring across the room at shark-boy and seems unaware that he nearly got toppled over. Tachibana gives the girl a polite smile. “And you are..?”

The girl stands up straight, flipping her hair back over her shoulder. “Gou Matsuoka. Your fifth squad member.”

Nanase looks at her, showing his first interest in the proceedings. “Matsuoka?” he repeats.

Tachibana casts him a nervous glance. He looks like he is about to speak, but a voice drowns him out.
“Iwatobi Squad!”

“Just in time,” Matsuoka murmurs. She pushes sweaty hair out of her eyes.

So. These are the people I am going to be spending the next few years of my life with. Risking my life with.

So far, I am less than encouraged.

Death has never been a heavy weight on my mind. As an Elite, life-extension technology could theoretically keep me alive and comfortable for the next two hundred years, and an researchers were kept safely far from the enemy lines. But in Recon the war is not theoretical, it is not starship movements on a screen. Recon means danger, it means the belly of the beast.

We enter the command the enormous command office, which I find obnoxious (fucking obnoxious) considering how cramped the rest of the Platform is, and the fact that there is nothing inside it but a desk and a holo-screen that shows an image of a sunny field, daisies moving lazily in the breeze.

“Took you little bastards long enough,” the commander grunts when we enter, although it had taken us hardly any time at all.

Nagisa salutes. “Yes, sir! Sorry sir!” The rest of us follow suit. All of my squad mates' salutes could use some work. Am I seriously the only one with any training at all?

The commander shuffles papers around his desk. He is a short, stocky man with a shiny bald head and a neatly trimmed mustache. His arms are corded with muscle—most likely augmented. He narrows his eyes at our sloppy salutes.

“You've all gotten your optical augments, have you?” he barks. He thumbs a button on the control panel on his desk and the lights dim. Tachibana’s eyes glow brighter than the grass in the holo-screen, Nanase’s sizzle electric blue, and when Nagisa looks at me, his eyes are the same luminous copper I remember from the ob-deck.

Matsuoka bites her bottom lip. “Not me, sir.” Her eyes vanish in the dark room, like human eyes ought to.

The commander brings the lights back up. “You won’t need one. You’ll serve as the unit’s navigator. You will not be out in the field.”

“Oh.” Matsuoka hides her disappointment well—only a childhood spent with my mother and father and the subtle ways they hate each other without speaking alerts me that she is feeling anything at all. She would be a terrific Elite.

The rest of us shift uncomfortably, and I know we are all thinking the same thing. How is someone who can’t find her way around the platform going to be able to direct us when we’re in enemy territory?

The commander pushes aside one vid screen and brings up another. “Iwatobi Squad…Iwatobi Squad…here we go. When you are deemed ready to advance to the field, your assignment will be Lorelie, third quadrant.”

Lorelie. The Kassadian home world.

“You will all report tomorrow at seven hundred hours for your aquatic augments.”
My stomach boils. I feel sick.

Outside of the command office, I float behind my squad like a balloon on a string. I barely notice where we are headed—only that it’s loud and echoing. Aquatic augment. Of course, I should have realized.

“You’re very quiet, Rei,” Nagisa says.

“Yeah,” Matsuoka adds. “What’s wrong?”

You never have to answer the questions of a Lowlander, says a voice in my head that sounds a hell of a lot like my father.

I clear my throat. “I just…had no idea we would need such advanced augmentation. I mean, aquatic augments are pretty complicated, aren’t they?”

“Lorelie is like, 90% water. And quadrant 3 is all water.”

“I know that,” I respond, irritated.

“Then why’d you volunteer for Recon?”

“I—.”

Nagisa, of all people, comes to my rescue. “Let it go, Gou,” he says, the repetition making him giggle. “Everybody’s got reasons.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hi guys! I'm having a ton of fun with this fic and, even though interest does not seem to be super-high, intend to follow it through till the end.

Note the change in rating.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mess hall is a long, low-ceilinged room with rows and rows of metal tables. They, like most everything on the Platform besides the personnel, are bolted to the floor in case of gravity-loss. It’s only now that I realize how hungry I am—I’d skipped dinner the evening before, and I had not had time for breakfast earlier this morning. Around us I see Recon blue, Combat black, and Starfleet grey, but no other colors. The Research sections must eat elsewhere.

Onboard the Platform, it is easy to forget that we are off-world. Stationary orbit means no acceleration or deceleration, and even if there were, the ship is most likely too massive for us to detect it. The view out the window on the far side of the mess hall is a cold reminder, making the room feel darkened even with the harsh burn of the overhead lights. The tiny pinpricks of stars only serve to make the blackness more intense, give it depth and contrast.

“Do you know how to swim?” Gou asks, as we join the back of the line for lunch. Despite Nagisa’s advice, she does not seem inclined to let it go.

My insides squirm unpleasantly at the thought. “Of course I know how to swim,” I snap back. But not very well. “I’m not a complete fucking idiot.”

They all stare at me, a spectrum of surprised, faintly glowing “What?”

Nagisa giggles. “I didn’t know you cursed.”

“Oh.” Right. Was this going to happen now—words just slipping out without me even meaning to say them? “Sorry.”

Nagisa shakes his head. “You should do it more often.”

“Yeah,” Gou agrees. “Makes you seem like less of a prick.”

Is it normal, I wonder, to want to strangle your teammates?

The food is bad, but it is not terrible. Nowhere near as inedible as I had been expecting. The five of us sit down at a table on the side of the hall closest to the door. Without discussing it, we have put as much distance between us and the window as possible. At the Indigo Academy, the dining room was bright and open, with high, arched ceilings. The meals were perfectly balanced for the teenage body. Of course, at the Academy I usually ate alone.

From my mother’s cautionary tales, I expect lunch with Lowlanders to involve swearing and
belching and arm-wrestling contests—and there is a fair bit of that—but not at our table. My teammates are calm, at least, even if Matsuoka is overly-abrupt and Nagisa is much too friendly for comfort. He sits on my right side, close enough that I can tell he smells like oranges. Our arms keep brushing. Every time it happens I shiver with a feeling that can’t decide if it is fear or excitement. Maybe it’s both.

Nagisa had stood in line with us, but he isn’t eating. He picked up what I am fairly sure is flavored water, but he is just fiddling with the bottle, rolling it back and forth across the tabletop. Matsuoka has noticed as well, but unlike me, she seems physically unable to keep her thoughts to herself.

“Are you not eating?” she asks.

Nagisa shrugs. “I’m fine.” He flashes me a quick glance, for no reason that I can think of.

“Hazuki probably isn’t hungry,” Tachibana says steadily, as he cuts up his chicken. Or what I hope is chicken. He puts just the slightest emphasis on Nagisa’s last name.

Matsuoka’s eyes widen and she colors slightly. “Oh. Oh.”

Nagisa just stares at where his hands are wrapped around the neck of the bottle.

As usual, I have no idea what’s going on. “What—.”

Nagisa shakes his head. I am just about to insist that someone explain, when Matsuoka lets out a whoop of excitement. “Rin! Rin, over here!”

Shark boy—the one to whom Nanase’s eyes seem magnetically drawn—has arrived.

“Gou.” A smile spreads over his face, red eyes taking on a manic glint. “This your squad?”

He squeezes himself onto the bench between Gou and Tachibana. My berthmate seems slightly annoyed, but he is too polite to say anything. The slight crease between his eyebrows is the only sign that anything about this situation makes him uncomfortable. Nanase is focusing determinately on his food, which I applaud him for, because it is a depressing thing to focus on. Nagisa barely seems aware that anything has happened—he’s still staring down at the bottle.

Now that Gou and Rin are seated beside each other, I do not need to hear her next words. “This is Rin Matsuoka—my older brother.” They look so much alike that they could have been twins. Same pale skin and glossy red hair, same slender wrists and lean bodies, although on Gou it is elegant, and on Rin it is threatening. And then, of course, there’s the shark teeth. Gou doesn’t have those. Their eyes are the same color as their hair, which makes me wonder if they had them augmented before they joined the confederation.

“We’ve met,” I say, inflecting as much icy Elite into my voice as I can.

Rin’s eyebrows pull in. “Really? Where?” He does not even bother to hide his disdain.

I have to actively prevent myself from reaching up to adjust my nonexistent glasses. “You shoved me against a wall.” I feel much more confident now that I have my teammates with me.

Recognition flashes in his eyes. He grins. “Oh, right. Sorry about that, bro. Bad day.” He doesn’t sound sorry.

“Haru and I went to school with Rin,” Tachibana explains helpfully.
“Yep.” Rin stretches, shoulders popping. “Until they kicked me out.”

“For what?” I asked.

“Fighting.” Haru says it to his gluey lump of potato. “He almost killed someone.”

Rin is cracking his knuckles now. The sounds make me wince. “Motherfucker deserved it.”

I keep expecting Nagisa to elbow his way into the conversation with his usual lack of decorum, but his focus does not appear to be on Rin at all. He is looking around the mess hall like he has lost something, scratching idly at his arm.

“I’ll—I’ll see you guys later.” The bottle tumbles out of his fingers and hits the table with a smack. He chews on his lip, and heads for the door.

Rin looks after him, then back at us. “The fuck is up with him?”

I leave soon after—I am not having any luck with my food. Besides, if I spend anymore time with Rin Matsuoka, I may end up saying something I regret, especially now that I have been granted the ability to curse.

We have showers in the berths, but they are tiny and lukewarm at best, and leave your body smelling like metal. According to Matsuoka, the locker rooms on the third floor (the training level) are much better, and during lunch they will be mostly empty.

All of things that could happen to an Elite like me in a place like this flash across my mind, but I brush them aside. I am a soldier now, without a rank in society. There is nowhere that is truly safe.

The locker rooms smell like chlorine and dirty feet, but there are shower stalls that fade to opaque when you turn the water on, which makes me feel less exposed than I could have. I bathe quickly, washing my hair with the basic, unscented gel that dispenses from the wall. I stand in air jets that dry me in forty five seconds—the ones at home take ten—before pulling on a fresh uniform.

I am on my way out, when a noise makes me pause. A low, broken gasp. I tense. Is someone hurt? Am I obligated to see if they need my help?

I glance around the next row of lockers, just as I realize that the sound is definitely not one of pain. Embarrassment floods me, and I prepare to flee as soon as I’ve seen what’s going on, but when I finally do get a clear view, I’m unable to move.

One of the recruits—Combat, from the red and black jacket falling off his shoulders—has his back up against the metal wall, chest heaving as he twists his fingers in the hair of the boy kneeling in front of him. From this angle, I can’t see what they are doing, but from the slick, wet sounds and the motions of the boy’s head, I don’t need to.

The Combat recruit tips his head back and groans. “Fuck. Fuck!” He has close-cropped hair and a slightly lopsided nose. His mouth has a mean twist to it, and when he speaks, it is with a heavy Colonies accent. “Yeah, that’s it you pretty little bitch,” he grunts, thrusting his hips. “God, fuck, you want it so bad, you—.”

My face burns and my heart pounds loud enough for me to feel it in my ears. My fingers feel cold when I press them to my cheeks, and I realize my hands are shaking. I should not be here, I should not be watching this. Why can’t they do it in a berth, for the love of god?
The boy on his knees lets out a soft, liquid moan as the recruit twits his fingers in his hair and tugs. The motion angles their bodies in my direction. The dirty locker room light falls on the boy’s face and suddenly it is as if I’ve taken a plasma burst to the stomach.

It’s Nagisa.

His cheekbones stand out sharp and high as he…as he sucks the Combat recruit’s cock—and is it even possible for him to do that and not choke? It looks so huge, and Nagisa is so small…

The recruit’s breathing quickens, chest heaving. He is cursing, using words I have never even heard before, calling Nagisa things that send a quiver of anger through me. *Whore, slut, toy.* I am responding to the sounds and sight of my teammate doing this, having this done to him, and while I know it is a natural bodily reaction, I still feel sick with shame.

The recruit lets out a wordless shout, holding onto Nagisa’s head with both hands, forcing him still, before slumping back against the lockers. Nagisa pulls away, and I can hear him panting.

“Shit, kid.” The recruit is unsteady on his feet.

Nagisa giggles, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as he stands up. “Told you.” His voice is slightly raw, but apart from that he seems unharmed. In fact, he looks almost cheerful, leaning back against the lockers, watching the Combat recruit re-fasten his trousers and straighten his uniform. He pushes copper-gold hair out of his sweaty face, pink tongue darting out to lick his lips, and suddenly I can’t help myself.

*Fuck.*

I am imagining him on his knees again, but this time he is on his knees in front of me. My fingers are the ones that twist into his hair, that hold him steady as I thrust into his mouth. Hot, sick arousal floods me, followed by a sharp shock of pain through my head. I let out a surprised gasp, and Nagisa and the recruit stiffen and turn like one creature. I duck back behind the row of lockers, biting my lip, holding my breath.

“Who’s there?” Nagisa’s voice follows me as I pick my way as quickly and as quietly as I can to door. As soon as I am sure I’m out of earshot, I run as if the entire Kassadian army has my scent.

Running feels remarkably good, so I relocate to the track on the other side of the floor. I don’t even bother with a patch to track my heartbeat and breathing, don’t change my clothes, just run until my muscles shake and the sweat dripping into my eyes nearly blinds me.

After about a quarter of an hour, my mind begins to settle back into its familiar placidity. Nothing too intense or troubling, nothing I can’t handle.

*See?* I tell myself, *You’re still you. An eye augment and lexical alteration won’t change that. Neither will an inappropriate sexual fascination with a teammate.*

I calm down enough to grow curious about what other features the track has—Platform 6’s gymnasium is said to be state of the art. Jogging over to the small blue screen beside the door, I bring up the options menu—modules for adjusting temperature, the rigidity of the track, hurtles… My finger hovers over an icon I don’t recognize, and a slow smile spreads over my face. It’s a gravity meter.

I experiment with it a little, turning the setting down until my feet do not quite leave the ground
when I run, but I feel like I’m flying anyway, utterly unbound and weightless. After a few laps I run to one end of the track, feeling sweat run down the sides of my face. Everything seems sharper than usual, more real, and I realize it is because my vision is no longer hazy—I can see all the way the other side of the track. I take a few deep, steadying breaths, and then I leap.

My momentum sends me up into the air, where I twist to the side, the gym spinning around me in wide arcs. I roll across the floor, moving up into a cartwheel and then flipping forward before I land on my feet. I sink a couple inches into the track, which I have made soft and porous.

I have not been able to fling myself around like this since I was a child; I am far too tall and broad-shouldered to be any sort of gymnast But this—jumping up and corkscrewing through the air, flipping backward and catching myself on one hand—this is amazing. Addictive.

I run and flip until I am exhausted, muscles shaky and numb, and when I reset the gravity drive to normal, my legs nearly collapse out from under me.

I meet Tachibana out in the hall, where he reminds me that we have to report to the med bay for a second injection, which I now imagine has to do with the aquatic augment we will undergo in a few day’s time. Dr. Amakata smiles when she sees us, but she is uncharacteristically quiet as she administers the injections, a small crease between her penciled eyebrows, as if something is troubling her.

By the time we return to the berth, I am chilly with sweat and my legs feel like two trembling jellyfish. I make due with the our in-room shower—metallic smell or no. I will not be venturing into the locker room again anytime soon.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Rei. What is he going to do with all these feelings?

Kudos and comments always appreciated!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the great comments, guys! I'm glad you're having fun with this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You have to remember—it’s all about trust. 100%, take-it-or-leave-it, undiluted, fresh-out-of-the-oven trust!”

The five of us shift awkwardly. We had begun by standing at attention over ten minutes ago, but at this stage in the speech, our concentration and posture has begun to droop. Captain Sasabe’s teaching style is…interesting. He struts back and forth across the training floor, hands on his hips, chin raised. His hair is blond, buzzed short except where it hangs over his forehead in tufts that I only imagine are supposed to be stylish. His eyes have a swirling augment effect to them that make him look mildly insane.

“That’s what makes up a team—not firepower, not raw muscle, not whoever’s dick is hardest—.”

Gou makes a choking noise that I am fairly sure is a laugh.

This speech is totally ludicrous, and also unexpected. After the Platform Commander’s greeting the other night, I had expected another lecture on how the weak will be crushed under the heels of the strong. Coach Sasabe, for all his bluster, seems to realize that whether weak or strong, we are here. We’re it.

“Lorelie ain’t no vacation planet, that’s for damn sure. When you’re down there, you got no one to depend on but each other. You four boys—.” He indicates us with a swishing jab of his finger. “You gotta be able to work together as a unit, be able to anticipate each other’s actions before they happen. And you’ve gotta be able to trust that Mononoke—“

“Matsuoka, sir.”

“Whatever. Gotta be able to trust that Matsuoka has your back, or you’ll get nowhere. And Matsuoka, you have to know they’ll follow your directions, no matter what.”

A shout rings out across the training floor. Two Combat recruits are on the ground, locked in what for a one bizarre moment looks like an embrace. But then one girl rolls on top of the other, slamming a fist down into her face. Captain Sasabe curses and takes off for the other side of the gym. The rest of the Combat squad has scattered—I can see Rin in the crowd, cheering the girls on as they fight.

“He’s a little weird,” Nagisa says after a moment or so. “Our training captain.”

“Look who’s talking,” I mutter.

“What?”

I drop my eyes to the track floor. “Nothing.”
I am an Elite—I have spent my life mastering my emotions—but today it has been next to impossible for me to look Nagisa in the eye. Every time I do, all I can see is him on his knees in front of the recruit, or worse, on his knees in front of me.

I stretch my arm out across my chest. My muscles are tight and trembling today. I suppose I deserve it after flinging myself around the gym the evening before and not even bothering to cool-down afterward.

The altercation across the training floor is sorted out swiftly, the two recruits pulled apart by Sasabe and the Samezuka squad’s captain. One of the girls spits blood onto the floor. A bruise is splashed like paint across her jaw. The other girl is barely conscious. The rest of the squad is laughing and jostling one another, but when the captain addresses them, they snap to attention. No sloppy salutes there.

“Noisy bastards,” Captain Sasabe grumbles upon his return. “Can’t leave ‘em alone for a second. Good to see you all can keep it together while I’m gone.”

Had he expected us to start beating on each other in the thirty seconds of his absence? I do not find that particularly encouraging. But some good has come out of the fight, it seems, because Sasabe has lost the thread of his speech, and decides to move on to the next stage. My squadmates look as relived as I feel.

I expect us to head straight for the pool, but as the captain tells it, it would be pointless to begin any training without our aquatic augments. Fear pulses through me at the mention of the impending procedure, spreading out like ink in my bloodstream, making me feel weighted down and cold. What with that and the fact that I literally cannot look at Nagisa without picturing him on his knees, it feels like nothing is safe—no thought can be trusted.

Captain Sasabe herds us into an adjoining gym, this one smaller and more old-fashioned. No gravity adjustment here. Instead there are mats on the floor and a climbing wall, several squat rubber dummies for hand-to-hand training. A cluster of ropes hangs from the high ceiling, making me think unpleasantly of entrails.

Captain Sasabe has us sit on the ground with our legs crossed, as if we are back in the nursery.

“What now?” Tachibana inquires politely, after a few seconds go by.

Sasabe crosses his arms, muscles standing out against the tight poly-skin of his uniform. “Now you’re all going to shut up. And look at each other.”

I laugh before I can help myself, and a few moments later the others join me. It is gratifying to know that I am not the only one who thinks this has to be a joke.

Gou arches her dark red brows. “You’re kidding, right?”

Sasabe points at his face. “Do I look like a kidder, Matsuoka?”

I pray Gou has enough sense not to answer the question honestly.

She ducks her head. “No, sir.”

“Exactly right. Next time one of you questions an order, you get double night watch. No sleep for mouthy bitches.”
Gou’s jaw tightens but she remains quiet. Tachibana is frowning at his hands, which are folded in his lap.

“So yeah, where was I?” Captain Sasabe nods. “Right. You five are gonna sit there for five minutes, and just look at each other’s ugly faces. No talking, no laughing, no fucking around. Got it?”

Is he serious? This is our first training assignment? Not that I am complaining—sitting around doing nothing sounds excellent to my drooping eyes and aching body, even if I cannot fathom what it has to do with fighting Kassadians. With the mess my life has been over the past week, I will not turn down an easy assignment.

Gou and I are paired together first, alongside Tachibana and Nagisa. Nanase sits to the side, looking, as usual, like he is about to fall asleep. Nagisa begins to giggle right away, that bright, mad laughter that makes my chest tight and my throat sticky. He gets a snapped word from the captain, and slowly subsides. I expect Gou to have trouble with this as well—she cannot seem to keep her mouth shut—but after seeing how easily she had shut down in the Commander’s office the morning before, I should know better. She stares straight at me, eyes blank, face relaxed. This more an exercise in self-control than trust, but that suits me fine. If there is one thing an Elite has, it is self-control. Still, the whole situation is off-putting. It feels immediately, startlingly intimate. Gou looks so different from the Elite girls I have known. She wears no makeup and her hair is pulled back from her face in a messy mound on top of her head. I notice distantly that she is pretty, beautiful even. There is a ferocity to her beauty that doesn’t go away, even when her features are smooth and placid. Both pairs get through that trial without much incident. Next time around, I sit on the sidelines, while Nagisa and Nanase, and Gou and Tachibana stare awkwardly at each other, while Captain Sasabe walks around, nodding every so often, like a man in a particularly boring branch of an art gallery. This is such an idiotic assignment. Shouldn’t we be learning how to kill people? How to move silently? I wonder what the Samezuka combat squad would do if they saw us gazing into each other’s eyes. Probably laugh their lowlife heads off.

Pairing with Tachibana is easy. No matter what he does, he seems to radiate calm, the faint glow of his eyes cool and steady. He smiles at me when we start, and it is a sad smile, I realize. And as I continue to look at him, despite his height and the never-ending broadness of his shoulders, he grows smaller in my mind, closing down in on himself. I suppose that, when the eyes are the only thing you see, everyone is the same. He has a broad nose and forehead, making him comfortably and classically handsome. I remember how big his hands looked when he had folded his clothes in our berth the first evening, and I immediately experience a strange, rippling jolt in my stomach, as I imagine what it would feel like to have those hands spread across my back.

I blink, and almost look away. I can feel my cheeks heating. What is wrong with me? I am surprised to find that the member of the Iwatobi Squad who is the worst at this exercise is Nanase. What with his seeming utter lack of interest in anything that is not Rin Matsuoka, I would have expected him to be able to stare straight through me and see nothing.

Haru’s eyes are heady, drowning blue, and I experience another stab of annoyance that he had been allowed to keep his eye color. Although, for all I know, these might not be Nanase’s natural eyes after all. I am finding that I have been even more conservative in my lack of augmentation than I had previously thought.
Staring into Nanase’s eyes, I think of the ocean, how the surface can be bright and still, but down below countless currents collide, cycling the water in vicious drags, making sure nothing stays in the same place for long.

There is an intensity behind his eyes, a chilly madness.

I focus on his other features, as I had with Gou—the small, well-formed nose, thin face, delicate mouth, feathery dark hair that falls into his eyes. Frown lines slightly mar his mouth and forehead. All of my teammates are fascinating to look at, now that I actually have the time and opportunity.

As we trade our positions off one last time, I find myself hoping for an emergency—that the Kassadians attack or something catches on fire. Anything to keep me from having to—

Nagisa sits down across from me. He smiles, but he doesn’t laugh like he had with all the others. We look at each other, our breathing settling into a rhythm. His eyes are molten gold and, if possible, he looks even better than he usually does. His skin is smooth and, where everyone else looks sallow and drawn beneath the gym lights, he almost seems to glow. A low, liquid feeling pulses inside me, spreading until I am nothing but nerves. My breathing goes shallow and I am sure my pupils are dilated. I hope Captain Sasabe is as moronic as he advertises, because I am currently displaying most of the classic signs of arousal. It would be obvious to anyone with any knowledge of biology. I try to stop myself from looking at Nagisa’s mouth and imagining it on various parts of my anatomy. The results are mixed.

I force myself to focus on his eyes, gathering the calm that I know is inside me, somewhere, lurking just out of reach. Compared to how he was with everyone else, he is watching me passively.

Or perhaps not so passively. Is it my imagination, or has his breath quickened as well? Is he flushed, or is it just a trick of the light?”

I should not be surprised if he is, considering what he had tried when we had barely known each other an hour, but still, the idea of him thinking of me while I am thinking of him…

“Allright, that’s enough,” Captain Sasabe hollers, and it feels like a stay of execution. Any longer, and I am not sure what I would have done. I certainly would not have been able to maintain eye contact. Every inch of my body aches for a different kind of contact, like Nagisa is magnetic and my skin is metal filings. I can feel pressure building in my head, and I get up and turn away before pain can burst into my skull like it had in the locker room. I focus on the swaying rope entrails and try to force my breathing under control.

“Ryugazaki, you on drugs?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m just—.”

“No?” A hand clenches down on my shoulder, spinning me around into Captain Sasabe’s slightly demented glare. His face looks huge up close. “No? The fuck you say to me?”

I resist the urge to flinch away. “No, sir.” My voice shakes and I am horrified.

Sasabe gets even closer to me. “You gonna cry, Ryugazaki?”

I swallow. “No, sir.”

He lets me go and I reel back into Tachibana, stepping on his foot. Sasabe tells us we are fuckwits, pathetic in that it took us the whole morning to just sit there and make eye contact, but I don’t think
any of us are listening.

On our way to the mess hall, all of us are quiet—even Nagisa and Gou. I focus on the metal floor in front of me, acutely aware of Nagisa to my left and Tachibana to my right. I don’t know if that silly exercise has made us trust each other more, but it has done something, even if I can’t be sure what. I feel at once closer and further apart from my squad mates, like there are infinities of space between us, but it is the same space. We are breathing the same air and walking down the same ugly hall on a military space station. Of course, I knew all this before, but it still feels strange.

I am the first one to break the silence which, again, is strange.

“So that was…peculiar.”

Gou crosses her arms across her chest, nails scritching at her sleeves. “Um, yeah—try fucking weird. That guy is a nut.”

“Yes, I’m not sure if I trust him,” Nagisa jokes, and we all laugh. It’s a little forced.

Gou especially looks disquieted, still scratching at her arms like she has an infection. “Yeah…well…I have this friend in Combat, Madeline—.” She blinks a couple of times, as if hearing her own voice is bringing her out of a dream. “She says that one of the Combat Squads had to have sex. It was, like, their first assignment.”

“What, with each other?” I ask.

“No, with a komodo dragon. Yes, with each other.”

“I’m not sure if I believe that,” Tachibana says slowly.

“Yes,” I agree, gratified that I have managed to keep my tone breezy. “What would be the purpose of that?”

Gou shrugs. “I don’t know. Camaraderie? You know, like the Spartans. Or maybe their captain just wanted to watch.”

Nagisa taps a finger against his lips. “Did they do it all together, or did they switch off, like we did with staring at each other?”

Gou laughs. “Good question. It would probably be more efficient to just do it all together.”

I roll my eyes and glance at Tachibana, who is laughing silently into his fist. Nanase does not seem aware that a conversation is happening.

“I find that story highly unlikely,” I say finally.

“Yes, well. You hate fun.” Gou brushes an imaginary bit of dirt from off her uniform. “Besides, what do you need team-building sex for, when you and Nagisa were so busy eye-fucking each other that last time?”

My heartbeat pounds loud in my ears, and I feel the urge to shove Gou out an airlock. Nagisa is just as shocked as I am for a moment, but then a beatific smile spreads across his face and he looks sidelong at Gou.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says brightly, before scampering ahead into the
mess hall.

Chapter End Notes

Kind of a weird chapter, I know. But we needed some team-building.

See you guys soon!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Hey, there! I've made a mix to go along with the fic--just some of the music I listen to when I'm writing. You can find it here: http://8tracks.com/autoeuphoric/some-of-us-are-looking-at-the-stars.

I realized that I've been using Ama-chan's first name all this time, so Dr. Miho has been changed to Dr. Amakata. My Japanese isn't good enough that I can really differentiate first names from family names.

That morning, when we had stopped by the Med Bay for our injections, Dr. Amakata had been absent, and we had been helped by a stern-faced man with a scratchy voice and frown lines as deep as battle trenches. Amakata is here now, smiling pleasantly as she gives Nanase, Tachibana, and myself our injections. Nagisa had said he would get his later that evening, and Gou doesn’t need them because the navigator of the team needs no augmentation.

When all three of us are finished, Dr. Amakata glances over her shoulder. “Rei, will you hang back for a moment? There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

I glance toward Tachibana and Nanase, not really sure if I’m asking for help or simply solidarity. Tachibana rises an eyebrow, and he looks like he might be about to offer to wait for me, but then Nanase murmurs into his ear—too quietly for me to make out—and Tachibana nods.

“We’ll see you later, then?”


Dr. Amakata is fiddling with her tablet as she says, “Go ahead and have a seat.” I sit back down onto the spindly metal chair, which is cold even through the polyskin of my training clothes.

She laughs when she looks up from her desk.

“Again with the nervous face! Am I really that terrifying?”

That sounds like a rhetorical question, so I choose to say nothing. I try to relax, but that mostly just makes me slide down awkwardly in the chair. My upper arm has begun to ache already, and I scratch at it idly.

“Stop that, you’ll only irritate it more,” Dr. Amakata says distractedly. She crosses her legs and laces her fingers. I can’t shake the feeling that I am about to be reprimanded.

“Rei, I wanted you to know that I followed up on your questions from the other day.”

“Uh…” The palms of my hands have started to sweat and inch, and I rub them across the knees of my pants. “What questions?”

“About metal augments. Whether or not they exist. I got curious and took another look at your scans. I know I didn’t ask your permission—.”
“That’s—that’s okay,” I say quickly. Nervousness brushes against me like a huge, furry animal of prey. I wish she would just spit it out, whatever it is.

“You have another augment installed, apart from the lexical block I removed,” she says after a moment. “I’m not surprised I missed it the first time. It’s high quality work—practically invisible. Very specialized and very expensive.” She taps her stylus against her tablet. “And I guess I was not looking as hard as I could have been. I would never have expected an advanced augment like that on you, what with your father being so high in the ranks of the HFA.”

I shift awkwardly on the tiny chair. “I don’t want to talk about the Humans First Alliance.” Right now, or ever. “What kind of augment is it?”

Dr. Amakata hesitates for a moment. “It’s an emotional augment.”

“I…” My voice shakes like that disgusting jiggly dessert they serve in the mess hall—the one Gou loves. “Can you explain what that means?”

“There are many different variations,” she responds, tapping a shiny pink nail on the desk in time with her words. “This particular model regulates and, in some instances, prevents certain feelings. It also appears to have the ability to override an emotion and replace it with another. Any it sees as objectionable.” Her nostrils flare. “I’ve never come across anything quite like it.”

When I say nothing, she narrows her eyes. “You are taking this much better than I thought you would.”

Well, my emotions are being dampened, I think. Out loud I say, “I’m still just trying to process.”

She nods, looking down at her tablet and punching in a few commands. “It also seems to—and I realize this is awkward—it also appears to be affecting your libido. Your sex drive.”

“I know what libido means,” I say stiffly. “I’m sure you do.”

“So, it’s inhibiting my sex drive?”

“Yes, that’s one of its functions.”

“It’s not working very well.” I flush, realizing what she will (correctly) infer from that.

Her eyebrows pull in slightly, but Dr. Amakata is nothing if not professional. “That’s just the thing—the augment has begun to degrade. Strange, since such a complicated upgrade should generally have more staying power. I can’t imagine you could have had it for more than five years or so—most likely you had the procedure when you entered puberty.”

“I’ve…noticed it before. The augment,” I say. A few years ago I had performed poorly on a math exam. Shame had crowded my mind, but it had quickly been replaced with determination to do better, to do whatever I could to improve myself. The desire to slack off and relax had been overrun by ambition, like a damn opened to devour a quiet stream.

And of course there had been the lust, lust replaced by disgust, and swift flashes of desire that hit me like kicks in the gut. Was that the degradation? Did I want to do these…things to Nagisa because my augment was no longer working?

I realize that Dr. Amakata is speaking again.
“I was in at the Medical Academy when emotional augments really began to come on the market. I found them…troubling.” Her small, pink lips pull down into the first real frown I have seen her wear. “Manipulating emotions is tricky, and—.” She fixes me with cool brown eyes “And the idea that someone would do it to their child is frankly monstrous.”

I feel a quick flash of annoyance. “So you’re saying my parents are monsters.”

Dr. Amakata shakes her head. “No, Rei. I’m saying your parents are a product of their environment. They thought this augment would help you be your best and, honestly, it probably did. But now that you’ve been assigned to Recon—.”

“I volunteered for Recon.” My voice quivers on the lie.

Dr. Amakata’s lips press into a thin line for a moment, but she doesn’t protest. “Now that you are a part of Recon, I think you would benefit from feeling your emotions as they were meant to be felt.” Her expression softens somewhat. “Cold, hard logic can only take you so far, you know.” She smiles. “Would you like to have the augment removed?”

I look down at my hands, which are shaking where they are clenched on my knees. “Yes,” I say at last. “I want to know what I’m really like.”

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My footsteps echo hollowly on the metal floor of the corridor, and I am hollow and strangely muddled, like all the parts of me have been shaken loose and then crammed haphazardly back inside. All this time I had just thought I was an exceptionally talented Elite, able to control my emotions better than anyone I knew, outside of my own family. Did my parents have emotional augments as well? My mother carried herself with an air of resigned melancholy, like she found it was her duty to be gloomy. As for my father, he had about two settings: disappointed, and enraged.

According to Dr. Amakata, I will have to wait until after the aquatic augment is performed before I can have the emotional one removed. Any work done on my brain could unbalance the hormones that the injections have been regulating. She will have to call in a specialist, most likely from the Medical Institute in Sky City.

“I’m good,” she had said, “But I’m not this good.”

I am too shaken to return to my berth. I would never have imagined that one of the more difficult parts of life on Platform 6 would be living in such close proximity to someone else, especially someone as even-tempered as Tachibana, but I find myself longing for the solitude I had at home.

Without meaning to, I find myself wandering to the same ob deck I had stood on two nights before, where Nagisa had kissed me. Is it really possible that it has only been three days since I had arrived on the Platform? It feels like weeks. Months.

I press my hands against the glass (it isn’t really glass—that would never hold up against the pressure of the void) and stare out at the starscape. Even though I know it is impossible, I imagine I can feel the chill of space seeping in through my palms.

When the emotional augment is removed, what will go with it? Will my personality change? My temperament? Will I become stupider? Smarter?

I am grateful for this time on my own, but there is a part of me that wishes Nagisa would appear the way he had before. It is a distant part, but it’s getting stronger all the time.
In a kind twist of fate, Captain Sasabe has given up on the idea of trust exercises for the time being; we don’t have to spend any more time staring into each other’s face, or falling backwards into each other’s arms, or having sex. With each other, or komodo dragons. One day is spent in endurance trials—running laps and sprints, jumping hurdles, climbing ropes and walls—and the next in hand-to-hand combat, armed and unarmed. I am the best at running, second-best at climbing, and worst at fighting. I am too tall and heavy to be particularly quick, but my blows don’t yet have enough power behind them to make up for it. Captain Sasabe makes sure I know it.

Gou’s an abysmal runner, but she scales the ropes as nimbly as a monkey at the Sky City Biodome. The way she tells it, she and her friend back in Lowtown spent hours climbing up the sides of abandoned apartment buildings and offices.

“All the good stuff’s on the higher floors,” she tells us. “You know, especially if the stairs have collapsed.”

Tachibana is best at unarmed combat, which comes as no surprise to any of us. His reach is unbelievable, and he could probably bench press me if he ever felt like trying. Nagisa turns out to be surprisingly good with a knife—fearless and quick, jumping under guards and spinning out of reach. He manages to back me up against the gym wall the first time we spar, one small hand pinning my shoulder, the other drawing the knife back, a wild gleam in his golden eyes, even as he smiles at me.

“For fuck’s sake, Hazuki. Don't telegraph your strikes! He’s going to see that coming a mile away!”

Nagisa chuckles and steps away from me. I am breathing hard, and it’s not entirely from the workout.

“I wasn’t really planning on stabbing him in the face, captain,” he says, turning back, tossing the rubber knife in the air and catching it on the way down.

My emotions stay fairly stable, although the closer we got to the Augment Day (as I have begun calling it in my mind) the more unsettled my nerves become.

The evening before the operation I find myself in the anti-grav gym again, and this time I make myself take the time to stretch. Life on Platform 6 has fallen into an uneasy routine, and although I am by no means comfortable, I have at least begun to relax a little. No one has given me any trouble for being an Elite, but I’ve gotten a few looks that say some people would like to try. Having a berthmate as big as Tachibana certainly has its merits.

I crank down the gravity and turn a few back flips from a standing position, before I take off running around the track. I move fast enough that the wind blows the hair out of my sweaty face, until the endorphins wash away everything else, even the constant ache in my upper arm that reminds me tomorrow my body will be severely altered, with my mind soon to follow. Perhaps my emotional augment is the reason why I enjoy running so much—the joy I feel from moving my body is purely chemical. The augment is not designed to react to endorphins.

About a quarter of an hour after I begin, I come out of a series of cartwheels to find someone standing beside the entrance to the gym. My new perfect vision makes it easy to tell who it is.

“Nagisa,” I say, surprised. “How long have you been here?”

“Not very long.” His eyes are shining a blurry gold. “Rei, that’s amazing! It was so beautiful!”
My face burns and I cover it by pushing sweaty hair out of my eyes. Hopefully I am already flushed enough from the exertion that it won’t make any difference. “It’s the gravity drive,” I say to the floor. “I could never do that without it.”

“It’s still awesome.”

Pleasure swells in my chest, but I squash it down as quickly as possible. Better to force it away on my own—who knows what the augment will see fit to replace it with? “It’s not—I mean…thank you.”

Nagisa grins brightly and rocks on the balls of his feet. I want to ask him what he’s doing here, but I can’t think how to phrase it without being rude. He is a recruit too, he has as much right to be in the gym as I do.

I decide to use a common Lowland phrase. “What’s up?”

He shrugs. “Not much. I was bored.”

No cocks around to suck?

I think it and then am immediately appalled at myself. I’m not being fair to Nagisa; it isn’t his fault that I spied on him in the locker room, or that I every time I see him I picture him on his knees. He is trying so hard to be my friend.

I itch at the sweat on the back of my neck. “I’m sorry that I’ve been…distant with you.”

Nagisa cocks his head to the side. “Aren’t you always distant? I just thought that was part of your personality.”

I laugh. “Maybe it is.” Then again, maybe not. Who knows.

Nagisa is playing with a loose thread on his sleeve, and after a moment I realize that he is nervous as well. “I wanted to apologize. For the other day.” He looks up at me, expression unusually serious.

“W-What?” I feel a flash of sick fear. He’d seen me?

“I never should have done it. I wasn’t thinking. I shouldn't assume that you want the same things that I do, so—.”

Relief floods me as I realize what he means. “It’s alright, I just…just didn’t expect it.”

But I do, a part of me is screaming. I do want the same things you do.

No you don’t, says another part, the part that always sounds like my father. Why would you want something so disgusting? He’s a Lowlander—who knows where he’s been?

Pain jabs through my head and I let out a gasp, pressing a palm to my forehead.

“Rei, are you okay?”

I nod. “Yes. Yes, I’m fine.” I lower my hand and attempt a smile.

He doesn’t look convinced. “Do you want to go to Rec Room or something?” he asks after a moment or two. “I mean—if you’re done working out.”
“I…didn’t know there was one,” I respond, walking to the control readout and adjusting the gravity back up to normal.

“It’s kind of lame. There’s video games and table tennis. Stuff like that.” He shrugs. “It’s just something to do.”

“Uhh…sure. “ Why not? I can handle playing table tennis with Nagisa. Whatever the hell that is.

“Are you nervous about the aquatic augment?” Nagisa asks, on our way through the twisting hive of Platform 6.

“ A little,” I say, and even that small admittance of weakness takes effort. “What about you?”

“Um, not really.” Nagisa’s tone is even, but he doesn’t look at me as he talks. Maybe he has trouble with weakness as well.

Nagisa’s approximation is right—the Rec Room is fairly lame. A couple of rickety green tables, bisected by nets, like a doll’s game of tennis. The rackets are tiny as well, and the recruits look comical standing on either side and smacking a flimsy plastic ball back and forth. A number of very old gaming consoles sit beside a couple equally ancient screens. No chance of getting to actually play one—recruits are clustered so tightly around the screens I can barely see what’s on them.

A vid screen hangs on the wall, playing a government news channel, and no one is really bothering to watch. Most of what gets reported is typically so edited and watered-down that it’s barely worth the electricity.

I barely even glance at the news, just catching a headline as it scrolls past.

_Explosion at Landsfield Penthouse._

My chest turns to ice.

Above the headline is footage of a glass-fronted building in downtown Sky City, oily black smoke issuing from the top floor, swirling away up and out of frame.

_No, no. It’s not possible._

But it is. I recognize the building because I have seen it innumerable times before. My family has lived in the penthouse apartment in the Landsfield Building since I was five years old.

My shock must have shown on my face, because suddenly Nagisa is standing beside me, one hand on my arm. “Rei, are you alright? Rei!” I blink, my eyes rolling back to pull up access to the net, before I remember that my uplink is disabled, and has been for the last week. On the outside, it must look like I’m having some sort of fit.

“That’s—that’s my house,” I manage to stammer.

Nagisa freezes. “What?”

I yank my arm away from him. “I said, that’s my fucking house!”
The room goes quiet. Someone mutters, “Elite bastard,” and a table of spacer recruits guffaw into cans of Cocola.

“Someone get your pretty palace all dirty, Elite? I hope they didn’t fuck up any of your coffee tables or water features.” A burly combat recruit with a pockmarked forehead leers. “Because that would be a tragedy”

I barely see him move through the haze of my mind, but suddenly he is just standing in front of me. He is a full head taller than I am, and infinitely broader.

“What did you say to me?” I ask.

The boy’s smile shows all his teeth, which are as crooked as a broken coastline. “What’s the big deal? You Elites have so much money you can just buy a new set of parents, can’t you?”

Blood pounds in my ears, and the spacer is suddenly flat on his ass on the Rec Room floor, clutching his jaw. For one ridiculous moment, I wonder if I have hit him without even meaning to, but then I see Nagisa. Quick as a serpent he had slipped between us and driven the palm of his hand up into the spacer’s chin. He stands over him, eyes electric with hate.

“Keep your ugly mouth shut, you piece of shit.” He spits on the floor.

One of the spacer’s friends, a blond girl with a pattern of stars tattooed along the curve of her throat, reaches down to help him to his feet. “Well, if it isn’t everybody’s favorite little cockslut,” she purrs.

I don’t have time for this. I leave Nagisa and the girl, who have begun circling each other like tigers. Sprinting full on down the hall, I nearly slam into Captain Sasabe, who yells obscenities in my wake. He may have also assigned me to double-watch—I’m not in earshot long enough to find out. My berth is mercifully empty, and I fling myself onto my bed, fighting my tablet free of the twisted sheets.

It is the first thing that comes up as soon as I tap over to the net: Vigilantes bomb Home of HFA Big-Timer. My fingers are so sweaty they leave a smear on the screen as I bring up the rest of the news report.

Sky City Police responded to reports earlier this evening of a bombing in the 1st District. The home of Daisuke Ryugazaki, chairman of the Sky City chapter of the Humans First Alliance, was the target of a brutal assault. Authorities have made no comment, but precedent would suggest the attack to be the work of VERDICT, a well-funded, well-organized vigilante group that operates in the slums of Sky City, populated mostly by Biometal Androids, or ‘Droids’ as they are more commonly referred to.

I read the words but I barely take them in. An envelope pops up in the corner of the screen. I tap it, my stomach twisting with nausea. I have three new messages. All of them are from my mother.

The first one reads: I’m sure you’ve heard by now. I am unharmed, but your father is in critical condition. No one will tell me anything.

The next reads: Your father is fine. The scarring should be minimal.

The third flash is much longer, and in complete sentences.

Hello, darling. I’m sorry if I scared you with my last few messages. I was distraught, and no one in that terrible city hospital would let me in to see your father. The rebels threw the bomb through the
drawing room window (the police detective told me they most likely had hoverboards) where your father was taking his tea. He has burns on the left side of his face and neck, but they should be cleared up in no time at all. No lasting harm done.

I am afraid I cannot say the same for our home. The fire damage was extensive, and I am afraid it cannot be salvaged. We are staying at the Plaza Hotel for the time being, until arrangements can be made to move out to the house upstate.

I hope you are well, my darling, and as glad as I am that you were not here to endure this terrible ordeal, I wish you were here with us now.

With all my love,

-your mother

The relief is so heavy in my blood that it feels as if I am being pulled down, sagging to my bunk. I let the tablet slip from my fingers and bury my face in my pillow. I don't cry.
I sleep in snatched bursts that night, punctuated by troubling, blurry dreams. By the time the alarms on our tablets go off—once again at 5 a.m.—I feel even more exhausted than I had the night before.

Nagisa had shown up at my berth moments after I had read the last flash from my mother, sporting a black eye and scratches across his neck that looked like they might have been made by fingernails. There was no need to explain anything to him—he had seen the news.

“Are they alright?” he had asked from the hall, when I finally looked up from my tablet, spots flashing in front of my eyes as they adjusted to the dark room, much faster than they ever had pre-augment. “Your family?”

I nodded slowly, and he had taken a few steps into the berth.

“Are you alright?”

I had hesitated for a moment before nodding again.

He had worried at his bottom lip, the flesh flushing a dark pink. “Do you want…” He trailed off to nothing. “I’ll see you tomorrow, a-after your augment.”

I swallowed several times, realizing with some surprise that I didn’t actually want him to leave. I didn’t want to be alone.

“Nagisa, I—.”

But he was gone, hallway sterile and empty.

What I want to do this morning is stand under the lukewarm water in the shower for as long as it holds out, wash off the nightmares and the fear sweat. I want something hot to drink, and a chance to tie together my thoughts, which are spinning out like space junk shunted into the vacuum. What I have to do is report to the med bay along with Tachibana, Nanase, and Nagisa. Gou had been planning to join us—for moral support, she said—until she had realized for how early in the morning the procedure was scheduled. Then she declined, in the usual eloquent Gou fashion:

“Fuck that. I’ll see you sad bitches when you wake up.”
Nagisa and Nanase are both already there when Tachibana and I arrive, both of them looking exhausted and uncomfortable. Nagisa has dark circles under his eyes and I doubt he’s slept, but the bruises and scratches are gone.

“They fixed you up fast,” I say.

Nagisa frowns at me. I point to my eye.

Realization smooths over his face and he nods. “Oh, right. Yeah. Yeah, they did. D-Don’t want anything getting infected, right?” His voice trembles there toward the end. It may make me a terrible friend and teammate, but I am glad that I am not the only nervous one.

A man sticks his head out of one of the exam room doors. He has steel-grey hair that does not match his unlined face, and pale, heavily-augmented eyes. Unlike all the other medics I’ve seen on the Platform, he isn’t dressed in a lab coat. “Hazuki?” he calls. “Is there a Hazuki out here?”

Nagisa jumps slightly, before giving the rest of us a sheepish grin and an awkward twitch of his fingers, which I realize is meant to be a wave. “I’ll see you all later, I guess. Um, good luck.”

Nanase nods, Tachibana smiles. I say, “You too.”

After Nagisa disappears, Dr. Amakata calls the rest of us into the operating room. This time, she doesn’t comment on my nervous expression. She doesn’t tell me there is nothing to worry about.

I wonder why Nagisa had been brought into a separate room for his augment. Now that I ponder it—he has all of his medical exams away from the rest of us—he had not even gotten his injections at the same time.

I have very little time to worry about it, however, because much to soon I am lying back on the cot, and Dr. Amakata is shooting the sedative into the crook of my arm. My anxiety, my confusion, my grasp on who I am, all of it is pulled away, until I am falling into a void as cold as space, and twice as black.

I wake up in hell.

At least, it feels like hell. I am unbearably hot, pressure pushing down on me from all sides, thickening the air until it is impossible to breathe. A fiendish orange glow surrounds me, pulsing lighter and darker, as if I have been swallowed by some enormous monster and it is moving around me in slow, rippling breaths.

I try to move, find I can’t, and as I begin to struggle, a shrill sound goes off somewhere far above me. I had not been aware that hell had fire alarms. If it did, wouldn’t they be going off constantly? The noise persists, and a slow lethargy blooms inside me, starting in my chest and moving into my arms and legs, until all I can move is my head. I thrash that as much as I can, black tendrils crowding into the edges of my vision.

No—not black tendrils. I realize what they are the same instant I realize that the air is not thickened—it’s not air at all. It’s water. I am suspended in liquid, and my hair is floating around my face like seaweed.

And then I realize something else. I’m drowning.

“Shit, he’s conscious.”

“What?”
The alarm gets louder, filling the entire world with noise. I thrash my head from side to side, panic blooming like poison inside me.

“Breathe, Rei.” A voice floats down from somewhere above me, a voice I recognize but cannot place. “You have to breathe.”

_Breathe_?! I open my mouth to tell the voice that I can’t fucking breathe, because I’m in water, but then the water gets in my nose and my throat and I swallow it down. Instantly, my head clears, and I’m gulping down more before I even know what I’m doing. The panic recedes and I remember where I am: on Platform 6, in Recon, receiving my aquatic augment.

I just wish someone had mentioned that it was going to be _gills._

“Good, that’s good, Rei. Just keep breathing.” Dr. Amakata’s voice is low and soothing, and suddenly I am moving, being pulled upwards by whatever is holding my legs and arms immobile. My head breaks the surface, and I draw in a great gasp of open air, coughing and choking as my lungs take over from the augment. I am shaking despite the heat of the water, everything suddenly bright and loud and impossibly crowded. By the time I am drawn fully out of the tank, I am shivering so badly that my teeth clack together.

I close my eyes. _Wonderful. I hope nobody has a camera._

For some reason, that thought makes me laugh, which makes choke, which sets off another bout of coughing.

“Fluid in his lungs!” someone calls in warning. The alarm is still screaming all around me, and I lose the thread of things for awhile.

When I come back to myself fully, I am in a much quieter room, the lights turned down to a merciful twilight. I am in a regular bed now, although my left hand is in a monitoring dock, held there by a clamp that I would not be able to release one-handed. With my other hand I grope along my collarbone, feeling the smooth, slightly clammy skin of my neck and chest unchanged. No gills, then.

Tachibana is to my right in an identical cot, eyes still closed, bangs vibrating in time with each panted breath. He looks softer in sleep, and strangely vulnerable.

“Are you awake?”

I look to my left, where Nanase has sat up as much as the monitoring cuff will allow. His usually bright eyes are dimmed with the remnants of anesthesia.

“Yes,” I respond needlessly. “Where are we?”

Nanase shrugs. “A recovery room, I guess.”

I nod, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment, remembering the press of the water around me, the helplessness at realizing that I couldn’t move my body. “Did…were you conscious in the tank?”

He gives me a sharp look. “No. Were you?”
“At the end, yes.” I let out a shaking breath. “I—I think something might have gone wrong.”

“Oh.” Nanase blinks. His eyes travel briefly down my body, and I am relieved that I’m no longer naked; I have been dressed in a thin grey hospital gown. “Well, you look alright.”

“Thanks, Nanase,” I say, only half sardonically. I think this is the most I’ve ever heard him speak out loud.

Nanase’s lips twitch. “You can call me Haruka, if you want.”

I am surprised, but too wrecked to argue it right now. “O-Okay. You can call me Rei.”

“I already do,” he says, sagging back onto his cot and closing his eyes.

Funny. I wouldn’t think he would call me anything at all. Even when I’m in the room, he barely seems to notice I’m there.

There is a stirring from the cot on the other side of me. “R-Rei?”

Tachibana (or Makoto—it seems useless to continue to refer to him by his family name at this point, especially inside my own head) is blinking his eyes open, hand twitching where it lies open on his stomach.

“Yeah,” I say. He gives me a groggy smile in return.

A swish and a chime, and the door across the room opens, admitting Amakata and another doctor I have never met. Right before the doors close, Nagisa whips inside after them. He is dressed in the same clothes he had been wearing when we’d parted ways, and he does not seem in the least bit groggy. Had his augment been delayed? He smiles at me from the door, and my stomach does a lazy backflip.

“How are you boys feeling?” Dr. Amakata asks, and somehow I get the idea that she is talking to me specifically.

“Like I was chemically paralyzed, and then almost drowned.” I roll onto my side to face her as best as I can.

“Right on schedule then,” she responds with a small smile. “I’m sorry about that, Rei. I don’t know what went wrong.”

The other doctor sits on the edge of my cot and shines a light into my eyes, one after the other. “Dose was too low,” he mumbles with a frown.

“You didn’t give me enough anesthesia?”

“Quiet,” he snaps, as if this is somehow my fault. “Breathe when I tell you to.” He checks my respiration and my pulse, asks me to grip his finger as hard as I can, like I am a newborn in a hospital. Makoto and Haruka watch silently, and Nagisa continues to hover by the door.

Finally, the man seems satisfied. “No lasting damage,” he says curtly, straightening up. “We’ll just have to wait to see if the augment took.”

“Wait.” I look from him to Dr. Amakata, fear rising in my like bile. “There’s a doubt? What if it didn’t take?”

Amakata’s fingers tighten on her tablet, pale pink nails glinting like a line of eyes. “Then we’ll
I sit up, yanking at my arm inside the monitoring sleeve. “What? No. Fuck that.”

Dr. Amakata’s gaze turns steely. “Don’t make me remind you, Recruit Ryugazaki, that although I am a medic onboard this Platform, I also outrank you. I would advise you to watch what you say.”

I subside back onto my cot. “I’m sorry,” I say, then quickly add, “Ma’am.”

She nods. “That said—it’s unlikely that we’ll have to perform the procedure again. The augment appeared to work fine. Your panic was what gave us cause for concern.”

“Oh.” Perhaps it had been all my fault after all. But what else would I have been expected to do, waking up in a tank full of water, utterly unable to move?

You should have behaved like the Elite you are. You should have kept your head. No wonder you got assigned to Recon—you can barely control yourself.

I grit my teeth as the two doctors move on to my teammates, checking their vitals.

You know what, voice? You’re getting more and more useless everyday. And when I get my emotional augment removed, you won’t even exist anymore.

“Nagisa,” Dr. Amakata says without turning around. “Who gave you permission to be in here?”

Nagisa, who has begun creeping closer to the cots, giggles and puts his hands behind his back, rocking on his heels. “No one,” he sing-songs, drawing the words out. “But I’m here to support my teammates. Look—Mako can barely sit up, and Rei’s grumpy.”

“I am not—.”

Dr. Amakata sighs and rolls her eyes. “Keep in mind that they need rest. Not everyone heals as fast as you do.”

Nagisa gives her a salute, which has admittedly improved a hell of a lot since last week. “Yes, ma’am.”

Amakata punches a few keys on her tablet. “Try to relax, gentleman, and throw this loudmouth out if he starts bothering you.”

Nagisa grins behind her shoulder. They are behaving like they’ve known each other for longer than a week, but that can’t be, can it? Nagisa is from the Lowland, and Dr. Amakata had to have grown up an Elite in order to have the post of medic onboard a Confederation Platform.

Once both doctors have left, Nagisa moves closer to the line of cots. “Hey, you guys look really shitty.”

Haruka snorts and Makoto says, “Thanks,” with a breathy laugh.

I frown. “And you look as good as you always do. Did you even have an augment done?”

Hurt flashes across Nagisa’s face for a fraction of a second, so quickly that I could very well have imagined it. “Yeah, I did.” He lifts a shoulder. “It just went really smoothly. I heard you had it rough, though.”

“I’m fine.”
Alright—I’m aware that there is something going on with Nagisa. I’m not an idiot. It isn’t just that he can seemingly heal injuries overnight and walk off things that have the rest of us flat on our backs, or that I have yet to see him eat when anyone else is watching. No—there is something else about him, some quality that makes him glow from the inside out. And is apparently degrading my emotional augment.

Scarcely a minute passes since Dr. Amakata has left the room when the door swishes open yet again.

“Holy shit, are you guys okay?” Gou is breathless, looking like she has just run from one end of the ship to the other. “I heard from one of the doctors that there was a complication with one of the Iwatobi Squad’s augments—.”

“I’m fine,” I say, for what feels like the twentieth time. I must have really been close to death, since everyone on the Platform seems to be talking about it.

“Good.” She flops down at the end of my cot. “It would suck if you died.”

“Thanks, Gou.”

She smiles, so I think she may have actually meant it. “Did you guys hear about the explosion in Sky City?”

Nagisa darts a look at me and Haruka opens his eyes. From his cot Makoto turns over groggily. “No. What happened?”

“They’re claiming DROIDs bombed an apartment building,” Gou snorts. “But of course they would say that. They always do.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

She shrugs. “Some HFA asshole, but—.”

Anger sparks inside me, accompanied by a brief shock of pain through my head. I press a palm to my eye. “Fuck.”

Nagisa steps closer to the cot. “Are you alright, Rei?”

“Should I go get the doctor?” Gou asks.

“That HFA asshole happens to be my father,” I snap in response, glaring at her through my fingers, but I can’t hold onto my anger. Try as I might, it slips away like letters written in sand. I can’t wait to have that damn thing out of my head.

Gou’s mouth falls open. “Oh. Oh, shit. Rei, I’m sorry—.”

“It’s okay.” Suddenly, I don’t want to hear her apologize, I just want to sleep. “I know not everyone agrees with his politics.”

“Wow, yeah. Wait—.” Gou’s eyes widen, and she looks from me, to Nagisa, and back again. “Wait, your dad’s really the chairman of the Humans First Alliance? Then why are you—.”

“Shut up.” The words are so sharp, voice so unexpectedly hard that for a moment I look around the room to see who could possibly have spoken. Then I see the look on Nagisa’s face. “Shut up, Gou.”
Before any of us can say anything, he turns and heads out of the Recovery Room, door closing smoothly behind him.

Chapter End Notes

OMG the drama.
“Well, the good news is that your augment appears to be working fine.”

I lift my head from where I have had it in a tub full of water set up on the exam table. *It’s just easier than using the operating tank,* Dr. Amakata had said as she filled it at the sink. Most likely, she had thought I would panic again which, to be fair, I probably would. My sleep over the last few days has been liberally spiced with nightmares that I can never gather the details of, though they all involve dark water and tiny spaces.

I push my sopping bangs out of my eyes, water running down my neck and beneath the collar of my uniform. I don’t want to know, but I ask anyway: “What’s the bad news?”

Dr. Amakata watches me struggle awkwardly with a towel for a few seconds—we’ve always had automatic dryers at home—before she says, “I’ve received word from one of my contacts at the Medical Institute back in Sky. Unfortunately, it doesn’t look like we’ll be able to get your emotional augment removed as quickly as I would have liked.”

“Oh.” I am not exactly dumbstruck at the news of a delay. Perhaps if I still officially retained my Elite status some of the red tape could have been disintegrated, but without political pull it is impossible to get anything done quickly in Sky City’s overworked system.

“I would have *liked* to have it out of you well before your first mission, so your emotional reactions and temperament will have leveled out somewhat—.”

My stomach clenches and I look up from under the edge of the towel. “How long will that take?”

Dr. Amakata purses her lips. “It depends. You may acclimate fairly quickly, or it may take up to a few months before you feel totally...yourself.” The brief, dark look she gives me echoes my own thoughts. *Yourself. Whoever that happens to be.* She sighs and rubs at the bridge of her nose with a thumb and forefinger. Her eyes are glassy with fatigue and her hair, usually styled into curling waves, is pulled back from her face into a stringy braid. She looks exhausted and stressed, but I doubt that has to do with my augment—no doubt she has more important concerns than the wellbeing of my feelings. “The thing is...I’ve reached a bit of an impasse with my colleague at the Institute. I don’t have enough information—how long you’ve had the augment, or even what it does precisely. She won’t even agree to examine you until we have more information. And all my requests to see more extensive medical records of yours have been denied.”

I squeeze a little more water out of my hair. “Doesn’t the Confederation have my records?”

“Not all of them. Rei, I want you to try to get your parents to release your records to me.”

I blink at her. “Are you serious?”

“I realize that it’s a very bad time, what with the incident at your home—.”

That’s what everyone has been calling it. Not *attack,* not *attempted murder.* *Incident.* And from the talk I’ve overheard in the mess hall and group training, it’s quite clear to what side of the
argument my fellow recruit’s opinions skew.

*They had it coming.*

I have always known that my father’s politics are not popular with the entire population of Sky City—and it is true that most of the support the Humans First Alliance enjoys is from the Elite class—but I had no idea he was personally hated.

It stands to reason, of course, now that I bother to think on it. Daisuke Ryugazaki has spearheaded repeated attempts to challenge laws that grant Androids the same rights as full humans, and in the Lowlands cyborgs are not just distant, quiet servants who vacuum your floors while you’re out or cook your meals in five-star restaurants. They are coworkers and neighbors and—in many cases, I’m sure—friends. Of course, of course people would hate him.

Luckily, apart from the night of the attack, when I had been shaken enough to yell out that the smoking ruin on the screen was *my house*, it does not appear to be common knowledge that I am my father’s son. Even if Ryugazaki is not a common name, we are hardly the only ones in the city, and I don’t look much like him.

I tell Dr. Amakata, “You don’t know my parents. They would never even admit to giving me the augment, let alone let a perfect stranger investigate it.”

“It hasn’t occurred to you to go them?” Dr. Amakata prods, frowning now. “Ask them face-to-face?”

Trying to imagine that conversation is laughable—my mother’s feigned protests of innocence, my father’s face turning red as he yells about gratitude and respect for the wisdom of one’s elders. “You don’t know them,” I repeat.

Amakata folds her arms. “I’m trying to help you the best I can, Rei. But without those records, I’m afraid my hands are tied.”

I put the towel back onto the counter, filtering the anger from my voice. “I’ll try.”

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I find Nagisa and Gou in the Rec Room in front of a vid screen, playing an ancient video game that seems to involve wearing out your thumbs on a controller to make your avatar hit your opponent’s repeatedly in the face. There is also quite a lot of yelling, jumping, and exploding of pumpkin-sized bombs pulled seemingly from the avatar’s back pocket.

“Get the bastard!” Gou shrieks, loud enough that a couple of Spacers playing cards look over. Nagisa is focused on the screen with singular intensity, and a moment later his character knocks the other out of the ring and into a moat full of sharks.

He lets out a satisfied snicker, grinning at the guy sitting to Gou’s right. “Pretty good,” he purrs. “But not good enough.”

The Combat grunt slumps forward moodyly in his seat, and I am less-than-pleased to recognize Rin Matsuoka—Gou’s charming brother. Even worse, Nagisa turns to high-five another boy in red and black, this one with a crooked nose and expansive forehead. Last time I had seen him he had been substantially less put together, but he had been part of an event that is now branded onto my memory for eternity. The boy from the locker room, the one who had fucked Nagisa’s mouth and called him a whore.
Nagisa is smiling at him, laughing at something he is saying, holding the controller out of his reach. It is a fleeting touch, but I see the recruit brush a hand over Nagisa’s thigh, and something flares up in my chest, cold and ugly.

Part of me wants to run, but another part—one that is getting stronger everyday—walks me the rest of the way across the room and pulls a chair up.

“Can I play?”

Nagisa’s eyes widen, but if I expect him to slap away the recruit’s hand or blush coquettishly, I’m disappointed. “Rei! I was hoping you’d show up.”

I have to clear my throat before I can get the word out. “Hey.” I actually have no desire to play video games, but I had to say something.

The Combat recruit narrows his eyes at me as Nagisa introduces him as Peterson. It is more appraising than hostile, but I still dislike him immensely.

Gou looks over, and without even bothering to say hello gushes, “Rin has a friend who can get us a ride to Ithaca!”

Rin leans forward, straddling his chair with an easy shark-grin. “What d’you say? You up for it, Ryugazaki?”

“I—.” That’s right—we are remarkably close to Ithaca on Platform 6 and, technically, we are permitted to leave the base during the evenings, as per Confederation law. It’s a bit of a joke onboard, since the only place to go would be outside the airlock. “How do you have a ride?”

There isn’t exactly a bus running.

“One of the guy’s on my squad’s got an uncle who works on one of the support crews. Says they’re going over to Ithaca for supplies tomorrow night.”

“I don’t know…” I glance at Nagisa’s and Gou’s expectant faces. “Will we all fit?”

Rin’s grin is knowing, like he can see right through my hesitation and he finds it hilarious. “It’s a big shuttle.”


Rin’s eyebrows rise almost to his hairline, but he pushes himself up and out of the chair. “Okay, cool. I’ll let him know.” He tosses a casual wave over his shoulder. “See you girls later.”

Gou raises her middle finger without even looking away from the vid screen. “You’re a sexist!” she chirps.

Our shuttle ride is scheduled for the following evening, so on top of our first day of training with our aquatic augments, I have a trip to a lawless, gang-run space station to look forward to, where we’ll all more than likely be robbed and beaten. Life has been such a joy recently.

All I really know about Ithaca is what I’ve seen in fiction—hundreds of action and spy vids take place there, although I doubt many of them are filmed on location. Someone would steal the cameras before the film crew could even set up. From what I have heard, you can get anything there—legal or illegal—and it’s one of the few places left in the entire galaxy where a human can
interact with a kassadian without someone getting blown up.

But I can worry about that tomorrow, if I survive our training session. It’s not that I’m afraid of water, just uninterested. Swimming just seems to be an inferior form of running—you need a pool, for one thing, and the bodily movements involved in keeping yourself afloat and propelling forward have always struck me as ridiculous.

“Swimming is good for you,” Makoto points out, when I make mention of this. “It forces you to regulate your breathing, and it works all the muscles without putting any stress on specific spots. Runners injure themselves all the time—swimmers don’t.”

“We’re built for running,” I protest. “We’re bipedal for a reason. And humans breathe air, not water.”

Makoto shrugs. “Now we breathe both.”

I scowl, but change into the skintight blue wetsuit all same.

The pool is small—not even fifty meters in length—but it’s deep. Deep enough to dive in, deep enough that we need specialized suits that cover the majority of our bodies, regulating temperature and compensating for pressure. According to Captain Sasabe, they used to carry apparatuses for breathing as well, before the aquatic augment was invented, but they were bulky and cumbersome, and had to be worn on the outside of the suit. The polyskin was designed to mimic and mirror back the exterior temperature of the water, to camouflage itself from sensors and infrared cameras. With the breather giving off an unavoidable bit of heat pollution, no matter how slight, the Recon grunts had been easy targets. Sitting ducks. Kassadians’ body temperatures are significantly lower than humans’, making it easy for the weapons systems to tell friend form foe.

Haruka doesn’t bother to wait for the captain. He takes one look at the pool, face lighting up in a way I have never seen before. He takes a running dive, cutting cleanly into the water with barely a splash. He is halfway across the pool before he resurfaces, falling into an easy crawl.

Nagisa whistles. “Wow, he looks just like a dolphin!”

I laugh. He does move beautifully—naturally, like he’s more at home in the water than on land. For a moment, I think there might be some merit to this swimming thing after all.

“Nanase!” Coach Sasabe has arrived, in a wetsuit of his own, and is bellowing practically in my ear. “Get your ass out here! Enough showing off!”

Haruka picks speed, breaking the surface and shaking the wet hair out of his eyes. He pulls himself out of the pool with an easy grace that makes me instantly jealous, just as the sleek, smooth muscles of his back make my mouth go dry. Is this going to continue until I can’t look at any of my squad mates without wanting to touch them in a way that goes well beyond camaraderie?

The Captain is still glowering, but with significantly less force than usual. No doubt he is relieved to find there is something that Haruka excels at apart from appearing blank and uninterested. “How’s the augment treatin’ you?”

Haruka shrugs. “It works fine.”

Sasabe crosses his arms. “You still take breaths when you swim.”

Another shrug. “Habit.”
“Well, you’re going to cut that out. All of you.” He turns to include the rest of us in his lecture. “You hear that? No longer any reason to surface. You got everything you need right here.” He pounds his chest. “Today we’re just swimming. If you all can handle that—“ He fixes me with a look that I personally feel is totally unmerited, “We start with combat basics tomorrow. Now get in the pool.”

Haruka swims first, easily adapting to the Captain’s orders and staying submerged throughout his lap. When he surfaces, he is breathing heavily but he is not panting for breath. The look on his face is puzzled and a little bit pleased. Makoto is next, and he is much more cumbersome in the water and not nearly as quick. Later, he admits that he has always preferred to swim backstroke, which is no longer an option.

Nagisa is quick but lacking in any sort of form—he doesn’t stick to one single stroke, varying his kicks and pulls more or less at random. Personally I don’t see what is wrong with this, since we’re not going to be graded on style, but Captain Sasabe still shouts about it for awhile.

I go last. It is every bit as bad as I expect it to be.

Not the actual swimming part—that I can do passably, though I’m nowhere near as graceful as Haruka. But as soon as the water closes over my head I remember a hellish orange glow surrounding me, water scalding hot against my skin, arms and legs held rigid and motionless. Alarms blare in my ears and the medics shout to each other, and try as I might to force myself to stay under, a few seconds later I am shooting for the surface, choking on the stale, chlorinated water as I gasp down air.

“What the fuck, Ryugazaki? Are you malfunctioning out there?”

“No sir,” I cough out around another lungful of air.

“What, you think the Kassadians are gonna wait for you to have a breather? Maybe you can all have a tea party on the bottom of the sea—.”

I have no doubt he has more to say, but I adjust my buoyancy with the readout on my left cuff and I am dragged beneath the surface yet again. When we are on missions with a destination locked into position, the suit will correct for depth automatically, but for now it has to be done manually. I open my mouth, but I can’t make myself override my body’s natural reflex not to choke to death. Panic steals all of my resolve and I thrash toward the surface, forgetting all about my weight belt and fighting against the pull of the pressure.

I get assigned double-watch for three days next week—which means standing at attention in front of the armory for four hours at a time instead of two—and the order to not even bother coming to training until I can stay underwater for longer than 30 seconds.

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The next day I reluctantly join the rest of the Iwatobi Squad in the docking bay, to find the Samezuka Squad already resembled. The largest of them has hair even redder than Rin's—magma red, emergency red—and in the semi-darkness of the bay I’m tempted to ask him to pull up the hood of his sweatshirt before a shuttle pilot mistakes him for a landing light. He and Rin bump fists, and when he sees Gou, he stands up a little straighter and crosses his arms to make his biceps flex.

Gou grins. “Hi, Seijuro.” I notice that she and Nagisa are carefully avoiding each other’s eyes, and when they have to interact, it is stiff, forced politeness. Whatever argument they’d had in the
recovery room hasn’t been resolved, then.

The rest of the Samezuka Squad is here too—two girls I don’t know and the silver-haired boy I’ve seen hanging around Rin. He has quick, nervous eyes that skitter on to Rin and hold there like laser sights.

“Matsuoka! What took you so long?”

“Sorry, Nitori,” Rin drawls. “Couldn’t decide what to wear.” He pinches at the lapels of his standard combat jacket and smirks.

Nitori’s uncle is a thin-shouldered man in a faded grey docker jumpsuit, oil-stains splashed runny-black up to his elbows. He greets us with a flap of his hand, and I notice that two of his fingers have been replaced with cybernetics—chrome silver with an extra joint. They are unreasonably creepy

He raises an eyebrow when he sees the ten of us assembled. “Gonna be a tight fit,” is all he says.

*Tight fit* is a bit of an understatement. The shuttle’s hold is packed with empty cases on their way to Ithaca for a re-supply. We perch between them as best we can, Gou and Makoto actually stepping into an empty wooden crate, Nagisa clambering up onto a huge, low refrigeration unit. I don’t get a chance to grab on to anything before the shuttle jars out of its docking clamps, and I end up on the floor with one of Combat girls practically in my lap. Her braids have beads threaded on at the ends, and one of them smacks me in the nose.

“Hi there.” She clutches at my arm as the shuttle limps its way out to the exterior doors. “Sorry. I just really hate these old clunkers.”

“It’s okay.” She smells good—kind of like almonds—and her skin augment is one of the more subtle I’ve seen on the Platform; a very tasteful pastel blue.

The other Combat girl snorts and folds her arms. “You call *this* a clunker. Where I grew up—.”

“Yeah, Yeah, Raik. We know,” the blue-skinned girl says wearily, climbing out of my lap. “No one has suffered like you’ve suffered.”

Raik scowls. She is wiry and pale, unusually small for Combat, although I suppose Rin isn’t exactly broad-of-shoulder himself. Her head is totally shaved but for a single stripe of dark hair down the middle. Her incisors are sharpened—like a vampire’s—and her pupils are silver and slitted. When she turns away, I can see a tattoo on the back of her neck, but too much of it is hidden by her uniform for me to make out what it is.

“You got a problem?”

I’ve been staring again. I jerk my gaze away and focus it on the grimy rubber floor. “No.” I rub my nose, and will this evening to be over with quickly.

Chapter End Notes
Oh, Rei. If only you knew. Unless I am very much mistaken, next chapter is where this story will finally begin to earn its explicit rating, if you know what I mean.
Approximately eighty five years ago, when space travel was still a fairly new convention, a Confederation warship had collided with a luxury cruise liner bound for Aurora, a resort planet on the outer ring of the system. Everyone aboard had been killed, down to the last deckhand, and because the authorities had reason to believe the warship’s ion core may have been compromised, no search and rescue mission was attempted. No one had wanted to risk the radiation poisoning just to recover a few charred bodies.

When an expedition finally was mounted, around a decade later, it was to find that the core had not exploded, but rather dismantled and looted for parts. Both ships had been picked over by scavengers, everything even remotely valuable removed. What’s more, the less-damaged sections of the ships had been inhabited. Hull breaches were patched, stairs and walkways cobbled together, a system of trade set up. Over the next seventy years, hundreds more spacecraft had been added, people coming to Ithaca from all over the galaxy to trade or party, or escape from their lives. It is now an enormous station of interlocking parts, miles and miles across, moving in a slow orbit around the outer planets. From a distance it resembles a shining metal city floating in a dense void.

We dock in a bay on the lower west side, in a district known for its nightlife, though of course, in space it’s always night. According to Raik, most of the clubs never close. When we clear the airlock, the first thing that hits me is the smell. It is ozone and shuttle exhaust and a hundred different types of food cooking. Not necessarily a bad smell, but after a month of breathing nothing but sweat, feet, and recycled oxygen it is overwhelming.

The dockworker who waves us in is skinny and fidgety, thinning hair almost as pale as his skin. He doesn’t ask Nitori’s uncle for a work order or a registration number, just accepts a thin, beaten silver coin and turns a yellowing smile on the rest of us.

“Confedies, huh? You little bastards are thick on the ground tonight.” He says it to me, since I happen to be the one standing closest to him. “You all lookin’ for a party?”

I don’t know how to respond—if I’m supposed to put my head down and keep walking, or if that would make things worse. Without any connection to any one planet or government, Ithaca is almost entirely gang-run. Not the best place to go around offending strangers.

“We…we might be,” I say, crossing my arms. “What…what have you got?”
The man’s leer widens as he turns his gaze on Gou and the two Combat girls. “Hit up the Silver Room in 6th Ward. Tell them Skinny Griggs sent’ya. They’ll do you right. “

Gou looks like she’s about to faint from suppressed laughter. “We’ll keep it in mind.”

Raik, as it turns out, is from Ithaca. As she leads us through the hive of jagged corridors and lopsided stairways, I lean over and ask her, “Do you know what the Silver Room is?”

She kicks at a sliding door to make it open faster. “Sure. Everybody does.”

“Yes…good?” I am terrible at this making conversation thing.

She gives me a coolly amused glance. “If you’re into blowjobs from underage whores.”

“Oh.”

Jinny—the blue-skinned girl—nudges me in the arm. “If you are, then you’re definitely in the right place. Everything is legal here.”

“Uh, that’s okay,” I say. “I’m not.”

Raik leads us to what once must have been the passenger cabins on the cruise liner. Scraps of damask wallpaper still border the walls, scorched and curling. The walls buckle inwards on both sides of the passage, propped up in places by wood planking and rusting bits of scrap metal.

We crowd around a door at the end of the hallway, dented wood with a steel reinforced lock. Raik knocks and calls out in a language I recognize as Old Greek. In the Academy I only studied Mandarin, High Frankish, and Kassadian. I don’t understand what she says.

The door is opened by a woman. Her look of suspicion quickly dissolves into delight when she sees Raik, and she takes her by both hands, almost lifting her off her feet as she pulls her inside.

“Well if isn’t everyone’s favorite little deserter. Let me look at you, sweet baby.” She spins Raik in a tight circle under her arm. She is dressed in a low-slung silvery dress that hugs her body, dark oily hair piled atop her head and held by a pair of thin, pearlescent sticks.

Nitori sticks his head into the cabin. “Is this the club?”

The woman raises an eyebrow. “Well, sure it is, honey bear. That there—.” She points to what appears to be a sitting room, with a sadly sagging couch and worn armchair. “—Is the dance floor. And that—.” She indicates a metal camping table piled with unfolded clothes, “Is the bar.”

Raik snorts. “Go easy on the kid, Ola. He’s from the Colonies.”

Ola strokes a shimmery black nail down Nitori’s cheek. “Don’t worry, hun. I was only funning. You all planning on hitting the clubs?”

Raik grins. “That’s the plan.”

“Hmmm…” Ola taps her chin. “I can understand why you came to me, then. This is definitely a disaster right here.” She waves her hand in my direction.

I frown. “Hey.”
“Hay is for horses, babycakes.” Ola claps her hands together. “Okay, now. There’s like a thousand of you, and you’re not all going to fit. So either take turns, or fuck off, mmkay?”

Seijuro and Nitori step back out of the cabin, along with Jinny, who declares she is perfect the way she is. I still have no idea what’s going on, even as we are led deeper into the cabin. The room is lit by a single electric bulb and a couple of glow spheres—round plastic baubles that burn with a white, chemical light.

The only other room in the cabin is a closet, although that descriptor in no way does it justice. It is huge, and stuffed so full of clothes that the walls are barely visible. A hat stand in one corner sprouts multicolored scarves in profusion, and pairs of shoes are piled in lumpy hillocks as tall as my knees.

Gou freezes in the doorway. “Holy shit.”

Nagisa pushes in beside her. “Awesome.” He picks up a gauzy pink skirt that would not have looked out of place on a ballerina at the Sky City Opera House. He looks at Ola. “Can we wear them?”

She grins. “Knock yourself out, baby.”

Gou hesitates. “How much is this all gonna cost?”

It’s hot in the apartment, from the glow spheres and the tight quarters, and Ola takes out a gold and black fan, hiding her face behind it for a moment like a femme fatale, fanning dark curls out of her eyes. “For you darling, nothing at all. I owe Raik for a little somethin’ somethin’.” She smirks. “You’ll have to give them back at the end of the night, of course.”

“Yeah, so don’t fuck them up,” Raik adds, before pulling her shirt over her head and tossing it onto a stool.

I make a strange sound in my throat, a bit like a bird with a seed stuck in its gizzard. Not my most Elite of moments, but in all fairness I had been taken by surprise.

“What’s the matter, Ryugazaki?” Raik smirks, rummaging through a snarl of shimmery coats. “Never seen a pair of tits before?”

“Tits?” Rin leans in through the wardrobe door. “I don’t see any tits.” He puts a hand over his forehead, like he is shielding his eyes from the sun as he looks back and forth.

“Fuck you, Matsuoka,” Raik snaps back, although it is fairly good-natured.

I look determinedly toward the door, but not before I have seen that her nipples are a light, delicate pink, and even if Rin is right and her breasts are small, well—they look alright to me.

“I guess I’ll just—.”

I start moving backwards toward the door, but a finger jabs into the small of my back, cutting off my retreat. “And where do you think you’re going, gorgeous?”

“C’mon Rei.” Gou is holding a pair of sparkly high heels in one hand, a ruffled white skirt in the other. “Let us dress you up!”

For a moment it feels like I’m back in the operating tank, unable to move or breathe. Nowhere to run. “I…don’t think those are my size.”
“You’d be surprised what you can squeeze yourself into if you really try,” Ola says, with a toothy grin that doesn’t make me feel any better.

Makoto looks into the closet, cheeks flaring red when he sees Raik, before sticking his gaze firmly on to me. “It might be a good idea to at least take a jacket or something, Rei. The less we look like Confederation, the better.”

Ola snaps her finger. “Give the boy a cookie. He’s right, buttercup. You won’t make many bosom pals on Ithaca looking like a Fed.”

“But Ithaca isn’t under Confederation jurisdiction,” I protest, even as I let Ola take my Recon jacket, smoothing warm hands down my bare arms.

“Yes, but no one likes anything about the man, darling.” She pulls a black leather vest out and holds it up against my chest, before throwing it aside. “Unless it’s sticking it in the man.”

“Don’t you mean, sticking it to the man?”

“If I meant that I would have said it.”

In the end, I am allowed to keep my shirt (which is a loose black muscle tank, and declared acceptable by Gou and Ola) but I am forced into a pair of tight grey jeans that squeeze things that were truly not meant to be squeezed. Ola gives me a pair of combat boots that are so big I have to loop the laces around my calves in order to keep them on.

Nagisa and Gou seem to have forgotten their antagonism at the prospect of a closet the size of a small colony, and have been scampering back and forth and giggling, daring each other to try on increasingly ridiculous outfits.

Nagisa comes out in a pair of very short shorts and a high-collared shirt covered in sequins, and Gou follows in a bright pink mini-dress. They admire each other and then immediately run off to swap clothes. The dress fits Nagisa shockingly well, and if I had not known better, I could have mistaken him from behind as a thin-hipped girl.

Makoto stands at the closet door, watching them and laughing. I notice no one has tried to force him into clubbing clothes.

“You should do something with that face besides scowl.” Ola tips my chin up with a finger. Each of her black nails are set with a tiny crystal. Up close, I see that she has an eye-augment similar to Nagisa’s—deep, hot gold. “You’re a very stunning young man.”

“Um…thank you.” I scratch awkwardly at the back of my neck.

“Magnificent eyes. No idea what a kid like you is doing in the military. You could be making millions doing ads or escort. You, and the brunette.” She nods toward Haru, who has changed his clothes as well—a tight black shirt with one arm fully covered and one left bare, white pants, and a silver belt. With his dark hair and pale skin, he is all monochromatic blocks of color.

“How does, um, anyone really end up anywhere?” I muse, a little shaken by the fact that I believe she has just told me I would make an excellent prostitute.

But it’s a fair question. A month ago, if you had told me I would be spending an evening on a gang-run space station, with a group of Lowlanders, getting dressed up by a woman who smelled
strongly of cloves and tobacco, I would have accused you of partaking in mood-altering substances. Now, the thought of spending a night the way I did back in Sky City—reading, studying, or attending one of my parents’ many social functions that require a son to parade around—sounds positively dull.

“Very wise question.” Ola’s purring, liquid voice makes it impossible to tell whether or not she is mocking me. She lights a cigarette, blows a stream of fragrant smoke past me, and goes to survey Raik’s wardrobe choices.

I try to flatly draw the line at makeup, but then Nagisa stands in front of me with a black kohl pencil (for eyes, I think) and pushes his lip out into an exaggerated pout. “Please, Rei? Haruka won’t let me do him, and you have such nice eyes.”

My hand darts self-consciously toward my face. “Really?”

“Yes.” He grins. “They’re beautiful.” He’s watching me expectantly.

I groan, but slump down onto the stool in front of the mirror. “Fine. Just…nothing too ostentatious.”

“Never,” Nagisa swears, though I don’t like the cackle that goes with it.

I let him tip my chin up, closing my right eye when he tells me to. That’s two people who have told me I have beautiful eyes in one night, and one of them a total stranger. Evidently, purple is more appealing than blue, and I suppose the soft, persistent glow doesn’t hurt.

Like he is reading my mind, Nagisa asks, “You’re not used to getting compliments, are you?”

I shrug. “Elites hardly go around gushing about one another’s charms. Flattery is usually reserved for garnering favor or manipulation.”

Social interaction in my class is a slow, intricate dance, one I have never excelled at. I have had to rely on my stoicism, my ability to wear any emotion necessary to remove myself from the situation as quickly as possible.

Nagisa licks the tip of his finger and smudges the makeup at the corner of my eye. “It isn’t flattery if it’s sincere.” He sits back, surveying his work. “I’m not trying to suck up to you or anything by telling you you’re gorgeous.” His grin is quick and flickering, before he tilts my face the other way.

“Wha…” The light in here is terrible, but I have no doubt he can feel my blush beneath his fingertips.

Of course, my parents had performed the usual genetic selection before I was born—gender, height, body type, facial structure—but that was the rule among Elites, not the exception. Beauty is a necessary weapon in any Elite’s arsenal. In the midst of my own class, I am nothing special.

But here, am I? I don’t know. My squad mates are all very attractive in their own way (a fact that my body has been more than happy to keep me informed of) and as Lowlanders, it is doubtful they have had any sort of prenatal genetic modifications at all.

Nagisa’s mouth settles into a thin line of concentration as he smoothes the pencil over my eyelids. He has settled on the shorts he was wearing earlier (the ones that are virtually nonexistent) and a blood red shirt with ripped sleeves, small enough that it leaves an inch of bare skin between the
hem and the waistband of his shorts. His eyelids are painted in sparkly blue and his lips are pink and moist. He is so close that it would barely take a whisper of movement to kiss him.

I shift uncomfortably, finding yet another drawback to stupidly tight pants.

“All done!” Nagisa steps back, biting at the end of the pencil as he surveys me like an artist at his canvass. “Tell me what you think.”

My chest tight, I turn to the mirror, not really sure what I am expecting.

My mouth drops open. “How—.” With nothing but a few well-placed lines of pigment, Nagisa has actually changed the shape of my face. I look older, rougher, the lines of my cheeks sharply defined. My eyes have a darker cast to them, makeup smudged at the corners just enough to make it look accidental. I look like I have just been in a fight, which I most certainly won. When I smile, it enhances the effect, making me almost…villainous.

I like it.

Ola gets a look at me, and she whistles. “Keep a hand on this one at all times, honey,” she advises Nagisa. “Or someone’s gonna steal him away.”

My rush of embarrassment is quickly muted by the augment, but lurking beneath all of that I feel the briefest spark of pleasure.

After trying on what had to have been every single piece of clothing in her size, Gou had chosen a long black dress with high slits, a red and gold embroidered dragon across the back, wings and tail curling around the waist of the dress. With her hair twisted up atop her head with chopsticks, she looks unusually elegant. If it had not been for those slits, she would have fit in at one of my mother’s parties. That thought makes me grin—Gou sipping champagne and making appropriate small talk with HFA contributors. Briefly, I consider mentioning it to her, just to make her laugh, to see the bloom of wicked potential light up her eyes.

Strange, to want to speak just to amuse someone else, to see them smile. Much like telling someone they are beautiful, just to be kind. Just to make sure they know.

Raik is wearing a tight teal dress that looks almost like it is made of plastic, along with a choker of spikes sharp enough to break skin. What with her wardrobe choice and Nagisa’s shorts and knee-high boots, we look totally ridiculous. I am fully expecting jeers as we make our way back through the creaking corridors of Ithaca’s west region. I quickly realize, however, that we would have stood out far worse in our Confederation uniforms. Everyone in the Agora (the Old Greek word for market, I believe, which is what the central breezeway of this district is called) is dressed just as absurdly as we are, if not more so.

A woman in spiked heels and a bustier is haggling with a shopkeeper over the price of a laser rifle, all the time keeping her hand on her own gun, which is slung low on her hips in a lacy red holster. A few stalls down, a man with a massive straw hat with a stuffed crow on the brim is selling a salty-smelling rice and shellfish stew. When we walk past, I see that one of his hands is a rusted hook.

A group of dockworkers drinking tiny glasses of cloudy liquor are gathered around an ancient, flickering screen. They watch us go by, heads moving like one creature, until they can no longer contain themselves and the catcalls start. One of them comments on Gou’s backside, while
another gives Nagisa advice on what he can do with his “pretty pink lips”. A third grabs his crotch and, to my intense distaste, actually begins unzipping his pants.

Raik’s eyes narrow, and she walks right up to the man, a leonine grace to her gait that had not been there a moment ago. “You pull that out…” she purrs, tracing a finger down his chest. “And I’ll cut it off.”

The men guffaw and the dockworker flushes blotchy. Raik smirks in satisfaction, rejoining us in the center of the street. I must have been staring at her, because she rolls her eyes and pats me on the cheek.

“Don’t worry, Sky-boy. I wouldn’t really do it.” I don’t believe her for an instant.

Still, she does seem to be in a considerably better mood now that we are on Ithaca—nowhere near as surly as she had been on the shuttle ride over. She even looks me up and down and says, “Ola sure did a number on you.”

“Oh, thanks.” Is it even a compliment? “Have you known her long? Ola?”

Raik leads us down a side street, this one much less well-lit than the main thoroughfare. High on one of the metals walls, a neon sign flashes out in a character-based language I don’t recognize, throwing out a shower of purple sparks every few seconds. “Since I’ve been old enough to know anyone. She’s been here since the beginning.”

We hop around the sparks, Nagisa letting out a little shriek as one of them hits his bare leg. “Since the beginning?”

“Uh, thanks.” Is it even a compliment? “Have you known her long? Ola?”


“But that was 80—.”

“Years ago, yeah. Ola’s a Droid. I thought you knew that.”

“I—.” It takes every bit of my Elite sense to keep the shock out of my voice. “No, I didn’t know.”

“She’s an older model, so she can’t leave the cabin. She needs to constantly recharge.” The seven of us move into single file to ascend a rickety metal staircase up to a higher platform. “And she’s starting to degrade. Smokes those nasty clove cigarettes to cover the burning plastic smell.”

“I see.”

I would never have guessed that Ola was artificial, not even at gunpoint. I had interacted with Droids before, of course. The servants that my mother hired to staff her dinner parties, and the three females that came to clean our apartment every Friday morning, after my father had left the house for work. They all look like humans, move like humans, but none of them had anything close to Ola’s vibrancy or personality. They came, they worked, and they left, never speaking a word past what was required of them.

But of course, what would they have to say in the home of the chairman of the Human’s First Alliance? My father hated my mother using Droid help, but she insisted that they were much more thorough workers than full humans. Besides, minimum wage laws did not yet apply to them and, if my father got his way, they never would.

I think back to the last party of my mother’s I had attended, a few weeks before my assignment to Recon. It was meant to be a dinner in honor of my graduation from Indigo Academy, but it had
quickly evolved, as most things did, into a meet-and-greet for my father. Or, as Gou might call it, an HFA circle-jerk.

My mother had hired three Brisbane models, which were especially designed for precision labor, like pouring wine and serving hors d’oeuvres. I remember being unnerved by their eyes. Despite the fact that their bodies were substantially different, their eyes were identical—deep ocean blue, quietly detached, as if they were only partially awake.

Ola’s eyes had been lively and golden, just like—

I stop in the middle of the corridor, so abruptly that Rin Matsuoka knocks into my shoulder.

“Fuck, bro. What’s the problem?”

I say nothing. My shoulder throbs from his bony arm, but I barely feel it. Those eyes. I have seen those eyes, spent five minutes staring into them on a chilly gym floor.

He heals so quickly. His medical exams are conducted separately from the rest of us.

I glance to the back of the pack, where Nagisa is chattering animatedly to Gou and Makoto, cheeks flushed with excitement, his bright, mad laugh ricocheting back off the metal walls. No, there’s no possible way. No synthetic human could be so alive, show such depth of emotion. Science has not reached Nagisa’s level yet. I am being a paranoid idiot.

He doesn’t eat, whispers that voice in my head.

Shut up, I snap back. There’s an explanation, there has to be. Nagisa is not a Droid. No way in hell.

Chapter End Notes

Come here, Rei, and I’ll give you a hug. You’re gonna need it.

This fic now has a tumblr tag! Cyberpunk free!
This one took a little longer, it's true. *sobs in a corner*

Thank you guys for the kudos and comments and encouragement, and thanks to everyone who prompted me on tumblr. I wrote a couple drabbles for this AU, including some Nagisa POV and some backstory. They're all on my tumblr, autoeuphoric, if you are interested.

The noise level rises significantly, the lights dimming to a simulated twilight as we reach the red lantern district of Ithaca—nicknamed The House of Cards.

“This used to be the warship’s upper deck,” Raik explains, without anyone having to ask. “Get it?”

I frown. “A deck full of clubs?”

She laughs. “You’re smarter than you look, Sky-boy.”

We pass a dozen different establishments, some of them occupying what once must have been observation pods and batteries, others built up entirely out of scrap and prefabricated materials. One particularly dilapidated den is blocked off by a sheer, sparkling curtain, The Silver Room flashing over the entrance in looping calligraphy. Two skinny girls in heels and lingerie stand outside the door, looking bored. One of them has a dark bruise under one eye, and they both look younger than Nagisa. I find myself hoping that we don’t run into Skinny Griggs.

Our destination is at the very end of the street, vibrating with music, a pair of double doors opened to spill blue and white light out onto the grimy metal floor. Block letters spell out the club’s name: Caligula.

“Subtle,” I comment.

“Yeah, this is a real subtle place,” Rin says, with his very best shark grin. He smacks me on the shoulder, in almost precisely the same place he had knocked into a minute ago. “Totally classy.”

Gou shoots him a suspicious look. “You’ve been here before?"

“Yeah,” he responds coolly, pushing bangs lank with sweat off his forehead.

“When? How many times?"”

“I don’t know, Mom. A few.” He lets his hair drop back down. “Next time I’ll be sure to get your fucking permission.”

He picks up speed to catch up to Makoto and Haruka. Gou scowls at his back, anger crowding out the hurt. “Dick.”

Raik knows Caligula’s bouncer (who doesn’t she know?) so the seven of us get in without paying
cover. My initial nervousness had worn off somewhat during our detour to Ola’s cabin, but as we walk into the club it rushes back, compounded. Trying on clothes and wearing makeup is one thing—going to a place like this is definitely another. I am so far out of my depth that I am surprised I am still breathing. I still haven’t been able to make my aquatic augment function properly, after all.

The music enveloped us, a low persistent pulse, words whispered in a language I recognize as Kassadian drawing us into the hot, slickly humid world of Caligula, which, by the way, is an absolutely ridiculous name for a nightclub. The space is much bigger than it had looked from the House of Cards—three floors, the second made of tiered metal walkways, the third built on hover-struts, its dance floor suspended in midair.

The place is thronged—clubgoers packed three deep at the bar, writhing together in a tight sweaty mob beneath the undulating lights. A stage stretches the length of the far wall, studded here and there with thin metal poles. It is currently empty, but the smaller stages scattered throughout the dance floor are not. Several cages hang from the ceiling, and although the angle is bad from down here on the floor, I can tell from the shadows that there are people inside them.

Nagisa is standing on his tip-toes. “This place is—.”

Loud? Ripe? A deathtrap?

He breaks into a wide grin. “Awesome!”

Ah.

But Nagisa is right—he fits into a place like this, just like he fits into the ridiculous shorts and high leather boots like he has been wearing them for years. Caligula has a frantic, desperate energy that someone like Nagisa, someone like Gou, can feed off of. Me—I was born without that particular trait.

Suddenly, all I can think about is how fervently I don't belong here, what a joke I am in these clothes. The whole last month of my life has consisted of fortune forcing me into places I could never, ever hope to fit in.

Then a warm hand wraps around my forearm, pulling me deeper into the club. “Come on, Rei! Let’s not get separated.”

“I don’t want—.”

But Nagisa doesn’t give me a chance to protest, tugging me forward. I either have to follow or be gulped down by the crowd.

We hurry to catch up with the rest as Raik leads us up to the second floor platform. Nagisa is small enough to duck and weave through the mass, but I get several elbows in the ribs and a spiked heel to the toe of my boot which, fortunately, seems to be steel-tipped.

The stairs tremble beneath our feet, the pulse of the music drowning out whatever it is Raik calls back to us over her shoulder. At the top of the steps she nearly walks straight into a man who has broken away from a group by the bar. He is dressed in a sleek, ash grey suit. I recognize the design—a Cremila, from an Earth label. My father has several. He complains about the exorbitant price tag every chance he gets, but that never stops him from buying one from the new line every fall.

Wardrobe choice is where the similarities between this man and my father end. He is tall and lean,
body more aerodynamically curved than a human male’s. In the darkened club his skin looks almost black, but whenever the lights flash white, I can see it is a deep, royal purple. The hand that is wrapped around a highball glass is delicately webbed, the skin between his fingers thin enough that the lights from the bar glow through when he raises a hand in greeting. An open-necked silk shirt does not entirely conceal two rows of small, fleshy flaps just beneath his collarbone. He has gills. A kassadian—an amphibious species from the planet Lorelie, and, according to the Confederation, the most dire threat to the human race in the whole of the galaxy.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite little confeddi.” He blows Raik a kiss through thick, bowed lips. “Taking a break from killing my countrymen?”

“Depends on whether or not they give me lip,” Raik shoots back, although she is smiling. She angles her body back to the rest of us. “This is Marvo Steel. He owns Caligula.”

Steel offers us a showy little bow. “Charmed.” None of us know what to say, and he makes a soft, hissing murmur that I realize is a laugh. “Why so serious? Don’t worry—I don’t get involved in politics, although I do have a few cousins in the Royal Guard Legion.” He shudders theatrically. “You can imagine the family reunions.”

“Probably as awkward as mine,” Nagisa comments.

Steel glances at him briefly in an exaggerated double-take. He laughs again. “Raik, I had no idea you had such a diverse group of friends. Or any friends, for that matter.” When he speaks his cheeks go almost alarmingly concave. His eyes are the smooth, perfect black of an oil spill. “The more confeddies the better, I say. You are all big spenders. Just make sure you checked your weapons at the door. I don’t want any trouble. This is a classy place.”

“Classy, huh?” Raik cocks a hip. “How much is a lap dance again?”

Steel takes a delicate sip of his drink. “From one of the dancers, or from me specifically?” He winks, eyelids closing vertically, like a lizard’s. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I’ve got things to see and people to do. Have fun, use protection.” To Raik he adds. “You can use my room if you like, dear. Though I doubt all of you will fit.”

He swaggers off down the stairs, leaving us a little breathless. We have all seen kassadians before—in vids and scattered here and there through Sky City before the war broke out and the state stopped issuing tourist visas.

Gou is staring after him with her mouth open. “Wait, you know him well enough for him to let you use his VIP room?”

The music changes, a filtered voice wailing about shattered hearts, the lights going from white and blue to swirling red, making it much harder to see where we are going.

“Not me. My mom.” Raik scratches at her bare arm. “C’mon.”

“Who’s your mom?”

“Someone.”

She clearly doesn’t want to talk about it, but since Gou is Gou, she presses on. “What did she do?”

“Christ Matsuoka, cool it.” Raik’s temper is fraying. “This isn’t Sky City. No one thinks it’s cute when you run your mouth.” She scans the crowd, standing on her tiptoes. “Thank fuck, there’s Jinny.” She slides off through the crowd.
Gou’s mouth hangs open for a moment, eyes going liquid before she quickly looks at the ground, bangs blocking the view of her face. I don’t know what to say, so I put a hand on her arm. She jerks away like my fingers burn.

“Don’t. Don’t touch me if you’re not—.” She shakes her head. “Let’s just go.”

Jinny has caught sight of us and is making urgent ‘come here’ motions over Raik’s head. Seijuro and Nitori are with them, looking as out of place as I feel.

We follow Raik up another set of stairs like ducklings behind their mother, to the level supported by hover struts. This floor is smaller than the others, just a dance floor and a line of rooms blocked off by curtains. Raik stops at the first one, and the Samezuka squad boys, Nagisa, Makoto, and Haruka follow her inside.

Gou starts to follow, but Raik blocks the way with an outstretched arm. “You heard Marvo. Not enough room. Sorry.” She doesn’t look very sorry.

Gou’s eyes harden and she crosses her arms. “Fine. Rei and I are just gonna go dance. Rght, Rei?”

“Uh…” I glance into the darkened VIP room, where Nagisa has vanished. “I guess.”

I really, really do not want to dance. Definitely not in front of my teammates, and certainly not to this music.

Ducking down below Raik’s arm, Haruka reemerges from the gloom and stands beside Gou. Gazing off across the dance floor, he looks like he always does—that he might have wandered in here by accident—but there is a firmness to his stance, a tension hovering around his eyes.

I find myself going to stand on her other side. Gou and her two awkward escorts. “We’ll see you all later, then.”

“Haru—.” Rin looms behind Raik, scowling when he sees Haruka. “You’re not coming in?”

Haruka shrugs.

Gou bares her teeth in a grin. “Tough shit, brother. He’s with me tonight.” Then she grabs us both and pulls us off and into the madness of the dance floor, but she doesn’t stop to make good on her threat. Instead the three of us push through and back down the stairs.

Gou heads straight for the bar. “I want a fucking drink.”

There aren’t any unoccupied stools, but we manage to elbow ourselves into a few square inches of real-estate toward the wall. Gou’s makeup is smudged, but her eyes are dry now.

The bartender stares straight down her dress as he asks, “What are you having?”

She points to the people closest to us. “I’ll have whatever they’re having, as long as it’s for humans and won’t make me cough up blood. Three of them.”

The bartender raises a pierced eyebrow, leaning toward her across the bar. “Hitting it hard, baby?”

“You bet your ass. Now pour me the fucking shots or I’ll come back there and do it myself.”

I wince, but luckily he seems more amused at her venom than insulted. She looks like she wants to spit some more, so I reach down and squeeze her wrist.
She glares at me. “What the hell?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t pick fights.”

“Fuck you, Rei,” she says, but she subsides back against the bar, blowing loose hair out of her eyes. On her other side, Haruka almost smiles. It occurs to me that if he had grown up with Rin, he must have been known Gou as well. Is that why Rin had seemed so irritated back there, because Haruka had sided with his sister rather than with him?

The bartender returns with three shot glasses, filling them with bright purplish liquor that appears to be glowing softly.

I reach into my back pocket automatically for my credit chip, before remembering that these pants are too tight for it. I left it at Ola’s cabin with the rest of my clothes.

“Only take drachma here,” the bartender barks.

Gou shrugs. “I don’t have any money.” She looks at me. “What about you, Elite boy? Buying me a drink?”

“I don’t even know what drachma is.”

The bartender snorts, just as Haruka drops a couple of silver coins onto the bar. Gou puts her hand over them before the bartender can take them.

“What is it now, Miss Nasty?” he asks, looking like he’s losing patience despite her cleavage.

“Actually, put it on our friend’s tab.”

“Your friend got a name?”


He raises an eyebrow, but he doesn’t protest.

“What?” Gou shrugs when she sees Haruka and I watching her. “She says she knows everyone.”

I don’t protest—Raik has not turned out to be as bad as I thought she would be, but she has not been exactly gracious to Gou. Instead I eye the three drinks. “Are you really going to drink those?”

“Not exactly.” Gou slides one glass in front of me, another in front of Haruka. She keeps one for herself. “We are going to drink these.”

I eye the liquor dubiously. It looks positively radioactive. “I think I’ll pass.”

Gou picks up her own glass and swirls it around and around with tiny motions of her wrist. “Oh, right. I forgot.” She grins. “You hate fun.”

“I do not hate fun.”

She salutes me with her glass. “Then prove it.”

Great. Peer pressure.

She turns to her left. “Haru?”
Haruka picks up his shot, considers if for a moment, before clinking it against Gou’s. He tips his head back and they drink together. Haruka barely winces; Gou sticks her tongue out. “Oh, shit that is nasty.” They both look at me expectantly.

I roll my eyes. How encouraging.

“Hell yeah,” Gou cheers, as I raise the glass.

Some evenings while she is preparing to go out, the whole stretch of hallway outside my mother’s dressing room smells like nail polish remover. If I were ever to drink it, I imagine that this is what it would taste like.

I shudder, but manage to choke it down. The aftertaste is vile and vaguely grape-like. The alcohol makes my nose burn and my head spin.

“Holy shit.”

Gou giggles. “I know, right?” She glances up and down for the bartender. “Let’s get another round—I’m not drunk enough yet.”

I cringe and angle myself away, hoping that will connote my disinterest. This is not my first experience with alcohol—I have been drinking wine with my mother and father since I was twelve—but wine is meant to be sipped, not taken in straight gulps, and is typically not strong enough to scour a shuttle exhaust port. The world has gone soft around the edges, and I feel heavy, the warm air strange against my skin.

Looking out over the ranks of liquor bottles and shiny gold taps, I see that I am now at a perfect level for a good view of the dancers inside the cages. There are three of them, two women and a man, dressed more or less identically in pairs of tight black shorts and very little else. At first I think I must be much drunker than I thought, because the dancers appear to be moving in slow motion, but then I realize that the cages are fitted with a localized gravity drive—tiny versions of the device that lets me leap around the gymnasium like a mad gazelle.

They do it with infinitely more finesse than I ever could, and I doubt I could move my hips at that rate either. The woman in the center cage turns a tight back flip, undulating in the air, writhing in time to the music as she twists snake-like back down. On the floor below them, the stage is now occupied by a man and a woman in leather, along with a wide assortment of whips.

The music changes again, and the lights along with it—a single white strobe that flashes the world into blinking stop-action. If I’d had latent epilepsy, it would now most likely be less latent.

I turn back to Gou and Haruka to find them talking, and I lean in to hear over the music. I am so close to Gou that I can smell her sugary vanilla perfume.

“—Turing into a real asshole. I mean, he’s always been kind of a jerk, but ever since the two of you broke up, it’s been, like, super teenage meltdown.”

Haruka’s gripping the bar so tightly that his fingers are turning white. Or that could just be the strobe-light. The hair in his eyes obscures his expression. Is that why he wears it long in the front, so he can hide behind it? It is very nice hair—feathery and glossy black under the lights. If I ran my fingers through it, it would probably be soft as a cat—

My thoughts are sliding together, melting in to one another at the edges. I shake my head slightly, forcing myself to focus back in on their conversation.
“—The fuck happened, Haru?”

“You know what happened. It’s over, whatever. We’re here now.” Haru mumbles something else that I don’t catch. I lean closer, catching another breath of Gou’s perfume. Where is it coming from, exactly?

I run my fingers along the bare skin of her neck. She’s very warm. She tenses. “Uh, Rei?”

I realize what I’m doing and snatch my fingers back. “Sorry, I…think I may be a little drunk.”

Gou snorts. “Wish I could get drunk off one shot.” On cue, the bartender returns with three more glasses of purple liquor.

I cringe. “No thanks.” If drinking these disgusting things is what makes you fun, I am fine with being no fun at all.

Gou sighs dramatically. “Suit yourself.” She takes two shots, hers and mine, one after the other. She begins to eye Haruka’s, but he picks it up, drinking before she can get her hands on it.

She sticks out her tongue and shudders. “Fuck, that is just as nasty the second time.” She turns to me, eyes shiny and unfocused. “Let’s dance. For real, Rei!” Her hand clamps down on my arm.

“Okay,” I hear myself say. Anything to stop her from buying more drinks. She hooks her fingers into a loop on my jeans and pulls me out onto the dance floor, into the writhing mess of sweaty limbs and pheromones and fabulous hair (it could be the alcohol talking, but everyone here does have really great hair).

“Maybe I should mention,” I say, when she spins back toward me, face glowing white in the spinning lights, “I can’t dance.”

Not strictly true. I can waltz and foxtrot and even tango a bit, but I can’t dance like this. In Caligula, dancing appears to entail a lot of waving of arms and grinding of pelvises. In general, I like to keep my pelvis to myself.

Gou puts her hands on my hips and pulls me in closer. “Just move. Don’t think about it so much.”

Gou, as it turns out, is an excellent dancer. She has good control over her muscles, isolating her movements in a way that makes me wonder why in the hell the Confederation had made her our Navigator, when it’s obvious that she should be in the water with the rest of us. For my own part, I try to move in time with the music and hope I am not making an ass of myself. Even if I am, it’s much too close and the lights too disorienting for anyone to notice.

While we dance, Gou keeps taking my hands and putting them on various parts of her anatomy—her stomach, her hips—and I keep taking them back. The third time I do this she leans in close to me. “You could always close your eyes and pretend I’m Nagisa.”

“W-What?” I stop moving. Someone’s flailing arm strikes me in the back.

Gou rolls her eyes and wraps her arms around my neck again. “Seriously, Rei? I’m drunk and I’m still sneakier than you.”

I flush. “I don’t know what you—.”

“Oh, please.” Gou tosses her hair. “Apart from the fact that you can’t keep your eyes off his ass
—.

“I don’t—.”

“—And how you two are always gazing into each other’s eyes…”

“We don’t—don’t gaze.”

Gou shakes her head. “Boys are so dumb. For fuck’s sake.”

We’ve migrated over to the edge of the floor and we’re not dancing anymore. Gou is glaring at me, and I can’t figure out what she’s so mad about. How is it any of her damn business how I feel about Nagisa? With the emotional augment still twisting my thoughts, there’s just no way—

“Hey, um, Gou?” It’s one of the guys from the Samezuka Squad—Seijuro, of the landing-light hair. “You…you maybe want to dance?”

Gou’s lips twist, and she spins away from me. “Sure.”

I’ve been dismissed, and from what I can tell, Seijuro has no problem with leaving his hands where Gou puts them.

Feeling suddenly aggressively sober, I shoulder my way back through the dancers and over to the bar. Our friend the bartender is flirting with a couple of kassadian girls, both of them a deep emerald color.

Haruka is gone, but I recognize who has taken his place. Rin is drumming his fingers on the bar, drinking an Earth beer with a label that I vaguely recognize. He sucks in his cheek when he’s irritated, just like Gou does.

“Where’s Haruka?” I ask.

He has the same grouchy glare as well. “How the fuck should I know? I’m not his mom.” He tips the bottle up, throat bobbing as he empties it in three long gulps. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Probably with Gou.”

I leave him trying to flag the bartender down for another beer. This night has gone badly enough without having to deal with another surly Matsuoka.

For lack of anything else to do, I wander back toward the third floor VIP Rooms. If Seijuro and Rin have cleared out, there should be enough room for me.

There is no one to prevent me from going in this time, so I push past the curtain and walk up a short set of dark wooden steps. The hover struts have some give to them, and I feel the VIP box swaying under my weight.

Clearly being a Very Important Person is not all it is touted to be, because the room has cleared of everyone except Raik and Jinny, and they seem…busy. Jinny straddles Raik’s legs, Raik’s hands disappearing beneath the hem of her shirt. Her braids clink softly as she tips her head back to let Raik kiss along her collarbone.

Her eyes flick up. “Can we help you with something?”

I shuffle a few steps back down the stairs. “S-Sorry, I’ll just—.”

“I can’t hear a fucking thing you’re saying,” Raik snaps. “Come closer—I swear you won’t catch
anything.”

In her arms Jinny shakes with giggles, her neck and the shell of her ears gone a delicate lavender. “Are you looking for someone?”

“Uh…” Every part of me wants to run, surprise and embarrassment mingling with the alcohol in my system to clamor against the emotional augment like rain on a pane of glass. “I’m looking for Nagisa,” I answer, without even knowing that I am going to say it out loud. If Gou knows, does everyone else? Has one month in Recon really eroded my Elite senses so terribly?

Raik’s mouth twitches up at the corner. “Oh, he’s around. And around. Boy’s got stamina.”

Jinny raps her knuckles on the side of Raik’s head. “Don’t be a jerk.”

“What? I’m helping—don’t put your finger in my ear!” She grabs Jinny’s hand and looks past her, back at me. “He’s in Room 6, I’m pretty sure.” Wrapping her arms around Jinny’s waist, she tugs her closer. “Have fun.” She’s smiling again, and it makes me nervous.

Room 6 is bigger than the rest of them, fitted with a sliding paper door rather than a curtain. The hover struts hum beneath my feet as I walk up the stairs, but I freeze halfway up as I hear a gasp of pain.

No, not pain. That had been an easy mistake to make back in the Platform locker room, but here there are too many voices. Low, distinct croons, murmured words, the occasional bitten-off cry. I know exactly what I will stumble on if I climb to the top of these stairs.

I wish I had taken that second shot.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger. I am a bad, bad lady.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

In my head, this chapter is titled: *Rei and the Very Bad, Terrible, No Good Night Out.*

On that note, enjoy!

One of the required courses in an Elite child’s compulsory schooling is the tastefully titled *Family Relationships and Planning for the Future,* in which they are divided into gender groups and sat down in front of vid screens to learn about sex.

Of course, all Elite children have had net uplinks since they were old enough to have one installed, and it is positively a right of passage to figure out how best to navigate around state censors and parental controls, so by that time we had all been well aware of what it was, but we had still watched in half-morbid fascination at the sterile, two-dimensional diagrams of the reproductive organs, cringing at the myriad unpleasant diseases that resulted from unsavory sexual contact. I’m sure the girls had a much more rigorous education in the subject, but what we were told boiled down to one general decree:

*Do whatever you want, but make sure it’s where no one can see it.*

The theme continues as you grow up. Partake in whatever it is you want—girls, boys, goats—just keep it to yourself and, by god, keep it out of the tabloids and off the net. These rules have never weighed heavy on my mind, since up until a month ago I have not had much of an interest in sex at all.

The situation I find myself in the midst of inside VIP Room 6 is exactly the sort we are taught to avoid. Crowded, indiscreet, and very, very public.

This room is about three times the size of Raik’s and Jinny’s, with one wall entirely open, looking out on the swirling lights and heaving sea of faces on the dance floor. Inside, just past the curtain, two women are pressed up against the wall, both of them wearing tight leather dresses similar enough to be some sort of uniform. They are kissing every bit as passionately as Jinny and Raik had been, and they are, by far, the tamest aspect of the scene. People are scattered throughout in varying stages of undress, from completely naked, to one woman dressed in an intricate silver and blue kimono. She is on her knees in front of a man who seems very enthusiastic about hitting her across the face with a specific part of his anatomy that I did not think was typically used for such things. But what do I know?

Very little, it turns out—much of what is happening in the room I have never even imagined would be possible. Or desirable. Every direction I look makes my face hotter, my heart beat faster, and why did I have to let Ola and Gou talk me into pants that are so damn *tight?*

Near the center of room, my gaze zeroes in on what I had been looking for in the first place—blond hair and a blood red shirt. The shirt is half off—one arm free, one still trapped—and the blond hair has a big, pale hand in it, fisted tight.
I want to look away, but at the same time I don’t. And I know I won’t.

Nagisa is on his hands and knees on a low black table, mouth hanging open on a gasp as he is fucked from behind by a man that I recognize as the Combat recruit from the locker room. It would be impossible to mistake that lumpy nose, and just the sight of it snarls a hot flash of rage inside me. As I watch, the recruit pulls Nagisa upright by his hair, until he is pressed back tight against his chest. He is saying something to him, something that makes Nagisa nod furiously, but a woman on the other side of the room has begun to moan loudly and persistently, and I can’t hear what’s being said.

A man has approached me—I’ve been noticed at last—but I ignore him, because the Combat recruit has let Nagisa go and he slumps forward on the table, panting. The recruit looks down at him, smirking, like he has just done something enormously impressive.

Then the two of them are approached by a tall, green-blue kassadian, who puts a hand on Nagisa’s backside. Nagisa raises his head and strains up to kiss him, and I have seen enough.

I turn away find the same man even closer—close enough that I can smell the alcohol on his breath. He is shorter than me by about a head, and old enough to be my father.

He rubs himself through his tailored dress pants and says, “How about it, cutie? You here all alone?”

I feel my lip curl, and briefly I wonder what the odds are I could get away with punching him in the crotch. Instead I put a hand against his chest and propel him backwards. He trips over his own feet and sprawls against the arm of a couch. Feeling vaguely like I’m floating, I walk back down the steps and out of VIP room 6.

- When I had seen Nagisa and the recruit in the locker room, I had been a shaking mess of emotion—shock and arousal and disgust all piling together until it felt like my augment was about to explode and take my brain with it. Now, my breath echoes in my chest, as if my body is a wide, empty space. Perhaps the emotional augment is functioning correctly for once.

I push roughly across the dance floor, using my height and shoulders to their full advantage, knocking aside a kassadian in leather and nearly sending the tiny human girl he’s dancing with flying. I trip going down the stairs in my overlarge boots and am steadied by a woman in a green dress. She smells like cinnamon.

“Are you alright?”

I nod and straighten my shirt, extricating it from her grip.

She leans close, talking over the noise of the music. “Can I buy you a drink?”

In the dark, I have barely had a glimpse of her face. Even under a clear, sunny sky, I would have had trouble seeing anything past the memory of Nagisa being pushed down against that dark table.

“Yeah,” I say. “Sure.” Because why the hell not?

I stand with her beside the bar, drinking a martini (which I don’t like very much, but at least it’s better than those purple shots) and she tells me her name is Shimmer. It is so obviously invented that I tell her my name is Heathcliff. She laughs, although I’m not sure if it’s because she knows the source material or just because it’s a stupid name. She seems surprised when I tell her I am
only seventeen, but she tells me it doesn’t bother her.

She does not try to make me dance, for which I am infinitely grateful, and we quickly give up on conversation. Instead she trails her fingers up my arm, feeling the contours of the muscle, so lightly my skin prickles. When she leans up to kiss me, I don’t stop her. Her lips are soft and I like the way her nails feel as they scratch across the nape of my neck, but it’s a very casual enjoyment, like stretching or feeling cool wind on my face. Pleasant enough, but not exhilarating, not the way I would expect kissing to feel like in order to justify how ridiculous people are about it. It’s nothing compared to the brief, gut-punch rush of the kiss I shared with Nagisa on the ob deck our first day onboard.

I pull back, wiping my lips with the back of my hand and looking away. She says something, but I can’t hear her, and suddenly I am so tired all I want to do is curl up on my tiny, lumpy cot and sleep for a million years.

Glancing down the bar, my interest is caught by several things that happen in very quick succession. I see a familiar blur of red hair and flash of sharp, white teeth—Rin is leaning against the bar and talking to a blond man with a luminescent eye augment, just like ours. Rin turns away for the briefest moment, during which the man tips something from a tiny glass vial into the mouth of his beer. He makes the vial disappear, all smiles again when Rin turns back, but the brush of his fingers against Rin’s cheek is lingering and possessive.

Rin picks up his beer, and I pull away from Shimmer. “Wait!” My shout is drowned out by the wall of music. Sweat gleams on Rin’s throat as he tips his head back to drink. The blond is crowding him against the bar, hand disappearing down to where I can no longer see it. I push against the crowd, but Rin has already begun to sag into the man’s arms. Whatever he had given him, it acts fast.

But suddenly the man is being pulled back, lifted off his feet like he’s in a localized grav-drive. Then he slams right back down against the bar, and I see Haruka, holding him by the collar and punching him square in the nose. Haruka’s face is creased with rage like I have never seen before, like I never could have imagined. He shouts and people scramble back as he hits the man again, blood as black as the bar-top in the wild light.

Haruka raises his fist again, and I catch him before the punch can connect

“You’re going to kill him!” I shout in his ear.

“Fuck you,” Haruka spits, and I’m sure he would have shaken me off and kept going if Rin hadn’t lost his grip on the bar and slid to the floor, eyelids fluttering like a hummingbird’s wings.

“Help me!” I say, bending down to grab Rin around the shoulders before he can be trampled. Haruka takes his other side and together we haul him to his feet. His eyes open for the briefest moment, and I see his lips form Haruka’s name, before he falls under again. I point us toward the exit, but Haruka shakes his head, nodding toward the third floor and the VIP rooms. As much as I don’t want to go back up there, getting Rin somewhere safe is far more important than my discomfort.

-mercifully, Raik and Jinny are gone by the time we get back up—maybe they’ve gone to join the orgy down the way. We lay Rin on one of the couches, negotiating him so that his feet are over a blotchy, suspicious stain, rather than his face.
“Do you have any idea what that son of a bitch gave him?” I ask, as Haruka rolls Rin onto his side.

He brushes the hair out of one corner of Rin’s mouth, touch unexpectedly gentle as he leans in close. “I can’t smell anything over the beer. It was too dark to see the bottle.”

I take a step closer. “May I?”

Haruka blinks, but he pulls back. Kneeling down beside the couch, I feel for the soft juncture under Rin’s jaw. I may have studied biochemical engineering at Indigo, but this is as basic as it gets. “His pulse is a little elevated, and his—.” I pull back one of his eyelids. “Pupils are dilated. But he’s breathing alright. Most likely just your standard sedative.”

Haruka nods, jaw tight. “I was worried it might be Ardor.”

“What does that do?”

He arches a brow. “What do you think?”

I shudder. “I hate this place.”

“You too?”

I sit back against the couch, rubbing my eyes, no doubt smearing whatever makeup that I haven’t yet sweat off. “Why did you come, then?”

He shrugs, but I see his eyes dart briefly to Rin. “Why did you?”

“Curiosity, I guess.” And the fact that I have found myself utterly unable to say no to a certain pair of golden eyes, but I keep that to myself.

Rin breathes out a small, grunting snort and his fingers twitch. Haruka reaches for his hand and laces their fingers together. Back at the bar with Gou, he had said the two of them had broken up, but with the way they can barely keep their eyes off each other, I doubt it is as over as either of them would like to think.

Haruka stands up. “I’m going to get him some water.”

“Good idea,” I say, although I doubt he’ll be in any state to drink it for awhile. “I guess I’ll stay with him?”

Haruka nods. “Thanks. I—.” He hesitates, rubbing his hands on his pants, leaving sweat stains on the white denim. “Just, thanks.”

“Sure.” I try to smile.

He vanishes down the stairs and I am left with nothing but Rin’s steady breathing and the far-off roar of the music and crowd. Distantly, I hope that the rest of them are alright—Makoto, Seijuro, and Nitori. Raik and Jinny seem like they can handle themselves, and Nagisa—

I groan and pinch the bridge of my nose. He had appeared to be handling things just fine.

Haruka has barely been gone thirty seconds, when I hear footsteps on the staircase.

“Gou!”

Her hair has come down from the chopsticks, hanging over Seijuro’s arm like a river of blood as he
carries her across the room. One side of her dress is torn, the strap ripped and flapping uselessly.

I shoot up from the floor, the room lurching slightly. “What did you do to her?”

“I didn’t do anything.” He deposits her safely on one of the couches, before rounding on me and jabbing a finger against my chest, a high, angry flush to his cheeks. “You were the one who let her down all those shots!”

Whatever had been in that martini had been strong, and I feel oddly cushioned by the air, separated from myself as I knock his hand out of the way. “I didn’t let her do anything! Have you ever tried to prevent Gou from doing what she wants?” I become aware that I am right up in his face, and that I’m taller than him. Gou murmurs in her sleep, her nose crinkling.

“Why is her dress ripped?”

Seijuro’s eyes harden, but he steps back a few paces. “I tried to catch her when she fell. She passed out on the dance floor.” He glances behind me. “Fuck, is that Rin?”

I nod. “Someone put a sedative in his drink.”

Seijuro swears and rubs at the sweat on his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Look, I’m going to go find Raik and Jinny. We need to get out of here before someone gets legitimately hurt.”

Judging from the two passed-out Matsuokas, I would say that that time has already come and gone, but I just nod and sit back down on the floor. “I’ll stay with them.”

Seijuro disappears and I lean over to check Gou’s pulse and breathing. She seems alright, but I doubt she’ll be up to much training in the morning. What with that and my ban until I learn to use my aquatic augment properly, we’re two squad members down. And where the hell is Haruka with that water? From the way my head is spinning, I could probably use some too.

It’s laughable—that people actually come to places like this for fun.

Light steps on the staircase, and I’ve got my mouth open to ask Haruka where the hell he’s been, but it isn’t Haruka who comes through the curtain.

Lazy golden eyes narrow when they see me. “Rei. I didn’t think you’d be here.” Nagisa smiles, and it’s an altogether sharper smile than I’m used to. He’s got his shorts and shirt back on, but his boots are missing. The dark makeup smudged around his eyes makes him look feral, like a predator escaped from the Sky City zoo.

He walks right by Gou and Rin like he doesn’t see them, swaying toward me and stumbling slightly. I move without thinking, catching at the front of his shirt, but instead of righting himself, he goes limp—a dead weight that pulls us both down to the floor.

“Nagisa, what are you—.” His skin is fever-hot, like it had been that evening on the ob deck. We hit the grimy carpet, me crouched above him on my knees.

“Rei…” His mouth twists in a devil’s grin as he pulls me closer. “You smell so good.”

He kisses me, lips burning, hand coming up to cup my cheek. It moves me the way Shimmer’s kiss hadn’t, a trembling wash of warmth. I want to tear the tight red shirt off him, feel his hot skin under my hands. Then he pushes his tongue into my mouth and I taste a faint bitterness. My insides twist with revulsion as I realize what it has to be.
I jerk away, prying his hands off my shirt, hearing the seams pull as it rips.

Nagisa makes a low noise of disappointment, slumping back on his hands. His mouth is bruised pink and his hair is a snarled mess. “What’s the matter, Rei?” he pouts. “Don’t like sloppy seconds?” He lets his legs fall open, and his tight shorts leave very little to the imagination. He grins. “You just wanna watch?” Dropping a hand to his crotch, he rubs a slow circle before flicking open the button and unzipping his fly.

“N-Nagisa!” I make a grab for his hand, getting a hold of it before he can pull himself out of his shorts. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Um, *having fun*?” He pronounces the words with grave, steady emphasis, like he’s worried I won’t he able to keep up. “Isn’t that the whole point of being here?”

The heat of his skin is making my palm sweat. “Nagisa, what is wrong with you?”

He stares at me for a few moments, mouth half-open, before pulling out of my grip and flopping back down onto the filthy carpet.

“You seriously don’t know?” He closes his eyes, talking to the ceiling, pushing his hands through his sweaty hair to make it even wilder. “I was starting to think you were just ignoring it. You know, because of your dad.”

“My dad? What are you even talking about?”

Nagisa drops his hands and rolls his eyes, which are, if possible, even more luminous than usual. In fact, beneath the watery mood-lighting, his whole body seems to be glowing. “Nothing. No things. Nothing at all.” He sighs and rolls back to his feet. “Well, if you aren’t going to fuck me, I’ll just go find someone who will.”

My stomach squirms at his words, and I make a sound of disgust before I can stop myself. “Haven’t you had enough?”

Nagisa’s usually bright laugh has a low, manic edge to it. “Oh, Rei. There’s no such thing as enough. Not for me.”

He skips back down the stairs and out through the curtain. I am winded and dizzier than ever, and only thirty seconds have passed before I start wondering if I had just hallucinated him—if such a thing were possible from two drinks, responsibly spaced out over the course of an hour. That couldn’t possibly have been Nagisa. He had always been so…so kind to me. Even when I did not deserve it, when all I had been was cold and recalcitrant.

I am just about to chase him down the stairs, say to hell with my Elite sensibilities and demand to know what’s wrong with him, when a low moan comes from the couch behind me.

“I turn to find Rin propped up on one arm, blinking rapidly, shaking his head like he’s trying to rattle the thoughts loose.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

He starts to push himself toward a sitting position, appears to think better of it, and falls back down onto his side. “Like I got hit by a hover-bus.” He coughs into the crook of his elbow, short, sharp barks that shake his whole body. “—that tried to date-rape me.”

“Good guess,” I say. “Although I don’t think I’ve ever seen a hover bus so ugly.”
Rin’s laugh doesn’t make it past his lips, but I can see his chest shake briefly. “Where the hell are we?”

“The VIP room. Haruka went to go get you some water. He should be back any second.” If he hadn’t gotten mugged on the way. At this point, I wouldn’t have been surprised at anything.

Rin’s eyes slide closed. “He attacked the guy, didn’t he?”

“Yes. I’ve never seen him so angry.”

“Haru’s got two settings—I don’t give a fuck and I will fuck your shit up.” Rin takes several slow deep breaths, eyes fluttering back open. “Keep talking to me—I don’t wanna fall asleep again.”

I shrug. “What do you want me to say?”

He squints at me. “Did I just hear you breaking up with that blond kid? Nagisa?”

I flush. “He’s not—we weren’t—. He isn’t—.”

“Oh, okay, okay, I got it. Don’t shit out a brick.”

Brushing my sweaty hair out of my eyes, I sit back down against the couch. “I’m not sure what was going on with him. He’s…not usually like that.” I fervently wish for Haruka—with him present Rin is sure to lose interest in anything I have to say.

Rin cocks a sleepy eyebrow at me. “Are you serious?”

“I wish people would stop asking me that.”

“He’s high, bro. High as balls.”

I drop my hand from my hair. “What?”

“Believe me, I knew enough tweakers back in Lowland to know a trip when I see one.”

I think of Nagisa’s shiny eyes and glazed, happy smile that had turned cruel in an instant. “I…didn’t know he did things like…that,” I say lamely.

“I said he’s high, I didn’t say he’s on drugs.” Rin’s words have a dreamy, fractured rhythm to them, like part of him believes he’s fallen asleep again.

“What do you…” How I long for a time when I could finish a sentence without drifting off into uncertainty.

Rin actually lifts himself back up onto his arms to look at me in hazy disbelief. “Holy fuck, really? You’re on his squad, and you don’t know this?”

Slick, hot dread is spinning inside me like a cyclone, gathering debris from my organs and blood as it passes through, but I still can’t stop myself from snapping out, “Know what?”

“Your boy’s a Hazuki. One of the new recreational models.” He lets out an incredulous snort of laughter at my continued confusion. “Shit, Ryugazaki—he’s a sex-bot.”

My insides fold in on themselves, feeling as small and shriveled as an apple core. “You mean—.”

“Yeah. He’s a Droid.”
Chapter End Notes

Big reveal for Rei, not-so-big for all the rest of us, but still--dun-dun-dun!!!!
There is little conversation on the shuttle ride back to the Platform. Even Raik and Jinny—who both show up looking extremely post-coital—seem to realize that absolutely no one is in the mood. Rin has recovered enough to walk on his own (with occasional unwanted assistance from Haru) but Gou is still only semi-conscious. Seijuro carries her. Nitori and Makoto are quiet as well, and though they have no visible signs of harm, it is clear neither of them particularly enjoyed themselves either.

Without really meaning to, I sit as far away from Nagisa as possible, facing the grey, dented wall of the shuttle, still in my borrowed clothes. When she had seen the state of most of our outfits, Ola had told us to keep them, although we did now owe her a not-insignificant amount of money for replacements.

By the time we dock back on the Platform, it is 3 a.m. earth-time, and I am utterly sober and so tired that every inch of my body aches. Nagisa is scowling at the floor; the high he had gotten from doing whatever he did with all those people is evidently gone. He doesn’t look at me, for which I am infinitely grateful. I’m not sure what I would have done if he had.

Despite my exhaustion, I am still awake an hour later, lying in my cot in berth 1608. From his incessant shuffling around, so is Makoto.

“Tachibana, are you awake?” I ask finally.

He stills. “Yes.”

“Did you know that Nagisa is a droid?”

He takes longer to respond this time. “Yes.”

I reach automatically for my glasses even though I know, of course, that they aren’t there and have not been for over a month. “You all knew, didn’t you?”

Makoto lets out a long breath and sits up, settling back against the cabin wall. His body is an indistinct shape in the darkness, eyes a bright, pearlescent green. “You really didn’t know, Rei? Your family must have employed droids. I thought all Elites did.”

I draw my legs toward me and wrap my arms around them, the way I used to sit when I was a child in Sky City, shut up in my room with homework to do. I’d had holoscreens—I could have studied in a rainforest or a snowy hillside or an asteroid belt, but some nights I had simply turned them off and stared out across the hazy expanse of Lowland, watching the lights come on as the sun set.

“Not recreational models.” I mutter it against my knees, so garbled that I doubt Makoto gets any of...
Alright, yes. Yes, I had known. Of course I had known. Only so much can be put down to peculiarities, can be dismissed as coincidence. It doesn’t take a genius (which, by the way, my aptitude tests say I am) to add all the data together and come to the most logical conclusion. I had not asked because I had not wanted to know.

“We all assumed you knew, since Nagisa used his model name as his surname—Hazuki,” Makoto is going on. “And when we realized you didn’t know—and when we found out who your father was—.”

I cringe.

“—Nagisa asked us not to tell you. He didn’t want you to hate him.”

“I could never—.” I stop, squeeze my eyes shut and force myself to think, because what would I have thought if he had told me what he was the day we met? I have always had a healthy amount of disdain for my father, as well as for all of his political maneuvering, but I had never been particularly interested in droid rights either. Would I have been able to treat Nagisa like a human, if I had known the truth sooner?

Of course not, says that voice in my head. Because he isn’t a human. He’s a thing. A machine built for one specific purpose.

I try in vain to fight back the memory of Nagisa’s mouth falling open on a raw gasp as the Combat recruits drives into him. His whole body had been shaking, hand clutching hard at the recruit’s thigh.

“If he was built—built for sex—.” I can’t help the volume of my voice from dropping as I say the last word, and I feel approximately ten years old. “—Then what is he doing in the Confederation?”

Makoto is settling back down into his cot, drawing the blanket up. He slings an arm across his eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe you should ask him that.”

--

Makoto rises at seven hundred hours for training, but I don’t even roll over. I am so tired that my eyes feel like bee stings, and my throat and tongue are swollen and hot. Besides, Captain Sasabe has told me there is no point in showing up until I have mastered my aquatic augment.

I haven’t. I can’t even keep myself submerged long enough to use it.

I sleep until midday (or until noon—day does not actually happen in space) before rising to take a lukewarm shower and stare at myself in the tiny, cracked mirror above the sink. I am sickeningly pale, my eyes rimmed in red. I have never had a hangover before, and I’m not sure how to cure one. I settle for drinking water, which is about all my stomach can handle right now.

After that, I sit on my cot and wish fervently for home. Home is always the best place to be when you feel like shit. Of course, if I had not joined the Confederation, my family’s penthouse would not be any less destroyed. If I had not joined the Confederation, I might even have been dead.

I pull out my tablet and open several net windows, each containing information on droids. A lot of it I already know, or at least suspect.

Unlike cyborgs and other robotic constructions, droids are at least partially human, and are thus
considered by many to be organisms, rather than machines. Starting with a bit of the human form is a great deal easier than constructing a being entirely from scratch, and AI processed this way turn out significantly more intelligent, creative, and self-aware than other cyborgs. Percentages of human tissue in droids tends to range from 5% to 30% and, obviously, the more human material used, the more human the droid, and the more expensive to make.

Nagisa must be at the very top end of the legal limit, if not over it. He is much, much too human to be anything less than 30%.

In my investigations, I find that there are three main types of net-sites dedicated to droids—those claiming droid are a menace, and that using them as anything other than glorified worker bees will result in the downfall of society (my father’s organization, the Humans First Alliance, is one of the more vocal of these groups), those that say droids are just the same as you or I—and thus deserve all the same rights as humans—and then finally the manufacturer sites, where droids can be purchased.

There are all sorts, it seems—servant droids (like the kind my mother hires for her parties) search and rescue droids, droids built specifically for combat (currently only in prototype), and recreational droids. These are marketed by many manufactures as companions. In fact, the level of creativeness in euphemisms for ‘sex slave’ is really quite astounding.

Some of these companies have recreational models that can be bought straight off the rack—they come in a selection of genders, ages, and races, with a default level of personality installed. However, at extra cost, you can have your very own person built to your exact specifications—body, mind, temperament. Everything accounted for. I can’t help cursing out loud when I see how much one of these specialized “Hazuki” models run. Whoever commissioned Nagisa must have been on the very top tier of society—the most Elite of Elites.

The list of upgrades and… functions is long and detailed. They can be programmed to perform any act you could possibly dream of (and many I would wager you couldn’t), to respond to pain as pleasure, to crave any sort of abuse. And although they won’t die if they don’t have regular sex, they will be considerably less healthy and content if they go without. Getting high from the act seems to be a very expensive add-on.

By the time I get to the bottom of the list, I am sick to my stomach.

How on earth is any of this allowed to go on? These beings were once human, no matter if only a very small amount of them still exists. And even if they hadn’t been—even if they are completely artificial, anything like Nagisa, anything with as much agency as Nagisa…

But how much agency does he have? How much is simply programming?

That voice again. I can’t wait to get rid of that voice.

I move over to the Confederation’s recruiting site, reading down the list of requirements. A recruit must be 16 years old, a native of Earth or one of the Earth-held colonies (which makes me wonder if Raik isn’t perhaps here illegally, seeing as she is from Ithaca) and pass a series of physical and psychological exams. Near the bottom of the page, mention is made of ‘orphaned droids’ of a certain level of awareness and intelligence being admitted on a case-by-case basis. Apparently, there is a whole committee assigned to making the decisions.

I look up orphaned droid, because that is a term I have never heard before. According to a technical dictionary, a droid is considered ‘orphaned’ if its owner dies, is arrested, or is otherwise incapacitated. If the droid is privately owned, it becomes the property of the state. Typically, they
are resold at discounted prices or (and this makes me feel even sicker than before) ‘decommissioned’. As in, broken down for parts.

In certain exceptional cases, however, a droid with a high human base percentage can opt of its own free will to join the Confederation, and serve the state that way. I look down the list (model names and serial numbers only, no personal names) but find on;y examples of droids recruited for grunt work or clerical duties. According to this database, no droid has ever been assigned to a squad before. Has the list simply not been updated recently, or is Nagisa a special case?

I spend all afternoon reading up on droids, and at seventeen hundred hours, Makoto returns, sweat-soaked and still flushed hot from exercise. He glances at me, seated cross-legged on my cot.

“How are you?” His voice has a strained quality to it that I have never heard before.

“Fine,” I say cautiously. “How was training?”

He peels his shirt off his damp skin and up over his head. His back gleams in the cool blue berth light. The sight of it, muscles still standing out from exertion, sends an unexpected thread of heat through me.

“A joke,” he says shortly. “Only Haru and I showed up.” He cards fingers agitatedly through his hair. “Captain Sasabe was not happy, to put it mildly.”

I swallow, waving my hand across my tablet screen to put it to sleep. “What happened?”

He lets out a noisy breath and drops his hands. “He blew up. Assigned us all kitchen duty, and four nights in a row on guard. Yeah, all five of us,” he adds, when I make a disbelieving noise. “He thinks if we are all punished together, maybe we’ll start acting like a team. Think about something other than ourselves.”

“I…I’m sorry. I honestly didn’t realize—.”

Makoto rounds on me, and his eyes are brighter than I have ever seen them, and the scowl looks incredibly out of place on his face, like a badly manipulated photograph. “This isn’t like your Indigo Academy, Rei. You can’t just skip out on training like it’s a class, and expect your parents’ reputation to take care of it for you.”

The shock of Makoto nearly yelling at me nearly reels me back into the berth wall. I have never seen him angry at anyone. The Elite part of me wants to sink into stony, superior silence. Displays of any kind—happiness or anger or fear—are unseemly. And maybe two weeks ago, I would have followed those instincts. But I’ve picked up new habits since then.

“Oh, sorry, mother,” I snap back. “I’ll make sure to get permission for next time before I make any decisions.”

Makoto looks as shocked by my outburst as I had been at his. We are both breathing hard, standing in the scant space between our two bunks, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off of him, from the energy burn at practice and the force of his agitation.

“That isn’t what I meant, and you know it,” he says, calmer now. “But we’re a team, Rei. We have to act like it. Gou’s hung over, and no one has seen Nagisa, but you—.”

“Wait.” The familiar sensation of emotion hardening into cold stone fills my guts. “W-What do you mean, no one’s seen Nagisa?”
Makoto shakes his head. “Haruka says he left their berth some time last night and hasn’t come back.”

That’s right—Haruka is Nagisa’s berthmate, (squad members room with each other, whenever possible) which means that there had been a 50% chance that I would have ended up in the same room as him. But there will be time to ponder on that possibility some other time.

“No one—who could he have gone? This is—this is a space station, you can’t just wander off…” But it’s a big station. There are plenty of places to hide, to secret yourself away, to climb in where no one will ever find you…

Makoto sits down on his cot, anger draining out of him. “I don’t know.” He looks down at the floor, and when he looks back up, his expression is much more earnest and Makotoey (Makoto-y—there goes my vocabulary) when he asks, “Did the two of you have a fight?”

“No,” I say, so fast, and in a high enough register that it is a ‘no’ that sounds a great deal like ‘yes’. “I mean, we didn’t fight. He just acted like an imbecile, and then ran off, and Rin said it was because he was high and—.” I groan and snatch my jacket from the foot of my bed. “I need to go. Sorry about—about everything.” I leave, and just barely manage to make it out without making a grab for my nonexistent glasses.

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The corridors of the Platform are thronged. Most training sessions have just let out—some recruits dripping with sweat, others with overly-chlorinated water from the pools where all the Lorelei teams prepped for underwater combat—everyone edgy and tired and anxious to get to the mess hall. I try to slink by as well as I can, but quickly tire of that, and very soon I am pushing my way through, going against the crowd, angry shouts and curses ringing after me.

“What the fuck, dude?”

“Elite piece of shit.”

“Don’t touch me.”

I ignore them all and keep going, even if I don’t rightly know where I’m headed, or even why I am doing it. How is it any of my business or concern what Nagisa does with his time? If he wants to disappear, he has every right to. A tight, thrumming feeling is building in my lungs, and it nearly reaches my throat and bursts out of my mouth, before I recognize it as a sob and force it back down.

He’s fine—what the hell are you doing?

“Ryugazaki. Rei!”

I turn to find Dr. Amakata standing at the juncture of two corridors, poised to go down a hall that leads to the senior crew member’s cabins—a place recruits are absolutely not permitted to go, although if you believe any of the talk, there are several people who routinely break that rule.

“Um, hello, ma’am,” I say, and remember to salute at the last moment, lest she remind me yet again that she is my superior officer. “Can…can I help you with something?”

Luckily, she seems amused at my fumbled greeting. Her hair is a bit lank, a dark, drying stain on the front of her lab coat that can really only be one thing. She must have just been getting off duty. One of her eyes is twitching badly and she is nearly glowing with exhaustion. “Have you spoken
“What?” I am disoriented for a moment, wondering why on earth she thinks I would ever tell my parents about Nagisa, when I realize that is not what she means. “No, I, I’m afraid not, ma’am. I’ll—I’ll call them as soon as I can. Tomorrow morning, definitely.” The emotional augment is the last thing on my mind right now, along with what I already know is going to be an uncomfortable and ultimately useless conversation.

Dr. Amakata seems to sense my distress, because she nods without further discussion. “Tomorrow, then.” She turns up the corridor, and I curl my fists, nails biting into my palms.

“Ma’am—Dr. Amakata?”

She turns back.

“Have you…you haven’t seen Nagisa Hazuki around, have you? He’s a member of my squad—blond, short—.” I hold up a hand to indicate how short.

“I know who he is, Rei,” she says. “And no, I haven’t seen him today.”


Dr. Amakata shifts her tablet in her hands. “When you do find him, make sure you’re not too hard on him, yeah? None of us asked to be what we are.”

I can’t prevent the thread of irritation that winds through my voice. “Am I the only person on the whole Platform who wasn’t aware that Nagisa is a droid?”

She scrunches up her nose. “Probably.”

--

Despite my mounting sense of panic, I find Nagisa in the first place I look. I have taken to calling it our observation deck in my head, even though we have only been there together a handful of times, and he has only kissed me the once.

The lights are turned down to minimum, soft white panels that glow with a gentle pulse, like a beating heart. He is sitting in front of the wide window, legs crossed, staring out into the abyss. Against the blackness of space, he looks so small.

I consider calling out to him, but there is no way he has not heard me come in—every sound multiplies into echoes in the wide metal room. I stand beside him at the window. He doesn’t look at me, but he starts to talk.

“There was this greenhouse back in the mansion. I guess it was really more like an indoor jungle than a greenhouse, actually. But it had this giant glass ceiling—totally clear, almost like it wasn’t there.” He lets out a soft breath, close enough to the glass to form an evanescent film of fog. He breathes just like a human being. “I used to lie under it and stare up at the cruisers and shuttles going by—going up, out here. To space.

“I used to think that if I could only get up there—get up here, everything would be okay. I could, you know, be free. But in the end it’s just another cage.” Leaning forward, he rests his head against the glass with a small thump. His shoulders shake, with tears or laughter. I can’t tell which.

He may be small, but in that moment, it seems like that tiny, manufactured body holds more than
the entirety of Sky City’s gilded corporate towers, Lowland’s crawling expanse of twisted streets and half-sunken buildings.

I sit down next to him. “The… the mansion—was that where you lived with your… with your owner?”

Nagisa laughs softly, rolling his neck so that his forehead is still pressed against the window but he’s finally looking at me. “So you figured it out, huh?”

“Not precisely,” I admit, rubbing my fingers across my chin, feeling the little bits of stubble that are coming in. “Rin told me.”

Another quiet, short laugh. “That dick.” He seems far more resigned than angry. “Sorry about last night, all the—you know—.” He makes a rather ambiguous gesture with a couple fingers. “—All the crazy.”

“It’s alright. I understand what was happening.”

Nagisa plants his hands on the floor and scoots himself around, so we’re both sitting with our backs to the window. Space looms huge and cold behind us, but if I keep my eyes on the lights and my attention fixed on Nagisa’s voice, I can forget it’s there.

“Really?” His eyes are brighter than the lights, and he seems to be shaking off whatever melancholy had gripped him when I’d come in. “What was happening? Explain it to me with some big Elite words.” He is the only one who could say that and make it sound complimentary rather than insulting.

“Well,” I begin, suddenly embarrassed at how I had spent my day—researching in lurid detail just what sort of functions he could be programmed with. “I read that sex makes you high.” I manage to say it without dropping my voice or stuttering once.

Nagisa draws his knees up to his chest, resting his chin on them, just as I had back in my berth. “It… can. It takes a lot.”

“A lot like last night?” I ask, and my face is burning now, but I force myself to keep looking at him.

He giggles, rather evilly, I might add. “Yeah, like last night. I’m sorry that you had to see me like that.” He sighs, and looks up at the ceiling. “Thanks for listening to me babble.”

“Oh—no… no trouble at all.” Listening to him talk will never be a chore, especially now that some of the old Nagisa—the true Nagisa—is shining through.

“I bet everyone’s pissed at me,” he muses, hopping to his feet. “For missing training.”

“I missed it too,” I say, following him up. “And so did Gou.” I tell him what Makoto had told me — double guard duty and five days of kitchen work.


He faces me, the soft glow of ob deck lights and the yawning mouth of black beyond the glass cast him into full contrast, a caricature for light and dark. The shadows make his smile look crooked. I realize that since we had started talking, even when I had asked him questions about his former life, I had not thought of him as a droid—not even in the slightest. He just seems like Nagisa, looking and smelling and sounding exactly the same as ever.
Then he reaches for me, and I flinch away.

It’s not an outrageous motion, but it is still there all the same. I pull back before he can put his hand on my arm or my shoulder, or wherever else he was planning to touch. I had not meant to do it, but it is done, and there is no taking it back.

Nagisa’s eyes widen in shock for a moment, before hurt folds onto his face like a tent collapsing in a breeze. That is gone almost at once, expression smoothing over to a numb blankness that makes my stomach twist.

“Nagisa, I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—.”

I reach for him, and this time he is the one to step away. “It’s okay, I get it,” he says, and I have never heard his voice sound like this—so distant, so frostbitten. “We’re squadmates. We can just leave it at that.”

He turns and heads for the corridor, and this time I am the one left standing alone in the cold light of the stars.
Chapter 13

Another chapter that I really like! I hope you guys enjoy it.

I've also posted all the drabbles I've written for this story so far, in a companion piece, "Fog and Falling Stars". I'll add more as I get around to writing them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ryugazaki, so help me—I will come into that pool and hold you down myself if you do not keep your head under the fucking surface.”

I splutter, expelling water from my lungs in deep, hacking coughs. It is a threat I have heard countless times, though Captain Sasabe has yet to make good on it. Makoto, Haruka, and Nagisa have already moved on to the basics of underwater combat, while I have not yet even managed to make it across the length of the pool without panicking. My throat closes up, lungs unable to trust my brain when it tells them it is safe to breathe.

Of all the time I have spent on Platform 6—including those first few days of utter bewilderment—the week after my fight with Nagisa is assuredly the worst. Five nights spent on guard detail means we are all dizzy with exhaustion, and kitchen duty means we go around coated in a thin film of grease, burns splashed over our hands and up our arms, which chlorinated water certainly does nothing to ease.

Nagisa has been unfailingly polite, serving his stint of guard duty with me without complaint, partnering with me when we are paired for drills in training, but he does not go out of his way to speak to me like used to, and he does not smile. That spark between us that had gone so far in sustaining me throughout the last month, is gone.

To top matters off, Dr. Amakata is irritated with me. She is of the opinion that I am not taking the removal of the emotional augment seriously enough.

The morning after my disastrous conversation with Nagisa, I wake up and retreat to the only place I can think of that I am sure to have privacy—that very same ob deck. I have never seen anyone there except for the two of us.

I bring up the lights and sit facing the ob window, tablet set up in front of me.

“Call home,” I order, before I remember that will send the call to the net link at our penthouse, which no longer exists. I don’t know the registration for the new house.

“Call mother,” I correct, which will send it to the mirror in her dressing room that doubles as a screen, so long as it has survived the explosion. A series of rippling blue lines appear in the air, projected by the tablet, and after a few seconds they are replaced by my mother’s face.

Her eyes are puffy, voice heavy with sleep. “Rei, darling? Is that you?”

“I’m sorry, Mother. Is it very early there?” It’s not—it’s nearly ten in the morning.
She yawns and covers her mouth delicately. “Not so very early. Your mother is just lazy. I must look an absolute fright.”

“You look lovely,” I say, which is true. Misaki Ryugazaki is always beautiful, even with dark, blotchy circles beneath her eyes and her hair in disarray. In fact, I like her better this way—most of the time she is done-up, put together so impeccably she could be a piece of hologram art. I smile, even though I know she cannot see me. This is a military facility, which means that no video is permitted to be taken, no visuals transmitted that could be captured and potentially sold into enemy hands.

We exchange pleasantries. She tells me about the latest fundraiser she has been organizing, and I tell her that training has been going well. Even though the room behind her is utterly unfamiliar to me, talking to her still makes my chest ache with the sudden sick longing for home.

I breathe through it and try to inflect some levity into my voice, keep my tone even, slipping easily back into Elite patterns of speech. I keep my words clipped, editing out contractions and exclamations.

“Mother, there is a matter I need to discuss with you,” I say, attempting to steer the conversation away from wine pairings and back to the purpose of my call.

“Anything, dear.”

I lace my fingers together in my lap, sitting up straighter automatically. “As you are probably aware, we are all subject to medical examinations when we board the Platform.”

“Oh, are you?” She sounds totally uninterested.

“Yes, we are. The medic onboard noticed something irregular about my scans when I had my eyes augmented—.”

“You augmented your eyes?” Her hand goes back to her mouth. “Oh, Rei…”

“It was compulsory,” I say, struggling to keep the defensiveness out of my voice. “Everyone in—.” I bite down hard on my words, because I realize that I had almost mentioned Recon. My parents are still under the impression that I am safe and shielded in front of a screen in Research and Development on the upper floors.

“Rei, what were you saying?”


Calm down. Keep it together.

“Mother,” I begin again when I have composed myself, “The medic says that I have an augment already installed.”

My mother is quiet for a moment. Then she laughs. It is a high, fluttery sound, like a captive bird beating its wings against a cage. “Oh, but that’s just he lexical augment, dear. It’s not a serious—.”

“It’s not the lexical augment, mother. I already had that one removed.”

She gasps theatrically, and I grit my teeth. I had not meant to say that. In fact, I had explicitly made the decision to keep it hidden. What the hell is wrong with me?
“Oh, Rei, you didn’t. Please tell me you didn’t.”

I almost tell her that it had been required, but I don’t. I am already lying by omission by failing to tell her about Recon—I refuse to lie to her face.

“I like being able to use whatever words I like,” I say instead. And I’m sure you would love to be able to tell father exactly what you think of him, I add silently. “But that’s not why I called. I want to talk about the other augment.”

“Other augment?” I can hear the jarring note of unease in the music of her voice.

“The emotional augment,” I say tightly. “The one you and father had installed to control my feelings.”

My mother flushes, reddening quickly across the bridge of her nose, just like I do when I feel the walls closing in on me. “Rei, I think it would be better if you spoke to your father—.”

“Mother, no.” I had called at this time of day specifically because I knew he would already have left for work. “This is very important—.”

“I really do not believe I am the person—.”

“Listen!” I snap, more forcefully than I mean to. “The doctor says the augment is degrading. It could malfunction while I’m in the field, or—.”

My mother is shaking her head.

“I only need full access to my medical records, mother! That’s all I want.”

“Rei, you must speak to your father about this.”

“Mother!” I shout, “Please—!”

“Goodbye.” She ends the call with the wave of a hand, but not before I hear the tremulous beginnings of a sob.

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That evening, I get a tersely worded flash from my father’s personal assistant, telling me that Daisuke Ryugazaki has penciled me in for a conversation the following Friday, as if I am a business lunch, rather than his son.

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In the intervening week, when I am not floundering in the pool or trying to avoid throwing longing glances in Nagisa’s direction, I take to spending time with Gou and, a bit to my surprise, with Rin. He has warmed up to me significantly since I had sat guard for both of them in Caligula’s VIP room. He is at once disgusted by my Elite status, and endlessly fascinated. He asks me constant questions, and seems to enjoy marveling over the answers.

“So you have an AI to pick out your clothes for you?” he repeats, lying stretched out on his cot, Gou beside him, flicking through images on his tablet. I am seated, rather awkwardly, on his berthmate’s bed—the skittish, silver-haired Nitori, who is out for the evening.

“Ever since I was a child,” I respond. “The system takes into account the weather, current styles, and agenda for the day, and picks an outfit accordingly.”
He throws back his head against the pillow and laughs. “That is totally fucking ridiculous.”

“It saves quite a bit of time, actually,” I say, stuck somewhere between embarrassed and amused. Rin, I have decided, is not as hostile as he seems. Just endlessly crass and emotional, reactions laser-quick and unaffected.

“Time for what?” Rin wants to know. “Drinking fresh-squeezed juice and painting your toenails?”

Gou punches Rin in the arm without looking up from the screen. “Don’t be an asshole. And holy shit, is all of this folder porn?”

“That’s why it’s titled Porn Folder, little sister,” Rin responds with an airy wave of his hand.

“Wow, that’s a lot of boobs,” Gou goes on. “And, damn, kassadian porn. Hardcore.” She tilts her head to the side. “Where does that even go?”

Rin sits up and tries to snatch the tablet away from her, rolling his eyes. “I know where you’re going to go if you don’t give it back. Right out the fucking door.”

Gou giggles and leans away from him, holding it out of reach. “And oooh, Elite Boys Gone Bad. No wonder he likes you so much, Rei.”

I flush and stammer out a laugh. It feels like some things I will never get used to, including casual talk of sex.

“I have literally nothing like that.” Rin makes a frantic grab for the tablet, snatching it out of her hands and glancing at the screen. He quirks an eyebrow. “Well, shit. I guess I do.” He drops the tablet on the bedspread. “Never watched it, though.”

“Sure.” Gou leans back against the wall and crosses her arms, grinning. “Just like you and Haru used to go up to your room and talk strategy.”

“Shut up.”

“Like, maybe strategic positions, but—.”

“I said shut up, Gou,” Rin snaps, bearing his teeth. “Just lay the fuck off about Haru, okay?” His eyes flick in my direction, and I can hear what goes unspoken between them: especially when he’s here.

I wonder if that’s my cue to leave, but then Gou stops pouting and asks me, “So what about you, Rei? You leave behind some fancy Elite princess when you came here?”

“Not exactly,” I say. “Unless you count my mother—and she’s really more of a queen.”

Rin lets out a surprised grunt of laughter. “He makes jokes. Who knew.”

“Do you like girls?” Gou asks me.


“I don’t mean me,” she shoots back. “I just meant—in general.”

Pretending that I’ve had a sudden bout of food poisoning does not seem to be an option. So I decide to tell the truth instead: “I like them fine. Do I…do I want to have sex with one? Probably not.” I drop my gaze to the floor, infinitely uncomfortable. I like the Matsuokas—honestly—but some
things I would rather not discuss.

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On Friday afternoon—the time I have been penciled in to talk to my father—I retreat to the ob deck with my tablet under my arm. I had been hoping to have this conversation in the privacy of my berth, but when I returned from the locker rooms, Makoto and Haruka had been deep in an unusually animated discussion. Haruka had been speaking out loud and everything. I had decided to leave them be.

I am already on edge (training had been disastrous, as usual) and when the call comes through, the sight of my father standing behind his desk gives me an unexpectedly acute jolt of emotion. It is trepidation, yes, but there is an unusually high ratio of irritation as well.

“I can’t see you,” Daisuke Ryugazaki barks as soon as the call connects. “Why isn’t your feed on?”

“Platform 6 is a military vessel. Out-bound feeds are illegal.”

My father frowns. “I don’t like it.”

*Then why don’t you sue someone?* I almost say it aloud, but I don’t.

My father’s state could not have been more different than my mother’s had been during our conversation at the beginning of the week. She had been soft and hazy with sleep—he is straight-backed and tense, stress showing in the creases in his forehead and the lines around his eyes. People have always gone on about how similar we look, and I suppose it is true, but there is a coldness to my father, a rigidity, that I do not possess. At least, not yet.

No greeting, no pleasantries, no *oh, Rei, how wonderful it is to hear your voice.* Not with my father. Just, “Your mother tells me that you have had your lexical augment removed.”

Of course she had. My mother has never been able to keep anything from my father. Or, I had thought, from me. Now I know better.

There is no point in feigning ignorance, especially not with what I had called him up to ask for.

“Yes, I did.”

My father drops his glasses onto his desk and rubs his eyes. “Do you have any idea how expensive it will be to replace it when you come home?”

“I’m not going to replace it, Father,” I say. “And if I ever did, I would be sure to pay for it myself.”

My father looks taken aback for a moment, but he quickly recovers himself. “Very well. If you want to be able to swear like a Lowland Docker, I won’t stop you.”

He moves from behind his desk, the hover-cam following him to a small bar in the corner of the office. He pours himself a drink, adding two ice cubes with a tiny pair of tongs. It looks like a doll’s tool in my father’s large hand. “Have you been granted a research stipend yet?”

“Ah, no, I haven’t—.”

“Did you talk to General Forester? I told you that he would be the one to make sure you have
everything you need.”

“I…I haven’t, no.” I don’t even remember who General Forester is. Probably someone in Research. Someone else my father has under his thumb.

My father returns to his desk and shuffles papers around, takes small sips of his drink, generally shows me just how low on his priority list this conversation is. I grit my teeth and force myself to remain quiet. This is why I had wanted to speak with my mother—it is far easier to hold my temper with her.

At last he folds his hands on the surface of his desk and looks straight into the camera, which has been set to hover at face height.

“Now, what’s all this about an emotional augment?”

I tell him as succinctly as possible what Dr. Amakata has told me—that I am fitted with an emotional augment that controls my reactions and temperament. I speak very generally—the way I make it sound, the augment had fallen randomly from the sky one day and interested itself into my brain through my ear. There is nothing suggestive, nothing accusatory in my tone.

By the time I am finished, my father is rubbing at his eyes again. “This…Dr. Amakata—this is the same one who took out the lexical augment?” I nod. “Seems to me he has—.”

“She,” I correct.

My father’s eyebrows shoot up. “Excuse me?”


He waves a hand. “Well, she seems to have far too many opinions on things that are absolutely none of her concern. That augment was an investment in your future, Rei—one your mother and I discussed extensively.”

I very much doubt that. I can rather imagine how that conversation had gone.

“It controls my thoughts,” I say stiffly. “I don’t want it.”

“It controls emotions, Rei. Weaknesses. Not thoughts. It will keep you rational.” He taps his temple with a forefinger. “Keep you sharp. No one ever got to the top by trusting their feelings.”

I swallow back the sour taste in my mouth. “Dr. Amakata says it’s degrading. It’s been misfiring and causing me pain.”

He stares at me for a few seconds, or where I suppose he imagines me to be—in fact he is more looking off to the left side of my face. I smile briefly at the knowledge that he can’t see me—I could be doing anything in the world and he would never know.

“We can have it looked at by Dr. Myles,” he says at last, nodding, as if coming to the conclusion of some argument with himself. “The next time you are on leave.”

I dig my nails into my palms because I had been afraid this would happen. Dr. Myles is our house physician—a gruff, balding man with cold hands and an astonishing affinity for forgetting everything you say to him the moment you are out of view. “Father, I don’t have leave for another four months.” And not until after my first Recon assignment. “I can’t wait that long. All I need is for you to grant Dr. Amakata’s colleague access to my full medical records—.”
“Absolutely not,” my father says. “The Ryugazaki files are private for a reason. I will not have some military doctor rifling through—.”

“She’s not in the military, father. Dr. Amakata’s colleague—.”

“I don’t care if she’s the personal doctor of the President himself!” My father slams a hand down on his desk, rattling the ice in his glass. “When I make a decision, that decision is final!”

“Father, please—.”

He takes a deep breath and composes himself, which makes me hope that at least some of my desperation is getting through.

“Alright, Rei. Here is what I can do. I will get Dr. Myles on a cruiser. I will personally pay to transport him out to Platform 6. He can repair your augment, and we can put all of this to rest”

I am shaking my head, and it takes me a few seconds to remember that he can’t see it. “I don’t want the augment repaired, father. I want it removed. I—.” I am speaking faster and faster now, words running away with me. “I want to be able to experience without a filter—.”

Daisuke Ryugazaki lets out a snorting, derisive laugh. “I’m sorry, is this truly my son I am speaking to?”

“Father…”

“It doesn’t matter what you want, Rei,” he roars, and even here, with hundreds of light years of void between us, I recoil, raising a hand to shield my face. “It matters what’s best for you, what’s best for your family! What were your mother and I supposed to do?”

“Supposed to do, I—.” I splutter, because I don’t even know what he’s talking about. “You could have, I don’t know, not f*cked with my brain?” I spit the curse at him as hard as I can.

He gives me a very disappointed, fatherly look—one which he has no right to. “Oh, Rei—.”

“And that’s not even all of it,” I cut him off. “Dr. Amakata says—.”

“Dr. Amakata,” my father snorts. “Sounds to me as if Dr. Amakata should learn to keep her mouth shut—.”

I raise my voice even further, trying to shout him down. “Dr. Amakata says that the augment has altered my sex drive as well, father! What on earth would possess you and mother to do something like that?”

My father winces on the word sex and it strikes me how ridiculous this is—this fully grown man, unwilling and unable to talk about things that my squad mates talk about everyday. Once again, I thrill at the idea of unleashing Gou on him.

“My god, Rei! What were we supposed to do? When you started showing signs of deviancy, we had no choice—.”

“Wait—.” I splutter, choking on thin air. “Deviancy? You mean—sexual deviancy?” I run my fingers through my hair—I want to pull it out. “You shoved an augment into my brain because I’m homosexual? What is this, the 20th century?”

“There were a myriad of reasons, Rei. Not just the improper interests you were showing in boys
“I can’t believe this,” I say, “I honestly—.”

“Believe whatever you like, Rei,” my father cuts me off for the twentieth time. “But please know that your mother and I were acting in your best interest, and we still are. I’ll have Dr. Myles on a transport to you by tomorrow morning.”

“Father, no, you can’t—this, this is a military vessel!” I am leaning in close to his image in midair, as if that will give my words more impact. “You can’t just send people—.”

“General Forrester will—.”

“I don’t give a fuck about General Forrester!” I bellow. “I don’t want your doctor, I want my medical records! I want this thing out of my head!”

My father is sitting back from his camera, as if the force of my rage might knock him out of his chair. His eyes are wide with honest shock. Whatever reaction he had been expecting from me—it had not been this.

“If anything could prove to me that you truly do need a functioning emotional augment,” he says finally, voice dangerously hushed, with the air of a man who had expected to be proven right, and has been, “It is this conversation.” He glances at his watch. “Unfortunately, I am all out of time for being yelled at by unstable teenagers. Look for Dr. Myles by the beginning of next week. Goodbye Rei.”

“Father, no, wait—.”

He flicks his fingers, and the feed goes dead. I am left in the darkened ob deck, staring at into the starfield, raw shock gnawing at my insides.

“...Hey, Rei?”

I rocket to my feet, only barely managing to hang onto my tablet, catching it with the tips of my fingers. “N-Nagisa!” Shame blooms on my cheeks and spreads all the way down my neck, until I’m sure even my aquatic augment is blushing.

He is standing beside the door, hands behind his back, rather sheepish. “I’m sorry, Rei—I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, you just—.”

Had been shouting my head off in a public sector of the ship. Anger and embarrassment war inside me, but exhaustion wins out and I just shake my head. “It’s alright.”

“I…” He sidles further onto the deck, and for the first time in the past week, his movements have no moody slouch to them. “I didn’t know you have an emotional augment.”

“Well—.” I let out a short, barking laugh. “Surprise.” My heart is still pounding and I am shaking with the spike of adrenaline. “I suppose we know each other’s secrets now.”

Nagisa laughs a little himself, trailing off to nothing. He indicates at where my father’s office had been hanging in midair. “Was that...was that really your dad?”

I push the sweaty hair out of my eyes. “Yeah. That’s Daisuke Ryugazaki.”

“Wow...he’s kind of an asshole.”
My breath huffs out, not quite materializing into a laugh. “Yeah.”

“Leader of the Human’s First Alliance, right?” His tone is light, but I can hear something lurking beneath it, quick and quiet and ready to flee.

“Nagisa… I think he’s wrong. I mean, I know he’s wrong. I don’t… I don’t want to be like him.” I wonder, if I reach for him first this time, can it undo all the times I’ve pulled away?

But before I can try, he scratches at the back of his head, ruffling up his hair. “Sorry… sorry I’ve been such a little bitch all week. You didn’t deserve it.”

He’s apologizing. Most people never admit to anything, even when they are clearly in the wrong, but here he is, apologizing.

“I did deserve it,” I insist. “I should never have flinched away from you.”

“You just reacted.” Nagisa twists his fingers together for a moment, clearly uncomfortable. “I get that. I know this is probably super weird for you, especially with…”

He doesn’t need to finish. I know what he means. “Are we… are we okay?” he asks instead.

I nod so quickly that I’m surprised I don’t give myself whiplash. “Of course! I’m just glad…”

He smiles—a real, glowing Nagisa smile that sends heat pulsing through my blood. “Me too. Now come on.”

“Where are we going?”

The smile widens. “To the pool. We’re going to get that augment working. I’m totally tired of listening to Captain Sasabe bitch.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay! After a whole 4,000 words, we are back to status quo! *rolls eyes* I swear, there will be some actual development in their relationship in the next chapter. (And when I say development...)

Thank you to everyone who has left kudos and comments. You guys are truly too kind.
A little forward mobility, anyone?

I make an honest attempt to slither out of it.

I tell Nagisa Dr. Amakata has to be informed about my father’s plans to send his own private doctor out to the Platform—which, to be fair, is the truth—but Nagisa counters by saying that she is most likely at the officer’s mess right now anyway, where I do not have authorization to follow. Besides, I am still so shaky with raw adrenaline that any explanation I tried to give would make very little sense.

I follow Nagisa down two floors and past the grav gym where I run, to my least favorite room on the Platform.  We stop in an antechamber to grab our suits, not bothering with hoods or flippers, since we won’t be going very deep.

The lights are set to minimum in the Well, and the wavering, lucent shadows on the walls make me feel as if I am already underwater.  Nagisa fiddles with the control panel beside the door, bringing the submerged lights up a bit, so the pool is less a black void and more a softly glowing canyon of blue.  He turns back in time to catch my shudder.

“Do you really hate water that much?”

“I don’t hate it.  I don’t mind swimming, so much.  Really,” I insist, when Nagisa raises a disbelieving eyebrow.

Haltingly, I tell him about waking up during the augment procedure, subsumed by that hellish orange glow, unable to move, alarms blaring in my ears.  Up until now, only the medics involved in the procedure know what had happened.  And Haruka, too, since I had been so disoriented when I awoke in the recovery room that I had started blurting things out.

“Why didn’t you just tell Captain Sasabe that?” Nagisa asks.  “I mean, you could have at least told us.”

“That…that’s a very good question.” One I know the answer to, but cannot quite put into words, especially knowing how perplexed they all are by how my Elite brain works.  Making excuses would mean admitting to weakness, opening myself up for attack along another avenue, but it is more than that.  If I say it aloud, it means that it is real, not simply a fear that I have created and could overcome inside my own head.  It is a handicap, and I already have enough of those.  “I suppose I did not want you all to think I was asking for pity,” I say at last.

Nagisa’s expression is blank for a few seconds.  It may just be the strange light of the Well, but his eye are less luminous today, face paler, the slightest hint of dark circles beneath his eyes.  But when he smiles his face lights up.  “Let’s get in the water!”

We enter at the shallow end of the pool, which makes me feel childish and silly, but also absurdly grateful.  During training, we begin by diving as deep as we can, and that feeling of boring
downwards into the heavy darkness and pressure is part of what sets off my panic.

“You know, I woke up in a tank,” Nagisa says, as we walk further out to where the water is lapping at our chests. “The first time.”

“You mean when you were...” Powered-on? Activated? “...Born? I’m sorry, I don’t know the correct terms for it—.”

He laughs. “Born works.” The water has crept to his shoulders, dampening the fine hair at the nape of his neck. “The first thing I remember is waking up in a tank inside this weird...jelly shit.” He wrinkles his nose. “It was really bright and my skin was all sensitive, and I couldn’t breathe...”

“You do breathe, correct?” I am fascinated despite myself. “I’ve seen your breath mist on glass.”

Nagisa nods, chin tapping the surface of the water. “Yeah, I breathe. I don’t think that I would die if I couldn’t—I mean, I might shut down for a little while, but nothing would be, like, damaged. Not the way a human would be, anyway. I still needed an aquatic augment, just mine was a little different from yours.”

“Right,” I say, remembering how he had been led away into a separate operating room from the rest of us. “Was it...were you afraid? When you woke up?”

“Not really? I guess I sort of...didn’t know enough to be afraid.”

“You knew nothing? You were a blank slate?” That is a terrifying thought—to have the brain of a sixteen year old, the capacity for understanding, and have your mind perfectly empty.

Nagisa shakes his head. “I knew some stuff...like math and counting and...gravity.” His grin is cautiously sly. “I knew what sex was.”

“Y-Yeah?” We’re in the center of the pool now, moving much slower and easier than we ever would in training.

He giggles. “Yeah. Fuck, it was totally ridiculous. Like, they had to keep me restrained the first time they came in to talk to me, so I didn’t try to jump them like some horny vampire.”

I laugh along with him, but my face is hot and I am acutely aware of how little space there is between us—barely two feet of water. It would be so easy to reach out and touch him, see what he actually feels like when I am not panicking or shying away. But, as always, the moment passes and I do nothing.

“Okay—this is probably deep enough, you think?” Nagisa points downward with a thumb. The lights stop twelve feet down, and after that is nothing but black, soundless void, as dark as space. Darker, even. At least in space there are stars.

“I-I suppose,” I say, horrified to hear the tremor in my voice.

“It’s okay. You’re totally safe, remember? You can breathe underwater.”

I laugh shortly. “Yeah.”

He smiles, and the knot of anxiety inside me eases just the slightest bit. Fumbling for the control panel on my weight belt, I adjust the pressure in my suit, taking a gasping breath as I am pulled down beneath the surface. Above me, Nagisa’s legs kick lazily as he treads water, little flurries of bubbles bursting around his toes.
I try. I tell myself that I am safe, that Coach Sasabe is not waiting on the side of the pool to berate me for my mistakes. It’s just Nagisa here.

But try as I might, I cannot stop the fear from creeping back. I am sure that if I open my eyes the water around me will have changed from blue to red, that the alarms will begin to scream. My skin is heating, water around me growing hot—

I streak upward, breaking the surface and taking deep breaths of sticky, recycled air. Coughing, I reel right into Nagisa.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Warm fingers push my bangs out of my eyes. He chuckles softly. “Wow, you are pretty bad at it.”

I laugh, because it does not sound unkind coming from him. “You should become a motivational speaker, Nagisa,” I say, and laugh some more, coughing up the last of the water in my lungs.

“Yes, I could talk at graduations. How to go from an actual slave to a slave of the military in four easy steps.”

I blink an eye open. His smile is relaxed and as wry as I have ever seen it; it sounds like he’s joking, but I know he’s not. That makes me feel at once incredibly burdened and gloriously light—that he would trust me with the knowledge of his past despite everything I am and all I have done.

“Did it…does it really feel like slavery?” I smooth my hair back off my forehead, so it’s dripping down my neck and not into my eyes. I have never thought of droids as slaves. At least, not until recently.

“Not…not really. Not at first. Droids aren’t programmed to want to be free.”

“Bad for business,” I say.

“Right?” He swims in closer to me. “Okay, this time try not going down so far. Wouldn’t it be better if the pressure wasn’t so intense?”

I nod, take a deep, gasping breath and slip back down beneath the surface.

It’s alright, I tell myself, as the air escapes my mouth in increasingly larger bubbles. You just have to force yourself to do the opposite of what all your instincts are telling you to do.

I shut my eyes and open my mouth, and take a huge gulp of water. My lungs seize up, bracing for the inevitable choking. I swallow, and my head instantly clears, life rushing through my blood as the aquatic augment filters the oxygen from the water, expelling the excess through the augmented skin in the back of my neck and upper shoulders. It feels unbelievably weird, but it isn’t painful. I take another breath, and another. My head is freed from the usual oxygen-starved rush of panic, but the pressure of the water, the vast emptiness around me still sends a cold jolt through me.

I yearn for the surface, full of an animal certainty that the place I am right now is wrong.

A blur of movement makes me tense, throat closing up again, but then I see the warm glow of golden eyes, feel the heat of familiar skin as Nagisa takes my hands and squeezes my fingers in reassurance. Our night-vision augments aren’t supposed to be used when we aren’t on official missions (overuse will burn the retinas out remarkably fast, which has the potential to become expensive and, not to mention, painful) and we have drifted down far enough that his eyes are the only source of light—enough to just barely see his face.
He smiles, and then I smile, and here we are grinning at each other underwater in a military space station, hundreds of light years from home. That thought sends a new note of panic through me. Underwater, even old knowledge feels fresh and terrifying.

It’s as if Nagisa can feel my fear, because he moves in closer, until his body is a line of warmth against mine. His fingers splay across my neck, nothing more than a soft weight through the fiberskin of my suit. When he kisses me, his lips are a hot shock. Every other part of my body is numbed against temperature-change, which is good when traversing freezing cold oceans in enemy territory, but shit for a situation like this.

I try to kiss him back, the pressure of the water making my lips thick and clumsy—fish lips. All I taste is chlorine and the persistent warmth of his tongue, and a moment later I realize that I am breathing easily through my nose, aquatic augment taking over without me even having to think about it.

And I have no desire to be anywhere but here.

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At nineteen hundred hours, it is unlikely that Dr. Amakata will be in the Med Bay, but it is the only place I know to look for her. The officers and scientists can page us in our berths, but not the other way around. Too many possibilities of prank calls, I expect. Nagisa offers to come with me, but I decline. Dr. Amakata would feel less free to talk with him present, and besides, I need a few moments on my own to think myself into knots.

When we had resurfaced, Nagisa had chuckled and kissed me again, briefly and closed-mouthed. “I knew you could do it,” he said softly against my lips. I had been fully expecting him to invite me back to his berth again, but he hadn’t—just struck off for the side of the pool, leaving me in the center feeling exhilarated, accomplished, and admittedly frustrated.

I realize, as I walk back through the honeycomb of corridors of the Platform, that I would have gone with him, would’ve done…well, whatever he wanted me to do. But he had not asked; perhaps things were not as alright between us as I had thought. But he had kissed me…

I groan. Even putting aside the droid element altogether, this sort of things is complicated.

The Med Bay is its usual bright, clinical white, quiet except for the steady beep of monitors along the far wall, no doubt measuring some experiment of Research’s. A distant squirm of shame wells up, but I dispel it quickly. The part of me that still longs to be told that my assignment to Recon had been one great mistake is getting smaller everyday. And honestly, the thought of interacting with only Elites again makes me shudder.

I am wondering where I should begin my search, when I hear voices raised in argument.

“—On thin ice, Amakata! This could very well be taken as treason.” It is a high but masculine voice, authority thin and quivering, as if a stiff breeze would knock it over.

Dr. Amakata’s laugh laps at the end of his words like a slipstream. “Treason? Don’t threaten me, Erickson. And be careful throwing around words you don’t understand.”

Where are the voices coming from? There are no doors here to leave ajar.

“You were his technician, Miho! And you didn’t think of including that one little detail in your report?”
“I didn’t think it relevant, Jeff,” Dr. Amakata bites out, leaving little doubt to how she feels about the man using her first name. “The accusations were unfounded and ridiculous, so I disregarded them.”

“That’s not for you to decide!”

I creep closer to the readouts at the back of the room, and realize as I do that the voices are coming from one of the screens—most likely a live feed used for keeping an eye on patients or ongoing experiments that a researcher had neglected to turn off. Dr. Amakata is standing beside the sink in one of the exam rooms, backed literally into a corner. She is smacking the counter for emphasis as she speaks, rings flashing on her left hand. The camera is at such an angle that I can only see the feet of the person she is talking to, which does not tell me much—all of the officers wear the same shoes when they are on duty.

“What do you want me to say?” Dr. Amakata asks in exasperation. “That I regret supporting the recruitment? He’s a brilliant recruit, Erickson, and he’ll be a brilliant soldier.”

“Yes, but assigning him to Recon?” the man says, and I go rigid. “There’s no way that went through without that little slut getting down on his knees for someone.”

_They’re not talking about me_, I realize in a rush. _They’re talking about Nagisa._

Amakata snorts. “Sounds like you’re simply jealous it wasn’t you.” She shakes her head. “We all start somewhere. That doesn’t mean we have to stay there.”

“Yes, and you would know all about that, wouldn’t you, Lowlander?”

Dr. Amakata goes instantly still. “Get out of my lab,” she says, in a voice so layered with threat that I half expect to see a gun in her hand.

I realize with a flash of panic that whoever she had been speaking to is about to emerge in the outer bay—exactly where I’m standing. I slap the mute button on the screen, turning around and stepping away from the console just as a door slides open and a tall, willowy man with graying hair emerges. He is dressed in Research green and has two stars on his lapel.

He frowns when he sees me. “What are you doing here, Recruit?”

“I—I only…I’m here to see Dr. Amakata. I have a…meeting scheduled with her.”

Commander Erickson’s frown deepens, and I can’t blame him. That had come out sounding extremely suspicious, and not a little bit creepy. He leans back around the door and calls to Dr. Amakata, who emerges, still enraged. Her gaze softens slightly when she sees me.

“Oh, Rei. Recruit Ryugazaki.” She pushes her hair out of her eyes, visibly gathering herself. “Yes, thank you for coming. You can see yourself out, can’t you, Erickson?”

His scowl turns to a sneer as I pass him to follow Dr. Amakata into her lab, and I can feel his gaze burning into the back of my neck. I know she had only been trying to help, but I do not like the idea of Erickson knowing my name.

I follow her down the hall and into her office. She sits down at her desk and crosses her legs wearily. “Tell me you have good news.”

My thoughts are so saturated by the conversation I had overheard that for a moment I have forgotten why I’ve come. “Er…not exactly.”
I describe the exchange with my father, glossing over the reasons he gave for the insertion of the augment, as well as the fact that I had lost my temper so shamefully.

“And that isn’t even the worst part,” I say. “Not only will he not give us access to my records, he’s sending his private physician here to fix my augment.”

She stares at me. “Here? You mean, to the Platform?”

I nod.

“That…” She is out of her chair and pacing the few feet between her desk and the wall, arms wrapped around her tablet, holding it to her chest as I have noticed she has the habit to do when under pressure. “That’s not possible.”

“I don’t think he cares about that.” My father has never been the sort of man to let anything get in his way—whether it be legality or reality.

Dr. Amakata sighs. “I wouldn’t worry, Rei. The most that physician is going to do is waste two days on a shuttle. I’ll make sure he doesn’t get onto the Platform.”

Some of the tension in my shoulders eases, but not all of it, because even though I know that Dr. Amakata is extremely capable, she has never gone up against my father.

“Is there anything else?”

I hesitate. For a moment I almost admit that I had overheard her conversation with Erickson. I doubt she would be angry, especially as it had not been my fault. After all—it does concern one of my squad mates. But the circles beneath her eyes are larger than I have ever seen them, and I leave without further comment. Whatever it was they had been discussing, I was not going to make her go through it again.

When I arrive back at my berth, Makoto and Haruka are gone—probably down to the mess hall for dinner. I am distantly aware that I am hungry, but I am so overcome by the last few hours that being near that many people feels like it will shake me totally apart.

I sink down on my cot, rub at my eyes with the palms of my hands. My skin is vibrating with all that I have learned today.

As foolish as it sounds, there had been a part of me that hoped the emotional augment would all turn out to be a mistake. A misunderstanding. How something like that could happen I have no idea, but really, my father didn’t have to be so god damn smug about it. He’s so afraid of having his perfect world disturbed, he refuses to see reason.

And Nagisa had heard…at least some of it. How long had he been standing there? Certainly long enough to hear the part about the repression of my sexuality, to hear me pleading and then being blatantly disregarded. Perhaps that is why had been so apologetic, so quick to forgive. He feels sorry for me.

But whatever his motives, he had kissed me in the pool, and I had not panicked, from the water or from his touch.

I smile into my hands. Two victories, then.
Besides, whatever else is going on in my brain, there is one part of the emotional augment that seems to have ceased functioning altogether, and recalling how Nagisa’s mouth had felt against mine is making that abundantly clear.

Lying back on my cot, I unfasten my trousers and run my fingers lightly over myself, still surprised every time that such a simple thing can send such a thrill running up my spine.

I had experimented with masturbation before I arrived on the Platform, of course, but not very often—certainly not at the frequency most males my age seem to. But now, here, with Nagisa always at the forefront of my mind, I am experiencing difficulty not touching myself whenever I have the time and opportunity.

I have that time now, so I wrap a hand around my cock and start to stroke, tipping my head back and closing my eyes. My legs are sore from training and from the low-frequency buzz of tension that coils through my whole body, and the muscles twitch and jump as I point my toes. Even as I try to make myself relax, I keep alert for any sound of approaching footsteps out in the corridor. As ubiquitous an act as this is, I still don’t want Makoto walking in on me doing it.

I’ve got to be fast, then, because dinner is almost over. I tighten my grip, shortening my strokes just toward the head, and picture—rather guiltily—the way Nagisa had looked the week before in the VIP room of *Caligula*, on his hands and knees, head thrown back in unaffected pleasure. I edit out the Combat recruit with the squished nose and insert myself in his place. *I’m* the one behind Nagisa, *I’m* the one pulling those noises from him.

Is that what I want? Do I really want to do that to him?

The thought sends a hot swoop of lust through me, and I quicken my strokes. That seems to answer that question well enough. I recall how hot his mouth had been when it had opened against mine, and I groan, my body shaking with climax as I imagine just how it would feel to be inside him.

I shower after that, washing away the chlorine, sweat, and...other fluids that have adhered to me throughout the day. My muscles are considerably less tense than they had been, but if possible, I feel even more conflicted than before. Lusting after Nagisa had been one thing when I had thought he was just a normal, albeit very friendly, human boy. But now that I know what he really is...

If I cannot look at him without wanting him, without imagining myself making love to him (or whatever other tepid euphemism you want to use) how does that separate me from the man who commissioned him for only that purpose? From the combat recruit, and whoever else he’d had sex with that night? Surely so many would only see him as a droid, as a possession to be used and put aside whenever the mood dictates.

I am realizing that this is the true horror of my father’s organization, and those like it. They have split the world into clear categories—droids, humans, Elites, Lowlanders—and refuse to see things any other way. Droids must be treated like the slaves they are, and eldest sons must carry on the family tradition, maintain the family reputation. Keep themselves in line.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I wrote this chapter over a two-day period, one hell of a sprint for me. Once I got started, I found it very hard to stop. Hopefully you'll see why.

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about!”

I hear Captain Sasabe’s whoop from ten feet underwater and halfway across the pool. My laughter sends a big, dancing bubble out through my mouth, my augment momentarily seizing as it senses the air moving out too fast. Laughter, sneezing, even attempts at speech—all of that is too much for the augment to handle. If we’re ever on an assignment where we have to converse with each other, or with Gou, we’ll be wearing helmets. Most of our missions will be about stealth, speed, and preparedness. No talking required.

I surface at the far end of the pool, to applause and Gou’s, “about fucking time!” I want to suggest she try it if she thinks it’s so easy, but then Nagisa offers me a hand up out of the pool, and my annoyance evaporates. The pressure of his skin sends a slow roll of warmth through me.

Sasabe claps me on the shoulder. “Way to get your shit together, Ryugazaki! We’re still dead last in the squad rankings, but at least I won’t have to kick your ass out of the Confederation.”

“Uh, thank you, sir.” Had that actually been a possibility? What happens to recruits who can’t complete their training? I have never actually heard of anyone returning to Earth before their tour is over. At least, not any Elites.

“Awesome, Rei,” Makoto says, as we change out of our wetsuits at the end of training. The atmosphere is light for once, rather than weighed down with my constant failure.

“Congratulations.”

I shrug. “I haven’t done anything that you all didn’t do first.”

Makoto smiles. “Still.”

Nagisa reaches around me to snag his shirt from his locker, arm brushing mine so casually that it could be passed off as accidental. But from the way his lips twitch, I know it isn’t. We haven’t discussed the kiss, but neither of us is ignoring it either, if that makes any sense at all. It’s there, electrifying the air between us. At least, that’s how it feels to me.

Captain Sasabe walks in, frowning down at his tablet. Typically, he waits outside in the hall with Gou before we all head to the mess hall, since she can’t follow us into the locker rooms. I am grateful for that regulation, since I’m sure she’d do it in a second otherwise.

“Ryugazaki,” Sasabe says, still squinting at his tablet like it has insulted his haircut, “You’re supposed to go to the Med Bay. Right away.” He arches an eyebrow at me. “Apparently you’re dying and are in urgent need of medical attention.”
“What?”

My hand freezes on the door of my locker. What with Dr. Amakata’s assurances and the relative quiet from the augment over the past few days, I had almost forgotten my father’s promise, and his threats.

His physician. Here. Ready and waiting to fix me.


I nod tightly, cutting him off. Makoto and Haruka both look enormously confused—I’ll probably have to explain a few things later, especially if Gou gets wind of this. Which, of course, she will.

—

“Nagisa, you can’t.”

“Sure I can. They said you have to go. They didn’t say anything about me not going. Besides, it’s not like I have to eat lunch.”

I groan, but don’t protest further. When I had left the locker room, Nagisa had followed me. I have grown a short blond shadow with a tendency to mutter, “I can’t fucking believe this,” every thirty seconds or so.

“You’re not going to let them do it, right?” Nagisa scampers to keep up with my much longer strides. “Rei!” He takes hold of my arm when I don’t answer. “Right?”

It’s the fear in his voice, more than anything else, that makes me slow down and take a few breaths.

“I—I don’t know,” I answer after a moment. “I don’t want them to.”

“Then they can’t make you!”

“You don’t know my father,” I tell him, just as I had told Dr. Amakata.

“But your father isn’t here, right? It’s just some shitty doctor.”

We’ve reached the Med Bay. I slow to a halt and realize that my hands are trembling. Nagisa’s right—my father isn’t here, but he doesn’t have to be. He’s like a spider, sitting at the center of his enormous web. Dr. Myles is just one its many strands.

“Rei.” Nagisa takes me by the arms and turns me to face him. His hair is damp, curling at his temples and the nape of his neck. Neither of us had taken the time to use the jets to dry off thoroughly. “Don’t let them fuck you up again.” He grins, eyes gleaming in the dim hallway. “Because all I could think about all through training was how much I want to suck your cock.” He squeezes my arms for emphasis. “And if you get that augment fixed, you won’t be able to let me.”

It’s a struggle to swallow, to remember to breathe as he leans in and says against my ear, “And believe me—you really, really want to let me.”

Incentive successfully implanted, he backs off, putting his hands behind his back and rocking on his heels, the picture off innocence once again.

“I…” I can’t maneuver my tongue well enough to turn my thoughts into words, so I just nod and press the release beside the Med Bay doors.
Dr. Amakata is standing just inside, waiting for me. There is a high, hectic flush to her cheeks, and although she is far calmer than she had been the evening I overheard her arguing with Commander Erickson, I have ever seen her so angry. She holds up a hand as Nagisa tries to follow me inside.

“Not you.”

Nagisa scowls. “But Amakata, I—.”

“Your presence won’t help here, Nagisa, believe me.”

He crosses his arms. “Fine.” He steps back out into the corridor, and the doors close. I would give my Elite status to be on the other side of them.

“Follow me,” Dr. Amakata says curtly, and I let her lead me into her cramped office at the end of the hall.

My father’s physician is there, looking abrasively out-of-place in his suit and tie and back-combed hair. He stands up when we enter, offering a hand and giving me a wide, false grin.

“Rei Ryugazaki. How are you, son?” He nearly crushes my fingers when we shake hands.

“Very well, Dr. Myles,” I respond, giving him an equally simpering smile. “So well, in fact, that I honestly think you wasted your time coming out here.”

Myles waves a careless hand. “Not at all, not at all. Anything for our best and brightest. Your father sends his greetings, by the way.” It is a subtle threat, but it’s there. Anything I do or say here will get back to Daisuke Ryugazaki, one way or another. It’s why I had left my jacket in the locker room—the one with the stripes of Recon blue down the arms and across the collar. Dressed as I am now, I could be in any division, although I see his eyes go to my arms and shoulders, which are a bit larger than they had been when I left. Research has no need to build muscle.

“How kind of him.”

Dr. Amakata crosses her arms. “Cut the Elite bullshit, or we’ll be here all day.”

Dr. Myles and I look at her with equal expressions of shock, though mine is delighted and his is certainly more scandalized. She ignores them both and indicates me with a flick of her hand.

“Rei, would you mind telling Dr. Myles what you told me?”

“Uh…” I’ve told her a lot of things.

“Namely that you don’t want your augment replaced, but rather removed.”

Dr. Myles frowns. “Don’t put words in his mouth,” he says, like this is a courtroom and I am a witness she is leading.

I nod. “She’s right, sir. I think my father must have misunderstood. I have no desire to have my augment replaced. I’m very sorry to have made you come all of this way for nothing.” I say it with a hard push of finality, to indicate that the discussion is over. My father does it all the time. It comes out of my mouth much less convincingly.

Indeed, all Dr. Myles seems to be is amused at my tepid attempts at Elite exchange. That’s what I get for speaking to only Lowlanders for a month and a half.

He shakes his head and chuckles. “Rei, Rei, Rei. I admit I was afraid of this.” He heaves a
dramatic sigh and looks at the wall, as if searching for a window he can gaze out of wistfully, but we’re in space, so he doesn’t have much luck. “The degradation of the augment is affecting your judgment. You aren’t fit to make decisions for yourself.”

I open my mouth to exclaim at the pure absurdity of this, but Dr. Amakata cuts in between us smoothly. “If Recruit Ryugazaki is unsound of mind—a diagnosis that I by no means concur with—than his medical decisions must be made by his most immediate family member or, if there is no family member present, by his attending physician. And since Rei is a member of the military, I am that physician.” Her voice remains totally steady all the way through.

Erickson had called Amakata Lowlander, but I can’t see anything but Elite when I look at her. I know she is my superior, but in this moment I could have kissed her.

Dr. Myles gives another of his condescending, laughably insincere sighs. God, he isn’t even trying. Does he really have that little respect for me? “You would be right of course, Dr. Amakata, if it weren’t for—.” He reaches into his jacket, pulling out a small, sleek handheld uplink. “—Express directions from Rei’s father as-to his wishes concerning Rei’s wellbeing.” He smiles. “I believe you said responsibility defaults to his attending physician when there are no family members present.” He wriggles the handheld in her face. “It has the Ryugazaki digital seal. Everything is good and legal.”

Amakata snatches the device before he can hit her in the nose with it and pulls it back to where she can read it. Her eyes narrow. My palms and neck are clammy with sick sweat, and my stomach is roiling. Can’t she read any faster?

When she looks back up, her eyes gleam with tight, hot anger, and for a moment I she’ll throw the link at his head. Instead she sets it down carefully on her desk. Her lips press together briefly before she says, “I can’t have an operating theatre prepared before this evening.”

“Wait, what?” I look between them, scarcely able to believe what I’m hearing.

Dr. Myles doesn’t even bother to glance my way, just picks up his uplink and slips it back into his pocket. “Very good. I knew you would come around, my dear.” He smiles, and I want to punch him in his shiny white teeth. Dr. Amakata’s military rank means that she and he are technically of the same station—he has absolutely no right to talk down to her. “I’ll be back at eleven hundred hours.” He finally nods toward me. “Make sure he’s prepped.”

Amakata says nothing, just waits for him to leave. Then she sinks down into her desk chair and puts her head in her hands. I don’t know what she’s so upset about—she’s not the one about to have her whole personality dismantled.

“How…how did he even get onto the Platform?” I ask, not managing to make the words to sound anything but an accusation. “You told me there was no way!”

“The order to came down from the top tier of Command. Your father is…is clearly a well-connected man.”

*I told you that,* I want to shout in response. Instead I take a deep, shaking breath and ask “What—what can we do?”

Dr. Amakata doesn’t look up.

“Doctor!” I say, voice made infinitely louder by the confined space.

Dr. Amakata drops her hands and looks up at me. And now here is all the evidence I need that she
had not been born an Elite, because the defeat in her eyes is uncensored, as raw as an open wound.

“Nothing, Rei. There’s nothing I can do.”

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I don’t recall how I get out of the Med Bay, if Dr. Amakata escorts me out or if I reel past the bank of monitors on my own, but eventually I find myself several hallways and a floor away, leaning against the hot metal wall, the world slowly closing in. It’s like the panic I had felt underwater, except worse, because no matter how hard I try, there is no resurfacing.

I manage to make it to my berth without falling apart, but I am trembling so badly that I can barely hold myself still enough to let the sensor scan my retina. It’s not as if being in here will be any better—it’s even smaller than the corridors—but at least here I can fall to pieces without everyone on the Platform knowing about it. I can be alone. If I ask for privacy, Makoto will understand.

But once I am inside, it is not Makoto who is waiting for me.

“Nagisa!”

He jumps up from where he was sitting on the edge of my bed. “Rei! I’m so sorry, I tried to wait, but then an officer came by and wanted to know what I was ‘creeping around for’—.” Nagisa is talking so fast that I am only getting about every other word. “But seriously, he’s the creepy one, he just hates me because I wouldn’t fuck him, and—.” He breaks off as he sees the look on my face. “Rei… Rei, what happened?”

I must look really, really bad, because he’s got his hands on my shoulders, guiding me over to the cot and sitting me down. “She…” My voice shakes like dry leaves in the wind. “Dr. Amakata can’t stop it. They’re replacing my augment tonight.”

“Fuck no, Rei, they can’t—.”

How strange it is, I think, as my breathing cracks and splinters and finally breaks into a hacking sob, that the thing I’m afraid of is the one thing that could have prevented me from losing control of my emotions?

“Rei…” Nagisa’s warm fingers touch my cheek, thumb brushing away tears as soon as they form. “You can cry.” I hear the smile in his voice. “You won’t embarrass me, swear to god.”

My laugh is thick and watery, and after a few deep breaths I manage to get myself back under control. Even without the emotional augment functioning, I am still an Elite. I will not collapse, I will not.

“I-I have to leave,” I say. “Before they can fix the augment.”

“Leave? How?”

“There are escape pods, aren’t there?” Even without an access code, I am fairly sure I could override the security protocol on the launchers. Escape pods are not typically a hot item for thieves.

“Rei…” Nagisa is still stroking my face, and his voice very clearly says he thinks I’m insane. “Where would you go? Pods don’t have enough thrust to get you anywhere.”

“It could get me to Ithaca,” I say steadily, even as my mind is reeling with possibilities. “The
Confederation won’t follow me there.”

“What? No, fuck no!” His reply is surprisingly emphatic, enough so that I blink up at him, momentarily derailed. He is glaring down at me, eyes shining, jaw set. “You wouldn’t survive two days alone on Ithaca!”

“But—.”

“You know I’m right.”

“I—.” I do know he’s right. I know absolutely no one there besides Ola, who is most likely not feeling particularly charitable to me, since I still owe her money for the ruined clothes. And if Dr. Amakata is right, my augment’s degradation is only going to get worse. If the gangs don’t get me, my own brain certainly will.

“Then what do I do, Nagisa?” My voice comes out in a tremor. “I don’t know what to do.”

Admitting weakness so easily now. Maybe you really do need that augment.

I squeeze my eyes shut, as if I can compress that voice down into nothing. After Dr. Myles’ procedure, that voice will be all I ever hear.

“You’ll still be you, right?” Nagisa’s smile is full of flimsy encouragement. “I mean, it’s gonna control your emotions, but you’ll still be—.”

I shake my head. “You don’t understand. You’ve only known me when the augment was already beginning to break down. Back in Sky City, I was…” Calm. Acerbic. Unruffled. And cold. Always so cold. “…Different.”

With the augment repaired, will I even be able to stay in the Confederation? Or will I be so filled with disdain for Recon and for my squad that I will need to be reassigned, or discharged altogether?

“I can’t go back to that.” Dammit, I’m going to start crying again. This sense of utter helplessness is maddening, a choking blackness that threatens to force its way into my throat and claw out my insides.

Nagisa presses close against me, standing between my legs, and despite the solid weight of the despair closing in on me, I feel a slow pulse of desire that makes my breath stutter.

I put my hand on top of his, momentarily struck by how much longer my fingers are, how his wrists look so fragile when compared to mine.

“Rei, I’m so sorry, I wish—.”

I don’t give him the chance to tell me what he wishes, because what’s the point? I grab him by the front of his shirt and pull him down, the force of it sending me reeling back, splaying him on top of me. His eyes widen in momentary shock—he had not expected me to do that. He had expected me to continue feeling sorry for myself and wasting time.

Very quickly, though, his eyes narrow and the corners of his lips pull up. He leans in to kiss me, running his hands up my sides, over my pectorals, and up the line of my neck to finally spread out across my jaw. Our noses knock together and he trembles with laughter. He tips my head slightly to correct the angle.
I don’t know how to kiss—it’s not something you can learn from a book or net-site, perfect on theory alone—but I don’t care. I need to get my fill, because when I wake up in the morning, I won’t want to kiss him at all.

My left hand splayed against the mattress is the only thing keeping us upright, and when I let my muscles go limp, I collapse down on my back. He makes a soft, hungry noise and follows me, crawling in to straddle one of my thighs. I taste little flashes of his tongue and my stomach trembles.

Nagisa spreads his legs further and rocks his hips and I realize with a hot jolt that he is hard and rubbing himself against me, moving his hips in tiny undulations. I feel the shape of his cock through the cyberskin pants, and some far-off region of my brain that is still thinking rationally tells me of course he would move like this—I’ve seen him fighting hand to hand, doing things I could only have pulled off in a grav-gym, if there.

“Rei, oh god—.” He bites at my lips, fingers lacing tight into my hair. “I want you so bad, Rei, you have no idea—.”

But I do. Finally.

Back in Sky City, I’d always thought of arousal as a distraction, an unavoidable bodily function that was soon enough dealt with. But now it’s thrumming through my entire body, filling me up until there is no more room for breath.

He gasps against my mouth, above me, grinding down against my thigh. “Rei, it’s been too long— Hazukis, we—.” His skin burns like he’s running a fever, and the hunger in his eyes is shocking.

They had to restrain me or I would have thrown myself at them like some horny vampire.

I recall the hollows in his cheeks, the dark circles beneath his eyes, how he has not looked his usual radiant picture of health in days. Has he been neglecting to take care of himself because of me? Because I had reacted so badly the last time I saw him with someone else?

“Rei, if you don’t stop—.” His voice trembles with warning.

“I’m not doing anything,” I say, but I pull him down more firmly on top of me and slide my hands beneath the tight, stretchy material of his shirt, feeling the flex of muscles as he moves. I want to drown myself in this heat, catch it and pull it into myself, because surely nothing, not even an emotional augment, could chase this away.

“Rei, it feels good—ah!” His hips jerk once, twice, and then he collapses on top of me with a low moan. The front of his pants and my thigh are...sticky.

After a moment, Nagisa groans from where he has face-planted into my shoulder. “God dammit, Rei.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “You made me come in my pants.”

My face burns, but I laugh. “I’m pretty sure you did that to yourself.”

He picks himself up, perched above me on all-fours, face pink, his eyes once again glowing like a stoked fire. “Sorry.” His voice is lazy and his mouth stretches into a soft, cloudy grin. “I promise I’ll last longer next time.”

His smile fades as he realizes what he’s said, that there isn’t going to be a next time. His shoulders slump and he presses his forehead against mine. “We’ll still be friends, though, right? I mean, we’ll still be squad mates.”
My body, which only moments ago had been a bright galaxy of sensations, has become a cold, white space. I feel like I am a temporary structure, easily collapsible into its component parts.

I extricate myself from his embrace, moving back to sit against the wall. “Of course we will,” I say, more to convince myself than to assure him.

Nagisa’s gaze has drifted in a southwards direction, settling firmly between my legs. “Your turn.” Apparently, he intends to focus on the positive. “I’ll even let you take your pants off first.”

“Nagisa—.” I am still aroused, but this no longer feels like the time. Why allow myself a taste of something that I will never have again?

He leans down, planting a kiss on my stomach, just above the waistband of my pants. Thin, tingling flutters move out from the point of contact. I put a hand on his shoulder, intending to push him away, but just end up holding on to him as he licks a slow line up the center of my abdomen.

The knock on the berth door makes us both jump, Nagisa narrowly avoiding getting hit in the crotch by my knee. At first I’m sure it must be Makoto back from lunch, but then I remember, of course, Makoto wouldn’t knock.

After a moment, Nagisa stands up and half-walks, half-skids over to the control panel. When he presses the door-release, he angles his body at forty-five degrees, no doubt to hide the spreading stain on his pants. He can’t hide the mussed hair or the kiss-bitten lips, though.

From where he is standing, he blocks my view of the visitor. Glancing back at me briefly, he wedges himself more firmly between the door and the jamb. I hear the quick murmur of a hastily whispered conversation, too low for me to make sense of.

When Nagisa closes the door, the saucy look is gone from his eyes, replaced by one of contemplation. For a moment, I think he is holding something behind his back, but then he brings his hands together to twist his fingers in a quick, anxious dance.

“Who was that?” I ask, as he sits back down, scooting toward me across the cot.

He drapes his arms over my shoulders. “Just… just Gou. She needed to ask me something.”

“Oh.” He goes back to kissing me, which is most likely why it takes a few moments for his words to register as off. “Wait—this is my berth. Why would Gou come looking for you here?”

That’s when I feel the sting on the back of my neck. At first I think Nagisa has dug his nails into my skin.

“Ouch! Wh—.”

Blackness rushes in from the corners of my eyes, splashing waves of dark haze across my vision. The last thing I hear before the world goes dark is Nagisa’s whispered, “I’m sorry.” Then I am lying in a void, his eyes burning above me like distant stars.
Chapter 16

The sun in my dreams is white hot, the azure glimmer of the water too bright to look at. My feet are buried in the sand and sweat creeps down my neck in tiny increments. The voices around me are happy, and when I open my hand, warm fingers intertwine with mine. I don’t want to leave this place.

Inevitably, I begin to wake as soon as I think this, the slow lapping of the waves slipping seamlessly into the restless murmur of wind through leaves. I am lying in a narrow cot with stiff white blankets. Above me, glimpses of blue sky shine through a canopy of green and gold.

Where am I?

The metallic tang of panic coats my throat, and as my heart rate increases, a low chime goes off. The noise is familiar enough for me to calm myself and answer my own question. I am still on the Platform, in the med bay. I spend a few delirious moments wondering where the trees and sky have come from, before I realize, of course, that it’s a holoscreen. It’s supposed to be soothing.

I roll onto my side, grunting at the effort. Across the room, Gou and Haruka are speaking quietly. Or maybe arguing. They are both dressed in training clothes, temples threaded with perspiration. Gou catches sight of me over Haruka’s shoulder and puts a hand on his arm.

“Look—he’s awake.” Gou propels Haruka toward the door. “Go get Miho.”

Haruka doesn’t protest, not even at being manhandled like a dog on a leash. He just nods at me and leaves. Gou watches him go, arms folded lightly across her stomach. She shuffles one of her feet awkwardly for a second.

“How’s everything up here?” She taps the side of her head. “Still a fancy genius?”

“I...think so.”

She points at herself. “What’s my name?”

“Gou.”

“Okay, what’s your name?”

I rub at the sleep in my eyes. “Did I get hit on the head?”

Finally, she grins, which is comforting. I don’t like seeing Gou nervous. It’s almost more unsettling than waking up in a hospital bed.

“What…what happened?” My lips feel fleshy and strange, like I haven’t used them in days.

Gou moves closer to the cot and I try to roll toward her, but the tug of the IV needles in the back of my neck stops me.

“Do you remember anything?”

I begin to say no, but then I realize that isn’t right. I remember the hopelessness, the empty burn of
despair weighing me down.

The memory is a laser-burst between the eyes. “The augment! Is that what happened? Am I—“

Shit, had they repaired it? Do I feel any different? More insufferable, less insufferable? Do I still like boys?

“Not exactly,” Gou says with a strange little laugh. “No augment, just—.”

The door swishes back open and Haruka returns, Nagisa following so close behind him he is practically stepping on the backs of his shoes.

“That’s weird,” Gou says cocking her head. “I remember Dr. Amakata being much more brunette. And much less slutty.”

Nagisa sticks out a bright pink tongue in her direction, before turning to me. The tongue goes back in and his eyes flick to the floor briefly before he says, “How do you feel, Rei?”

“I—.”

I remember.

Nagisa waiting for me in my berth, Nagisa kissing me back when I pull him down on top of me. Rubbing himself against me like he couldn’t stop even if he tried, like I am too much of a temptation. Nagisa kissing my bare stomach. The stinging pinch on the back of my neck and then —

I’m sorry.

The alarm goes off as my heart rate spikes again. Nagisa takes a step toward the bed, glowing eyes heavy with concern, but before he can say anything else Dr. Amakata arrives, Makoto just behind her.

“Good to see you conscious, Recruit Ryugazaki.” She walks briskly to the monitor behind my bed and turns off the alert, switching out the tubes of saline and whatever else they are filling me with, before stepping back into view and checking something off on her tablet. “Your whole squad has been anxious to see you.”

Gou and Nagisa exchange a quick look and Makoto smiles at the floor. They are all acting so strangely—even Haruka is hovering somewhere between smug and shamefaced.

“How did I—.”

“You’re really very lucky,” Dr. Amakata goes on. She turns off the holoscreen, which I’m grateful for. It’s making me dizzy. “White Fever can be a terribly damaging viral infection.”

“White Fever?” I repeat. “I was ill?”

Dr. Amakata nods emphatically. “Yes, very ill. So ill, in fact that it was absolutely out of the question to do anything that might compromise your immune system such as, for instance, put you under anesthesia or perform any sort of invasive procedure.”

At first I have no idea what she’s talking about, but as I see her lips curving up into a smile, it begins to dawn on me. Too sick for invasive procedures…

“That augment,” I say. “It would have been too dangerous to have it repaired.”
Dr. Amakata nods sagely. “Such a shame for poor Dr. Myles, after coming all the way here.”

Gou snickers. “You should have seen the son of a bitch,” she says. “I didn’t know people could really turn that color.”

“Where is he?” I ask.

“Back on Earth,” Amakata says. “He had State sanction to be on the Platform, but only for twenty-four hours. At the end of that time, he had to leave, whether or not he had done what he came for.”

“So…” I try to sit up, but the room wants to start spinning, so I stop. “That means I can’t have the augment?”

“Not for another few weeks, at least. Possibly a month.” Dr. Amakata gives a little rolling shrug. “It depends on how your vitals are reading.”

A cold, tight weight inside me is loosening by degrees, coiling away like smoke into the sky. A month. That’s more time than I had before, at any rate.

My gaze moves to Nagisa, who still looks slightly abashed. “You injected me with something?”

Before he can respond, Dr. Amakata cuts in, “None of us have any idea what you’re talking about, Rei. Or, you known, the fact that we could all be court-martialed for it.”

I nod to show her I understand. My thoughts feel like a star, burning hot and ever-expanding. “What…what about my father?”

Dr. Amakata shrugs. “He’s welcome to lodge a formal complaint. But I don’t think there’s much arguing with a viral infection.”

Gou and Nagisa chuckle. Even Makoto coughs politely into a fist. Haruka is smiling. They’re all here—my whole squad. I went to sleep, and I woke up, and I don’t hate them.

“Thank you.” There is emotion in my voice, and for once I am not ashamed of it. “Thank you all —.”

Dr. Amakata holds up a hand. “Don’t thank us just yet. When I say you aren’t fit to undergo surgery, I mean it. Any surgery. Including the one to remove your augment, when we finally get our hands on your files.”

I glance uneasily toward Haruka, Makoto, and Gou, but if they had been a part of this, then obviously they know everything.

“Okay,” I say.

“Also,” Dr. Amakata goes on, “You’re on convalescence for three weeks. Which means you won’t be going on your first mission.”

The damn heart-rate monitor chimes again. “What?”

“The mission is in two weeks,” Makoto points out helpfully.

“You won’t be strong enough by then—at least not according to the Confederation’s standards.” Dr. Amakata lays her wrist against my forehead. Most likely, she has some sort of scanning or heat-sensing augment. Most doctors do. “Your fever is down, but it isn’t gone. You’ll stay in the Med Bay for the next couple days, at least.”
Privately, I wonder why she couldn’t have chosen a slightly less potent virus to infect me with, but I do not want to sound ungrateful. Besides, what did I know about epidemiology? This may have been the safest choice.

So instead I just nod. “At least I won’t have to listen to Makoto snore.”

Makoto laughs. “I don’t snore.”

Gou wrinkles her nose. “I don’t know, you look kind of like a guy who snores.”

A brief moment of panic crosses Makoto’s face. “What does that mean?”

“Alright, children,” Dr. Amakata says, glancing down at her tablet. “The patient needs rest, and you all need to get back to training.”

“Training doesn’t start for another half hour—,” Gou protests.

Dr. Amakata points at the door.

They leave, Makoto still looking mildly concerned. He doesn’t snore—I’m not even sure why I said it. Since when have I known these people long enough to tease them? Is that something that happens all at once, or gradually?

Nagisa is still standing beside my bed, and I expect Dr. Amakata to urge him out as well, but she doesn’t, just goes back to checking readings on the monitors, updating the numbers in her tablet.

“Don’t keep him up for too long, Nagisa,” she says as she leaves, and again I get the odd impression of familiarity. Then the door slides closed and I am left alone with Nagisa.

He’s worrying the hem of his Recon jacket between his fingertips, and all at once I am struck by the sheer detail and artistry that has gone into him. He’s a droid with nervous habits.

“Nagisa, it’s okay,” I say after a few moments of silence. “I’m not angry.”

He looks up. Like in the pool the other day, his eyes are slightly dimmed and his cheeks are hollow. “I had no idea how sick it would make you,” he says, voice thin. “Gou—Gou just came to the door with the injection gun and said that if I wanted to stop them from fucking your head up, I had to use it. There wasn’t even time for her to tell me what it was. She…she just told me to trust her.”

“So it really was Gou at the door.”

He nods. “Dr. Amakata gave it to her. I guess if I hadn’t been there she would have tried to do it herself.”

I laugh, the sound wheezing in my chest. “She probably would have just knocked me out.” Gou always seems more inclined toward violence than subterfuge.

He echoes my laugh, but it’s forced and uneasy.

I reach out a hand toward him, but I don’t think he sees it. “Everything’s okay. I’m fine. I sort of…feel like shit, but…this is better than having the augment repaired.”

Finally, finally, he meets my eyes. “Really?”

“Yes.” I say it without a moment of hesitation. White Fever I can come back from. The augment,
though…that would have made me the perfect son. The perfect Ryugazaki. And this time, it would hold. No mistakes, no shoddy workmanship. My father values his investments more than that.

Nagisa’s hand is warm when he puts it in mine. My stomach trembles at the memory of what we had been doing last time I was conscious, but I am still too foggy to feel much of anything past that.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Nagisa says. “And, you know, still you.”

“Me too,” I say. Nothing like the threat of the complete erasure of your personality to make you appreciate it.

He leans toward me, and I shy back. “I’m probably still contagious.”

His lips twitch up. “I don’t get sick. I’d climb into bed with you if I didn’t think Amakata would shove a stethoscope up my ass.”

I groan, and he takes that opportunity to kiss me, deeply, hands fistling tight in my hair, fingertips stroking lightly across the punctures from the IV needles, where the skin is sensitive and slightly enflamed. He is so warm, mouth so soft that for a moment I want to pull him down next to me and risk Dr. Amakata’s rage.

Nagisa kisses the curve of my jaw, nips at my ear. Behind us, my heart rate monitor chimes. We break apart, Nagisa’s giggles hot against my ear. “You should probably sleep.”

“Do you sleep?”

“Huh?”

I shrug. My mind is having trouble keeping up with my tongue after tasting Nagisa’s. “I was just wondering.”

He laughs. “I sleep. That part’s human, I guess.” He squeezes my hand, and I’m almost certain the glow in his eyes has deepened.

--

The next time I wake up it is a much less gentle experience. A medic I have never seen before is shaking me by the shoulder, eyes insistent. What, is the fucking Platform on fire?

“Recruit Ryugazaki, it’s your mother.”

I blink at him. “What?”

“Your mother.”

“She’s here?” I crane my neck to try and see around him.

“She’s calling from Sky City.”

“Oh, right,” I say, feeling foolish.

“I told her you were asleep, but she insisted. I’ll pull her up on the screen.”

“O-Okay.”
A moment later my mother’s face appears on the panel opposite my bed. I’m glad the medic hadn’t put her on the ceiling screen—my mother’s enormous face looking down on me from on high when I’m only really half awake is not particularly appealing.

She is dressed in dinner clothes—a pale pink dress and small white jacket, her hair up in a twist. “Rei?” She frowns.

“I’m here, Mother,” I say, recalling that she can’t see me.

“Rei, darling!” She puts a hand to her mouth, rings glittering. From the movement of the light and the steady hum in the background, I can tell she is in a car—one of the Ryugazaki fleet, I imagine.

“Is everything alright?”

“I should be asking you that. White Fever is horrid—I can’t believe you caught it. What are they thinking, letting something like that loose on a military vessel?” she says, like it’s a dog that jumped a fence.

“I’m alright, Mother. I’m fine.”

“Your father and I were so concerned. They wouldn’t even let Edward stay and see to your care—they threw him out on the first shuttle back to Earth.”

It takes me a few moments to remember that Edward is Dr. Myles’ first name. “I have an excellent medic here on the Platform, Mother. I’m being very well taken care of.”

“I imagined you would be, but your father still seemed awfully upset.”

I don’t want to lie to her, so I say nothing.

A few moments later she goes on. The Sky City streetlights leave her face ghostly pale. “I am planning a trip to Aurora next week. Would you like to join me?”

“Aurora?” That, I had not been expecting. “Why?”

She shrugs elegantly. “It has been a difficult few months, what with your leaving and the explosion, and your father…” Her eyes flicker out into the hectic glow of the city.

“What about Father?”

“Nothing, nothing,” she demurs, and just like that, her smile is back, more brilliant than ever. “I just need a vacation. And I would love to spend it with my son.”

I am unexpectedly touched. I have spent the last month so angry with both my parents, but I have missed her. Her love does not feel conditional like my father’s does. I think she could perhaps find it in herself to forgive what I am, or what I am becoming. Of course, my father would never allow it, and she would never go against his wishes.

“I’m in the Confederation now, Mother, I can’t just leave to go on vacation.”

“But I was told you are on convalescence for at least the next three weeks. Why not come spend some of it with me? I know you are growing up, Rei, and it stands to reason you have no desire to spend your time with your mother—.”

“Oh, Mother—.”
She holds up a hand. “I understand. I would just—.” She looks away from the screen for a moment, calling up to the driver, “Another time around the block, if you would.”

Nowadays, most cars are equipped with autopilots, but not ours. My mother had been in an accident involving a cab with a malfunctioning AI, and ever since then neither of my parents have trusted them.

“I would very much like to see you, Rei.”

It’s the quality to her voice, the way she tilts her head, the fact that she had asked the driver to take her on another circuit around the District rather than go into the house, that really makes me consider it.

“I’ll ask my superiors,” I promise.

To my surprise, Dr. Amakata is all for it.

“I think the leave can be arranged. Definitely.” She is checking my vitals again, taking my pulse and confirming that the fever is no longer burning up my insides.

According to her, I had spent my two unconscious days in a sort of fugue-state—sometimes semi-conscious, but unaware. All of it is a black gulf in my memory.

“It’ll do you some good to breathe in some real oxygen for a change.” She’s cheerful, but she looks exhausted again, circles smudged beneath her eyes darker than ever.

If I had died, what would have happened to her? She had taken an incredible risk for me—one many people would claim had not been worth it. But Dr. Amakata has always understood. In fact, sometimes I think she wants the emotional augment out of me even more than I do.

I have been unable to ask—I don’t want to risk being overheard, especially with the knowledge of how easy it had been to eavesdrop on her conversation with Erickson.

She gives me a pale blue pill and watches to make sure I swallow it. “I imagine your family has a house on Aurora.”

“Yes. Lots of Elites do.”

“Mm. Open your mouth for me.” I stick out my tongue obligingly. “And I’m sure that house has a terminal.”

“Of course it does.” Almost every home, even Lowland houses, have terminals where the net can be accessed and information can be stored—birth certificates, aptitude test scores, medical records…

I realize what Dr. Amakata is driving at just as she adds, “And that terminal would be connected to your family’s mainframe, wouldn’t it?”

“…Yes,” I say slowly. It’s a vacation home. Only occupied a few days out of the year. The data might not even be encrypted. Who breaks into a house to steal medical files?

A trip to Aurora is sounding better and better.

I spend the next few days sleeping, reading, and going slowly stir crazy. My body is still weak
from fighting off the virus, but I have not gone this long without physical activity in years, and by
the night before my departure to Aurora, my skin is crawling with pent-up energy.

Around 24:00, when I am lying in bed and trying to convince my muscles that in just one day
they’ll be free to do whatever the want, the door opens. I expect another nameless medic, but it’s
Nagisa, dressed all in black training clothes, hair damp. Perhaps he had been unable to sleep as
well.

“Hey.” I sit up. I am no longer attached to the IV, but I can still feel the ghost-pain of needles in
the back of my neck.

“You’re leaving tomorrow,” he says, like a formal announcement.

“Yes,” I say, with a squirm of discomfort. I will be lying on one of the most exclusive beaches in
the galaxy, and he will be training to delve into enemy territory. They all will be. “But only for a
few days.”

“Do you remember what I told you before you went into the med bay last week?” Nagisa’s eyes
glow softly in the semi-darkness, and his voice has a low threat to it, a promise.

“You…you told me not to let them fuck me up,” I say slowly, and even if my mind has not quite
catched up with where this is going, my body certainly knows. I’m stupidly glad I’m not hooked up
to that heart monitor anymore. It would be going insane.

“Nagisa—.” I swallow in a thick, gritty rasp. “That—that door doesn’t lock, a-and there are medics
here all night. How did you even get in?”

“We’ll just have to be sure to be extra quiet, right?” Nagisa hums, ignoring my question.

I have felt this before—on the ob deck that first day, in the VIP room of Caligula—the heat coming
off him, along with something else—a draw, invisible hands reaching out to pull me in. I don’t
want to resist, and I don’t try.

The bed squeaks loudly when clambers up. He kisses me with the same hot, giddy hunger he had
back in my berth, just before he had injected me with the White Fever.

“I—I hope this time doesn’t involve me being knocked out,” I say, when he leaves my mouth to
leave soft bites on my throat and along my collarbone.

Nagisa’s giggle is harsh, more a growl than anything else. “If you do end up knocked out, it won’t
be from poison.”

I open my mouth to correct him—White Fever is a virus, not a poison—but it gets caught on a
moan as his tongue curls around one of my nipples. I shouldn’t be surprised by the feeling—it’s a
very obvious erogenous zone—but the jolt of pleasure is still a shock.

Nagisa glances up at me, and I can just see the curve of his smile in the dark. His hands move to
the waistband of my hospital pants, which are thin and scratchy and made of a recyclable material.
Fingertips across my hipbones make my cock twitch, a low, ticklish shiver moving through me.

Footsteps echo out in the hall—a medic making rounds—and both of us hold our breath until they
pass.

My pants get tangled up around my knees, hampered by blankets and the fact that Nagisa is
practically sitting on my legs, and in the shuffle of trying to pull my feet up far enough to kick them
I forget that I am not wearing anything underneath them. That I am now lying here naked with someone else on top of me.

And because that someone happens to be Nagisa, he takes a long, sweeping look at me and says, “Holy fuck, Rei. You are so hot.”

He’s staring at my cock, which is lying against my stomach, almost fully erect. My face heats.

His tongue flicks out to moisten his lips. “You should be in vids,” he says. He wraps a hand around me. “This should be in vids.”

I press my hands against my face and laugh because it’s ridiculous—he’s ridiculous, this whole situation feels ridiculous. “I don’t think those are supposed to be in vids.”

Nagisa raises an eyebrow. “I think you’re watching the wrong vids.”

He starts to stroke me. It is clear, bright pleasure, and after such a long time spent stewing in pain and worry and the turbulent storm clouds of my own emotions, it feels startlingly uncomplicated.

I wonder if I should be trying to undress him, too, do something in exchange, but then he’s moving backwards down the bed, glancing over his shoulder to make sure he doesn’t topple off the end of it.

Another pair of footsteps passes in the hall; I am acutely aware that anyone could walk in at any moment. Dr. Amakata. Erickson. Any of the somber-faced medics who check my vitals several times a day. But then Nagisa leans down and licks a slow, wet line up my cock and I decide, alright—it’s worth the risk.

Again, I know this is supposed to feel good. People would not be so obsessed with it if it didn’t. Still, I am surprised by the pleasure, the raw intimacy of looking down and seeing Nagisa there, intent. He wraps a hand around the shaft and gives the head a few licks with the flat of his tongue. Then he pushes his hair out of his eyes and takes it into his mouth.

I let out a loud, gasping breath, and immediately cover my mouth with my hand. My heart beats frantically as I wait to see if anyone heard, but there’s nothing. Nothing but the slick, slightly lewd sound of Nagisa sucking my cock.

That thought makes my face burn and my pulse pound even faster. “Nagisa—.” I want to tell him how good it feels, but I don’t know how to say it. I make a grab for his shoulder, before he takes my hand and settles it in his hair instead. I tighten my grip and he makes a low sound of encouragement. Then he pushes all the way down until I can feel his throat tightening around me.

“Oh my—Nagisa, fuck!”

He starts to laugh and has to pull back up. He strokes me with both hands, mouth red and eyes molten “Feels good?”

“How—.” I realize that I still have my hand over my mouth and quickly remove it. “How do you do that?” It doesn’t look like there’s enough room in his throat. “Don’t you have a gag reflex? Don’t you choke?”

“I can,” he says steadily. He squeezes the head of my cock and the sharp jolt of pleasure makes my legs twitch. “Do you want me to choke on it?”

“What? No! That’s not what I—.”
“My master liked it when I choked.” He shrugs, like he has just told me his old owner liked sugar in his coffee. “Hazuki’s can take a lot of damage. We’re made for it.”

A fierce swoop of protectiveness moves through me and I reach for him, tracing my fingers down his cheek and across saliva-slick lips. He pushes into my hand like a cat.

“I don’t want you to choke,” I say quietly. He smiles, and then more footsteps out in the hall remind us both of where we are.

“Okay,” he agrees, “No choking.”

So instead he just licks and sucks and swirls his tongue, giggling at my increasingly inept attempts at keeping my breathing under control. When I come (a very brief amount of time later) I cover my mouth with my hand again, heels digging into the mattress to prevent myself from thrusting my hips up too hard. I see Nagisa’s throat work as he swallows. He coughs a little, gives my cock a few more soft licks. This time I know it isn’t my imagination—his eyes are much brighter than they had been before he started.

I fall back against the mattress, staring up at the blank holoscreen ceiling, my body thundering with endorphins. Nagisa is uncharacteristically quiet, as if he’s giving me time to gather myself for a reaction.

I rub a hand over my brow and it comes away slick with sweat. “Thank you,” I say, because I can’t think of anything else. What are you supposed to say after someone does something like that for you?

He giggles. “You’re welcome.” He’s looking at me again, eyes moving across my body, and I feel the sudden need to cover myself, even if he’s already seen everything. There isn’t much room on the cot, but he drapes himself against my side and kisses my neck. “I’ll miss you. When you’re on Aurora.”

“I’ll miss you too,” I say, and mean it.

Chapter End Notes

Aww yeah git it Nagisa.

Writing sex in Rei’s voice is so weird.

To everyone who’s drawn fan art on tumblr--thank you so much! It’s all gorgeous and it makes me so happy. And thank you to everyone who has left kudos/comments. And sorry that I am such a fail at responding to them in a timely fashion.

See you all next time, on Aurora!
Greetings, Free! people. (do we have a fandom name? FreeStylers? Free!dom fighters? ) Anyway, We're back, and we're on Aurora. And now I want to go to the beach.

Thanks for all the great comments/feedback/kudos. You guys are my favorite.

My shuttle departs early in the morning—when my squad doubtlessly has training scheduled—and I have not told anyone when I’m leaving, but I still can’t suppress the slight tremor of disappointment as I wait in the bay just outside the airlock. I would have liked to see them before I left.

My ident card, tablet and a small case of Dr. Amakata’s pale blue pills are my only luggage. I have clothes in the house on Aurora, and it’s not as if Confederation training uniforms will be of much use on a resort planet. Especially not anything that designates me as Recon.

When the shuttle arrives, I find I’m actually glad that none of my squad are here. If Gou had seen it, I would have never heard the end of it.

It’s sleek and shining, painted an ostentatious silver and blue, nearly eye-watering after the bare recycled metal of the Platform. I don’t know if my family owns it—I’ve never seen it before. I would not put it past my mother to have simply bought one for the occasion.

The cabin is perfectly climate-controlled to my body temperature, and as I sit back in the passenger chair, the leather conforms to the counters of my body. Above me is a wide, frosted compartment, filled with white wine, soft drinks, and bottles of mineral water.

“Are you equipped with voice-activation?” I ask aloud.

“Yes, Mr. Ryugazaki,” the AI says, in a cool female voice that is vaguely familiar; I think she is the default my father uses on most of his devices.

“How long is the flight to Aurora?”

“Five hours and twenty-seven minutes. We will be experiencing a slight delay due to a meteor storm in the seventh sector.”

“Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.”

The shuttle has an entertainment center—vids, video games, access to the Ryugazaki digital library—but I am not in the mood to be entertained. I drink one of the mineral waters and think about how strange it feels to be alone—really alone—for once. I spend most of my waking time with my squad, and in the berth there is Makoto, and even in the med bay I had not ever truly been on my own—there were medics and nurses and then Nagisa...
After he had left my room the night before, I had not expected to get any rest at all, my body still too keyed up by the memory of him between my legs, looking smug as I gasped and shuddered beneath his hands—but sleep had come fairly easily. I am once again vibrating with pent-up energy, and although I in no way loathe the Platform like I had when I first arrived, I’m finding myself eager to see the sky and feel a breeze that hasn’t been looped on repeat through a ventilation system.

I doze through a few hours of the trip, then spend the rest of it with a net link open, reading through headlines, making a half-assed attempt to see if I’ve missed anything significant. Nothing jumps out at me—droid rights marches that turned to riots, food shortages in Lowland, new legislation pending to force all cyborgs to wear visible markers that make them instantly distinguishable from humans. Via Nikara, the lead singer of a popular rock band, had been shot during an awards show, and a breakthrough had apparently been made in the Cyrus Feller case—an Elite millionaire who had been murdered a few months ago. Pictures had recently surfaced of a prominent member of the Sky City governors’ board in a compromising position—several compromising positions, in fact, with several different prostitutes of varying genders.

Business as usual, it looks like.

I keep the windows blanked out throughout most of the trip—I have no desire to stare out into the abyss of space and ponder my existence—but I order the AI to turn them off opaque for the descent into Aurora’s atmosphere. That’s always worth watching.

Centuries ago, they say that Earth looked much the same—a swirl of blue and white, rather than just a haze of grey. There are three small continents on Aurora, along with countless chains of islands. It is rich in natural resources but—by order of a treaty made years ago—the only trade allowed on Aurora is the tourist trade. It is one of the most expensive places in the galaxy.

Perfect for the Ryugazakis, had no doubt been my father’s thinking when he bought the vacation home for his wife as an anniversary present.

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It’s mid-morning on Aurora, at the beginning of the planet’s summer (which is about twice as long as a summer on Earth) and the shuttleport is crawling with Elite families and couples. There are Lowlanders and cyborgs as well, but most of them will be on the other side of the port, where the public passenger shuttles disembark.

Once I have flashed my ident card at customs and descended the tall escalator into the bright, airy atrium, it occurs to me that I don’t know who I will be meeting. We have house cyborgs on Aurora, but it has been a few years since I’ve been here and I can’t remember what any of them look like. This realization gives me a brief squirm of guilt, which definitely would not have happened only a few months ago.

It turns out I have no reason to worry, because as soon as I emerge into the lounge, I see my mother, sitting at a table and drinking lemonade out of a tall glass. She waves to me as soon as I walk in.

“Rei, darling!”

“Mother,” I say, as she takes my hands and kisses me on both cheeks. “I didn’t expect you to come meet me.”
“It’s been ages, darling! How could I not?”

She is wearing a long white sundress and a blue wide-brimmed hat. She seems much shorter than I remember, and I wonder how in the hell I could have grown so fast in such a short span of time, before I realize that it’s because she isn’t wearing heels. Just open-toed sandals.

“My dear, you look so pale,” she says, touching cool, delicate fingers to my cheek.

“Yes,” I agree. “But it isn’t because I’m unhealthy. It’s just—no sun in space.”

She smiles. “Well, we will certainly fix that here!”

She’s right. The twin suns are already high and hot in the sky, and I feel myself start to sweat as soon as we step out of the shuttleport’s air conditioning. It’s glorious. I want to strip off all my clothes and just lie down to bask in it, but that would result in a scandalized mother, a sunburn, and most likely an indecent exposure charge, so I resist the urge.

The heat makes me think of Nagisa and the warmth in his skin, which makes my cheeks flush as I recall the last time I’d felt it. I shift awkwardly and glance around for the valet stand.

“Oh, the car is in the lot, darling. I don’t trust the valet cyborgs here—they put a dent in your father’s car last summer.”

“Oh.” I frown. “Where’s the driver?”

“She’s right here.” My mother pulls a key out of her purse with a small smile. “I drove.”

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The ocean is a dazzling aquamarine, spreading out endlessly as we speed down the coastal highway, bordered by a narrow ribbon of white beach. The sky is a perfect blue mirror, punctuated by the threat of rain piling up in the distance; storms on Aurora are frequent at this time of year, and always spectacular.

I drink in the wind and the heat, dizzy from the sheer volume of fresh oxygen and open space. Already I can barely believe that just six hours ago I was back on the Platform, where there are certain corridors that I can’t stand up straight in without smashing my forehead into doorways.

I have my eyes closed, face tipped into the wind, and when I open them it’s to find my mother taking swift glances at me whenever we hit a straight stretch of road She has secured her hat with a gauzy ribbon tied beneath her chin, and little strands of hair fight loose to thrash in the wind, like they are desperate for escape. After a few seconds I realize that I am staring at her and try to dredge up a bland Elite smile. I don’t quite manage it.

“You seem a bit different,” she says, eyes flickering back to the road.

You have no idea. Different to the point that my old self wouldn’t even recognize me.

“So do you,” I respond. “When did you learn to drive?”

She smiles, and for a moment it is not the smile I know. Not the demure mask of utter complacency that she wears back in Sky City, the one she may as well have pasted on for all it expresses. There is real pleasure in this smile, real nostalgia.

“When I was sixteen.”
“What?”

“My mother taught me, just outside the city. I never had a license until a month ago, however.”

Her face darkens just a bit. “Your father told me not to bother, but I insisted.”

“I bet he loved that,” I say, before I remember who I’m talking to.

She keeps her eyes on the road. “Not especially.”

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The Ryugazaki vacation house stands at the edge of the bluff overlooking the sea, and coming round the bed in the highway it looms out of the distance like a castle on a rock. In years past, I had always felt a thrill of pride whenever I saw it. It’s a place that can’t be missed, that demands the eye. Now, even if it’s still beautiful, I see its arrogance.

Being inside the house feels at once familiar and utterly alien. It is a wide, cool space, the walls white, the art calmly abstract. I have not spent enough time here for it to feel like home, but now it’s the closest I’ll come, since my house in Sky City no longer exists. After my tour, I’ll be returning a place I’ve never seen before. I’ll be an Elite again. My father’s son.

The thought sends panic skittering at the edges of my nerves, so I push it aside as best I can.

My mother and I eat lunch on the veranda overlooking the bluff, and although I can’t see the ocean from where I’m sitting beneath the umbrella, I can hear it. The rhythmic crash of the waves reminds me of the constant hum of the Platform’s engines.

The staff in this house are all artificial—cyborgs, not droids. The man who serves us lunch is dexterous and quick, but there is nothing human about him. He may as well have been an electric toothbrush, for all the emotions he shows. Before he heads back into the house he bows to us, eyes blank, and a slow shiver moves down my spine. Before I had joined the Confederation, it had been easy to treat cyborgs—and droids—as if they weren’t there. Now I find myself wondering what they do when we aren’t on Aurora. Deactivate themselves? Stand in the dark, silent house and stare at each other?

My mother is subdued throughout lunch, conversation as polite and bland as ever, as if in penance for her slip in the car. Afterward she goes to lie down and I climb the twisting stairs up to the lofted bedroom at the top of the house.

I toss my ident card and case of pills on the bed, and open the closet to find fresh clothes. I put on a pair of white linen pants and ribbed blue tank top, because none of the other shirts fit across my shoulders anymore. I press the release on the room panel, turning on the overhead fan and unlocking the door. I stand on the balcony and look out across the beach. The wind has picked up and the storm clouds are moving closer, piling one on top of the other miles out to sea, turning the water a darker blue, and grey a bit farther than that.

I grip the railing, close my eyes and breath in the salty air. That old feeling of isolation is stealing over me, the sense of otherness that I had carried in Sky City. Throughout my time on the Platform it has been steadily evaporating, without me even fully aware of it. It’s the proximity, or the camaraderie. I have never been a part of any sort of group before.

I miss them. And I miss him.

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The shuttle lag catches up to me around nineteen hundred. I rest my eyes for what feels like a second, and wake up to find that I’ve fallen asleep on top of my bedspread, the corner of the pill case digging into my chin. For a moment I wonder what has woken me, and then the strobe flash of lightning bleaches my room into a deadened landscape of contrasts. I count five seconds before the thunder hits. It hasn’t started to rain yet, but the wind hooks its teeth into the palm trees, lashing them back and forth, and when I step out onto the balcony the world smells like ozone.

The cloudbank is almost on top of us, approaching like a descending war cruiser, streaked through with tiny veins of lightning. Weather. I had nearly forgotten it existed.

A flash of white in my peripheral vision pulls my attention downward.

A figure stands at the edge of the lower veranda, as pale as a spirit against the storm. My pulse spikes and I wonder if it’s considered a home invasion if they don’t actually invade your home, but then I see the black hair and recognize the white dress from this afternoon. It’s my mother.

She’s standing beside the swimming pool, the wind rippling the water and her dress in the same frenzied undulations. Her hair, which had spent all day imprisoned beneath the sun hat, has been released into the wild. If anyone had seen her in Sky City, standing barefoot in an oncoming thunderstorm, she would have been dragged off to an asylum.

I don’t know when I make the decision to go out, but I find myself descending the stairs and ordering the AI to open the outer door. The wind surrounds me and draws me out toward the balcony, the sea air a warm, wet assault on all my senses.

My mother turns around as I approach. Her face is blank and for a moment it’s like she doesn’t recognize me.

“Mother…”

Then she grins, and if I had thought the smile back in the car had been out of character, this one is out of the realm of possibility. It is wide, mad, nothing quiet or polite about it. It is raw delight.

It shakes something loose in my memory.

“You like storms,” I say wonderingly. “You used to bring me up to the roof when I was a child, and we would watch the clouds roll over Lowland.”

“I thought you had forgotten that.” She turns back to the sea and I have to strain to hear her next words. “I barely remember it.”

It had been over a decade ago, before the cab accident. Even if she hadn’t been injured in the crash, it had changed her fundamentally.

Or, then again, maybe it hadn’t. Maybe it had just broken her nerve, made it harder for her to fight back, to keep herself afloat above the demands of a child and a husband and the Elite lifestyle.

At home my mother is staunch and unyielding in defense and deference of my father, happy to be a pretty trophy that stands next to him and nods to his distinguished guests. This woman, who stands and turns her face into the storm, does not resemble her in the slightest.

“Your eyes are different,” she says when I step up to the railing beside her. “I saw they were purple this afternoon, but—.”

Oh shit. I raise a hand toward my face. “Are they glowing?”
She nods.

I had been so careful not to wear anything that could connect me to Recon—not my jacket or dogtags, anything with a blue stripe. I had totally forgotten about my eyes. Vision-correction makes sense for a member of Research, but night-vision and a color change definitely don’t.

“I…”

She shakes her head. “You are nearly a grown man, Rei. There is no need to justify anything to me. Or to your father.”

I can hear it in her voice—she knows about the conversation we’d had, how I had begged, pleaded with him. Totally lost my composure. How now that the augment is eroding, I am all the things they feared I would become—emotional, volatile, and homosexual, just to name a few.

There is no need to justify anything to me.

It’s possible my mother hadn’t asked me to Aurora because she is concerned about my health. Maybe this is the only way she knew how to speak to me without my father’s constant oversight.

Maybe, I don’t know this woman at all.

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I get up early the next morning and run along the beach, practically euphoric at the taste of fresh air and the shift of the sand underneath my feet, even if it is harder to maneuver on than the grav-gym floor. There is hardly anyone out at this time of the morning, and the colors of the beach and ocean seem especially saturated after last night’s storm.

A basket of fresh pastries, coffee, and a note on the house datapad had been waiting for me when I’d come into the kitchen this morning. My mother had gone into town to meet a friend for brunch, which is definitely in character for her, so much so that I have half-convinced myself that last night had been a dream. Or that the person I spoke to on the veranda had not been my mother at all, but some mythical creature that had crawled up from the deep.

The ocean is so beautiful that I am tempted to send a picture to Nagisa, but I can’t think of any way to convey that I am not bragging about what a wonderful time I’m having while all of them are stuck back on the Platform. I suppose I could caption the photo.

This is beautiful. It reminded me of you.

I snort. That would be ridiculous.

I run for a little over an hour, finding myself miles down the beach, sweating under the rising sun. After days of hardly any use at all, the muscles in my legs are trembling. The thing about getting used to running in a gym is that you don’t have to worry about when to turn around. It’s a long walk back to the house. Dr. Amakata would probably kick my ass if she knew I was pushing myself like this.

After a moment of awkward indecision, I walk into one of the open-air pavilions on the beach. A pretty girl in a bathing suit and sarong seats me in the shade beside the bar, her smile mechanical enough to tell me she’s a cyborg.

“Thank you,” I say without thinking about it, and her smile droops for a moment. That’s right. You don’t thank cyborgs. It’s considered uncultured and weird.
I smooth my face Elite-blank. *Look, I can belong here, too.* Bringing up the menu on the table read-out, I order a strawberry and vanilla smoothie infused with ginseng, and then proceed to gulp down the water the waitress pours for me. I feel shaky and strange, the sweat on the back of my neck turning clammy. Maybe I am not as 100% as I thought. Then again, I would probably feel strange no matter what. Being here, surrounded by the quiet murmur of Elite conversation, cyborgs at the ready to bring me anything I want, feels unbelievably bizarre. Add in that my mother is not acting like my mother and it’s like my entire life has been turned upside down and shaken. Again, I wish my squad was here. With Gou, things that seem awkward and uncomfortable would become funny, and with Nagisa—.

Thoughts of Nagisa will not do anything to settle my system, and I try my best to think of something else, because smacking an erection against the underside of a café table does not sound particularly appealing.

I sit back and drink my smoothie (which is delicious, but that probably has more to do with the fact that I’ve been living off military rations for the last two months than with the high quality of this random beach pagoda) and try to guess which members of the wait staff are droids. Droids are at least partly human, which means they look a lot more natural than an cyborg that is 100% artificial.

The bartender is almost certainly not—his motions are much too jerky as he wipes down the counter, and when he turns toward me, his expression is blankly pleasant. The rest of them are more difficult. They are varied in expression and facial features and their movements are smooth, but after spending time with Nagisa—who has the most flawless rendering of any droid I’ve ever seen—all the others look drab in comparison.

The café begins to fill up, people trickling in off the beach for coffee or breakfast or some combination of the two. A group of four comes in and is seated a few tables away from me. They are around my age and it’s clear that they have stayed up all night rather than gotten up early. The girls are in short skirts, their hair mussed, and the boys are dressed all in black. One of them has glitter smudged around his eyes. They are all giggling and leaning against each other, obviously still slightly drunk. Behavior like this is scandalous, even on a resort planet, but none of them seem to notice the looks they’re getting. Either that, or they just don’t care.

They order mimosas, and when the waitress comes back with them, the boy with the glitter around his eyes says something to her, and they all laugh. The waitress laughs too, if a little nervously. One of the girls sips her mimosa and leans back in her chair. Then she glances over at me and I am caught staring. She grins, like she doesn’t care, like she isn’t surprised. I look away and suck casually at a lump in my milkshake.

*Look at what a cool, un-creepy Elite I am.*

A couple minutes later I chance another glance at them. I jump and let out an extremely undignified yelp—the girl is standing right beside my table. Mimosa still in hand, she grins down at me. Her skin is a soft chocolate brown, hair a teased mass of curls. Her eye-augment is a fairly common one—dark green cat’s eyes.

“Mind if I sit here?” she asks.

“I—.” My throat is coated with smoothie and I clear it. “Not at all.”

I should really get up and pull her chair out for her, but she sits down before I can try. “We were just talking over there and Marcia doesn’t believe me, but you’re Rei Ryugazaki, right?”
I stare at her in blank surprise for a few moments, before I manage to get a hold of myself. I used to be so good at this. “Ah, yes. Yes, I am. How—.”

“Shit, I knew it!” She smacks her hand down against the table, before tipping her head back toward her friends and calling, “I knew it!”

The other three laugh and one of the boys cups his hands around his mouth to call, “You’re drunk!”

She rolls her eyes. “Ignore them. They have no class.”

Her smile is infectious, and I find myself returning it. “Have we met before?”

She shakes her head. “No, but you were in the news a lot last month—your whole family was. Your house blew up, right?”

“Er…yes.”

“That’s really rough. You’re in the military now, right? In the Confederation?”

My mouth is hanging open, and I force it shut.

*Just think about it for half a second,* I tell myself. *You’re the heir of one of the most well-known families in Sky City—of course people are going to talk about you.* Just because I am hundreds of light years away doesn’t mean life as usual doesn’t go on. And life as usual for Sky City Elites is a nonstop carousel of gossip.

“I suppose I’ve been in the tabloids,” I say. “I wonder who they’ve engaged me to while I’ve been gone.”

The girl sips at her mimosa with her pinky out. “Well, me. Once.”

I raise an eyebrow. “How did that turn out?”

“I broke it off. You were way too clingy.” She laughs. “I’m Lesedi, by the way. You can call me Edi.”

This time I remember my Elite manners. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Her friends are watching us, and I get the feeling that they are not the only ones. I can practically feel the disapproving glare of the two old ladies and their silver teapot a couple of tables away.

“Do you want to sit with us?” Edi asks. “I thought you looked kind of lonely over here.”

“That’s…that’s very kind, but I’ll have to decline.” I motion down at my nearly-empty glass.

Her grin doesn’t falter. She leans toward me and I can smell the alcohol on her breath. “Well, then you should come to Adam’s party tonight. He’s got a really awesome house. Private beach and everything.”

I hesitate—I have been to enough Elite parties to last me a lifetime, but these four don’t act like any Elites I’ve ever met. It’s that, and possibly a tinge of loneliness, that makes me say, “What time?”

Chapter End Notes
I really like this chapter, despite the fact that nothing really happened beside characterrrrr developmenttttt.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Visiting home in Washington DC, and the humidity/smog combination is giving me migraines. Despite this, here is the chapter!!

Here is a post of all the gorgeous fanart that people have done for the fic. Go give them some love!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I am not sure how I am meant to get to this beach party, but as luck would have it, when I enter the coordinates into the house’s terminal, it informs me that it is just a half a mile up the beach. Easy enough to walk to. I won’t even have to go to the trouble of asking my mother for a car and a driver.

I am poised to shut off the terminal, when I hesitate.

I press a knuckle to the module labeled “Records”. I have never looked into the family files before —I’ve never had a reason to. According to the datastamp, mine and my mother’s are a good deal larger than my father’s, which makes sense, considering her cab accident and all the augments that have been periodically shoved into my brain.

My hand hovers over my own file, but before I can open it, one of the house AI’s glides in, carrying an armload of fresh cut lilies. She bows when she sees me, scattering a few petals across the stone tiles. “Good afternoon, Mr. Ryugazaki.”

“Could you call me Rei?” I ask, as she sets the flowers down on the counter and bends to collect the fallen petals.

She pauses. “Sir?”

“Call me Rei,” I repeat. “If your programming allows for it.” “Mr. Ryugazaki” just makes me think of my father.

She bows again. “Of course, Rei.”

I close out the terminal. I could wait for her to finish, order her out, or even hack the terminal in front of her and instruct her not to tell anyone, but I don’t. In all honesty, I am having a pleasant day so far, and I don’t want to expose myself to the full extent of what my family has done to me. I have all week.

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It is not quite full dark when I reach the house. The sun is falling from the sky into the sea like a melting caramel, dark, hot yellow against the waves. The whole skyline glows.

I give my name to the AI at the gate, and it lets me in without a word. I follow a sandy path lined with torches that tremble in the breeze like dancers in perfect sync. This house is bigger than mine, but it isn’t sitting on top of a cliff, so it is not nearly as imposing. Also, it’s probably less likely to
be knocked over by a hurricane.

Paper lanterns hang from palm trees and the rafters of a wooden gazebo, and a few of them float in midair, bobbing around a DJ hover-platform floating above the crowd. Some people are dancing on the beach, but most of the party is further up toward the house, scattered across the deck and a swimming pool that glows a bright azure. The people inside it don’t seem to be wearing very much.

When I think Elite Party, I imagine my mother’s dinner gatherings, the galas my father sponsored and would often bring me to in order to parade me around like a stud horse. Even the few functions I have been to thrown by people around my own age were typically small, and involved maybe a couple dozen painfully hip teenagers draping themselves across leather furniture and using words they didn’t understand.

This is more like the club on Ithaca. Even the music reminds me of it, low and pulsing, and I feel a shiver of unease. My shoulders tense and my skin feels too tight. The only reason I don’t immediately turn around and bolt is that while Caligula was utterly closed in—a stampede waiting to happen—here I can see the sky, now fading to a dark blue, threaded with hazy streaks of grey cloud. A breeze comes off the ocean, cooling the sweat on my forehead and the back of my neck. I can leave whenever I want to. I’m fine.

“Rei!” Lesedi descends on me in a cloud of perfume and enthusiasm. Her hair has been gathered into a haphazard mound on top of her head, fixed with chopsticks, and coated with something that makes it shimmer in the light from the pool. Her dress is long and flowing, and gold bangles glimmer at her wrists. “I’m so happy you’re here! I’m glad you didn’t think I was a crazy person this morning. I was a little drunk.” She cups her hands around her mouth and leans toward me when she says it, like it’s a secret.

“I didn’t notice,” I say.

She laughs and puts her hand on my arm. “Such charm. Come on—I’ll introduce you to the host.”

In a way, she reminds me of Gou, but that could just be because Gou is the only girl around my age that I speak to on a regular basis. I wonder if the two of them would get along. Not that I’ll ever have the chance to find out.

I let her pull me through the crowd, past the pool—where there is a game going on that seems to involve girls sitting on boys shoulders and then pulling each other’s hair—and toward the bar. It has two levels—one up on the deck and the other down by the pool, so you don’t even have to get out of the water to get your drink.

Lesedi seems to know everyone or, rather, everyone seems to know her. People turn to greet her, and she moves through the crowd like a queen among her subjects. I can’t believe I’ve never met her before—if she’s this well-known and from Sky City, we would have definitely been spinning around the same circles. Maybe she’s much older than she seems, or much younger?

I’m getting looks as well, some curious, some admiring—most of them from girls. One girl in a tight black dress actually licks her lips when she looks me up and down. How subtle.

Lesedi taps a boy on the shoulder and he turns away from the bar. He’s holding a pink drink that doesn’t look quite as toxic as the purple shots from Caligula, but it’s a pretty close contender.

“Adam! This is Rei Ryugazaki. From this morning.”
Adam grins and we shake hands. “Right! You’re the guy Lesedi almost jumped on this morning. I hope she didn’t use extortion to get you to come tonight.”

Lesedi punches him on the shoulder.

He swats her away playfully. “I’m Adam Warrington,”

I do recognize Adam, both him and his name. The Warringtons are well known, not because of any particular status or political influence, but because of how they look.

Centuries ago, back when deep space travel did not exist and the human race was still confined to Earth, the physical differences between races had been much more extreme. There had even been a time when one’s value in society had not been based on wealth, classification, or family-standing, but on the hue of one’s skin. Not to say that there are no longer variations—Lesedi has characteristics that name her family line as most likely from the African continent, just like mine pick me out as East Asian—but Adam is pale, nearly ghostlike, with ice blue eyes that I doubt have been augmented. His hair is red and a faint dusting of freckles decorates the bridge of his nose and bare arms. If his family had not possessed Elite status, he would no doubt be treated as an oddity, mistrusted in Lowland for his ghost-like appearance.

Lesedi nudges Adam and nods at me. “He looks great, doesn’t he?”

Adam looks me up and down without a hint of embarrassment. “Yeah, he does. Have you introduced him to Khari yet?”

“Not yet.” Lesedi shakes her head, earrings flashing. “Where is that asshole?”

My mouth drops open. It is the first time I’ve ever heard an Elite curse so offhandedly. I mean, apart from myself, of course. Lesedi and Adam notice my surprise and laugh.

“Wow, man,” Adam says. “Lighten up a little. Want a drink?”

“Uh—.”

“It’s not his fault, Adam. He’s a Ryugazaki. They’re all proper ‘n shit. 100% Sky City.”

“But you both are from Sky City, aren’t you?”

“Not originally,” Lesedi says. “I’m from Casablanca, and Adam grew up in the Tampa Peninsula. That’s why he talks so funny.”

“The place is a shithole,” Adam adds. “Lots of crocodiles.”

“So I’ve heard.” Especially considering that the whole peninsula is almost entirely underwater, and more coastline is being swallowed up every year.

Adam grins at me. He has glitter around his eyes tonight as well, and his hair is gelled up into a nest of spikes.

Lesedi leans across the bar and chirps something at the droid bartender. Then she turns back to Adam. “So you going to go find Khari, or what?”

He arches a thin eyebrow. “I’m the host, not a servant. Go find him yourself.”

“Um, that’s exactly why you’re going. This house is crazy huge, how the hell do I know where he is?”
Adam rolls his eyes. “Be right back,” he says to me, sliding off his stool and heading off casually into the crowd, holding his drink up above his head to avoid flailing elbows.

“How’s Khari?” I ask Lesedi.

“The other guy with us this morning.” She grins. “He wants to meet you.”

Something about her smile makes me flush. “A-Alright.”

The bartender returns with two champagne glasses and a dark blue bottle. “Pour for us, would you, sweetheart?” Lesedi asks, reaching out and tucking a stray curl back behind the droid’s ear.

She smiles. “Of course, Miss Mira.”

She pours out two glasses of champagne. It shines a deep gold in the panel lights along the bar, the carbonation writhing like a sandstorm, tiny bubbles fleeing for the surface. Lesedi waves her fingers to let the droid know she’s dismissed, and then offers me one of the glasses. I actually do like champagne—much more than I like martinis and purple drinks that taste like a locker room smells. I have never seen this particular brand before, and it has a rich, almost buttery taste—much too good for a party like this, I would think.

Lesedi leans back against the bar and looks me up and down. “Adam’s right, you know. You really do look great.”

I glance down at myself. “Thank you.” I am still in a tank top and lounge pants, even if they are different colors than the ones I wore yesterday. My mother wants to bring me into town to buy clothes that fit my recent physique change, but she had been out all day. I have no idea what you wear to a house party on the beach, but it seems I made the right choice—most people are dressed even more casually than I am, in varying stages of dishevelment, although I am sure it is deliberate and probably took a good deal of time to prepare. Smudged makeup, mussed, sun-dried hair, clothes hanging from hips and shoulders. Many partygoers seem to be going for the post-coital look.

Lesedi finishes off her champagne, and I am faintly surprised to realize that I am keeping up with her, mirroring her motions as she drinks. It’s delicious, and barely tastes alcoholic.

“I want another?” Lesedi asks, turning back to the bar before I can respond, calling brightly to the droid bartender. The way she is treating her is familiar to me—in this, at least, she is behaving the way a citizen of Upland normally would.

Some Elites—my father, for instance—treat droids with disdain, indifference, and sometimes outright cruelty, but most simply ignore them, or behave the way Lesedi is—addressing them as if they are small children or pets. The bartender seems pleased by her attention and only too happy to serve, but I can’t even fathom speaking to Nagisa like that. He would probably laugh at me if I tried.

Is he really so unlike other droids? Or is it simply because I have grown attached to him? Then again, I don’t think I can ever again bring myself to treat a droid, or even a plain AI, simply like they were an unthinking labor machine, like a space cruiser or a vacuum cleaner. It does not feel as if I have the right.

Lesedi hands me a new glass of champagne. “What are you going all cross-eyed for?” She grins, like she’s got me all figured out. “Thinking too hard?”
“No,” I lie, and drink more champagne.

Before she can ask me anything else, Adam returns, pushing through the crowd with another boy just behind him, who I also recognize from that morning in the café.

“About damn time,” Lesedi grins, even though it’s barely been five minutes. I’m starting to think that all girls become increasingly harder to deal with the more they drink. All people, I guess. “Rei Ryugazaki, this is Khari Dimencho.”

“Hey.” Khari doesn’t offer to shake hands—he’s got both of his firmly stuck in the pockets of his tight black shorts, which are the only things he’s wearing. He’s colored closer to Lesedi than to Adam, hair shaved down to bare stubble, short enough that the dark swirl of tattoos that begin on the crown of his head and move down his neck to spiral around his arms are visible. He has a regally sculpted face—high cheekbones, small nose, and curved, sensual lips. His eyes are outlined with black and dusted with gold that shimmers when he moves. He would not have looked out of place on the lid of a sarcophagus, and for a second I am actually struck speechless.

When I finally manage to shake my thoughts back into gear, I realize that he is familiar as well. It takes me a few seconds to place him, although from the look on his face, he knows me at once.

“You’re from Springwell,” I say. “You were at the track finals last year.”

He grins. “Yeah. Beat you, didn’t I?”

I would not go that far. We hadn’t even run in the same heat. His time had been better than mine, however, so I don’t argue.

“Indigo won the meet.” Alright, I argue a little.

“Only because we were running on your track.”

I snort. “It’s a regulation track. They’re all the same.”

“Whatever you say.” He doesn’t seem too upset, though.

Lesedi drains her second glass of champagne and rolls her eyes. “Seriously, athletes. I don’t get you. I can think of such better ways to get all sweaty.”

Khari lifts an eyebrow. Both he and Lesedi are looking at me, and I’m suddenly hot from my cheeks all the way down to the tops of my shoulders. I take an inadvisably large gulp of champagne to cover it, which just makes my face heat more. I resist the urge to glance toward Adam to see if he is looking at me as well.

“Why don’t you guys take Rei on a tour of the house?”

I finally do turn, and find that Adam has grown an attachment while I’ve been looking the other way, in the form of a blonde girl with feathery pink eyelashes. She’s giggling and biting her lip, sweat gleaming on her neck and bare shoulders. She is seems to be attempting to climb Adam’s like he’s a flagpole. Her cheeks are flushed and her hands, where they’ve begun stroking across his chest, are shaking.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She doesn’t even look at me.
Lesedi laughs. “She’s fine. Adam’s parties might suck, but at least his shit is good.”

“Got any left for me, babe?” Adam asks the girl. She gives a drunk little giggle and pulls a vial out from between her breasts.

Lesedi wrinkles her nose. “Hygienic.”

The liquid in the vial is totally clear, from what I can tell, and there isn’t much of it. Adam holds it up to the light, before shaking it and popping off the cap. He opens his mouth wide and pours it in.

“Fuck, don’t take it here,” Lesedi groans. “No one wants to look at your boner.”

“Speak for yourself,” Adam says, slurring the s’s. He takes a deep, shuddering breath, eyes dilating and cheeks flushing. He’s sweating, too, but his smile is excited and easy as he says, “Maybe you guys could give Rei a tour,” like he’s forgotten he said it already, before he lets himself be pulled away by the girl.

“Was that—.”

“Amor,” Lesedi says, crossing her arms. “Yeah. Now we’re not going to see him for the rest of the night.”

“O-Oh.” I hadn’t known it was Amor—I was just going to ask if it was a drug—but it makes sense. Now that I think about it, Adam and the girl had been displaying classic signs of arousal. Amor is illegal on Earth, but not many substances are controlled on Aurora.

Lesedi puts her empty glass down and slides off her stool. “Come on—want to see inside?”

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The house is every bit as crowded as the pool and the bar, so it isn’t much of a tour. More just navigating through several tall rooms with high windows, which would probably have been really nice if they had not been filled wall-to-wall with sweaty, half-dressed people. I follow the bounce of Lesedi’s hair, light glinting off the metal chopsticks, up a short flight of stairs and along a hallway that passes by an enormous fish tank built into the wall. A school of blue fins pass by in a blue and yellow cloud, and a small crab waves a claw at me. I find myself waving back, and quickly drop my hand.

The champagne is affecting me, but it’s quite a different feeling than I had gotten from those nasty shots on Ithaca. Those had left me muffled and strange, like my brain was full of cloud cover. This is a warmer buzz, softer. I feel my shoulders loosening somewhat, and when Khari’s arm brushes against mine, I don’t shift away. His skin is warm and just the tiniest bit damp, like he has spent the day lying in the sun. He smells like saltwater and wine.

Lesedi sticks her head into a room off the hall. It’s dark except for the steady blue pulse of a control panel. “This is it, right?”

Khari nods. “Yeah, go ahead.”

The two of them walk inside. It’s dark except for the steady blue pulse of a control panel. “This is it, right?”

Khari nods. “Yeah, go ahead.”

The two of them walk inside. I try to follow, but bounce of the cushioned force field that materializes when I try to pass the jam. It flares to life in spidering lines of blue, before fading back to nothing.

“What the hell?”
Lesedi starts giggling and Khari says, “Shit. Sorry, dude. Hold on.” He taps out a code onto the control panel, and the force field dissipates with a slow ripple. “It’s just so no one comes in and messes with anything. It already knows Lesedi and me.”

I walk into the room, which remains dark despite our presence, which is a bit unsettling. All the rooms in my own house bring up a pre-set level of light depending on who is present.

Khari shuts the door behind me, deepening the darkness. I can no longer see them—I can barely see my hand if I hold it right in front of me. “What…what are we doing in here?” I ask.

“Here, sit down.” Lesedi takes me by the arms, turning me around and steering me backward through the room. The back of my legs hits something soft and I slide down onto what feels like a sofa. A tingling sense of unease begins to fill me. I have followed two virtual strangers into an unsecured, unknown environment. Captain Sasabe would be cursing me and three generations of my family if he could see me now.

Warm fingers touch my cheek. “Oh, shit.”

I swallow. “What’s wrong?”

“Your eyes. They glow.”

“Oh. Right. Yeah, night-vision augment. Everyone gets them in the Confederation.”

“Way cool.” Lesedi’s earrings jingle as she leans close to me. “Are you ready?”

Another tinge of unease. “Ready for what?”

She laughs again, and this time it sounds less warm and more crazy. “Go ahead, Khari.”

I brace myself for an attack, or for them to start trying to take my clothes off, but instead I hear a slow whirr, like a vid screen turning on, and a moment later the whole ceiling lights up.

“What is—.” I let out an appreciative gasp when the picture comes together. Space—the galaxy painted above us in broad, milky strokes, stars and colorful planets spinning around a sphere of pulsing magma. The entirety of the Sol system, moving in a slow, simulated dance.

“I know this isn’t a big deal for you,” Lesedi says. “Since you can just look out the window on Platform 6—.”

“No, it’s awesome,” I breathe. And I mean it.

Directly above us is Aurora, white and cool blue, and a few feet away Titan 5 glows as red as a dragon’s eye. Nothing remotely humanoid can live on it—the atmosphere is so volatile that it is constantly bursting into flame. In a distant corner of the room Earth rotates in its swirl of smoky-white.

“It just makes everything look so…small,” I say. “When you’re actually in space, you are the one who feels small.”

“I don’t ever feel small in space,” Lesedi comments from one side of me.

Khari laughs from the other. “That’s because you have an unrealistic perception of your own importance.”

“Edi!” A voice yells from the hallway, so loud that a tiny ripple actually moves across the force
field. A couple more voices join in—all girls, all very drunk. “Lesedi, get your shiny ass out here!”

“You were saying?” Lesedi pats me on the cheek—although I think she was aiming for Khari—and stands up. “Nothing unrealistic about it.”

She opens the door, letting in a rectangle of light. “What the fuck, Nizzy? Calm yourself!” She kicks the door closed after her, shutting out the noise of the party and sending us back into the dark, only lit by the glow of planets and starlight.

“What’s that all about?” I ask.

“Something important, I’m sure. We probably won’t see her for a little while. She’s got to handle the peasants.” He chuckles, and I feel his breath on the side of my face. It makes me realize just how close we’re sitting, his thigh pressed up against mine. The galaxy light highlights bits of his face—cheekbones, eyelids, the ridges of his brows.

His fingertips are warm against my skin as he drags them up my arm, feeling across my shoulder in the dark. “All confedlies look like you?”

“Uh…” I clear my throat. “W-What?”

I can just see the curve of his smile. “If everyone on that Platform looks this good, I regret not signing up when I had the chance.”

“Oh.” He’s complimenting me. And trailing his fingers across my neck and over my cheek. “I’m definitely not the best looking person there. There’s—.” I think of Haru and Makoto, and Nagisa’s deep golden eyes, the pink flush to his lips after he’s been kissing me, the way his mouth had dropped open on a soft moan as he moved against me on the cot.

Khari’s hands are bigger than Nagisa’s and not as warm, but his lips are just as soft when he presses them against my jaw, just below my ear. “You’re fucking hot,” he says, words damp against my neck. “I thought it when I saw you run back in Sky City, and I think it now.”

“That’s—.” His mouth is wet and it sends a shiver through me. I put a hand on his shoulder, and I think I mean to push him away, but instead my fingers tighten down. He takes that as an invitation and presses his mouth to mine.

Maybe it’s the champagne, but kissing Khari is easy. He smells wonderful, and his kisses are slow and deep, like he could do it all night long. One of his hands drops to my knee, nails scratching through the denim, tiny shivers radiating out from the touch. It feels good, but then his fingers move further up my thigh, and I remember exactly where I am and what I’m doing.

“We shouldn’t—.” I pull away a little, and he follows, pressing open-mouthed kisses to my neck, licking down to my collarbone.

“What, you got a girlfriend up in the stars?” He laughs softly. “Or a boyfriend?”

“I—there is someone.”

“Oh yeah?” I can hear his smile in his words, even if I can’t see it. “They hotter than me?”

Before I can answer he’s arching his body up and away from me, and in the light from the artificial Milky Way, I can see him working something out of his pocket. It’s a struggle, because his pants are pretty tight.
He holds his hand out, palm up. “What happens on Aurora stays here, right?”

At first his hand looks empty, but then I see the glint of a small, cylindrical vile—exactly the same size and shape as the one the girl had given Adam out at the bar. “Wanna try?”

Chapter End Notes

Pretty boys and drugs. Oh, Rei.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Back in the south after my brief sojourn home. It's hot as balls here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Amor trembles in the palm of Khari’s hand, flashing blue and red in the artificial light of the tiny Aurora and Titan circling overhead. I poke at the vial like it’s a specimen.

“This is only one dose, so if we split it we’ll only get half the effect, but…” Khari grins, all flashing eyes and animal heat against my side. “Should still be a ride.”

I have never taken any sort of drug besides medical narcotics, and definitely nothing that does what Amor does. I don’t know Khari at all, and I remember the fear in Haruka’s eyes when he’d thought that’s what the guy in Caligula had given Rin. This is an altogether terrible idea.

But still, I pick up the little vial and hold it up to the galaxy light. It’s warm from Khari’s skin, and it has to be my imagination, but I feel a pulse through the glass, like the drug has its own heartbeat.

“The first time’s always the best.” Khari leans in to suck beneath my ear. “Makes you feel crazy —fucking out of control.” His hand drifts further up my thigh and over my groin, where he rubs me through my pants in slow, confident strokes. “Bet a guy like you’d be hot out of control, Ryugazaki.”

My cock throbs and a dense mass of terrified arousal turns a slow back flip inside me. “I’m not sure —.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you, swear to god.” He chuckles. “Two athletes like us? We can burn it out of our systems fast.”

I honestly don’t know what I would have done—drinking random liquids at parties is idiotic, although his fingers are making that hard to keep in mind—but before I can answer one way or the other, the door slides open, light from the hall striking Khari in the face, making his earrings glitter and his eye augment reflect back like a wildcat’s. A whole group of people pile in.

“Shit, you’re right, this is legit!” One of them, a boy in a very small swimsuit and nothing else, is looking up at the galaxy with a wide, drunk grin.

The other two boys are occupied looking at the girl with them—they don’t appear to be interested in the universe orbiting overhead. “Shut the fucking door,” one of them says, and the drunk boy slaps the panel on the wall.

“Nice.” The third boy is taking off his jacket. “This work?”

The girl nods.

Two of the boys start taking off their pants, and beside me Khari straightens up. “Uh, what the fuck?”
The three guys jump, letting out noises of shock so similar that I laugh. The girl doesn’t seem surprised at all. Her face is just blankly pleasant.

“Whoa, dude. Didn’t see you there.” Swimsuit Guy turns toward us, and for a second I think he’s Adam, but then I realize it’s just that his coloring is similar—pale skin, reddish-brown hair. His eyes are blue as well, but they look augmented, and his chin is pointier than Adam’s. In fact, all three of them appear to be colored along the same lines.

“How did you even get in here?” Khari wants to know.

Right. The force field should have activated when they tried to walk in, bounced them away like it had me.

“She let us in, isn’t that right, baby?” says Swimsuit Guy.

She nods. “That’s right.”

“Then how the fuck did she get in here?”

They are talking about the girl like she isn’t even here. Then I recognize the droid from the bar—the one who had poured Lesedi and I our champagne—and realize that, to them, she isn’t here. At least, not in any way that matters. She looks toward us when Khari says ‘she’, and I see the deep golden gleam of her eyes. I don’t know how I could have missed them back at the bar.

“She probably has default access to all the rooms in the house,” I say, getting up off the couch. I am oddly lightheaded, but I steady myself as best I can. “The door recognized her and disabled the force field—.”

I break off with my explanation, because no one is listening, and because one of the boy’s has stuck his hand down the top of the droid’s dress.

“Okay, wow,” Khari says. “Did the three of you really come back here to bang Adam’s Hazuki?”

“He said we could,” says the boy fondling the bartender. “You gonna get naked, baby?” he asks her.

Obligingly, she unzips her dress and lets it fall around her legs. Her breasts are small but perfectly shaped, and she has a tattoo just about her naval. It’s too dark for me to see what it is.

Khari’s mad—I don’t even need to see his face to know that. His neck goes rigid and he squares his shoulders, like he’s getting ready to throw a punch. “You all need to get out. You can’t be in here.”

The guys, who are now all focused on the droid, ignore him. One of them is kissing the back of her neck, and another is pulling her dress the rest of the way down her hips. “What the fuck is Adam doing, having something like you tend bar?” one of them says. “You should be dancing on the bar.”

“Yeah, that’s like buying a hoverboard and using it as a chair. Except a hoverboard can’t suck you off.”

They guffaw to each other stupidly, and I feel my mouth curling with distaste.

Khari does not take well to being ignored. “Did you all not fucking hear me?”
“What?” One of them looks round from where he’s pushing the droid down to her knees. “This room for faggots only?”

Khari curses and springs forward. I follow without thinking and catch his fist as he draws it back. “What the fuck?” he snarls at me.

“Calm down,” I say, the Recon soldier in me wanting to diffuse violence before it can get started. “She’s a Hazuki—she…she likes sex, right?”

Khari gives me a disgusted look. He yanks his arm out of my grip. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

I shrug, face heating. “I only meant, she’s the one who brought them in here, right? She wouldn’t have lowered the force field if she had been trying to get away from them.”

“He’s right, isn’t he, baby?” One of the guys strokes the droid’s hair. “You want it, don’t you?”

She nods up at him. Then she turns her head and nods at Khari and I. She doesn’t look upset, but she isn’t smiling. She isn’t doing anything at all.

“It’s because she’s programmed to,” Khari argues back at me. “You think she’d want his pasty dick otherwise? It’s only because the three of them look like Adam.” He makes another disgusted sound in his throat. “C’mon.”

Khari leads the way back out to the beach and down to the bar, where he doesn’t even bother to wait for the bartender—a male droid with blue and silver hair who has replaced the girl—just leans across and snatches a bottle of tequila. He forgoes a glass, grimaces at the taste, and then slumps moodily back against the bar.

“Are you okay?” I ask after a couple seconds.

He gives me an annoyed side-eyed glance, because this is the sort of thing Elites don’t talk about, but then he rubs his knuckles into his temples and blows out a breath.

“Yeah. I just hate that shit.” He takes another swig from the bottle. “They’re not animals, you know?”

“Yeah,” I say, settling next to him. “I know.”

He offers me the bottle, and I shake my head. His eyeliner has smeared, and he’s got his arms wrapped loosely around himself like he’s cold. His lips are still flushed and red. I had been worried he was going to try to push the Amor on me again, but now I realize that’s a groundless fear. The mood has very clearly been broken.

I’m relived and—if I’m honest—the tiniest bit disappointed. What would it have been like, to feel that loss of control? Part of me wants to know. Maybe one day I could try it, maybe with Nagisa...

No, says the part of me that wants to stop over-thinking. Don’t be an idiot. Just forget about it.

Knowledge is power, crows the other part, the part that doesn’t like me very much. Gather data. There is no crime worse than willful ignorance.
“Hey, Khari.”

He grunts and tilts his head toward me. He smells even better than he did before—a little like vanilla. Is that a new augment I haven’t heard about? Periodic odor release?

“About what you said back inside—that droid only showing interest in that boys because they look like Adam.”

Khari takes another sip of tequila. “What about it?”

“What did you mean, exactly?”

He narrows an eye. “You fucking with me?”

“Not at all.”

He laughs and tips his head back. “Damn, Ryugazaki. They keep you under some rock when you were growing up? A diamond, maybe?”

“Something like that.” There hadn’t been a whole lot of sex droids around when I was young.

“When Hazukis get custom-built, you usually get them programmed specifically to be into you.”

“What, you mean by genetic signature?”

“Naw, too complicated. It’s just by features—hair color, eye color, facial structure.”

A creeping sense of unease rises in the pit of my stomach, but I ignore it. “But what if you get an augment?”

He shrugs. “You can reprogram them, I guess. Probably expensive.”

The music changes from steady trance with a deep, throbbing base to something light and bubbly, and a cheer goes up from the dancers. Apparently, this one is popular.

“So because those guys looked like Adam…”

“The droid wanted to fuck them, yeah.” Khari sets his bottle down on the bar, heavily enough that the tequila sloshes up, an alcoholic tidal wave. “Which makes them creepy fucks, in my opinion.”

“Right,” I say distantly. But I’m no longer paying attention.

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It storms again that night, wind pounding against the balcony door, lightning showing me washed-out flashes of my bedroom, even more bland in monochrome than it is in color. I look out the windows around 22:00 when I get home from the party, and again at midnight, but there is no sign of a ghostly figure facing into the storm. I don’t even know if my mother is home—I hadn’t seen her when I came in.

I flip back and forth on my bed for an hour, turning to stare at the wall and then back round to the balcony and the storm. Around 2:00 I give up and wander downstairs into the kitchen. The rain paints wandering shadows on the granite counters, and the house terminal glows with a steady blue light.

I get a mineral water out of the refrigerator, fog blooming from my fingertips on the glass, and
drink it down in four steady gulps. Then I push my palm against my forehead and wince, waiting for the cold ache to subside. None of the water on the Platform is chilled.

The twin lights on the terminal stare at me accusingly, and I am filled with the random urge to give it the finger. I don’t, but I do walk over and bring it out of sleep. I should go through the medical files, before I make up more excuses to avoid it. It’s not as if I’m expecting to get much sleep tonight.

But instead, I bring up the call function and say, “Call Nagisa Hazuki, Platform 6.”

The terminal’s lights glow in a radiating left to right flash, before a standard AI voice says at full volume, “The connection cannot be made—this individual is—.”

“Mute!” I hiss at it.

“—Out of range or does not—.”

“Mute!” I repeat, louder so it can register my voice. It silences and drops the call, blinking innocently at me.

I wait, staring over my shoulder into the ghostly white living room, but all I hear is my heartbeat. I have the distinct impression that I’m alone in the house. A sour ache settles in me, even though it’s probably better that the net had not been able to find Nagisa. What would I say? Hi! I just found out you probably only like me because I have the same coloring as the pervert who had you built for him, isn’t that great? Also, how’s things?

I walk over to the sliding porch door and rest my head against the glass. It’s cool from the rain and I squeeze my eyes shut. After getting home from the party, I had turned on my tablet to see if what Khari had told me is true. According to most sources I found, it is. And it also makes perfect business sense. Of course you wouldn’t want your awesomely expensive sex droid to be interested in someone else more than you, and the manufacturer would doubtless require Hazukis to be reprogrammed before they could be re-sold. Higher profits that way.

But Nagisa has been interested in people other than myself, hasn’t he? He’d had sex with all of those people at Caligula (well, at least two people—I had not actually seen him do anything more than that) and he and the Combat guy seem to know each other very well.

Yes, but you are the only one he pursued, the one he made himself ill for.

I groan against the glass. Surely he isn’t doing that while I’m gone? Abstaining for my sake? We had not talked at all about exclusivity. Of…committed relationships. Was that sort of thing even possible on a military facility? Or was his programming what caused him to do that? Put his desire for me ahead of his own health?

“Fuck.”

I go back up to my room and sit on my bed, watching the rain trailing down the door to the veranda, eyes burning with exhaustion, mind unable to settle down.

Why is this bothering me so much? Does it really matter why he is attracted to me? Would I be happier if he wanted me for my sparkling wit or brilliant sense of humor? Is a droid being programmed to be attracted to a certain set of genetic characteristics really so different than a human born with certain predilections?

Yes, it is, since human desires and preferences are randomized, while droids are fitted with theirs
for a specific purpose. It’s like Khari had said—they want sex because they are forced to want it, and they want it from specific people because that was decided for them as well.

I manage to drift off around 4:00. It feels as if only a few seconds go by before my tablet is ringing to inform me that it’s nine in the morning, and I’m being summoned to breakfast with my mother.

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The rest of the week goes by more or less uneventfully. I run, swim, and eat. I’m not sure whether its my improved physique or just because part of me knows that it’s back to military rations soon enough, but I find myself much hungrier than I remember being in Sky City.

My mother insists I let her take me shopping, even after my repeated attempts to convince her that there’s no point—I’ll be going back to the Platform soon enough, where civilian clothes will just take up space.

“You can just wear them when you visit home, darling,” she’d said.

I wear the new clothes out to the functions she drags me to—brunch with a few society ladies and their own children, and an evening garden party that I manage to beg out of with a headache after the first hour.

There are no more conversations like the ones we had in the car and out in the storm, although she does continue to drive and makes no mention of the few curses that manage to slip into my speech, and a few times I catch her watching with something more than her usual politely passive interest. Is it worry? Indecision? I can’t tell.

I spend time with Lesedi and Khari as well. I like them both genuinely, far more than I’d ever liked anyone else my own age before I’d joined the Confederation. Khari makes no more passes at me, which is a simultaneous relief and disappointment, as so many things seem to be. The closest he comes is one morning when we are sitting in the atrium of the Farnese Hotel drinking coffee and (in Lesedi’s case) bloody marys, listening to her tell a story about a hoverboat race that she had not won, but should have. Gradually, Khari’s attention slips off her and focuses on me. He smiles slowly and I flush, remembering the things he’d whispered to me at the party, about how he wanted to see me lose control.

I realize, belatedly, that Lesedi is no longer speaking, and she’s watching us across the table, stirring her bloody mary with a stick of celery. “You two done eye-fucking? Because there are a lot of rooms upstairs if you need to be alone.”

Khari looks away from me slowly, attention settling back on Lesedi. “Hover racing. Yeah. Fascinating.”

She shows him her bright red tongue and keeps talking.

More than once that week I wonder what it would be like if this had been my life, if I had been born in Casablanca with friends like these, rather than in Sky City with no friends, and the isolation of my family’s prestige. I can’t even begin to imagine it.

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The last night of my stay in Aurora arrives and—unsurprisingly, really—I have so far failed to follow Dr. Amakata’s instructions. Not consciously—it’s simply slipped from my mind repeatedly, the way unappealing tasks so often do. But tonight my mother is bringing me to some party or another, and she’ll be out of the house picking up her dress and shoes for the next hour or
so. That’s plenty of time.

I wake the terminal and waste no time tapping a knuckle against the file icon on the far left. I bring up the statistics for the data: 74 files in all, 17 of them encrypted.

17? How many goddamn augments do I have? Then I realize that this is an overview of the entire family’s files—my mother’s and father’s as well. Still, it is a large number for a family of three, especially one that is relatively healthy.

I dismiss the data and open my own file. Scrolling down, I fly past the first few years of my life—vaccinations, influenza, mild anemia…there. The first encrypted file. It is dated eleven years ago, when I was eight years old. Most likely my lexical augment, since I doubt that I was showing unwanted interest in anyone back then, boys or girls. The ones from five years ago are more likely to be the mental augment. There are four of them.

Four different augment procedures? I don’t remember them at all. I rub at my forehead as if I can coax the memories out. Had the augment really been so complex, or were there complications? Whatever the case, there is plenty of data here for Dr. Amakata.

I attempt to open one of the files and am greeted by a red lock-wall. There is space for a four digit code. Just to make sure, I try all the basics—the code to our old apartment, the code to access the garage, the last four digits of my registration number. Nothing. Rather sheepishly, I try birth years. Still nothing. It isn’t a surprise—I’ll have to hack the lock-wall with outside software, which will take about thirty minutes, provided it has only the standard level of security.

Before I try, however, I scroll back to the previous screen and go further down the timeline. All my recent augment procedures in the military are encrypted as well—eye, aquatic, removal of the lexical augment. My stomach twinges as I realize that of course the records would be updated, along with all my ties to Recon. Hopefully, my father has been too busy to read any of them.

It’s probably fine; I would have heard about it if it wasn’t.

As soon as I fight down that swell of panic, I frown and scroll back through. Three recent procedures, four for the mental augment, and one for the lexical. That’s eight.

So where are the other nine encrypted files?

I bring up my father’s file, scrolling quickly through, hyper aware that the shadows on the wall are creeping ever closer—it’s getting later, and my mother will be home soon.

Nothing is encrypted in my father’s file—just normal, respectable illnesses and routine checkups. I switch over to my mother’s, a nervous tingling starting in the tips of my fingers, like they can sense the contents before I see it. Childhood illnesses, vaccinations, and—file encrypted, file encrypted, file encrypted. Nine of them, all within a two week period, eleven years ago.

Blowing out a deep breath, I dig into my pocket for the tiny laser screw-driver I had bought in town earlier that week. I had software to hack the encryption, but I needed to access the terminal from the back. It had to be a direct-link, nothing wireless. Exceedingly inelegant, but I’m no hacker.

The lights in the kitchen come up. “That really is not necessary.”

The screwdriver leaps from my hand and goes skittering across the kitchen floor. “Mother!” I chase after it, like I believe if I can only get a hold of it, she’ll never suspect. It rolls under the refrigerator, and after a moment or so I straighten up, body going hot and cold in waves. When the hell did she get back?
“I would prefer you did not tear the house apart, darling.” She doesn’t look angry—she doesn’t look anything. Her expression is blank, an odd contrast to her vibrantly patterned floral dress.

“Mother, I can explain,” I say quickly, desperately.

She reaches into her purse. “Don’t bother.” Pulling out something small and metallic, she slides it across the counter to me. “Start with my files.”

I know what it is before I pick it up. A skeleton chip—the master key. If my father had known she’s giving me this, if he’d known she’s even had it made…

I turn toward the terminal. As soon as it senses the presence of the chip, the lights pulse and the screen goes from red to green, files unlocking. The back of my neck prickles as my mother begins to move around the kitchen, opening cupboards and setting glasses down with a clink. This is beyond bizarre.

I open the first file and scan the contents. Then I open another. By the time I reach the last one, I am no longer taking in any information—the words are bouncing off my supersaturated brain, straining out into the atmosphere.

Turning, I find my mother has poured out two glasses of dark scotch. I’ve never seen her drink anything harder than wine. “Well?” she says.

“I…I don’t understand.”

A flicker of a frown. Yes, you do. You are far brighter than I will ever be, and I understood it just fine.”

“I…this…” My brain has disconnected from my mouth, it seems. “When did this happen?”


“Yes, but—I thought you were unarmed.” I jab a finger back toward the files. “That is not unharmed.”

My mother pushes one of the glasses across the counter to me. “You are right, of course.” She takes a tiny sip of her own. “I wasn’t unharmed. Quite the opposite. I died on impact.”

“What?” She’s joking, or—or it’s a metaphor. It has to be.

“I was medically dead for six minutes. Then your father arrived and demanded that I be resuscitated. The paramedics did as they were told, but against their better judgment.” The barest trace of humor touches her mouth. “There was not much left to resuscitate, you see.”

I’m holding onto the glass. I can feel it beneath my fingertips, but I am not all together convinced that it’s there. It feels false, and so does the floor I’m standing on, and the air pressing against my skin and filling up my lungs.

“They…rebuilt you,” I say. All the procedures, the commissioned parts and donated organs. “You’re partly artificial.”

She folds her hands on the countertop, pink fingernails glowing against the granite. “Mostly. 68%, to be exact.”

My hands are on the countertop as well, but only because if I let go I’m going to fall and never get
back up. “That means—.”

My mother’s words buzz from her lips and hang around her head like flies. “I am a droid, yes.”

Chapter End Notes

This family, I tell you.

So, I’m planning a brief hiatus this summer (about a month and a half) while I’m on vacation/working on some original stuff, and initially I had planned to begin it after this chapter. Then I decided that would be way too douchey of me, heh.

So, one more chapter, and then summer hiatus!
Chapter 20

The scotch burns my throat, but I don’t care; I drink it straight it down. When I set my glass on the counter, she refills it. Maybe she thinks that if I have enough, I won’t remember this in the morning.

The kitchen lights shine prismatic and flawless on the cut crystal. Everything in this house, on this planet—it’s all flawless. My hand shakes, and I have to put the glass down before I smash it.

“Why did you keep this from me?”

It’s a stupid question, a child’s question, and it shivers out of me in a child’s voice, high and pinched.

“Up until four months ago, I had no idea.”

I look up sharply. Every part of her face is familiar—eyes, lips, nose, forehead. It’s the words that are coming out of it that are foreign.

“They augmented your memory?”

“No augmented. They never uploaded it in the first place.” She presses a hand to her chest, so hard that the skin around her fingers goes pale. “I am not Misaki Ryugazaki, Rei. I am not your mother. She died eleven years ago.” She takes a hard, rasping breath, and as she pulls oxygen into her own lugs, it feels like she’s pulling it out of mine. “I have been designed from your mother’s physical specifications, and from as many parts of her original body as they could salvage.”

Stop, stop, stop. The word screams in my head—all of the voices in there, none of them want to hear this.

“I was fitted with a personality that was like your mothers, but not identical. You see, your father had some…undesirable traits removed. I became obedient, I became a perfect wife.

“At first, I obeyed Daisuke’s every wish. I was overjoyed to. But slowly, over the years, my programming began to degrade.” She swirled her own scotch around in its glass. “That’s the danger of droids with human components over the legal limit—certain remnants of their former body’s personalities can manifest, especially if all of the parts are from the same body. I began to…I suppose you could say I began to wake up.”

“Like Nagisa,” I say.

She blinks at me. “Who?”

“No one. Keep talking.”

Her eyes narrow a bit, maybe at the order, but she follows it. “Four months ago, I was ill. Do you remember that?”

“Ill?” I think back. “Yes, I do.” She had gotten very sick one night at dinner, coughing and clawing at her throat. I had knocked a 200 credit bottle of wine off the table in my haste to get to her. “I
thought that was a shellfish allergy.”

“That’s what Dr. Myles told me, but was lying. Something in my digestive system malfunctioned, and I…I just knew.” She begins to pace back and forth between the stove and the porch door, yet another thing the mother I know would never do. “I hired a hacker to get me access to your father’s private files, and there it was.” She points a pale hand to the terminal.

My stomach is roiling and I am already regretting the scotch.

“When I saw it, I…” She puts two fingers to the center of her forehead, like an actor in a vid pretending to mind-read. “I did not remember Misaki’s life so much as…feel it. It’s hard to explain.”

I swallow a few times before I ask, “And this personality, the one I’m talking to—?”

She shakes her head. “Is not the one your mother had before she died, no. It’s more…a compilation. A separate personality—or consciousness, I suppose you could say—that emerged out of necessity in order to deal with the information I had gained.” She means that my mother, the mother I grew up with, would not have been able to handle it. She wouldn’t know what to do.

“So father has a degrading AI for a wife, and a son with a malfunctioning augment.” I’m laughing, and I don’t even know why.

“No,” my mother says.

“No?”

“Your augment isn’t degrading. Well, it is, but not because it’s faulty. It’s because I began mixing a certain combination of alkaloids into your meals. They were designed to gradually cease the augment’s function.”

I had been telling myself that nothing else could shock me, that I had reached my saturation point for the evening. A dangerous bet to make with yourself. “You…you were poisoning me?”

She drums her fingertips on the countertop. “In a way, I suppose I was. I knew about your augment even before Misaki’s memories started coming back. I never liked it, but I knew it was not my place to complain.” A spasm of anger crosses her face. “I did it for your own good, Rei—.”

“I am so fucking sick of hearing people say that!” I slam a fist down against the counter, rattling the glasses, my voice echoing off the shiny metal surfaces of the kitchen. “You don’t get to tell me what’s good for me, mo—.” The word tries to slither out and I choke it back down. She isn’t my mother.

She looks distantly sad, the way you might look while standing at the grave of a friend who had died a long time ago. “It wasn’t meant to cause you any discomfort—it should have eroded without you even noticing—.”

“Well, I noticed.” Lancing pains in my head, debilitating mood swings. “And Dr. Amakata saw the augment on the first scan she took—.”

“This is the woman who claims to need your medical records so she can remove the augment, correct?”

I nod.
“She’s lying. There is no need for removal—it should cease function on its own, if it hasn’t already.”

“What?”

She shakes her head. “Whatever that doctor wants our files for, it’s not to remove your augment.”

“I…” My head is throbbing, because no, not Amakata, I cannot handle another betrayal. “I don’t believe you.”

She shrugs. “You don’t have to. I won’t stop you from giving her the files. Whether she truly means to help you, or just wants to ruin your father, well—.” A ghost of a sneer touches her lips. “Either one is fine with me.”

I say nothing, even though I know that if father is ruined, we are ruined as well. I don’t care. I would give up everything—my wealth, my Elite status, my future, just to unlearn all the things I have just discovered.

The droid comes around the counter and, after a moment of hesitation, she holds out her arms to me, like she used to when I was a child.

“No.” I shake my head, voice quivering with tears. “Don’t touch me!”

Still, I don’t resist when she pulls me against her, burying my face in her shoulder, smearing tears and snot on her beautiful pink dress. She strokes my hair and tells me it’s alright, even though we both know it isn’t.

This droid is not my mother, but she is the only mother I have left.

--

The shuttle ride back to the Platform is simultaneously the longest and shortest I have ever taken. I spend it replaying my mother’s words over and over in my mind, stretching the hours out to infinity. Still, it is not anywhere near long enough to prepare myself to face my squad, to be able to smile and laugh and hide all that I have learned. To be able to face Nagisa again, after everything I have learned about droids.

And my father…just thinking about him makes acid burn in my throat, makes the little shuttle feel like it’s closing in around me. Not only had he controlled his son’s emotional and sexual maturation, he had built himself a replacement wife. Why? Because he didn’t want the bother of finding another real one? To avoid scandal?

Her family—my grandparents and my uncle—all of them think Misaki is alive and well in Sky City. Perhaps that had been my father’s fear—that if he were no longer married to my mother, her family would rescind his access to their assets.

And of course, he was the Chairman of the HFA. The leader, the most vocal advocate of anti-droid measures, and he had a droid for a wife. It would be funny, if it was happening to anyone but me.

--

I expect the shuttle bay to be as empty as it had been the morning of my departure, but there are several Confederacy ships docked for unloading. My face burns as I disembark from my gaudy shuttle, still dressed in my Aurora clothes. I ignore the snickers and catcalls, heading back out the airlock and into the familiar overheated, poorly lit corridors of Platform 6.
I have no idea what time it is, but it must be either early afternoon or late evening, because the halls are crowded. More insults and scathing looks are thrown my way, but I refuse to look at the ground, show any of the shame I feel.

I am so focused on not giving a shit about what any of my fellow recruits think that I walk right into someone as I turn a corner.

The guy whistles. “Hey there, Elite boy. You’re looking good.” He is short and bow-legged, but looks more than adequately muscled to beat me to the ground, if he feels like it. I don’t recognize him or any of the men with him, but they know me.

“Had a nice vacation? Real relaxing?”

I force myself to look him in the eye. “Yes, thank you. It was quite enjoyable. Now—.” My voice trembles just the slightest bit, and his eyes narrow, scenting prey. “If you’d just get out of my way—.”

“Your way? I think you’re the one who bumped into us, Ryugazaki.” He sneers, grabbing my chin. “Why don’t you put that pretty mouth to use, and we’ll call it even?”

My jawbones grind together beneath his meaty fingers. Movement flashes in the corner of my eye. More of them?

“Coercing oral sex in the hallway, huh? Classy.”

I know that voice.

The recruit spits on the ground. “Fuck you, bitch.”

A flash of red and blue, and then the recruit is reeling away from me, clutching his nose.

“Fuck who now?” Gou stands next to me, two of her knuckles already starting to swell, but she’s smiling. She looks…a little unhinged, honestly.

It’s all very well for her to defend me, but now it’s the two of us against five very large Combat recruits, and as badass as she is, I don’t like the odds.

“Gou, what are you—.”

“Shut up, Rei.”

“But—.”

She stretches, shoulders popping. “You seriously can’t go anywhere these days without running into assholes. Right, guys?”

It isn’t Gou and I against five after all. It’s Gou, Makoto, Hauka, Rin, and Raik, and I against five.

I like that much better.

“Did I just hear someone calling my little sister a bitch?” Rin gives the recruits a shark grin. “’Cause she isn’t even the biggest bitch here.”

“Yeah, that would be you,” Raik says.

Gou starts laughing silently. The Combat recruits retreat. The one with the broken nose throws us a
murderous look as he vanishes around the corner.

“Yeah, good choice!,” Raik calls after them.

“Pussies!” Gou adds. Then she turns to me. “Christ, Ryugazaki. What the fuck are you wearing?”

“Uh…” I glance down at my white linen pants.

“It looks terrible,” Gou say. And then she hugs me.

--

I manage to go two whole minutes without asking about Nagisa. They all smile when I do. They’ve probably been taking bets. I wonder who won.

“He’s getting polished, or adjusted, or whatever else they do to him in the med bay.” Gou says. “But he’s gonna meet us at the pool.”

Evidently, I’d arrived during down time. My squad is planning to spend it practicing a maneuver they’ve been having trouble with.

When we reach the stairs, Raik salutes ironically. “Well, you kids have fun swimming in circles.” She and Gou bump fists. When had those two become friends?

I say goodbye for the moment as well, climbing two floors to the bridge to check in with command, before heading to my berth. I put away my few belongings and then sit down on my cot, tablet balanced on my knees. The decrypted files are on it, seventeen years of my life, every augment procedure I have ever undergone. I had read through them on the shuttle ride from Aurora.

Apparently, the emotional augment had taken four separate twelve hour procedures, across the span of three weeks. I spent a month and a half in the hospital, and then two weeks recuperating at home. I remember none of it, and that fills me with fear so deep and potent it is a solid mass inside me, filling up my lungs.

If I can be made to forget this, if the droid who looks like my mother can be programmed to not even realize what she is, what else could a doctor do to a person without their knowledge?

And what about the manipulations that happen without operating tables, without ever swallowing a single pill? The slow, insidious words that crawl in through your ears and eyes and wrap like wires around your limbs. It’s how people can treat droids like animals, how I had grown up thinking myself superior to everyone I came across just in light of my birth.

If I’m honest, I still think that. I’m just starting to believe that I shouldn’t.

--

I decide to head to the pool to watch my squad train, because I don’t want to be alone. On my way, I wonder if Nagisa is still in the med bay and, like my thoughts have conjured him up, a voice echoes down the corridor.

“Rei!”

I turn, neck prickling, shivers swimming laps up and down my spine. I have time to take in a blue and gold blur before it hits me in the chest, knocking me back against the wall, lungs compressing as the breath is forced out of them.
Wiry arms go around my neck and I get a mouthful of blond hair. “Nagisa—!”

He giggles. “Sorry.” He brushes his hair back out of his eyes, staring up at me, cheeks flushed, lips wet like he’s been licking them. He smells like antiseptic and mint toothpaste.

I had been so worried over how I would face him after everything I had learned on Aurora. But he smiles at me and I kiss him, in the corridor outside the med bay, where anyone can see us. He makes a soft, slightly surprised sound against my mouth, gripping hard onto my jacket and returning the kiss, tongue even warmer than I remember it.

He pulls back for just long enough to murmur, “Welcome back.”

--

Ten minutes later we finally make it down to the training floor, my lips swollen, my neck stinging from tiny bites. I’m thankful that I at least will not be putting on a wetsuit. Nagisa is grinning, eyes shining, body nearly giving off light. He looks wonderful, and I experience a very brief pang when I wonder who he has been with to keep himself healthy, but I let it go. I’m just glad he hasn’t been making himself ill for my sake.

“Isn’t we going to the pool?” I ask, when Nagisa heads for an unfamiliar gym.

“Yeah, we are,” he says, brightly. “Fuck, you’ve really missed a lot.”

The pool in the room beyond is nearly twice the size of the one we’ve been training in, circular, with no ropes to delineate lanes. I stand at the edge and look down. It’s deep, and there are wide, lopsided structures all the way down. It’s too dark to tell what they are.

“Obstacles,” Nagisa explains. “You’ll see.” Then he puts on a pair of large, opaque goggles and takes a running dive off the edge.

Makoto, Haruka, and a third swimmer are already underwater. At first I think it’s Gou (which is strange, because she never trains with us in the pool) but then I see her standing on the far end. She is making wide, flamboyant gestures with her arms, and saying something emphatically, again and again. I think she’s gesturing me over, but when I get closer I see the headset she’s wearing. Of course—Gou is the navigator. They have begun training blind with her directing their movements. On recon missions, our helmets will be equipped with night vision capabilities, but at times the water will be so dark as to render that completely useless.

“Makoto, Haru, do Purple Butterfly. And this time, don’t run into the wall.” She swipes her left hand to the side, most likely moving simulations around on the digital readout. “Yeah? Well, fuck you too, Haru. Do it.”

The Purple Butterfly is a flanking maneuver. The two swimmers separate and converge on a target from opposite sides. We’ve memorized a whole list. Purple Butterfly, Red Shark, Green Whale, Blue Dolphin.

“Nagisa, Yellow Penguin.” Gou extends her hand and flicks it upward. The Yellow Penguin is when the swimmer turns up the heat release on their suit just enough to catch the interest of any sensors, and then rockets up toward the surface, lowering the heat back down as they go. It’s a divisionary tactic, or a last ditch attempt to avoid being made.

“Rin, what are you doing, are you spinning in circles? Cut it out!”

I start, and then look back down into the pool. It’s just light enough for me to see a flash of red
hair. Rin must be training with them in my place. He may even be going on the mission in my
case, since technically I am on medical leave for another two weeks.

The training session lasts for half an hour, before another Recon squad complains that Iwatobi is
hogging the pool. Gou and the other squad’s navigator nearly come to blows, before Makoto
surges out of the pool and inserts himself between them. He is very reasonable, but honestly I think
it’s his sheer physical presence that calms everyone down. It’s hard to argue with back muscles like
that.

Gou bitches about it for a little while, but then cheers up considerably when Rin suggests poker in
the rec room. “You guys coming?” she asks Nagisa and I.

I glance at him. His damp hair paints slick trails beneath the collar of his jacket, and the veins in
his hands are standing out from the exercise. His mouth twitches.

“No, I’m not really feeling it.” He glances sidelong at me. “What about you, Rei?”

And now everyone is looking at me. Could he be any more obvious? I clear my throat. “Uh, no
thanks. I’m, I’m a little tired.”

Gou smirks. “Riiight.”

--

“You look great,” Nagisa says. He’s climbed up on my cot and crossed his legs, looking perfectly
at home. “You’re all tanned.”

“Yes.” I set a knee awkwardly on the corner of the bed, not really leaning any weight onto it.
“Yeah.” I set a knee awkwardly on the corner of the bed, not really leaning any weight onto it.
“You…you look good, too.”

He grins whisper-quick, like he knows what I’m getting at. “Heh, yeah. There are some people
willing to help me out.” He fidgets with the hem of his jacket. “Does it bother you?”

My first instinct is just to reassure him, but I force myself to actually think about the question.
Does it bother me, the idea of him with other people?

“I understand why it’s important,” I say slowly, “And I would much prefer it to you getting sick.”

Nagisa scrunches up his nose. “So, you’re saying no, it doesn’t bother you, but in a really Rei
way.”

“Yes,” I laugh. “I suppose I am.”

He sighs and falls back like this is his bed, like it’s his pillow he’s dripping his wet hair all over.
His shirt rides up a bit, pants pulling tight across his thighs. He’s probably doing it on purpose.

“Who…who did you, uh, spend time with while I was gone?” I’m not sure why I ask—I’m not sure
I actually want to know.

“Just a couple people. Ivan, mostly.”

“Ivan?”

He splays his legs slightly, hand resting lightly on his stomach. My heartbeat radiates up into my
throat. “Yeah. That big guy from Combat. Buzzed hair, blue eyes?”
“Oh.” Him. “His nose is crooked.”

Nagisa squeezes his eyes shut and giggles. “Well, he has a great cock, so I can look past the nose.” He winces. “Sorry. You probably don’t want to hear about that.”

“No, it’s…it’s alright.” The more interest that Nagisa shows in people who are not me, the more it disproves Khari’s theory that he’s imprinted on me because of what I look like.

And speaking of Khari…


Nagisa is threading his fingers through his damp hair. “Really?” His stomach muscles flex as he sits up. “Who? What’s his name?”

“Um…Khari.”

“Was he hot?”

I laugh. “Yeah.”

He squirms a little in satisfaction. This is my berth, my bed, but with Nagisa here, it’s a changed landscape. I try not to think about the last time. It had begun with kissing, and ending with an injection to the neck.

Nagisa rocks forward in a smooth, slow motion, until he’s on his hands and knees. “You should have brought him back with you.”

“I don’t think that’s regulation,” I say, voice only quivering the slightest bit as Nagisa moves closer. “And he wouldn’t have fit in my suitcase.”

“Shame.” He touches my stomach through my shirt, traces my ribs, rubs his palms across my nipples. It feels less like he’s trying to seduce me and more like he just wants to reassure himself I’m here.

“I really missed you.” His touch moves up to my neck, thumbs pressing briefly into the hollow of my throat. His eyes are brighter than the berth lights.

“I missed you too.” It’s such a simple thing, but also so imperatively true that it feels like giving away something I did not even know I had.

Nagisa presses his forehead against mine. The warmth seeps into me and I say, “You’re always so hot.”

“Mmm…thank you.”

“That’s not what I—you know what I mean.” I ignore his giggle. “Do all droids have such high body temperatures?”

He pulls back. “I don’t know. I haven’t met many other droids.” He kisses me, once, twice, three times, and then he’s pulling me down on top of him, fumbling between us to yank open the button on my pants. “Come on, come on.” The anticipation buzzes between us like static.

Undulating against the bed, he works his sweatpants down off his hips, eyes mad and shining. “I missed you, fuck, it’s all I’ve been thinking about—.” He tosses the pants across the room, where they hit Makoto’s cot before sagging down to the floor. “That last night in the med bay, Rei—.”
I nod, gasping openly as he pulls my hard cock out of my underwear, small, hot hand gripping me firmly. I remember—I spent most nights on Aurora remembering, and then trying hard not to look any of the cleaning AI’s in the face the next day.

“I thought it would be awesome to be all dramatic—” he says, voice momentarily lost as he bites down on my bottom lip. “—Before you left, but it wasn’t enough. I—.” He rolls his hips up against mine, before hissing in a sharp breath, whole body jerking.

“What? What’s—“

He laughs and shakes his head. “Nothing, just your zipper—.”

I look down between us, to where my pants are hanging open. “I—sorry, hold on—.”

I stand up quickly, nearly tripping over myself in my hurry. Nagisa watches, flushed, one hand tangled in his hair, the other wrapped around himself. I take my shirt off as well, since it seems silly not to. Then I stand there, cheeks hot, unable to drag my gaze off the floor.

His gaze prickles my skin, sends trails of sweat down my back.

“Fuck, Rei, come here.”

The weak springs of the cot scream as I join him on the bed. He’s unzipped his jacket, and I press my hands against his chest, soaking up the warmth radiating off his skin.

“Rei…”

I groan as he begins to stroke us both at once, moving his hand up the shafts and rolling his palm across the heads. “My hand’s too small—.”

I wrap my hand around us instead, and his hips jerk. His eyes slip closed. “Rei.”

Go slow, I had told myself on the shuttle ride back. Make sure you know what you are getting into.

But his desperation, the hot reality of his skin and mouth, the tiny moans that grow in volume as I move my hand faster, it’s taking hold of me like a gravity field, pulling me in from the abyss.

Nagisa’s eyes flutter open and he grabs my hand, stilling it for a moment. “Gimme.” He curls in to lick my palm and up my fingers, sucking two of them into his mouth. My cock throbs as I feel his throat trembling from the inside.

“What are you doing?”

“Wet,” he explains, pulling back up, my fingers and his lips glistening with saliva. “Keep going.”

I catch on, wrapping my hands back around us both. Saliva is hardly a good lubricant—it dries quickly—but for now the extra slickness makes it much easier.

“Rei, Rei—.”

He throws back his head, and without thinking I lean down to kiss his throat. His every motion is so infinitely sensual that I can’t resist. I stroke us harder and he moans. “Fuck, I want you so much, god, even when I’m with other people—.” I catch the head of his cock with the edge of a nail, and I’m about to apologize, but he arches his back and grips my shoulders. “I just think about you—.”
A shiver of unease moves through me, but with Nagisa writhing underneath me it’s hard to focus on anything else. I force my hair out of my eyes and roll my hips against him. No, that’s putting it too elegantly—it’s turned into a hard rut, the cot creaking underneath us, our breath so loud in the quiet of the berth.

Nagisa’s nails sink into my back, skidding in perspiration, and when he comes his eyes close and he shakes so hard I almost lose my grip on him. Sweat shines on his forehead and the sides of his nose, and his fingers tremble as he pulls his jacket aside. “Finish,” he breathes out. “Come on, Rei.” He pinches his nipples until they’re as pink as his cheeks. “Get your come all over me.”

Arousal hits me hard and I stroke myself faster, not bothering to wipe Nagisa’s semen from my hand. Under any other circumstance, that would have made me cringe with embarrassment, but I’m learning that in this context, my reactions become slightly blurred.

Nagisa’s gaze is rapturous, adoring. And his next words make me go cold all the way through.

“I don’t want anyone else, Rei. Just you.”

Pleasure washes through me and I let out a wet, choked gasp, streaking white up Nagisa’s chest. My arms shake as endorphins flood my system, and I collapse beside him on the cot, scraping my chin against the rough top blanket. Beside me, Nagisa makes a deeply satisfied noise, tracing fingers up my back. For a moment, I manage to convince myself that I had imagined it, that those words don’t mean anything, and then—.

“You’re perfect, Rei.” He pushes sweaty hair back off my forehead, the glow of his eyes filling my vision to the edges. “I feel like I was made for you.”

Chapter End Notes

Eheheh you guys didn't think I'd leave you without a sense of lingering dread, did you?

So, hiatus time! I'll still be on tumblr and around the archive, but don't expect another chapter until around mid-August. I need a little time to recharge and work on my novel. And I'm going to the beach in a couple weeks. SWIMMING.

I hope everyone's having an excellent summer so far, and I hope everyone's enjoying season 2!!
A couple of days ago I thought that, since it's August now, I would take a look at this chapter and see what sort of shape it was in. As it turned out, it was almost done. So I thought I'd finish it and throw it up here, just 'cause.

*sigh* Shows what happens when I try to take a hiatus.

Sleep spends all night hovering at the edges of my perception like a faulty net-link, connection too shaky to manifest. Makoto has training early with the rest of the squad, so I try to keep my turbulent tossing to a minimum and force my brain to settle down into rest. Around 5:00 I abandon the attempt, grab my tablet, and leave the berth.

The corridors are empty but not silent. Every inch of the Platform is lush with the tense, heavy hum of the engine. After my first few days I have barely noticed it, but my week on Aurora has me readjusted to planetary silence.

I have no real destination in mind, but I find my feet pulling me down a floor and across the Platform to the med bay. The chances of happening on Dr. Amakata this early are close to zero, but when the doors glide open, there she is, standing at the bank of monitors with her head bowed and lips moving, as if she’s committing something to memory. She tenses at the sound of the doors.

“Rei!” The exhaustion on her face is devastating, but the time of day justifies it. I probably look worse. “I heard you were back on base. How are feeling?”

“Not in the mood for small talk,” I hear myself say.

Her eyebrows flick upward. “That’s not very Elite of you.”

I shrug, which is not very Elite either.

The doors close behind me, shutting us together into the pale austerity of the med bay. I have spent the last day and a half agonizing over the decision, but when it comes down to it, I make it in a second.

I put my tablet down on the security desk. “I have the files.”

Amakata beams. It pushes aside her exhaustion like a sun clearing a cloudbank. “Rei, that is excellent news!”

Is it just my imagination, or do her hands shake slightly as she reaches for the tablet? Do her eyes gleam with triumph? Will I ever be able to look at her again without seeing artfulness to her actions?

I want to trust Amakata. She is one of the few true allies I have.
“I’ll send these to my colleague in Sky City.” She taps a command into her tablet, then nods. I begin the file transfer. On the closed network, it takes less than three seconds.

“It should be possible to perform the procedure by the end of the month.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“You didn’t have too much trouble getting your hands on them, did you?”

I hesitate. I have given her the files because, honestly, I can’t come up with a solid reason not to. If I refuse, I would have to explain why, and if I pretend not to have them, she will continue to hound me for them. And as far as I know, Dr. Amakata so far has never told me a lie, while my mother and father have deceived me for over half my life.

As for ulterior motives—well, it is no secret that Amakata dislikes mental augments and the Elite lifestyle. As growing up in Sky City has taught me, no one’s actions are ever solely altruistic.

But there is not need to tell her everything.

“No,” I say. “I didn’t have any trouble at all.” I retrieve my tablet from beside hers. I am halfway to the doors, when I make another snap-decision, and turn back. “Dr. Amakata, may I ask you a strange question?”

“Hmm?” She looks up, eyes glazed. Clearly, her mind is already elsewhere. “Yes—yes, of course.”

“You are the doctor that Nagisa goes to for…maintenance, correct?” I have heard him refer to her by first name, and they have a repartee beyond what the rest of us have with the med-bay doctors.

“Yes. Well, one of them. I can’t discuss any details. Doctor-Patient confidentiality holds, even with AI’s.” She smiles briefly.

“It’s a general question. About droids.”

She nods to show she’s listening.

“I read somewhere that droids—especially Hazukis—are often equipped with facial recognition capabilities. As in, they can be built to respond favorably to certain physical features.”

She nods again. “Facial structure, hair, and eye colors are the most commonly used markers.” Her mouth twists in distaste. “A fairly inexpensive add-on, considering the implications.”

The implications being, I suppose, that an AI is not only forced to obey your every whim, they are made to enjoy the experience, no matter what it is.

I am worrying at a loose thread on my sleeve and I force my hands to still. “Exactly how well-tuned is this programming? Could it be fooled?”

“Yes,” Amakata says slowly. “Fairly easily, depending on the precision of the work. Most standard models can be fooled by a similar combination of features.”

Like Adam’s droid on Aurora—those boys had not looked particularly similar to Adam, they had just had his coloring.

“What about custom droids?” I push. “More detailed work.”

“Rei…” I know there isn’t a chance that she doesn’t know who my questions are in reference to.
“Please,” I say. “Just answer the question.”

She runs her fingers through her hair in a high sweep. “I suppose, in theory, that the software could be sophisticated enough to only respond to very close matches. Family resemblances—siblings, or parent and child.” She grins wryly. “Which is why it’s always better to keep your recreational droid habits to yourself.”

I nod jerkily, barely even listening anymore. The question had been a scab—I’d known it was there, known it would burst open if I picked at it, poisoning my blood.

*Parents and children.*

“Is that all you wanted to know?” Clearly, Amakata is anxious to go through the files.

“Yes.” My voice is slippery and my body feels as brittle as my mother’s antique china. “Thank you.”

My morning is spent in the grav gym, since the Iwatobi squad is training blind in the lower gym, but in the afternoon they are pushed to the other pool. I join them there.

Captain Sasabe runs the time trials, clicking his tongue when I come back from a hundred meters of butterfly stroke. He shows me the watch and I wince.

“Slow and steady doesn’t win this race, Ryugazaki.”

“Yes, sir.” It’s nearly as bad as a month ago when I was struggling with my aquatic augment.

“Still…” Sasabe puts his hands on his hips and gazes off across the pool. “For an invalid who’s spent his last week on a cushy resort planet….it ain’t half bad.”

“I…thank you, Captiain.” I think it’s the closest thing to a compliment I have ever received from him.

“Yeah, yeah…no need to get choked up.”

Nagisa grins at me from across the pool. I smile back as best I can, trying to force some enthusiasm into the flex of the muscles.

*You’re perfect, Rei. I feel like I was made for you.*

This is not his fault.

I repeat this to myself as we run drills. Even if he only likes me because he is conditioned to, he does not deserve to be punished. I try to respond as normally as I possibly can.

It isn’t enough. By the end of training, his lips are puckered into a pout, which I notice all the more because I very much want to pin him to the lockers and kiss it away. I don’t, and he leaves without saying goodbye.

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This rhythm repeats itself over the next few days. I spend my mornings on my own, working to get my body back up to standard, running, climbing the ropes, lifting weights. I join my squad in the pool in the afternoon, and every evening I report to the med bay, where Dr. Amakata checks my vitals. My health, she says, is excellent, but the medical leave will still extend until the end of the month. Even if it is lifted early, I would still be too far behind to join my squad on the upcoming
mission.

And then there is Nagisa.

We are perfectly cordial to one another, speak just as much as anyone else does over meals (where he does not eat) and over cards (which he usually does not play) but I can feel the distance stretched like a climbing cord. He is aware of my agitation, but seems to have decided not to press me. I expect this is advice he’s gotten from some other quarter, since our interactions have never been subtle before.

In a way, it is like the time I flinched away from him on the ob deck, except now he seems sad, rather than angry.

And also like the last time, I find myself spending an unlikely amount of time with the Matsuokas and, occasionally, the Samezuka squad. I don’t speak much—unlike Rin, the rest of them seem uninterested in my life as an Elite. As it turns out, Gou and Jinny had known each other before they entered the Confederation. They had both been members of Lotus, a notorious all-female street gang that had emerged in Lowland during the riots ten years ago. Gleefully, Gou shows off a long, jagged scar on her left arm, running from elbow to wrist.

Raik snorts. “What, you trip and fall?” She is of the opinion that anything that does not happen on Ithaca is not worth talking about.

Gou bares her teeth. “Yeah. Over a cop with a laser whip.”

“What happened then?” I ask.

The snarl becomes a grin. “You ask all the right questions, Rei. That’s why I like you.” Her eyes skip back to Raik. “I broke his jaw.”

Raik’s breath hoots out of her. “That’s why you’re always fucking up your knuckles, Red. You gotta aim for softer targets.”

--

Five days after my return to the Platform Rin asks me, “So, is there any particular reason you’re fucking Nagisa around?” He’s seated on his cot, attempting to stretch out a pulled muscle in his calf.

I’m sitting on the floor, leaning against his berthmate’s cot, flicking idly through Sky City news updates on my tablet. “What do you mean?”

Rin grunts and kicks his bedding down to the foot of his cot, stretching back out on the flat sheet. “Don’t be an asshole. He’s moping like you left him at the alter.”

“I—we’re not—it isn’t—”

“Jesus, Ryugazaki, calm down. Everyone knows. He talks to Gou all the time, and she talks to everyone else.” Rin reaches for his foot, hooking his fingers around the heel and bending down to touch his forehead to his knee. “Nagisa thinks you can’t handle that he’s a droid.”

Guilt pricks me. “That is totally—.”

“I told him he’s probably right.”
“Completely not—wait.” My tablet slithers out of my hands and onto the berth floor. “You told him what?”

Rin’s face is still pressed to his leg; his voice sounds like it is coming from beneath a rug. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“No! Yes, but—no.” I drag in a humid breath. “It’s complicated.”

Rin sits back up and twists his spine until something pops. “Right.”

I expect him to keep going, but he doesn’t—just leans back against the wall, one leg hanging over the side of the cot. He is the picture of unconcerned laziness, and I recognize something of Gou in the casual way he drapes his arm across his stomach.

I scratch at the scuff mark on the floor beside Nitori’s cot. This goes nowhere unless I let it. I can get up and leave, steer the conversation in another direction, even remain totally silent.

I fold my hands in my lap and ask, “How much do you know about droids?”

I don’t tell him everything—just the bits about Khari and the droid at the party, and the red-haired boys who had brought her into the galaxy room. I tell him what Dr. Amakata said about genetic traits. He listens, sitting on his cot and rotating his wrists, bending his fingers to stretch the tendons. My mind plays a constant counterpoint to the story—what are you doing, what are you doing, you can’t trust him—but I ignore it. I’ll allow my Elite conscience zero input here.

“He said, he feels like he was made for you?” Rin repeats, dubious. “Dude, are you sure he wasn’t just, I don’t know, being romantic or something? I mean—.” He scrubs his bangs back out of his eyes. “—What were you doing when he said it?”

“We—.” I am suddenly even more interested in the scuff mark on the floor. He knows what we were doing, the bastard. He just wants to make me say it. “We were—.”

What is the proper term? Grinding? Frottage? Fooling around? Did that act count as having sex, or did that phrase only apply to oral or penetrative acts? Maybe—

“Dude, don’t have a seizure over it.” Rin shows me a predator’s grin. “I’m sure it was nothing too freaky. Although, he is a Hazuki, and I did finally watch that Elite Boys porno. There’s a whole lot of—.”

“We were having sex,” I say quickly.

“Right.” He clears his throat. “Look, I know you don’t have a lot of experience—.”

I briefly consider being insulted.

“—But people usually don’t mean the shit they say in bed. Or they do but, like, really subconsciously.” He groans. “Look, I’m terrible at this. You should go to Gou if you want sex advice.”

“I didn’t ask for advice.”

“Yeah, but you need it so bad I’m giving it out for free. Look—don’t worry too much. Even if he really does like you because you look like the old pervert he was designed for—.”

Surely that is meant to be insulting.
“—Who the fuck cares? People like each for a lot of reasons. Not all of them are magical and noble. You’re not the creeper that made him, right? So just chill out.”

For a few bewildered seconds, his words rattle across the tumultuous landscape of my mind. Is it really that simple? “You’re right,” I hear myself say. “You’re right.”

Rin looks abruptly suspicious. “Really?”

I shrug. “Yeah.”

“Well, shit.” He flops backward onto the cot, springs screaming a stifled protest. “I thought you were gonna go all Elite on me and deny everything.”

I laugh and shake my head, once. “Waste of time.”

I have other doubts, ones I can’t air to Rin, that eat my insides like necrotizing bacteria, dissolving me one bite at a time. There is only one person I know who can ease them. Either way—I am convinced that knowing is better than not.

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Nagisa opens the berth door the next morning, shirtless and tousled, sleep crusted in oblong streaks at the corners of his eyes.

“Rei?”

It’s early. I could have waited until after training that afternoon, but now that I’ve decided, I’ll boil over if I don’t get the words out. They had blared through my dreams all night.

*Genetic traits. Parents and children.*

Nagisa blows a stray curl out of his ear in a sullen little puff. “Oh, so you’re finally talking to me?”

I put my hand beside his on the jam. He stares at inch of space between our fingers. “Please,” I say.

He sighs, and still doesn’t look at me. “Gimme a second. Haru’s sleeping.”

We know where we’re going without discussion, following the familiar route to our ob deck, the place where all our previous arguments have begun and ended. The specter of space blooms behind Nagisa as he angles his body back toward me, arms crossed. “Well? What super-important Elite rule did I break?”

I blink. “Huh?”

His shoulders hunch. “It had to be something, right? Did I get come on your slacks? Did I not moan at the right frequency?

“Wha—.” I shake my head wonderingly. “Nagisa, this isn’t your fault. You haven’t done anything.”

His laugh is thick with scorn and pricks like a hundred needles across my back. “It’s the droid thing, then. You still can’t deal.”

“It’s…” My heart is racing and sweat pools chilly between my shoulder blades. You’d think I was
facing down a fully-armored kassadian soldier, rather than a five-foot-four boy with a bedhead. “While I was on Aurora—.”

“Is it that guy?” Nagisa looks me in the eye for the first time since we left the berth. “Karl, or whatever?”

“Karl? Oh, Khari.” That’s right—I had told him I’d met someone. “No, it’s not him—he’s just a friend.”

“Then what?” Nagisa’s cool aloofness is cracking. I can see the hurt bubbling up in miasmic pulses.

I twist my fingers together, for once letting my nervous habits have their run of me. At least I no longer automatically reach up to adjust glasses that aren’t there. “I know you can’t help being what you are, anymore than I can help the family that I was born into.”

Nagisa snorts, like he finds it absurd I’m suggesting my Elite status is comparable to being an artificial life form with the sole purpose to serve.

“—But I just have to know. Your previous master—the one who had you constructed for him—what was his name?”

Nagisa’s eyes widen, expression collapsing in a moment of blank surprise.

Shit. Fuck. I knew it, I knew it, this is when he tells me—

“Cyrus Feller.”

“I ca—wait. What?”

The name reverberates in my ears. It’s so different from what I had been expecting that it takes me a moment to realize I recognize it.

“The Cyrus Feller? The dead one?”


“But—.” My thoughts feel like a runaway shuttle bus. “But he was a droid rights activist! He donated thousands to the campaign to get the Human’s First Alliance abolished!”

Nagisa shrugs. “Yeah. And he bought himself a pretty fucktoy on the side. Are you seriously telling me you think donating money to charity makes him above that?”

“No, no of course not.” Politics and actions rarely aligned—I had recently found that out for myself first hand. “But Cyrus Feller doesn’t look—.”

“Anything like you?” Nagisa rubs his fingers through his hair, shoulders slumping with relief. It’s cautious, but he’s smiling. “Yeah, but he used to.”

“You mean he’s been augmented?”

He nods. “When I first met him, he had dark hair and blue eyes and a distinctive nose, like yours.”

“What do you mean distinctive?”

Nagisa giggles. “And he has hands like yours.” He closes the distance between us and takes me by
the wrist, spreading my fingers across his cheek. His eyes close and he lets out his breath. “Big hands.”

The last picture I had seen of Cyrus Feller—taken the same day he was found dead—he’d had shoulder-length blond hair and startling silver eyes. His nose had not looked the least bit distinctive. But if he had originally looked more like me, he would have had Nagisa programmed to respond to that coloring. But at least—

I release a deep, shaking laugh, relief pulsing into every inch of me.

Nagisa moves my hand from one of his cheeks to the other, like he needs the balance. “What’s so funny?”

I hesitate. Now that I know the truth, the very thought seems absurd. I don’t even want to say it out loud.

“Tell me!” Nagisa insists, pouting.

He deserves the truth.

*The truth is dangerous.*

So is everything else.

“When I discovered that Hazukis were equipped with facial recognition, I worried that you…that you liked me because…”

“Because…?”

I flush. “Because I look like my dad. I thought maybe he had been the rich Elite who had commissioned you.”

Nagisa stares at me for a few blank seconds, and then he’s laughing so hard he spits on me, reeling back out of my grip and doubling over. God, I’ve missed his laugh, despite the spit, despite the fact I’m the brunt of it.

“Fuck, Rei!” he coughs out, giggles still echoing from the ob deck ceiling. “That is *dirty.*”

“I know that!” I say, embarrassed. “But it was a reasonable assumption, considering—.”

“Considering what, that your dad is a kinky old man? Does he fuck a lot of little boys?”

I groan, pained. “No, of course not, but—.”

“Rei…” The giggles subside and Nagisa is just smiling now, light radiating from his eyes. He takes both my hands, and this time he doesn’t put them anywhere on his body, just holds them. “I might have noticed you at first because you looked like Cyrus, but that’s not why I like you.”

“Then—why?”

*Why me? Why not Makoto or Rin? Why not the Combat recruit, with his crooked nose and huge cock?*

“Because you don’t belong either.”

His answer is so short and so simple that I keep quiet, waiting for him to go on.
“That’s…that’s it?”

“I guess? I haven’t thought about.” He taps his forehead to the center of my chest. “I try not to think too much.”

I am so giddy with relief I feel drunk. “That’s…that’s probably wise.”

“I like how sometimes you’re super formal, and sometimes you aren’t,” he goes on, voice roughening slightly. “I like when you curse. And I like your hands.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that.”

“And your dick.”

“I…think I remember you mentioning that too.”

His hands find my hips and he traces fingers lightly across my stomach. I shiver and pull him in close, and suddenly his arms are wrapped beneath my armpits, his head resting on my shoulder. The warmth of him radiates between us and I close my eyes.

“You’re an idiot,” Nagisa says into my neck. “Also your eyes are purple.”

I struggle to see how those things are linked. “I don’t…”

“Your eyes were blue when we met.” He leans back a little, tracing a finger across my cheekbone. “And then you—.”

“Got the augment,” I say, with a dawning sense of embarrassment. The night-vision augment. Haruka’s eyes were already blue, so I had to be purple. Nagisa had most definitely shown interest in me before and after the procedure.

“So you’re an idiot for worrying about stuff like that.” Nagisa takes me by the shoulders and shakes me lightly. “Next time just ask me if you want to know something, okay? Don’t go all Elite and weird on me.”

My thoughts skip on a low note of irritation. “I grew up an Elite. It’s just how I think.”

Nagisa plants his forehead against my chest and shakes his head from side to side. I’ve seen him do it before, to Gou and Haruka. It’s a gesture of affection I have never come across before and am not entirely sure how I feel about.

“I know,” he says. “It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re…that everything’s okay.”

I kiss him, because although there are so many things that are not okay, at least at the moment, this is not one of them.

Nagisa pulls away dazedly, lips pink. “We should probably go have sex somewhere.”

Several parts of me give a hard, simultaneous throb. “We…we have training in half an hour.”

He kisses me quick and soft on the chin. “That’s fine.” His eyes narrow to slivers of hot gold. “I work great under a time limit

Chapter End Notes
Oh you boys

If anyone's gonna be at Otakon this weekend, I'll be wandering around, dressed as a femme!Clear from Dramatical Murder. Should be a good time.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Water Day=Space Day recently.

I haven’t watched the new episode yet and I have to keep reminding myself not to go on tumblr.

Also, I’m currently running a giveaway on my blog; one of the prizes is a fic commission, and the other is some merch. Just in case anyone is interested.

“Wait, wait.” I need to be sure I am actually hearing this. “You put your tongue where?”

I say it in a lull in the Rec Room conversation, just in time for my voice to rise up over the others, tight and disbelieving. I get a smattering of laughter, but it’s hardly the strangest thing that’s been said here. I’m fairly sure the table of Spacers next to us is discussing someone’s cousin’s droid that had been hacked and could now only communicate through dog barks and Italian arias.

Still, across the table from me the Matsuokas are losing it. Gou sits tipped back in her chair, ponytail a high arch of red that quivers whenever she laughs, so it’s practically dancing now. Rin has his chin propped on his fist, shoulders shaking with the effort to hold his own laughter in.

For the last twenty minutes they have been, as Gou puts it, giving me tips. Otherwise known as unsolicited sex advice.

“Oh, come on.” Gou’s chair rattles back down with a thunk of metal on metal. “You can’t be this innocent. Seriously, you can’t. There is no way.”

“Hey, this—.” I scratch at a burning cheek. You would think that I’d just asked her where babies come from. “This isn’t exactly common knowledge, this is…”

“Kink?” Rin suggests.

“It’s not that kinky,” Gou says with mild disdain. “Haven’t you seen it in porn?”

I almost lie and say no, of course I haven’t, but lately I’ve resolved to lie less to my friends.

“Yes, I have,” I say, and Gou gives Rin a superior smirk. “But I didn’t think…I didn’t think anyone actually did it.”

That sends them both flying into more laughter. These two…I don’t have siblings, so I can’t say for sure, but I would not think this was the sort of conversation you’d want to have with your older brother present, or your younger sister. But the Matsuokas have yet to show any signs of embarrassment.

Not all Lowlanders are like this. Makoto and Haruka certainly aren’t, and though I’d never spoken intimately with Mikoshiba or Nitori, they both seem to possess the usual level of shame. Rin and Gou are a special case, I suppose.
“So you have an augment to breathe underwater, your fucking *eyes* glow—,” Gou ticks them off on her fingers. “Your emotions are all screwy, you’re dating a robot—.

“He’s not a robot,” I say, irate. That’s an old-fashioned slur, but still unkind. I doubt she would ever call him that to his face.

“—But you don’t know what a rim job is?”

“I know what it *is*—.”

“Well, obviously—.”

“Chill out.” Rin raps his knuckles on the side of her head. “I think that’s enough of *Madam Gou’s Sex Guide for Idiots.*” He shoots me an apologetic glance. “No offense.”

“None taken.” If he gets her to stop talking, he can call me anything he likes.

“Nowhere near enough,” Gou says, but she subsides back into her chair and takes out her tablet, and a couple moments later gets up to join a group of Recon girls that I have never spoken to. Gou seems to know everyone.

Rin watches her go, fooling with the braided leather ring on his middle finger. I’ve never seen him without it, even in the water. “She really likes you.”

“She does?”

“Platonically,” Rin adds, unnecessarily. The chances of Gou being interested in me romantically are about as likely as my father warming up to Nagisa.

“She only gets in your face like that if she gives a shit about you.”

I laugh, because I think he’s joking. “Gou gets in everyone’s face.”

Rin shakes his head. He’s had a haircut, the tips less ragged than before, but with those teeth he’ll never look like anything but a Lowland rogue. “Not like that. Not like she cares. You should hear her defend you.”

“Defend me? Against who?”

“People. Douchebags. Guys who don’t like having an Elite in their section and think they have a right to complain about it.”

“Right.” No reason to think they would keep their sniping for only times I’m present.

He tips his own chair back. “Yeah, well, don’t let it get to you.”

“I don’t.” At least, not much. “I’m an Elite. I’ve been judged and examined all my life—my whole family has. At least on the Platform there aren’t tabloids.”

Rin grunts in agreement. He is looking at me like he can’t decide whether I’m real or just a holo-projection. “Why did you volunteer for Recon?” he asks finally. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but…” His tone says he knows this is not just an idle question.

I don’t want to talk about this, and I *definitely* don’t want to talk about it here, where anyone can listen in. Rin is sliding his ring round and round his finger, moving it up and down, revealing flashes of untanned skin.
I fold my hands on top of the table. “I didn’t volunteer for Recon. I was assigned. I…I wanted to be a scientist, but that’s not—not what happened

I’m not sure what I’m expecting—laughter, consolation, incredulity at the thought of anyone wanting to be a scientist—but Rin just nods. He makes a fist, knuckles bulging around the leather ring. “Not everyone ends up where they want to be.”

--

Through uncomfortable trail and error, Makoto and I have discovered that the water in our berth shower can be coaxed hot if the tap is only opened halfway. The flow is reduced to a pathetic trickle, but at least it isn’t freezing. I spend a good ten minutes with my face turned into the spray, focusing on nothing beyond the water tracing my features, outlining my nose and mouth.

Only a single sentence, and I had only said it to Rin, but I still feel ragged, skin peeled back to reveal distant parts of me. Amazing how much can be built up around simple words. How much fear they can contain.

Honestly, who cares if they all discover I’m here against my will? If pressed, I doubt any of them would truly think I had volunteered for Recon.

I step out of the bathroom, and immediately fumble backwards for a towel. “How did you get in here?”

Nagisa is sitting perched on the edge of my cot, supremely pleased with himself and, from the smirk and general direction of his gaze, pleased with me.

“I have my ways.” He wriggles his fingers in the air like an old world illusionist. “Come on, you don’t need to cover up. I’ve seen it before.”

I sidle to the chest of drawers between the cots, still holding the towel closed around my waist. “It’s just strange to have someone watch you get dressed.”

Nagisa scoots further down the cot and puts a hand on my ass. Absolutely unsubtle, just grabbing a handful of it. “Why would you want to get dressed?”

- 

We slide easily into a drill we’ve run all week, moving with the confidence that only members of a squad can. Even before we’d started doing this, I had been very aware of how Nagisa moves; it would be impossible not to be after months of training together. I kneel between his legs on the cot and press kisses to his stomach and ribs, the delicate place where thigh meets hip.

The first time I had done this, I’d had my doubts. Nagisa seems to enjoy it, but he is a Hazuki droid who can suppress his gag reflex, and he’s had a great deal more experience. To me, giving oral sex seems awkward and, well, messy.

“Don’t worry so much,” Nagisa had said, the first time I’d tried. “You’re just sucking it, not operating on it.”

Slightly defensive, I’d given the head a flat lick.

As far as enjoyment goes, I’d overlooked one very key detail—giving pleasure can be even headier than receiving it. Nagisa had shuddered and grabbed at my hair, bucked into my mouth. I think he’d been overacting a bit—I could not have been so adept right away—but I appreciated the
thought.

With this in mind, I kiss the inside of Nagisa’s thigh and then higher, spreading his legs apart, stomach squirming with an unbearable concoction of nerves and anticipation. I glance up the instant Nagisa realizes what I’m considering, and I swear his eyes throw out a hot pulse of light.

“Rei.” His thigh flexes in my fingers and he digs one of his heels into the mattress, jabbing a spring and making it scream. “Rei, do it, do it—.”

Excitement is contagious in situations like these, and I find myself equally out of breath, fingertips skittering across the soft skin of his inner thigh. “You mean—should I…with my tongue?” I am momentarily disgusted with myself when I can’t get the words out.

Nagisa sucks in his breath narrowly, like he’s pulling it in through a straw. His eyes squeeze shut. “Tongue, fingers, dick, whatever you want, just fuck me Rei, please—!”

Hardly able to believe I am doing this no more than an hour after Gou had giggled at my innocence, I lick. Nagisa gasps. It tastes of nothing but sweat and the slightly bitter tang of skin that has been confined in a wetsuit, and chlorine. It occurs to me that since Nagisa doesn’t eat, it’s likely there are other functions his body does not perform.

Emboldened by this thought, I lick deeper. The sounds Nagisa makes are in complement, deep and shocked, pulled from the depths of his belly. I spread his legs further to give myself more room.

“Rei, fuck—!”

I am perversely fascinated by the rhythmic clenching of the muscle beneath my tongue. This is certainly messy and awkward, but Nagisa arches his back, stroking himself, and gasps my name when he comes. It’s worth it.

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The Iwatobi Squad—or the Iwazuka Squad, as Nagisa and Gou have taken to referring to us—is scheduled to depart at five hundred hours. Compensating for travel and planetary time, they will arrive on Lorelie at precisely dusk. The operation begins as soon as they hit the water.

For a mission, it’s as standard as they come, really more like a training exercise. One of the Confederation’s stealth seekers—tiny, unmanned pods that gather planetary data—has gone offline, likely due to a circuit error or mechanical problem. It needs to be retrieved before its location can be detected by any passing kassadian brigades. These are the sort of missions Recon is meant for.

“Quick, dirty, and anonymous,” Rin had opined, to which Haruka had responded with a very rare blush.

Usually, no recruits but the mission team are permitted in the airlock before departure (“they’re heading into enemy territory, not going on a frickin’ vacation to the Tarin Crystal Moon,”) but Sasabe had made an exception for my extenuating circumstances.

They settle into the shuttle, Gou up front in the Navigator’s chair, the other four sitting behind. The material of their skinsuits is a deep, slick blue, rather than the usual training black, and their optical augments gleam like an imperfect rainbow in the shadowed shuttle.

“Try to have fun without us,” Rin calls up with sharp grin.
I arch an eyebrow. “Don’t let them get blown up,” I tell Gou.

She salutes, flipping switches with her other hand, bringing up flight itinerary and schematics. Nagisa blows me a kiss. Captain Sasabe rolls his eyes.

“Bunch of fucking comedians.”

Just before the shuttle snaps closed, Nagisa blows him a kiss too.

On my way back through the Platform, Sasabe’s words flit briefly back to me. *Heading into enemy territory.*

We’ve been so isolated on the Platform, memorizing 3D maps and sparring with underwater simulations, enemy combatants nothing more than hazes of color. War in abstraction. It’s easy to forget what it’s all actually for.

*They’re trained,* I tell myself. *They’re prepared. It’s just a routine mission.*

-

I’m awoken in the middle of the night, and before I even swim to full consciousness, I know something is wrong. I see Makoto and wonder why I am so viscerally disturbed. Then it comes to me and I flail upwards into sitting position.

Makoto can’t be here, because he’s on Lorelie. The mission is scheduled for three days, and it has not even been twenty-four hours. I do an awkward, lumbering hop out of bed, one foot tangling in the bed linen. “Makoto, why—.”

When I see his face, I don’t need to finish the question or hear his answer. His eyes are wide and shocked, mouth open like he is halfway through a silent sob.

“Makoto—.” My fingers curl, ready to claw at thin air, at anything that can keep me afloat

-

The med bay is more crowded than I have seen it since the first day of our initial exams. Medics are thick in the corridors, swarming the readouts on the walls, their white coats punctuated here and there by the black and silver of officers in uniform. A group of recruits hangs against the far wall, looking as if they’ve been pushed there by the tide. I see Raik and Seijuro at once, and when a Spacer recruit moves to one side, Haruka. I am searching for a blond head, and I don’t find it.

Nagisa isn’t here.

I stand frozen on the threshold, and the med bay doors emit a high, irritated tone; they want to close. A medic tosses me an impatient look. “In or out, recruit!” I choose in.

“What happened?” I ask as I approach the recruits on the wall. “Where—is he okay?”

Seijuro and Raik remain blank, like they don’t have it in them to remember who I am, or what the words I’m saying mean. Haruka doesn’t look up when he says, “Third door on the right.”

I have the distant impression that the room has quieted around me, and that the only reason I have not yet been thrown out is no one had expected a Recon grunt to storm in and start yelling. I don’t care, I feel none of the usual shame at failing to control my reactions.
“Ryugazaki, don’t be a—.”

I don’t hear the rest of Raik’s entreaty, because I am already striding down the hallway and banging open the third door on the right.

I’m not sure what I’m expecting. Nagisa dead, or as dead as a droid can get—broken down into his component parts, nothing but artificial flesh and scrap metal. But what I find on the other side of the door is so disparate that at first I cannot make sense of what I am seeing, my mind taking it in and processing in stuttering flashes.

White coated medics swarm the floor. Two huge vertical tanks hang suspended from the ceiling. An entire wall is lit with monitors and flickering lines of text, life size 3D scans of the human body rotating slowly.

Inside the tanks float the real thing—two bodies, and neither of them is Nagisa.

That’s good, I tell myself.

The bodies are so pale they glow in the lucent blue lights of the tanks, limbs grotesquely magnified by the ripples in the water. The figure in the tank to my left has a cloud of steel-grey hair and a single tube fed down its throat. It drifts, deceptively peaceful amidst the chaos of the room.

The other tank is in utter contrast—its occupant is covered in red, bleeding out into the liquid of the operating tank, stuck all over with tubes and needles. Robotic precision arms swarm it, operating more delicately than a human hand ever could. It takes me a moment to realize that the blood is not the only red in the tank. The body has red hair, red eyes drooping half-closed.

No a body, I tell myself. Not just a body. I don’t want to think the last word, but it slides in before I can shut the image down.

Not just a body yet.

“What the fuck, who the fuck is that?” One of the surgery technicians notices me at once and starts shouting. “Get him out of here!”

Hands grab my shoulders and hook up under the hem of my shirt, hauling me back out into the corridor. On one side is Raik, on the other Makoto; he must have left the berth right after I did.

I hang limply in their arms. “That’s Rin.” My brain needs to reboot after all the conflicting data it’s taking in. “He—he’s injured.”

Raik gives me a hard shake. “No shit, Elite. Thanks for the update.”

They let go of me and I spread my legs to balance in the center of the hall, as unsteady as if I’m walking on one of the narrow beams in the gym. Rin, bleeding, injured, close to death.

“Who was—.” Silver hair. The other tank. “Nitori? But he wasn’t even on the mission!” I don’t know who I am arguing with.

“He’s giving plasma.” All of Makoto’s edges are worn down, his voice ragged. “He and Rin have the same blood type.”

“Oh.” I nod, but then immediately switch to shaking my head. “But, what—.” Surely there is a more perfect match for Rin than Nitori? Surely one of the medics would have realized another Matsuoka was in the room?
A fresh, bottomless wave of horror rolls over me. *No, it’s not possible. She’s the Navigator, they don’t even get in the water.* “What about, what about—.”

Shouts explode from down the hall, and suddenly my world bursts open into red and black, pain burning through my eye and into my brain. I am so disoriented that it takes a few seconds for me to realize that I’ve fallen down because I’ve been punched in the side of the head.

“What about *Gou*?” someone snarls from above me. “What about *fucking Gou*? What the fuck about you?”

Gou hits me again, hard, in the neck this time, but it’s the sight of her that really hurts. Her hair is a loose, volcanic mess and she is still dressed in her mission skinsuit, scorch marks marring the line of it along her side. From tears or rage, her eyes are wide and red, and the twist of her mouth says she has never seen anything more disgusting as she looks down at me.

This feels unreal, like a joke. Bizarrely, I remember months ago when I had seen the results of my placement exam. But just like then, who would make a joke about something like this? Who would be so cruel?

“Gou—.” I’m ready for her this time and I catch her fist, using the strike’s momentum to springboard me to my feet. She pulls back and drops lower, driving her shoulder into the center of my chest, driving me back against the wall. The breath rushes out of me, but I manage to pant, “Gou, what the *fuck*?”

She screams through her teeth. “He wasn’t supposed to be with us! It was supposed to be you! If you hadn’t been out there resting your delicate Elite ass for a whole fucking MONTH—!”

I realize what she means, and her words are a verbal keycode to a deep-buried vault of guilt, the one I’ve been carefully hiding away since I’d arrived back on the Platform and seen Rin performing all of my Recon duties, in addition to his own Combat ones. I slump against the wall, not moving when she pulls her fist back to hit me again. It’s a widely telegraphed strike, but I don’t intend to dodge it.

Her wrist is caught before she hits me.

“Gou. Stop.”

My throat closes up.

“I said, stop.”

Nagisa stands just behind Gou, dressed in a pair of hospital pajamas identical to the ones I’d woken up in after the White Fever. His feet are bare. He looks like he’s just wandered in off a closed ward.

“Let go of me, asshole!” Nagisa just bends her arm back, so she’s forced to either turn to face him or have it dislocated. “Fuck, get off me!” She thrashes like a hooked fish—Nagisa’s fingers don’t move. They are pale and tense around her wrist, but no visible signs of strain show around his mouth. I can’t be sure, because he is wearing a blindfold of black synthetic material, shiny, like leather.

“Nagisa…”

He doesn’t react to the sound of my voice, but keeps his attention focused on Gou. At least, I assume that’s where it’s focused.
“This isn’t Rei’s fault, Gou,” he says, voice eerily calm and words overly enunciated. I would say he’s drugged, if droids had been susceptible to any of the standard tranquilizing agents. “Rei’s bigger than Rin is. If it had been Rei, he would probably be dead. Is that what you want?” When she doesn’t respond, he repeats the question, with exactly the same inflection he used the first time. The muscles in his forearm flex and Gou bites down on a noise of pain. The tips of her fingers are going white.

Again: “Is that what you want, Gou?”

“Nagisa, just let go,” Makoto reaches for Nagisa’s arm. “Stop this, it isn’t helping—.”

“Tachibana, don’t touch him!” Dr. Amakata has arrived, harried and out of breath, tablet hanging loosely from one hand. “All of you stay back, no one touch him.”

“He’s—he’s touching me.” Gou claws at his fingers with her other hand. “He won’t let go—.”

“It’s alright, Nagisa—.” Amakata disregards her own advice and taps him on the back of the neck. Like she’s initiated a reset protocol, Nagisa drops Gou’s arm and steps away. Gou pulls away so fast she trips back into me. I attempt to stop her from falling while touching her as little as possible. She gives me a sharp, searching look, but doesn’t try to hit me again.

“What’s going on with—.” My question dissolves into a noncommittal noise; I’m not sure what to ask. Still, Nagisa turns to face me regardless, neck moving strangely as his shoulders remain stationary, face utterly expressionless. With his eyes covered, he looks remarkably inhuman. He continues to look my way, even as he is handed off to an orderly. A slow chill creeps over me.

“What the hell is wrong with him?” Raik looks like she’s trying to decide whether or not to laugh. “Is he glitched-out?”

Dr. Amakata sighs and pushes her limp hair out of her eyes. Whatever they are paying her, it is certainly not enough. “His personality core is just a little scrambled. He’ll probably have issues with impulse control and emotional balance for the next few days. I’m keeping him under observation.”

“But—but he’s okay?” I can barely squeeze the question out.

Dr. Amakata nods. “He should be. His eyes need to be replaced—they were fried in the blast.”

Seijuro curses under his breath. Raik curses over hers. I feel momentarily ill. “All, all these medics…” I wave a hand back toward the front room. “They’re all here for Nagisa and Rin?”

Dr. Amakata rubs at her eyes. “No one’s told you?”

I look back and forth between her and my fellow recruits. “Told me what?”

“Two other squads were attacked at the same time we were,” Gou says dully.” Now that she’s no longer attacking me, she sounds as drugged as Nagisa “A Combat and a Recon.”

“What…” I swallow. “What happened to them?”

Dr. Amakata holds her tablet against her like a shield. “Two of them are still in surgery. The rest are dead.”

“We’re the only squad who didn’t lose anyone,” Makoto says thickly.
Gou tilts her head back against the wall as the sounds from the operating room swell from loud to cacophonous. “At least not yet.”
Dr. Amakata chases us out of the Med Bay before anyone else can start yelling or pummeling each other. Honestly, Gou and I are lucky neither of us ended up in the brig. I notice, as we stand in a stagnant circle outside the bay doors, that Haru is not with us. Either he had slipped by Amakata’s notice or she had not had the heart to throw him out. 

I look between them all, heavy with the desperate need to do something, to understand. “What happened?”

As one creature, Raik, Makoto, and Seijuro look at Gou. She rubs her palms into hollow eyes. “Tell them whatever you want.”

“Gou—.” Seijuro starts forward.

“Not now.”

“But—.”

“I said fuck off!” A flash of the former viciousness overtakes her and she steps out of his reach, turning and heading up the corridor, as quickly as she can without breaking into an outright sprint.

So we’re not loitering outside the Med Bay, I bring them to the ob deck. Even if this is the most people I’ve ever seen it contain, it still feels empty without Nagisa.

Nagisa’s words in the Med Bay echo through my head. *If it had been Rei, he would probably be dead.* 

*This isn’t your fault,* I tell myself, over and over again. *You didn’t ask for the mental augment, and you didn’t ask for White Fever. You didn’t volunteer to be removed from the mission.*

I turn back to find Raik lingering on the threshold, arms crossed over her chest like she’s cold. “I… need to find Jinny. She’s been on watch all night and she doesn’t know anything…about anything.” She drags an arm across her eyes and bares her teeth, like she’s hoping to frighten away her own sorrow. “I want her to hear it from me instead of some gossiping spacer.”

When she flees, I turn back to Makoto and Seijuro, wondering if they will desert me as well. “What happened?” I ask again.

Makoto passes a hand across his eyes. “They knew were coming. It had to be an ambush.”
“Kassadians?”

He nods. “A whole deep-sea platoon. They attacked as soon as we hit the water. Percussion bombs and sub-aquatic lasers.”

I curse. We had been hit with low energy percussion blasts during training to get an idea of what it feels like. It’s not exactly a spa massage.

“They shot one of the Combat teams right out of the sky.” Makoto goes on. “I saw it from under the surface. It was like a unification day salute. Red and orange fireworks.”

Seijuro lets out a humorless laugh at the comparison. Just a grunt of punctuation.

“We couldn’t get back to the shuttle, since Gou couldn’t get in close enough to pick us up. We scattered, and she directed us on the coms. The water was too churned up to see anything, even with the optical augments. It was—.” Makoto swallows, perspiration glimmering on his throat. “It was terrifying. We weren’t prepared for it. We couldn’t have been.

“The only one who really kept his head was Nagisa. We would all be dead if it wasn’t for him. He threw a flash bomb to give us some time, even though it was at too close a range to be safe.”

“That’s how his eyes got burned out,” I guess, shuddering at the image.

Makoto nods. “Yeah. We would have all gotten away, but…but Gou—.”

Seijuro makes a wild motion with both hands, like he’s throwing something invisible at Makoto. “That wasn’t her fault, you can’t just—.”

“I know that,” Makoto says steadily. “I’m not blaming her. I’m just telling Rei what happened.”

“What?” I look between them, blood pounding in my ears. “What did she do?”

“There was so much going on at once—she had to keep herself out of range and track our positions while giving us commands to make up for the low visibility and—and she made a mistake.”

Hollow realization opens up inside me. “You mean with Rin?”

“She ordered him to move up when she should have said down. He—.” Makoto’s voice wavers slightly and I can hear the emotion pushing at the edges of his words like water in a dam. “He swam right into the explosion.”

I drag in a breath. I think of the rage in her voice and the hatred in her eyes as she drove her fists at me.

“She isn’t taking it very well,” Makoto says.

I touch a fingertip to my left cheek, hot and throbbing and starting to swell. “I noticed.”

So it isn’t your fault, a voice whispers in the back of my head. It’s hers. She’s the reason Rin is bleeding out into an operating tank.

“She’s blaming herself.” Fuck you, voice in my head. “She shouldn’t be. That’s a mistake anyone could make. Any navigator.”

“We told her that,” Seijuro says. “Me and Raik told her we don’t blame any of you for it, it’s just part of the job, but—.”
“That isn’t going to make her believe it,” Makoto finishes for him.

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My face is aching, but I can’t abide the idea of returning to the Med Bay, so I just head to my berth and dig an ice pack out of the first aid kit stashed above the sink. Cracking the seal, I knead the thick gel between my fingertips as the freezing agent is released, cooling it in seconds. It’s an incredible relief on my cheek. I wish I could push it all the way through into my brain, soothe that as well.

The thick digital numbers on the wall tell me it is 6:53, but it does not feel like morning. It doesn’t feel like anything. We are just floating out in some unidentifiable limbo.

If Rin dies, how will we know? Will they com us immediately, or will we have to wait to find out for ourselves that he will never emerge from the white, noisy room? I want to cry but I also want to stay absolutely silent. I sit on the edge of my cot.

After an unidentifiable length of time, Makoto comes back in. We don’t speak, but I am glad of his presence, even if he immediately goes into the bathroom to shower. When he comes back out he sits on his own cot in sweatpants and dries his hair. Drops of water paint slick trails down his pectorals and onto the hard lines of his abdomen. The quick spike of arousal I feel is almost annoying. I hate that my body can continue to react as usual, when my mind knows so well that nothing is as usual.

It isn’t until Makoto begins to get dressed—tank top, cyberskin jacket and pants—that I realize the implications.

“Wait—do we have training?”

He tosses the thin white towel on top of his neatly made bed. “No. Captain Sasabe told us to get some sleep, but I can’t—.” His voice breaks, and he takes several hard, deep breaths. “But I need to run off some energy.”

I stand up. “I’ll come with you.”

- 

We run in the grav gym but leave the gravitational force at normal. I want to feel the resistance when I push myself off the floor, want my muscles burning and the breath rasping in my throat. Makoto keeps up with me well—he is not a runner, but he is strong and his legs are long. He doesn’t ask to stop, not even when sweat is dripping in his eyes and the heat flush has worked its way down his neck and onto his shoulders.

Eventually I have to be the one to stop us, and we just walk the track, catching our breath. Makoto is crying, tears mingling with sweat, but he makes no noise and I say nothing. I leave him to his thoughts, and I am left to mine.

Up until now, I have avoided thinking about Nagisa, how empty he had seemed in the Med Bay, how cold and flat his voice had been as he held on to Gou. He had defended me, even with a damaged personality core. I don’t know what that means.

Whenever I close my eyes I imagine the explosion, Nagisa throwing a flash bomb, the kickback burning out his eyes. What do they look like under the blindfold? Mangled metal and artificial flesh? Just empty holes? I shudder.
I don’t know how we are supposed to spend the rest of the day waiting for word, but fortunately we don’t have to. On our way back to the berth, Makoto and I both receive a flash from Haruka.

We pull them up on our tablets at the same time. The relief that spreads through my body is so acute that I’m dizzy. Nitori is conscious, and Rin is going to live.

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Over the next few days, our normal schedule resumes. My medical block is finally lifted and I am allowed to participate in all aspects of training. I am very behind and will have to log extra hours in the pool to acquaint myself with all the maneuvers I have missed, but I am grateful for that, because the more exhausted I am, the less energy I have to expend on thought.

Nagisa is still under supervision in the Med Bay, so Makoto, Haruka, and I train alone. Gou is also absent for two days while Command reviews her performance in the mission to determine whether disciplinary action is required. I had been outraged when I heard, but according to Captain Sasabe, it is just procedural. Navigators have complicated, lightning-fast jobs, and casualties happen. No one blames her for her mistake.

“And they don’t want there to be a Court Marshal,” Raik growls when she hears. “Hell, they’d probably have been happiest if she’d gotten you all killed, along with herself.”

“Thanks, Raik,” Haruka says.

She shrugs. “Less evidence of their fuck-up, the better.”

That is the other difference in life at the Platform: the tension, the unspoken knowledge that all is not as it should be. Three teams attacked simultaneously at different entry points is more than bad luck. The kassadians had to have had significant forewarning to get their teams in place, which means there has to be a spy. And because only the officers are aware of mission objectives until just a few hours before deployment, the spy has to be at a considerably high rank.

When Gou does return to active training, she is focused but subdued, only speaking when it is absolutely necessary. The lack of her usual enthusiasm is crippling—I never realized how very much I had relied on her optimism and snide jibes, even when they had been at my expense. She has the ability to inject energy into a room, but also the talent for sucking it up like a black hole.

With Nagisa and Rin still in the Med Bay and Gou effectively socially comatose, I find myself feeling truly alone for the first time on the Platform. I still train and eat and play cards with Haruka and Makoto, but it isn’t quite the same. They know Rin very well, and I feel like an intruder. I spend time surfing the net and reading, running in the grav gym, and exchanging the occasional flash with Lesedi. She and Khari are back in Sky City, and bored out of their minds. They’ll be returning to Aurora in a few months for the winter season, and she keeps insisting that I come to visit as soon as possible. I’m still not convinced she knows what ‘deployed’ means.

Four evenings after the disastrous mission, I am headed back to my berth. The remainder of the Iwatobi squad and Samezuka squads are still in the rec room, but after a day of training I am exhausted. If this night is anything like the last few, I will spend hours staring at the ceiling, and when I finally do sleep it will be plagued with dreams of an explosion I did not witness. Still, it’s better than withstanding Raik and Seijuro’s forced cheerfulness, or Nitori’s barely veiled hostility. He is not nearly as forthright as Gou, and he’d never say it out loud, but I know he blames me for Rin’s injuries as well.

I turn a corner, and bounce hard off someone coming from the opposite direction. I stumble back,
hitting the wall. “Sorry, I didn’t—.”

A solid weight hits me, and for one crazy moment I think that it’s Gou back to punch the other side of my face. But then I feel hot skin, and a fluffy blond head buries itself against my shoulder.

“N-Nagisa!”

Suddenly he is kissing my neck, my jaw, the exposed line of my collarbone. “Rei…” His hands push up beneath my jacket, burning against my ribs. He looks up, and I suck in a sharp breath.

“Nagisa, your eyes!”

He giggles. “I know, right?”

The blindfold is gone, but so are the deep, shining gold eyes that I have become so familiar with, that I have seen widened in shock and dark with arousal, screwed tightly shut against pleasure. Instead, his eyes are—

“Pink. Nagisa, your eyes are pink.”

Bright and crystalline, like the delicate sugar crystals my mother used to buy for me in the winter.

“What?” He pouts. “You don’t like them?”

“No, that’s not what I—.” Pale on the outside, fading to a deeper color toward the center, they are hypnotic. “They’re just…just really different. Who did them?”

“Miho. I mean, Dr. Amakata, whatever.” He waves a hand to show how very unimportant the specifics are. “It’s just so nice to be able to see again. I was getting sick of being led around by that sweaty orderly.”

I’m sure I remember Dr. Amakata telling me that she does not have the expertise to perform augment surgery more complex than eyesight correction or the night vision upgrade. Certainly nothing invasive like removing my emotional augment or reconstructing an entire eye. But maybe it’s different with droids.

Or maybe she’s lying.

I don’t have a chance to let my suspicions spiral away into orbit—Nagisa has both hands on me now, one moving up and the other down. He cups and rubs me through my briefs, and despite my protests I feel a pulse of arousal.

“Nagisa! We’re in the—.”

With the other hand he grabs my chin. He kisses me, mauls my mouth so hard that I taste copper. He’s bitten my lip open. I shove at his shoulders, but I might as well be trying to body slam a passenger shuttle.

“Nagisa, stop, let go of me—!”

He laps at my mouth. “You’re all I’ve been thinking about,” he says madly. “You’re the only thing I saw when I had no eyes.”

“That’s really romantic,” I grit out. “But you’re hurting me.” I push him again, just as uselessly.

I’ve known in theory that he must be stronger than me; droids are always stronger than regular
humans. But the reality of it is frighteningly disorienting. He is so much smaller than I am, limbs
slimmer. It’s strange to think that he could break me in half if the desire ever arose.

“Nagisa—.”

The pink eyes gleam with the same bio light that the gold but—and perhaps it’s just the situation—
they are a lot more unsettling.

“Rei—.” He kisses me again, sucking the blood off my mouth. My lip stings and I wince. “Why
won’t you kiss me back?”

“Rei, don’t move.”

I hear Dr. Amakata, giving me the same order she had Gou and Makoto. I am in no position to go
anywhere at the moment.

“Nagisa, let go of Rei.”

He rolls his eyes, and his grin is like a child’s who has just come up with a new and exciting way
to cause trouble. To my utter mortification, he starts to stroke me, jerking me off in the corridor in
full view of Dr. Amakata, two junior medics, and anyone else who might happen along. My hips
buck—just a physiological reaction. My body is responding to him as it always does.

“Fuck off, Miho,” he says, stroking me faster. “Rei and I are busy.”

To her credit and my eternal gratitude, Amakata is utterly unphased by his hand in my pants. She
doesn’t even glance down. “You had no clearance to leave the Med Bay, recruit. You are still
under observation.”

“Fuck you,” Nagisa says again. “Don’t ever forget, doctor—I could destroy you in a second.”

Amakata’s eyes widen and Nagisa laughs. It’s a cruel, black sound, as cold as the space pressing in
on the Platform, and not one I would ever think him capable of making. He turns back to me, and
Amakata’s face goes utterly blank.

“I promise, Hazuki,” she says, putting a hand on the back of his neck, “That any destruction will be
mutually assured.”

His body jolts and he goes completely still. Then, just like he had with Gou, the strength in his
hands fades and he steps away from me. The light fades from his eyes like a child’s android doll
going into sleep mode.

“What did you—.”

Amakata holds up her hand. At first it just looks like an empty palm, but then I see the tiny black
sensor dots on her middle and fore fingers. “Electromagnetic pulse. It goes straight to the
processing center of the droid brain and overwrites the commands. He’s fine, just a little bemused.”
She smiles thinly.

“Why—.” I gulp in air, realizing with horror that I am hanging half-hard out of my pants. I adjust
myself with shaking hands. Amakata looks away politely. “Why did he do that? What’s wrong
with him?”

“His personality core is still not completely repaired. I told you, he may have trouble with impulse
control.”
“But...but he was Nagisa again.” At least, he had been nothing like the blank canvass of a few days ago.

“Like I said, it’s only a very small data error.”

I watch Nagisa round the corner with the other medics. I wonder how safe they are with him, how long they have until the pulse wears off.

“And all that weird stuff he was saying about destroying you?” I push sweaty bangs out of my eyes. “Was that a data error too?”

“I honestly have no idea what that was about.” She fiddles with the collar of her lab coat. “I just played along.”

“Bad ass.”

“What about Rin?” I ask before I can help myself. I know she isn’t supposed to give out any information, especially not to someone who isn’t even on his squad, but all this secrecy seems unnecessary.

She hesitates, before sighing and pushing her hair back behind her ears. “His vitals are good—I expect him to regain consciousness within the next few hours. If everything holds steady, you all may be able to visit him in a couple of days.”

Elation swells in me, along with an unexpected stab of foreboding. What will I say when I see him? I’m sorry you got blown up in my place? I wish it had been me? I don’t.

“That’s...” I swallow. “That’s wonderful to hear. Thank you for telling me.”

My prediction that I would hardly sleep that night is amazingly sound. I listen to the constant purr of the engine and Makoto’s slow, slightly chesty breaths and replay the look of manic glee in Nagisa’s new pink eyes as he had pinned me to the wall, as he had threatened Dr. Amakata.

His personality core is still not completely repaired.

Nagisa has been pieced together by scientists and doctors and mind scapers, uploaded at the behest of Cyrus Feller and his appetite for a young, cheerful, outrageously oversexed boy. With one shifted line of code, he could have been entirely different. I have known all of this for months, and
yet I am filled with a slow, coiling fear that I can’t parse out.

If the core is ever damaged beyond repair, Nagisa—my Nagisa—would vanish.

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True to Dr. Amakata’s words, Nagisa does rejoin us the next evening, fully functioning and completely stable. He hugs Gou, who blinks in surprise but tightens her arms around his back. Possibly out of reflex. She and I lock eyes, and although she frowns and looks away the same way she has all week, I know we are thinking the same thing.

He doesn’t remember.

Just to be sure, I compliment his new eyes. He blushes and splays his fingers across his face, tips fanning out over his cheekbones. “I’m glad you like them. I was kinda worried you wouldn’t.”

It is beyond strange to see him acting so normal again so soon, as if the day before had been a dream, or an act. I do my best to keep my discomfort off my face, because once again I know this is not his fault.

“Why did you choose pink?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Most of the other colors were taken? And I guess I was tired of gold. Technically I’m not functioning as a Hazuki anymore, so I don’t legally have to designate myself as one.”

That is one of the laws my father is trying to get changed—he and the Human’s First Alliance want all droids to have to wear defining markers, whether or not they are in active service.

“I’m surprised Dr. Amakata actually did the color change,” Nagisa goes on. “I was pretty out of it when I asked.”

Someone curses from out in the hall, and Raik throws herself round the curve of the door, hooking her fingers onto the edge to keep herself upright. “What are you assheads doing in here?”

Makoto and Haruka look at each other. “Is that a trick question?” I ask.

“Rin’s awake.”

Nagisa lets out a squeal of delight and hops up into the air, and Haruka and Makoto echo him, but my attention is all on Gou. At Raik’s words, her whole body ripples, a spasm of muscles that both want to carry her forward and keep her riveted where she is.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“I’m telling you now. C’mon!”

We charge after her like a gaggle of nervous goslings, tripping over each other’s feet. Captain Sasabe would be ashamed. My heartbeat pounds a staccato counterpoint to the rhythm of our feet, and though I can’t see her face, I can feel the tension radiating off of Gou where she jogs in front of me.

I wonder if they will let us into the Med Bay, considering what had happened the last time we had come in as a group, but we don’t get that far before we are greeted by an entourage coming in the other direction. Jinny and Seijuro walk on either side like an honor guard, as Nitori pushes Rin along in an old-fashioned wheelchair. He is pale and his cheekbones slice out sharp and prominent.
One side of his head is buzzed almost to the skull, leaving him looking oddly unbalanced. Despite this, he’s laughing at something Nitori has said, and when he sees us, his face splits into a familiar shark grin. When no one says anything, he arches an eyebrow.

“Shit, guys. You’d think someone almost died.”

I laugh with the rest of them, but all I can remember are the last words I said to Gou before they shipped out for the mission.

Don’t let them blow themselves up.

Unsurprisingly, it is Nagisa who crosses the chasm of awkwardness first. “Keep making lame jokes,” he says, voice only a bit higher than usual. “And you’ll make me regret saving your life.”

My mouth drops open in shock—that’s going too far too fast—but Rin is laughing again. “I don’t know why I bothered waking up. It’s assholes all over the place.”

Makoto and Haruka do not join in the laughter. Makoto’s eyes are naked with shock, horror laser-cut into the lines of his face. Haruka’s eyes tremble, and for a moment I think his optical augment is malfunctioning. Then I realize the blur is tears.

I follow their gazes to Rin.

What…? At first I don’t see what it is that has them so alarmed. And then I do.

I hadn’t noticed it because there is nothing to notice. Rin’s left leg is clad in pale blue pajamas, heel planted on a footrest jutting out from the wheelchair’s rigid metal body. His right leg isn’t wearing anything. It’s not there.

Chapter End Notes

My only excuse is that everything has to get worse before it gets better.
“Rin—.”

“Don’t.”

“Rin, I just—.”

“I said don’t!” Rin spits it out so hard it rocks his whole body. “I’ve already had enough pity to last me a lifetime. I am not about to take it from all of you.” Shoulders rising and falling with his breaths, he glances back at Nitori. “Now, c’mon. Next to the shit they feed you in the med bay, the mess hall is five-fucking-stars. Let’s go.”

Dutifully, Nitori wheels him onward down the corridor, leaving the rest of us to huddle together in a tight, shell-shocked constellation. The thrum of the engines is especially loud today. It sounds like voices.

I look at Raik. “Did you know—.”

Her face twists, like she’s trying to swallow something slimy. “Not until the last five minutes.”

Makoto, Haru, Raik, Jinny, and Seijuro break off to follow Rin and Nitori. “You guys aren’t coming?” Jinny asks over her shoulder.

“I…I lost my appetite,” I say.

Nagisa steps closer to me. “I don’t have an appetite.”

Jinny twists one of her braids around her fingers nervously. “Okay.” She hurries to catch up with the rest of them. Then it’s just Nagisa and me.

And Gou.

She immediately turns away when I glance at her, but the only other thing here is the blank corridor wall. She spins back on her heel with a grinding noise of frustration.

“Stop looking at me like that!”

“Are—are you talking to us?” She is making very focused eye contact with the floor.

“No, I’m talking to the alternate personalities that I manifested in response to my traumatic experiences. Of course I’m talking to you, asshole!”

“I…” Nagisa is totally bewildered. Of course—he has no memories of the past few days. He has no idea why Gou is angry.

“I…How exactly am I looking at you?” I ask.

Her hair is a red war banner as she tosses her head from side to side. “Like, oh wow, Gou’s distraught, Gou’s taking out her guilty feelings on me because she can’t deal with them herself. Poor Gou, it would really be better to feel sorry for her than get mad. Am I close?”
“Yes.” I cross my arms. “Except for maybe the not getting mad part.” Because I’m pretty much there. “If you’ve really got it all figured out, then maybe you should make use of that data and plan your actions accordingly.”

Gou laughs in my face, her own pulsing bright with anger. “Oh my god, what the fuck are you? I thought he was the A.I.” She jabs her finger toward Nagisa, who winces like the words are static electricity.

We’re starting to attract attention, other recruits appearing at either end of the corridor and sticking their heads out of berths.

“Gou, we really shouldn’t do this—.”

“What the fuck are all of you looking at?” Gou shouts. She takes off down the hall, elbowing her way past a Combat guy. He makes the mistake of laughing at her and gets a heel jab in the back of his knee for his trouble, sending him down on his ass.

It’s an incredibly well-calculated move, especially for someone so overwrought. Not enough force to leave marks he could show to a commanding officer, but still appropriately dramatic. No wonder they’d made Gou a navigator.

“I have no idea what’s going on,” Nagisa announces as soon as she rounds the corner out of sight. As briefly and succinctly as I can, I describe Gou’s part in Rin’s injury, as well as her attack in the med bay. Afterward, Nagisa swears and rubs his hands up and down his arms, although I’m not sure he even gets gooseflesh. “Holy shit, I don’t remember any of that.”

I realize that, in my desire to keep our discussion as private as possible, Nagisa and I have drawn in close, my back nearly to the wall. I look down into his brand new eyes. The familiarity of our positions is not lost on me, but in the brutality of the last few minutes, his presence is comforting rather than alarming.

“Do you remember anything at all from when your core was damaged?”

Nagisa shakes his head, so close his bangs brush my shoulder. “No. Well, some feelings, sort of.” He shivers and glances down the corridor. “Should we go after her?”

“And say what?”

“I don’t know. I just...” He leans into me, breathes in deep. “I just wish none of this had happened.”

It would be tautological to agree, so I remain quiet.

As loath as I am to admit it to myself, I put off going to see Rin.

I need to eat, my berth needs to be tidied, I have to respond to Lesedi’s latest flash. But around 22:00 I run out of excuses.

I can hear them talking from down the hall. For all their many qualities, no one could accuse the Matsuokas of being low-key.

—The fuck do you want me to say? That I don’t blame you? I don’t, Gou. You know I don’t.”

Rin sounds tired. The door to the berth is open, so there is nowhere to stand that doesn’t
immediately announce my presence. From the annoyance in his tone, I expect to see them squaring off, but Rin is simply sitting on his cot, propped up against the wall. Gou is in the wheelchair, and she’s got one foot up on Rin’s bed. They look unbelievably casual.

Rin sees me first. “Hey, Elite.”

“I—uh. I can come back.” I don’t want my presence to set Gou off again.

“Naw, don’t be an idiot, come in.”

I do, and I close the berth door behind me. I have not been raised in the Lowland, where privacy is hard to come by. They might not care if the whole Platform hears our inter-squad squabbles, but I certainly do.

Gou gets up. “I’ll leave.”

“No, you won’t.” Rin snaps his fingers and points back at the wheelchair. “I heard that you tried to put your fist through Rei’s face while I was in surgery. I’m your older brother and I’m pulling rank. And if that isn’t enough, I’m pulling got-my-fucking-leg-shot-off rank. So sit down.”

Gou sucks her cheeks in, and for a second I’m sure she is going to explode, but then she drops back into the wheelchair and crosses her arms. “Fine. Whatever. Are we gonna talk it out and share our feelings?”

God, I hope not. I’ve had enough of Gou’s feelings over the past couple days—they tend to result in bodily harm.

“Listen.” Rin’s eyes slip closed for a second, his lashes bloody arcs against the hospital-paleness of his skin. “This is no one’s fault. Except for the fucking Kassadians, okay? It’s not Rei’s fault for getting sick, and it’s not your fault for fucking up. It just happened, okay?” He thumps a fist weakly down against the bed. His chest is rising and falling in agitated, shallow breaths.


We understand each other. Rin needs for this to be alright, so we are going make it alright.

“Good.” His voice has gone distant and his chin is dipping down toward his chest. “No more fighting.”

“The meds are probably kicking in,” Gou says, standing up and taking him by the shoulders, helping to ease him down onto his pillow. The empty left leg of his pajama pants looks like a deflated balloon, almost grotesque in the way it throws off the symmetry of his body. I can barely look at it.

“He took meds to help him fall asleep,” Gou explains needlessly. “I should probably—.”

She opens a com link on Rin’s terminal and calls the med bay to send someone to come get Rin. Evidently, he had been permitted to visit his quarters and the rest of the ship, but he is still technically on bedrest, which means he has to spend the night under observation. Two orderlies show up with a stretcher. Gou and I wait for them to cart Rin away, hazy and half-asleep.

He gives us a blurry wave as he goes. “Try not to be jerk-offs while I’m gone.”

Gou laughs. The look in her eyes is tender and miserable, but it’s no longer angry. That’s got to be an improvement.
When Rin and the orderlies are gone, Gou and I wander back toward the rec room side by side. We’re not exactly walking together, we just happen to be going in the same direction.

Gou has her face turned away from me when she says, “I’m sorry.” It’s stiff and nearly inaudible.

“Oh—are you really?” I don’t mean it to come out snide, but it does.

Gou shoots me an annoyed look. “I’m trying—look, I’m not sorry for being pissed. I think I had a right to be angry at you. And everyone had a right to be angry at me.” She rubs at her eyes, palms her nose to hide snuffles. “But I’m sorry for flipping out and punching you. I…that wasn’t right.”

I stop walking. I am honestly floored. I’d been thinking that it would be quite awhile until Gou started talking to me again.

“I accept your apology.”

She nods, entire torso bobbing. “Cool, well. I feel better.” We start moving again and she walks backward, shoving her hands into her jacket pockets. “Okay, now that that’s out of the way, can we please talk about Nagisa, and how fucking creepy that was?”

“Wha—.” My mouth drops open in blank shock, and then I’m laughing so hard that I have to stop again and brace myself against the hot metal wall, because this is just so Gou. Trust her to make up with me just because she needs someone to gossip with. She was angry, but as soon as it’s over, she’s done. It’s done. We’re fine.

Here I am, dying of laughter in the Platform hall and Gou is staring at me and saying, “What, fucking what? Did you break down? Do I have to attach your power source?” And I swear, I fall a little bit in love with her. Or as much as I can, while being in love with someone else and not having much of any physical attraction to girls in general.

“I’m alright,” I say, picking myself back up, while Gou gives a couple of staring Spacer recruits the stink eye. “It’s fine, I-I’m…Nagisa, what were you saying about Nagisa?”

“Oh, right. Well, wasn’t it weird? The way he was just…blank? And I don’t just mean with the—.” She holds her hand horizontally across her face to simulate the blindfold.

I quickly sober up, because this is not a situation I find funny at all. After a brief moment of deliberation, I tell her about what had happened in the corridor, because I have to talk about it with someone, or I’m going to go insane, and since Rin is currently comatose, it may as well be Gou. I gloss over the bits with his hands in my pants in front of the medics, but I think she gets the gist regardless.

“Freaky.” We’ve already passed the rec room, but neither of us says anything. At this point we are simply walking a circuit of the Platform; I don’t much feel like staying in one place at the moment and I doubt she does either. “And that part with Dr. Amakata is really weird.” She spins back around toward me. “Oh, did I never tell you?”

I know what she’s doing—he’s gaining momentum, trying to keep herself high enough to not slip back down into blackness that persists at the edges of all our minds, waiting to pull us in and swallow us up. I always have to go inward, try to reason myself out of it. Gou moves outward into the world, forcing her will on to it until she can believe her control is genuine.

“I can’t believe I never told you this—I guess there was just so much going on.”
“Gou,” I say, exasperated. “Told me what?”

She puts a hand on her hip. “The time Amakata threw a gang symbol up at me.”

“What?”

“I know, right? Lotus’s symbol—,” she says, referring the gang she’d been in back in Lowland. “Is this.” She does a complicated two fingered gesture across her chest and up toward her chin. “And she did it to convince me to trust her enough to give you the White Fever.”

I am growing so accustomed to the feeling of being utterly cast adrift that the spinning inside my head is almost comforting. “And you never thought about mentioning this before?”

“Hey, there was a lot going on!” Gou snaps. “Like you being half dead, and all of us almost faced —.” She lowers her voice at the last second, hissing. “—Faced with criminal charges for helping Amakata murder you! And then you left for Amazon—.”

“Aurora.”

“Whatever. You left, and then when you came back there was the mission training—.”

I stop her. “Okay, you’re right. It’s only—”

“I know.” Gou shakes her head. “Whoever she is, she’s not your usual Elite doctor.” Her eyes get wide and her mouth stretches out into flattened oval. “Oh, holy shit, what if she’s the spy?” She sounds more elated at this prospect than concerned.

“I…don’t think she’s the spy,” I say, half-apologetic. Whenever Dr. Amakata behaves suspiciously, it has to do with droids or augments—I don’t know how my emotional augment could have anything to do with Confederation military tactics.

Oh god, please have nothing to do with Confederation military tactics.

I briefly consider telling Gou about my suspicions that Amakata has been lying to me about my augment, but then I’d have to explain where those suspicions came from. Gou may be unreasonable and overbearing at times, but she isn’t slow in any sense of the word.

Like a solar cannon charging up for a shot, Gou steadily brightens over the next few training sessions. She’s trying harder—we can all tell. Her commands get clearer and her timing improves drastically. Even Captain Sasabe, chronically unimpressed, can find nothing to fault her for.

“Looks like the two of you have made up,” Makoto comments, after he’d overheard her teasing me about my flashy entry dives.

(“What are you, a beautiful butterfly?”)

“Yeah, I guess we have,” I say, although I am not nearly so arrogant as to imagine that our touching reconciliation is the cause of Gou’s improving humor. Rin had told her he doesn’t blame her, and thereby freed her to stop blaming herself.

From what we can get out of Dr. Amakata, Rin is being fitted for a cybernetic prosthesis at the end of the week. Until then, he comes with us to meals and occasionally to the rec room, wheeled around dutifully by Nitori, Gou, and occasionally Haruka. I have barely seen the two of them
exchange words through this entire ordeal, but there have also been significant periods when neither of them are anywhere to be found. That doesn’t necessarily mean they’ve been together, but still.

I have received no further communications from my father pertaining to my augment. Perhaps he doesn’t know my medical restriction has been lifted, or Myles has been unable to get another special permission to come aboard a military vessel.

Or perhaps the slowing eroding hunk of silicone in his son’s brain has simply slipped my father’s mind. If I died, he could always replace me with a better child, a droid child with fewer objectionable qualities.

Even though I’ve only been back on the Platform a little over two weeks, I am already so sick of its gleaming walls and burning metal smell that when Jinny and Raik offer me a ride out to Ithaca, I can’t agree fast enough.

“No nightclubs this time,” I say.

“Hell, Ryugazaki. I wouldn’t take any of you to a club again if you paid me. You all are a fucking buzz-kill.”

“You guys were definitely a mess,” Jinny adds, slightly more diplomatic than her girlfriend. I don’t protest, because that is more than fair.

As soon as we hit the Inner Market, Raik and Jinny vanish into the colorful currents of the crowd, leaving Nagisa and me on our own. He had agreed instantly when I’d asked him along, and he’d also seemed relieved that we weren’t going back to Caligula. Even though it had seemed like he’d had much more fun that night than the rest of us.

We wander down the main boulevard of the enormous nation cruiser, and again I am stunned by the sheer variety of faces and species. On the Platform skin tones differ and augments impose some disorder, but recently everyone has begun to look the same. Same uniforms, same exhaustion, same weighted knowledge that all is not as it should be. It’s an unexpected relief to descend into a place the war barely seems to have touched, even if it is loud and foul-smelling, and full of pickpockets, cutthroats, and a weird, blue and gold tentacled creature that appears to be selling potted pants.

The air smells like grease and cooking meat down at this end of the market, and it makes my stomach growl. Still, as much as I have changed in the last months, I am not yet prepared to surrender my insides to the ravaging landscape of Ithacan cuisine.

We turn a corner onto a street of low, covered carts, hung with gauzy scarves and strung beads and coins that rattle and clink as customers upset them. A few have flags designating their nations or planets of origin, but there’s no wind inside the space station, so most of them hang too limply to distinguish.

Nagisa tips his chin up. “Mmm…smells good.”

“I sniff. “Yeah.”

A woman beneath a silky blue awning is pouring out tiny cups of coffee from an ornately filigreed pot, slightly tarnished along the base. Its neck is so long it resembles a pot-bellied giraffe. My mother would love it—something legitimately old, not just weathered to look that way, like so many objects in Sky City. When a nation is so new, ancient things become precious.
Food would end badly, but I’d be alright with coffee, wouldn’t I? There’s a water purifier beside the stove in the back of the stall, and provided she’s using it…

Ah, hell. I’ve survived White Fever, I can survive space station coffee.

I order two cups, paying with the heavy silver drachma that passes for currency on Ithaca (that Raik had been so kind to lend me at an alarming rate of interest) before I remember.

“Oh, right,” I say as I turn back to Nagisa. My neck burns. “Sorry.”

“Heh?” He takes one of the cups from me and points to a bit of support wall that has been flattened and sanded smooth. I’m not sure if it’s supposed to be used as a bench, but there isn’t anywhere else. I sit and Nagisa hops up next to me. He grins, clinks his cup to mine, and takes a big sip.

“Ech! Bitter!”

“Wha…”

He takes another sip and makes a similar face. “Is coffee usually this strong?”

I shake my head slowly. “No, this is a special preparation method; we can sweeten it if you want. I…thought you couldn’t eat?” I add after a moment.

He giggles. “I can’t. But small amounts of liquid aren’t a problem. I can ingest those just fine.” He wriggles his eyebrows. “I’m a Hazuki, remember?”

“I don’t…” Oh god, he can’t mean what I think he means, can he? “Seriously? Just for that?” I drop my head into my hand and massage my temples. “The universe is a strange and terrifying place.”

Nagisa drinks his coffee and laughs harder. “Is it really that surprising?”

“That you have the ability to process liquids just so you can swallow….”

“…Semen?” Nagisa asks brightly.

We drink our coffee, me trying not think about semen, and Nagisa thinking about…well, who knows. I watch him out of the corner of my gaze. The change in his profile truly is shocking; I would not have thought something like eye color would make so bold a difference, but it does. It’s almost like looking at an entirely new face. Perhaps it’s the glow that’s makes his eyes so prominent.

“…Rei?”

“Hmm?” I startle out of my daze, realizing that I have been openly staring at him. “Sorry.”

He rotates his shoulders, shaking out the tension. “You’re just being kind of quiet.” He fidgets a bit more. “Is it ’cause of what happened when I was damaged?”

I want to say no, of course not, but that would be a lie.

“It’s strange that you don’t remember it,” I admit. “That almost makes it seem as if it didn’t happen.” The memories feel like phantoms, while the impressions are still very real.
Nagisa taps his fingernails against the rim of his empty cup, looking out across the ragged tapestry of carts and colored flags, people weaving in and out like tiny needles. “Dr. Amakata says I attacked you.”

“Oh, I—I didn’t think she would tell you.”

He shrugs. “I asked. I felt sort of…funny when I woke up again, like my insides got loose and then screwed back together too tight.” He drops his chin against his chest a couple times, like he’s responding to some internal Morse code. “That probably doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, it does.” I had felt it upon returning to Aurora, and when I discovered the truth about my own mind, and my mother’s. I understand coming back to awareness of yourself and finding you are not quite how you remember. “Do you want me to tell you exactly what happened?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Yeah.”

So I do. I tell him how he’d pinned me to the wall, ignored my protests. I describe the vicious pleasure in his eyes when he’d told Amakata he could ruin her. He stays silent and stone-faced until that moment, but then his brows jab inward and he looks back at me sharply.

“What?”

“Uh, that you could…could ruin her. Or, destroy her…in an instant.”

“Oh.” He sets his cup next to him and folds his hands. “That’s weird.”

“Yeah,” I agree, hoping he will go on. When he doesn’t, I pick back up. “So if I’m being hesitant, or, or distant, I just wanted you to know why that is. So that what happened last time doesn’t happen again.”

Nagisa’s smile is strained, but it’s there. “You mean, you avoiding me for, like, no reason?”

“No apparent reason,” I counter. “There was a reason.”

“Yeah, a made-up one.”

“Yes, but I thought it was real.”

“You thought I was fucking your dad.”


And then we’re both disintegrating into laughers, so untamed that I start to wonder if there had really only been coffee in that pot. We get a few looks from a group of women in full ballroom regalia, complete with swishing hoop skirts and powdered wigs, and a Kassadian holding a box of broken clocks. As we subside down into silence, Nagisa leans against me and props his head on my shoulder.

“This is good though, right?” The warmth of him radiates through my clothes and soaks into my skin; my very own miniature sun. “No wall-pinning or creepy stuff.”

I take his hand and turn it over, lacing our fingers together. “Yeah. It’s good.”

Chapter End Notes
See? Good stuff can still happen, I promise.

Also bad stuff.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Hello, and welcome back to space.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next shock finds us in the early morning.

It comes through as a red alert on all our tablets, but by the time it’s sent most of us already know. It is all anyone is talking about, whispers and rumors compounding until the very walls are resounding with them.

They had caught the spy.

“Jeffery Erickson’?” Gou reads out from her tablet, although we have all heard the name countless times by breakfast. “Who the almighty fuck is that?”

“An officer.” Makato is pushing his eggs around on his plate, chasing them with a piece of toast. “A low-level one.”

A sensible position for a spy—senior enough to attend briefings, but not to be burdened with any undue responsibility.

Gou locks her tablet with an irritated swipe of her knuckles. “Well, that’s boring.”

I sip my tepid coffee and silently agree. If this is what all the tension has been leading up to, then color me let down. Not that I am truly craving more excitement, nor had I expected the spy to turn out to be Dr. Amakata, but I had at least been hoping to feel some satisfaction with the conclusion. Instead all I’m left with is the distant impression that I’ve heard the name somewhere before.

“Don’t be so quick to judge, children.” Raik slides onto the bench, crowding Gou until she is practically in my lap. “I know something all of you don’t.”

“How to hijack hovercars?” I suggest.

Gou snorts into her oatmeal. “Come on, Rei. Everyone can do that. I can do that. I bet Makoto can do that. He’s pretty dexterous.”

“Not that dexterous.” Makoto is focusing on his plate, but he’s smiling in a way that makes me think we are no longer talking about hijacking. As usual, I’m missing something, and it’s probably something dirty.

“I know what they didn’t put in the report,” Raik goes on, helping herself to a sausage off my plate.

“How about the spy?”

“Mmm.” She licks grease off her fingers.

Gou takes a huge, messy bite of oatmeal. “The suspense is killing us.”
“The spy officer is a droid,” Jinny cuts in.

Nagisa, who up until now has been picking at the label on his water bottle, bored with the whole conversation, looks up. “He is?”

Raik smacks the back of Jinny’s hand. “Thanks, dick.”

With her skin augment, Jinny’s blush is a deep purple. “Sorry. You were just dragging it out so long...” Their fingers clasp briefly.

“Like she said,” Raik picks back up. “Erik Jeffson or whatever his name is. He’s a droid. And even better, he’s an illegal droid.”

“As in, illegally present on the ship?” Makoto asks.

“As in, over the legal limit. Way the fuck over. About five percent.”

Stunned silence follows. Five percent over the limit means he is 35% human. Three percent more than my mother, and two percent less than Nagisa. Of course, the rest of them don’t know this.

“Is that even possible?” Gou wants to know.

Nagisa and I lock eyes. I say, “It’s possible. Just very illegal.”

“If a droid that human was manufactured, you’d be breaking, like, five million slavery laws,” Nagisa adds, face perfectly smooth.

“How would a droid get to be a commanding officer?” Gou wants to know. “It’s weird enough that they let Nagisa into Recon. We all got medical exams when we got on board, and there was that immigration screening before we even got onto the shuttle. He must have masked his bio-signature somehow.”

“You are thinking way too hard, Red.” Raik laces her hands behind her head. “Screw bio-signatures. Never underestimate the power of bribes.”

“You can’t bribe AI’s,” Gou counters.

“You can bribe their operators.”

“Yeah, but every operator in the system?,” Gou and Raik may have called a truce, but Gou still doesn’t like her getting the last word. “He’d have to be using a cloaking chip or something, I don’t know. I’m not a hacker.”

Jinny nudges Raik. “Raik is.”

“I can hack into systems, not set them up.”

“I know who might know,” I say slowly. “Or at least, I know a droid specialist.”

--

After the scene we made last time, I half-expect the automated doors of the med bay to have our faces recorded as persona non grata, but they swish open as obligingly as ever. Compared to the madness of the evening of the aborted mission, the empty lobby is eerie. Gou, Makoto, Nagisa, and I walk past the bank of security monitors, me in the lead, although Nagisa has probably been here at least as many times as I have.
Raik and Jinny had split with us after breakfast.

“You aren’t coming?” Gou had asked.

“No, I’m not. Because I don’t give a shit.” Raik looks angry, but that has more to do with her eye augment than anything else. Generally, she looks angry. “You all go play Space Detectives if you want. All I care about is that they caught the bastard.” And that had been that.

“Do you think everyone is—.”

Gou cuts me off with a stage-whispered, “Shush! Do you hear that?”

A man’s voice spills from Amakata’s office. I’m starting to wonder if she leaves her door open on purpose. Does she want to be overheard, perhaps, or is it simply to show that she has nothing to hide?

“—Not exactly sure what you’re getting at. Who cares who funded it?”

We stop as a single animal, because we all know that voice intimately. It has followed us into our dreams, shouting out maneuver numbers and ordering endless drills.

Nagisa mouths Captain Sasabe, unnecessarily. Gou jostles his shoulder and points at the open door.

“What I’m saying,” Dr. Amakata responds wearily, “Is that they have gone beyond human rights violations. This is a war crime. If anything is going to make the Confederation take their heads out of their—.”

Her voice cuts off like a call put on mute. Glossy, manicured fingers wrap around the jamb, before Amakata sticks her head round as well. Her face cycles through and discards several expressions—anger, dismay, shock—before hitting and sticking on mild annoyance.

“What are you doing here, recruits?”

“We…had a question,” I say.

I’m distracted, because I have just been hit by a heady wave of déjà vu; I know where I’d heard the spy’s name before.

I’d overheard Amakata arguing with an Erickson shortly after I arrived on the Platform.

Amakata crosses her arms. “It takes all four of you to ask a question?”

“Uh—.” I glance back awkwardly. Gou and Makoto are watching me, and Nagisa is looking at his fingers, intensely fascinated by the curves of his knuckles. “Yes, we—.”

“Ryugazaki!” Captain Sasabe comes out into the corridor after Amakata, face red, unusually disheveled. His hair is wet and unstyled, and with it pressed slick to his head he looks years younger. The alert had clearly pulled him out of bed early. “What the hell are you all doing in here? Training’s in—.” He glances at his tablet. “Four minutes! Move out!”

“Captain, we just—.”
“I said move out, Recruit! Let Amakata do her work. She’s a doctor, not a babysitter.”

Then what does that make you? I want to ask, but I also don’t want to be thrown in the brig.

--

The four of us are uncharacteristically subdued through the day’s training, but we don’t get chewed out by Sasabe like I’m expecting. He seems content to behave like the whole scene in the med bay hadn’t happened, and we follow his lead. If Haru notices that something is strange—we’re being nearly as quiet and focused as he is—he gives no sign. No doubt Makoto will fill him in soon enough.

I keep asking myself if what we had heard is important, if it’s more than simply one of many conversations to be spawned by the discovery that a Platform officer is a spy and an artificial human. Especially now that I remember where I’ve heard Erickson’s name before. By evening, I still don’t have the answer.

--

Nagisa and I pass up the mess hall in favor of my berth that evening; I’m not hungry, and he never goes to dinner unless I do. As soon as the door lock engages he sits on my cot, eyes glimmering in the soft light.

“You think Doctor Amakata is involved with Captain Sasabe?”

I lean back against the door. If I join Nagisa on the bed my ability to reason will be sucked away like debris from an airlock. “I don’t want to jump to conclusions. I’m not surprised they’re acquainted.” It’s a big Platform, but it’s not that big. “They must be pretty close in age, and doctors have the same rank as captains. Do you think they could be planning something?”

Nagisa’s gaze is uncomprehending.

“Wait, what are we talking about?” I ask, distracted by the bio-light in his eyes. Their intensity is a good early warning system to how close he is to jumping on me. As if the intent, serpentine way he rolls off the cot and moves toward me isn’t warning enough.

“What are you talking about? I’m talking about sex.”

“You think Sasabe and Amakata are…”

“Fucking, yeah. Why not?”

Where to begin. “Well, they don’t seem to, ah, share many interests.” Amakata is an Acamedy-accredited physician and droid expert, while Sasabe’s pursuits seem to be mostly yelling and hitting things.

Nagisa shrugs. “So? It’s not like they’re going to be talking politics while they’re doing it. They’ve only got to share one particular interest for this.”

I groan. “I don’t want to think about it.”

“I mean, what do you and I have in common, really?” He drapes his arms over my shoulders and presses himself against me, rolling his hips, slow and sinuous. “Besides the obvious.”

“And what’s that?”
“A mutual fondness for homosexual activities.” He affects a stuffy Elite accent, precise vowels pronounced on the tip of the tongue, sharp S’s. He even leans back and pushes his fingers toward the bridge of his nose, nudging up imaginary glasses.

“Is that supposed to be me? I wasn’t that bad,” I protest as he giggles into my neck.

“Denial is unhealthy, Rei.”

“Is that right?” I slide my hands down his sides, rubbing at the furrows between his ribs through the cyberskin jacket.

He grabs me by the lapels and I hit the berth door with a thump, metal groaning beneath my weight. Nagisa goes for my throat, careful to bite low enough to stay hidden beneath the collar of my wetsuit. He yanks at the buttons on my pants.

“Are you gonna fuck me tonight or what?” He gets a hand inside, strokes me through my briefs. “I only have so much patience.”

“Nagisa—.” I recall the sight of him on all fours, fingers scrabbling at the hard shiny surface of a table, mouth opened on a silent, continuous moan. He must feel my cock pulse because he grins and strokes faster.

“I’ll be gentle, I promise.” He bites at the shell of my ear.

My laugh is a breathy vibration as I put both hands on his chest to propel him backward to the cot. Then two loud bangs echo hollowly right next to my head.

I curse and startle, wondering what the hell it could be now.

“Uh, Rei? It’s Makoto. I’m back from dinner. Obviously.”

I launch myself off the door. “Okay, just a—.” He doesn’t need me to let him in—he’s keyed to the retinal scanner too—but I appreciate his courtesy, even if he’s arrived at the worst possible moment. Nagisa is propped against the corner of my cot, hair wild, lips bruised, eyes glowing like shuttle beams. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look so irritated.

I hit the door release and smile at Makoto, attempting to pull my shirt down in the back. “Hey, how was dinner?” I ask, entirely too cheerily.

Makoto’s cheeks go pink as he has his suspicions confirmed. “It was good. Well, no, it was as awful as ever, but...you know.”

I nod quickly. “Yeah, yeah, definitely.” I strain against the silence. “I guess...I’m going to take a shower.”

Behind me, I can almost hear Nagisa rolling his eyes. He doesn’t understand my discomfort with our teammates’ knowledge of our activities. If I allowed it, he would climb right into the shower after me, even with Makoto in the berth. Of course, there’s absolutely no question of what we had been doing a moment ago, but the idea of someone right there, someone hearing us...I don’t know if I’ll ever be comfortable with that.

“And I guess I’ll go bang my head against a wall,” Nagisa says, standing up from the cot. He kisses me briefly, and leaves.
I retreat to the shower, leaning into the spray and biting my lip, trying to rid myself of my frustration as quickly as possible. Nagisa always teases when he touches me, always draws it out, but I don’t have the patience or the hot water for that. I am also very aware that Makoto is still out in the berth, and probably knows exactly what I came in here to do.

That thought makes my stomach squirm, my cock throb, and my body tense. I come with a grunt, all evidence swirled away down the drain. I am embarrassed, but not the mortified I’d be if I’d been in here with Nagisa, trying to keep silent as he takes apart.

--

Makoto is on his tablet when I come back in, one earpiece fitted, and I remember that this is the night he sets aside every week to speak with his family. They all get in on the call—his mother, father, and two younger siblings. I can’t imagine either of my parents giving up an evening to talk to me. Not that I’d want them to.

I sit on my cot and towel off my hair; the dryer in the bathroom is so feeble that we’d both given up on using it after the first month or so.

“Rei, you know, if you and Nagisa ever want to be alone, I don’t mind spending time somewhere else for an evening.”

I rub much harder at my hair than is strictly necessary. “I—that isn’t—.”

“Rei,” Makoto says gently, but with enough authority that I can’t help but meet his gaze. “You shouldn’t be ashamed of whatever choices you’ve made.”

“I’m not ashamed—.”

“I know that according to Elite culture your actions may be inappropriate, but you shouldn’t ever think that any of us see it that way. You’re a member of our squad, and you have as much right to be here as anyone does. And as much right to be happy.”

Slowly, I let my towel settle around my shoulders, unexpectedly touched. I don’t feel ashamed of what I’m doing with Nagisa—at least not on a conscious level—but Makoto’s confidence still leaves me feeling unbalanced and watery.

“It’s not that I’m ashamed, or—or think you all won’t approve or something along those lines,” I say shakily. “It’s just…a little weird.”


--

Coach Sasabe’s is relentless for the rest of the week. I know it’s his intention to leave us too exhausted to return to the med bay to question Amakata about the spy, but it’s working regardless. The task no longer feels as pressing as it had. The spy has been caught, security will tighten as a result—beyond that, what can be done?

At the end of the week, Raik finds us in the rec room to let us know that Jeff Erickson has been found dead in his cell.

“Like, totally dead?” Gou is, as usual, the first to break the shocked silence. “Does that happen? How do you kill a droid?”
“The same way you kill anything.” Raik smacks a fist into her open palm. “Punch until it stops moving.”

“The droid was beaten to death?”

“And its core was ripped out.”

Nagisa flinches beside me, hand moving reflexively to his forehead. The droid core isn’t located in the brain—it’s attached to the spinal cord—but Nagisa thinks with his head, the same as the rest of us. The mind is still the part of him that would go dark. I find his hand and draw it into mine.

Gou tosses her cards out onto the table; apparently the game is over. The frozen faces of the queens of hearts and diamonds stare at the ceiling. “How do you always know all this stuff?”

Raik smirks. “They’re saying it was self-inflicted.”

“Wait, Erickson beat himself up and ripped out his core?” Makoto taps his own hand into a neat pile beside Gou’s chaos. “That sounds unlikely.”

Gou snorts. “No shit, it sounds crazy. I mean, do they even have the strength for that? Could you do that?”

Nagisa looks delicately offended—perplexed and a little disgusted, like she had just asked him to describe his last bowel movement. “I could. But I wouldn’t. No droid would. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Humans kill themselves,” I point out. “From a logical standpoint, that doesn’t make sense either.”

Gou shakes her head. “Cover up,” she says decisively.

Raik shrugs, still aggressively uninterested in doing anything besides passing on the bad news, and sits down on the edge of the table, jostling it and sending Makoto’s perfect pile skidding into Gou’s. “Where’s shark-baby? Still getting his leg attached?”

“Yeah. He’s going to be at dinner, though.” Gou begins stacking the cards back up. “Someone will have to tell him about the spy.”

We beat Rin to the mess hall. Nitori and Haruka are absent as well. Nitori has declared himself Rin’s unofficial handler while he’s still wheelchair-bound, and Haruka hasn’t been apart from Rin much in the last week, except during training. Gou has spent time in the med bay too, but I can tell she needs some distance. Seeing the evidence of her mistake wears on her, even if Rin has absolved her of the ultimate responsibility.

Dinner tonight is some sort of lasagna dish, but the sauce tastes like the plastic it’s packaged in, and it’s difficult to tell what is noodle and what is cheese. It’s all the same color and consistency.

“Next time we have leave, you’re all coming to Aurora with me,” I say, stabbing my fork into broccoli so overcooked it slides limply from the tines before I can get it into my mouth. “The food there is amazing.”

Gou smacks her lips. “Yes, we can feast on quail eggs and champagne brunches.” Her accent goes fussy and stilted.
“Really, though,” I say. “We don’t actually sound like that.”

“Hey, we’re the ones who had to listen to you for—Ai, what the hell?”

Nitori is standing a couple feet off, fingers gripped tight into his Combat jacket. He’s clearly desperate to speak, but too polite to interrupt. Or too afraid of Gou.

He jitters up to the table. “Have you seen Rin? Nanase and I—.” We all follow his nod to the other side of the mess hall, where Haruka’s gaze is sweeping from side to side like he’s lost something. Or someone. “We…we were supposed to be escorting Rin. But I don’t know—.”

“Hey! What the FUCK IS THIS?”

Panic blooms in Nitori’s eyes. “Oh no.”

Tracking down the source of the voice is difficult—everything echoes in here.

Nagisa nudges me in the ribs. “Over there.”

He points to the top of the hall where the captains sit, where a slash of red hair floats above rigid shoulders.

Before I know it I’m on my feet and moving toward him, not sure what I hope to achieve, but knowing that I need to see this. Nagisa and Nitori are behind me. Gou shouts after us—I can’t hear the words but I know she’s angry. A couple seconds later and she catches up.

“What the fuck is he doing?” she hisses.

We stop with only one table between us and Rin, close enough to see who he’s shouting at. I know him by sight—Samezuka’s squad leader, Captain Lewlin.

“Are you listening to me? What the fuck is this?!”

Even with Rin bellowing in his ear, Lewlin barely looks away from his dinner. “That? That’s a prosthesis, Recruit. An expensive piece of cybernetics that you’ve been given at no charge.”

He stabs at his lasagna like he finds its presence insulting. “You should be grateful.” Lewlin has an overlarge jaw—he reminds me of pictures of proto-humans, creatures we evolved from millions of years ago.

“Fuck that.” Rin’s voice shakes out, raspy and dehydrated, like he’s been crying. “I can’t swim with this. I can barely walk!”

The entire hall has gone quiet, but Lewlin still doesn’t bother to keep his voice down. “You’ll be reassigned.” His lips twist. “Don’t need to walk to monitor substations, do you?”

Rin slams a fist down on the table, making the silverware rattle. Captain Lewlin’s fork slips out of his fingers and splatters tomato sauce across the tabletop. “I can’t work at a desk!” His voice cracks. “Captain, please—.”

Lewlin wipes up the sauce with a grunt of disgust. A tiny spot of it has stained the cuff of his jacket. “What do you want, Matsuoka? You want me to put in an advanced biotic request for a Recruit so green he’s still got grass growing out of his ass? You think I’m gonna stick my neck out for some pit kid who got himself blown up in the first 30 seconds of the mission?”

Rin reels back from the table, body folding in on itself like he’s been hit by a percussive blast.
Even to an untrained eye, it’s obvious his prosthesis doesn’t fit. It’s too long and the hip rolls awkwardly when he takes a step. Whoever had attached the nerves had done a shoddy job of it.

“Enough shouting, Lewlin,” a Spacer Captain snaps from down the table. “Some of us are trying to eat.” For a second I think she is going to defend Rin, but she just goes back to her dinner. Captain Sasabe isn’t here, and even if he had been, would he have bothered to help out a Recruit who isn’t in his squad? Isn’t even in his section?

Rin kicks at the table with his good leg and flees. He blows right past us, ignoring me when I say his name. The prosthesis forces him to hobble. Some of the Recruits laugh, and one table breaks into mocking applause.

Beside me, Gou is pulsing with rage. I put a hand on her arm before she can throw herself at the Captain’s table.

“Don’t. It isn’t worth it.”

She slaps me away. “I know that, Rei! Christ.”

Rin bangs out of the mess hall, and we follow, all four of us.

Anger for Rin aside, this has made me realize just how singular a Captain Sasabe is. He may shout and order us around, compare our swimming styles to forms of immobile sea life, but he respects us. Or, at the very least, he treats us like human beings. In the Iwatobi Squad it’s possible to forget that the Elite/Lowland divide exists, but it’s still here, always a constant pressure, a pulse that pumps blood through the galaxy.

Just outside the mess hall door, Nitori hesitates. “Maybe—maybe we shouldn’t.”

Gou looks at him, hair flicking like an irritated horse’s tail. “Why not?”

“What if he wants to be alone?”

“Fuck what he wants. C’mon, Rei.”

Chapter End Notes

As everyone doubtless knows, today is a certain special butterfly’s birthday. So happy birthday, Rei! I hope you enjoyed your gift of sexual frustration, confusion, and friendship drama. Hope you have a wonderful day!

Thanks to ouroboros for the excellent beta.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Happy 2015! I hope everyone's year has been good so far. Mine has consisted of writing, making coffee, and watching anime, so. Can't complain.

And speaking of, Some of Us turned 1 on New Year's Day! My space baby is a growing up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before Gou and I can take a step, the mess hall door bursts open and Haruka explodes out. I catch a glimpse of flushed cheeks and a twisted mouth before he vanishes around the next curve.

Gou moves so quickly that I have to jog to keep up with her, following the bounce and sway of her ponytail. We chase them all the way down the hall toward the med bay; Rin moves surprisingly fast on his cheap prosthesis, probably faster than is entirely safe.

We find him panting, pale, shaking all over. His forehead is pressed to the metal wall like he’s hoping to soak up the heat of the Platform. Haruka stands beside him.

Rin’s fist smacks hollowly into the wall beside his head. The strikes increase in intensity, the booms rise in volume until his knuckles are coming away bloody. “It hurts all the fucking time, Haru. It doesn’t even fit!” He kicks his right leg out to the side like he wants to fling it away from him. “I don’t have a Sky City bank account, and Mom doesn’t officially exist in the system, so they wouldn’t even let me borrow on credit—!” An aching sob shakes his shoulders. “This is all they would give me. I’m not—I won’t…I’m not ever going to swim again, Haru!”

Haruka’s gaze flicks away from him for the slightest moment, toward Gou and me where we stand at the end of the corridor like rubberneckers at a crash sight. He pulls Rin to him and Rin clutches at his jacket, shuddering, and when Haruka’s arms go around him, fingers cupping the back of his head, he buries his face in his neck and sobs.

Haruka holds him and kisses his forehead, his hair, the side of his face. Watching this, I feel like more of a voyeur than if I had walked in on them having sex. Beside me, Gou makes a strangled noise and turns away, as if her brother’s grief has lodged itself in her own throat.

“This is ridiculous,” I find myself saying. “This is absolutely ridiculous. They wouldn’t even let him borrow—? That isn’t—.”

“Isn’t what, Rei?” Gou asks. “Normal? Fair? Life as per fucking usual?” She grinds a palm into her eye, like my naïveté is giving her a headache. “You are such a little child.”

We descend easily into bickering—it gives us something to focus on besides the sound of Rin going to pieces and Haruka comforting him—but approaching footsteps stop us before we can really get going. Echoes clang off the low ceilings, giving the sound the quality of a small army. That’s not out of the question, since we have a large army stationed on the Platform. But it’s far too rhythmic for the chaotic scramble of recruits released from training or on their way back from dinner.
Gou and I have just enough time to flatten ourselves against the wall before a full dozen men and women come marching round the corner. They all wear the same double breasted coats with polished silver buttons, blue hats all crooked at the same angle (except for the guy in the back who’s done his the wrong way around) handguns obvious at their belts, laser knives strapped to their sleeves.

“Is that the—.”

The Sky City Militia. A full company. The government calls them the city’s guardian angels. Most of Upland calls them a waste of tax credits. They are meant to be an auxiliary police force, but they don’t amount to much more than mercenaries-for-hire, government-sanctioned privateers to the piracy of the Lowland gangs. Still, seeing them on the Platform, even if it is a Confederacy-run station, is so disorienting that for a moment all I can do is stare. The echo of their heeled boots are gunshots on the industrial space-grade steel. This place is not meant for dress attire. They breeze past us all without a second glance.

The edges of Rin’s eyes are puffy, as red as his augmented pupils, and he has mucus trembling on his upper lip. Still, he sounds quite normal when he says, “What the fuck is it now?”

Unless the Militia is very turned around, they could be only headed in one direction. Beyond a few supply docks, the med bay is the only section with access on this floor.

“Who the hell are they?” Gou demands. “And why are their hats so stupid?”

I start to respond, but Rin beats me to it. “That’s the SCM. Didn’t they ever make a bust on your girly gang?”

“I don’t know. Not all Elites know each other.”

Lotus doesn’t do Elite jobs,” Gou snaps back. “And those are the most Elite-looking bastards I’ve ever seen. Did you see their shoes? Why the fuck are they here?”

Haruka and Rin glance at me.

“Let’s go find out.”

The med bay is a frothed ocean of Sky City blue and medic white, the Militia and the Platform doctors squaring off in ranks in the lobby. Amakata stands at the head of a phalanx of orderlies, flanked by the elderly male medic who had taken my vitals and spoken to me while I was recovering from White Fever. Dr Rodriguez, maybe?

“This is a medical facility,” Dr. Amakata is telling the leader of the SCM, a woman with a long white-blonde braid, her face smooth and unaugmented. “I’ll have to request that you declare your presence at the bridge before you interrupt our work. Come back with a pass, and I’ll give you the official tour myself.”

Her eyes flick briefly to where the four of us have frozen in the doorway, and for a moment I think we’re going to be ordered out, but Amakata refocuses on the Militia leader, smile small and poisonous.
“We have an official warrant,” the woman says, flashing up a screen on her tablet so quickly Amakata has no chance to read it. “We’re here on official business. My name is Ira Kalm, Commander of the 4th Cerula Brigade.”

Cerula? Cerula is an Uplands district, located toward the outskirts, one of the few forested areas left on the east coast, and easily one of the most expensive districts in the city. Too expensive for the Ryugazakis, although my father would never admit to it. He would simply proclaim the mansions too gaudy, the countryside vastly inferior to the central metropolis.

“If the Confederacy wished to mount an investigation, they would send their own representatives.” Amakata’s eyes narrow. “And not a gaggle of overly-embroidered thugs.”

Commander Kalm’s shoulders tighten the slightest bit, but she lets the insult go.

“Jeffery Erickson’s death is being handled internally,” Amakata goes on. “It was a Platform 6 security breach, and Platform 6 is dealing with it.” She glances pointedly at the pair of titanium handcuffs hanging from the Commander’s belt. “And I promise you, , you won’t need those. The droid is in pieces, and I don’t think any of them are going to put up much of a fight.”

“We aren’t here for the robot,” Commander Kalm says, tossing out the slur as easily as she tosses the cuffs to one of her lieutenants. “We’re here for you.”

Amakata’s eyes harden and she goes still. It’s a rigid stillness, like an AI powered down. The man with cuffs moves toward her. I blink, and suddenly the man is on the ground, facedown, and the cuffs are skidding away across the slick white tiles. Amakata presses her knee down in the middle of his back, fingers curled in his hair, gripping tight to hold him still.

“Don’t touch me,” Amakata says, voice layered with ice. Her hair has come down from its neat bun, drifting around her face in gauzy tangles, color scraped across her cheeks, rash-red. Five laser-sights center on her chest.

I don’t know what to do. “Dr. Amakata—!”

“Quiet, Rei.” Her attention stays firmly fixed on Commander Kalm. “Who hired you?”

Kalm says nothing. Tiredly, she walks across the lobby and sweeps up the cuffs, like this is just another dull task in a very dull day. Circling behind Amakata, she yanks her off her soldier, handling her much more roughly than is necessary. Amakata’s eyes tighten, but if it hurts, she makes no sound.

“What the hell is going on?” Rin demands it of everyone, and gets a response from no one. The orderlies have formed a trembling knot, mice chased into the corner of a cage. Dr. Rodriguez begins to shout, calling this an outrage and a miscarriage of justice.

“Present your warrant, Commander.” He pronounces her title with bitter derision, before rounding on us. “And you, Recruits! What are you doing here? Leave, immediately!”

My heart thrums against my ribs. “What are the charges?” I direct this at Commander Kalm, well aware that I am obeying a direct order from a superior. I won’t leave—not until I understand.

“The charges?” Kalm raises a delicate eyebrow. “The charges are a long and impressively varied list—destruction of property, falsification of identity and credentials, theft, affiliation with a known terrorist organization—.”
Beside me, Gou sputters in disbelief. “Who the—this is so full of shit—.”

“—But setting all of that aside, I have been hired for one very specific task.” Kalm pauses to let the dramatic tension build. “Izumi Grey, you are under arrest for the willful and premeditated murder of Cyrus Feller.”

It takes a few chaotic moments for me to realize that I recognize the latter of these names. The former must be referring to Dr. Amakata.

“You will be taken into custody, and returned to Sky City to stand trial.”

The vacuum of space has leaked in through the walls of the Platform and filled the med bay; so absolute is the silence lurking at the end of Commander Kalm’s speech. Dr. Rodriquez stares at Amakata in horrified disbelief, and one of the orderlies has a hand clapped over her mouth like she might be sick.

Amakata spits a bit of hair out of the corner of her mouth, yanking once at the cuffs. “They sent SCM after me?” The sneering anger that I had caught glimpses of in the past few months—moments of fractured weakness in between calm smiles—is finally plain on her face. “Isn’t your time better spent spoon-feeding Sky City officials while their hands are busy jerking each other off? Who thought it would be a good idea to hire you fancy fucks to track down a murderer?”

Casually, like she’s opening a door or picking up her fork at dinner, Kalm hits Amakata across the face. Rin and I make identical noises of fury, and from behind us comes a flat, blank curse.

“Fuck.”

Nagisa has arrived, and he is looking at Commander Kalm like he has plans to tear her lungs out of her chest and stomp them under his boots.

“Nagisa?”

He looks swiftly down at the floor and I think, he knew. He knew who she was. Because he is horrified and scared, but not surprised.

“Is that a confession?” Kalm is asking Amakata.

Amakata—Izumi Grey, whoever she is—spits blood out onto the tiles. “The bastard deserved to die, but I’m not the one who killed him.”

“Cyrus Feller was a genius!” one the militia shouts, a young man with a nasally, pedantic voice. “He was philanthropist! He made enormous strides in—.”

“Cyrus Feller was a butcher and a pedophile!” Amakata shouts over him, eyes burning so brightly she could be a droid herself. “And the only thing he ever made strides in was destroying people’s lives!”

Nagisa whimpers, and I reach for him reflexively. Does anyone know, I wonder, that Cyrus Feller’s personal Hazuki droid is in the room with us? That there could truly be no more perfect a witness of his cruelties?

Nagisa says nothing, and I follow his lead. While she is hauled away, the Militia closing ranks around her, I am sure Amakata gives him a small nod. She won’t betray him; I can tell from the set
of her jaw and the angry lines between her eyes.

---

The news that one of the senior medics has been taken away in vacuum cuffs spreads across the Platform like a bacterial infection, whispers mutating into rumors: that she’s a droid, a Kassadian spy, that she had killed her own orderlies in an escape attempt. It also appears to be well-known that the four of us had witnessed the arrest, and we are suddenly much more popular than I am comfortable with. I am spinning through a galaxy of shock, and all I can give are stuttering yes and no answers, and half the time I don’t even know if I’m right. All I want is a chance to be alone with my thoughts, or alone with Nagisa.

I get the latter a few minutes before midnight, when the two of us finally retreat to our Ob deck, which seems colder than usual. Nagisa must see me shiver, because he wraps himself around me, the droid heat of his body soaking into mine.

“This is crazy,” I say into the top of his head. “This is absolutely insane.”

He kisses the side of my neck. “Yeah.”

I pull back far enough to make eye contact. His gaze flickers away from me a few times, but eventually comes back and holds steady.

“You knew Amakata from before, didn’t you?”

He bites his lip. “I knew her when she was Izumi. I told you that a doctor used to come in every other week to do my maintenance.”

“That was Amakata?”

He nods. “I liked her—she would stay longer than she was paid for sometimes, to keep me company. And then one day she showed up when she wasn’t scheduled to. I think…I think she was searching the house. I’m not sure who she really was, but she definitely wasn’t just a doctor.”

“She killed Feller? You saw her do it?”

He slithers out of my grasp and paces halfway to the Ob window. “Maybe? I mean, I don’t…don’t really remember.” He grinds his palm into the side of his head, like he’s trying to scrape a memory loose. “It’s like…like it was a vid that I walked out in the middle of.”

“Maybe she erased your memory?” I suggest without much enthusiasm. Even if she is a droid specialist, she would have needed a great deal of equipment to perform a core-wipe, and not the sort any private citizen would have at their home, even one as wealthy as Cyrus Feller. Besides, if she was going to erase Nagisa’s memories, why not erase any evidence that she’d ever known him at all? Why just erase the act itself?

“Was it just a coincidence that you two got assigned to the same Platform?”

Nagisa shakes his head. “About two weeks after my master’s death, some dickhead in a uniform came to ‘collect’ me.”

“To…to decommission you?” I ask, wincing as I use the euphemism. To kill you. To tear you to scrap. Just the thought makes me sick with fear and also deliriously angry.

“Probably to re-sell me. I’m too valuable to be decommissioned.” He says it without pride. I
suppose that when your value was based on how much a wealthy Elite would pay for you, the term loses most of its meaning. I hold him closer to me.

“Amakata showed up again. She looked…different. Her hair was shorter and a different color and I think she’d had a skin augment done. She used to be a lot darker than she is now.

“She didn’t let the guy take me—she said she could get me a posting on a Confederation platform. She was really insistent—showed the guy ID that said she was a military doctor.”

_Faking credentials_, Commander Kalm had said.

Nagisa rubs his hands up and down his arms and across his chest, like he’s feeling to make sure everything is still there. “You said I started saying weird stuff to Miho when my core was damaged, like…I could ruin her?”

I remember the blank eyes and crazy grin and shudder. “Yeah.”

Nagisa’s mouth is tight, brows knotted inward, leaning forward under the pressure of his worry. “I guess…I guess that was just because I know she killed him? Or did I know other stuff?” He digs his nails into his arms. “I wonder, if I took my core out—.”

“Wha— No!”

Nagisa smiles, a quick flicker of assurance. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to actually do it. I’m just wondering, you know, hypothetically.” He comes back across to me and leans into my chest. I wrap him in my arms again, although I’m not sure who is holding who up anymore. “I can’t believe they found her. I can’t believe they sent the Militia here. How did they even get jurisdiction?”

“I suppose it depends on who is funding them.”

It is a fair question.

My mother’s words echo through my memory, _you shouldn’t trust that woman._

Could my mother have..? No, that is absolutely absurd. Not even my father has enough influence to send an entire company of the SCM onboard a Confederacy space station. He’d had enough trouble with one civilian doctor.

--

I never had trouble sleeping in Sky City. The environmental system in my room had been designed to perfectly regulate the temperature and oxygen balance and firmness of the bed, and on the off-chance I did experience insomnia, it would release a dose of gaseous sleep-aid, fast-acting and absolutely reliable. Even without all of that, what had I had to trouble my sleep? The only negative emotion the augment ever let me really feel was boredom, with the occasional flash of free-floating anxiety, the knowledge that all was not as it should be. Maybe irritation at my father, impatience with my mother. Before Nagisa, the most rebellious thing I’d ever done was signing up for the Confederacy without conferring with my parents.

Here, the beds are lumpy and our berth fluctuates between drafty and suffocatingly warm, and the only sleep-aid is the contraband whiskey Raik and Gou occasionally barter from a shady officer. And my thoughts are never still.

I had been sure that Dr. Amakata was more than she appeared, and that she and Nagisa had known
each other. But I never would have guessed she was an assassin, at the very least a murderer. That sounds even more outlandish than spy.

And she’d wanted my family’s files. Why? All my father and Cyrus Feller had in common were their Elite statuses and lack of empathy. My father is the chairman of the Human’s First Alliance, and Feller had been well known for donating to droid’s rights groups. They’d never have gotten along at cocktail parties. And further, why is Amakata so obsessed with my augment? Why would a wanted murderer hiding on a space station be so concerned about the health of one random recruit? It must all fit together somehow, I just can’t see it.

--

One thing is for certain—I need to find a way to speak to Amakata.

“Absolutely not,” says the officer on duty at the prison block the next morning. Amakata has an entire block of the brig to herself, guarded in alternating shifts. A meteor shower between the Platform and Earth has slowed the Militia’s departure for around thirty-six hours. “She’s a murder suspect.”

“Yeah, but she is also my doctor,” I say. “I need to ask her a medical question concerning, my, uh…health.”

All I get is a glare and a, “Fuck off.”

“Good try, Rei,” Nagisa says on our way back. I’m pretty sure he’s joking.

--

“I’ve got to find a solution within the next day and a half,” I say later, when the two of us have installed ourselves in Rin’s berth. “We’ll have no chance once they transport her to earth. Not even an Elite will have access to her after that.”

“Here’s a question.” Gou is seated once again in the wheelchair that Rin no longer needs but has failed to return to the med bay. “Why do you care?”

I frown at her.

“She’s medic, she helped you with your augment, blah, blah, blah, she saved your life, but what is there to figure out? She killed a dude and ran away to space. End of story.”

“Not even that rare of a story,” Rin agrees. He is rubbing at the line of inflamed skin at his hip, where prosthesis meets flesh.

*I just want to know,* is what I should tell them, but I can’t explain my confusion or suspicions of Amakata without explaining where they came from.

*But why can’t you tell them?*

The voice in my head is back, and for once it might be right. My first instinct is always to lie, to conceal anything that could potentially be dragged out and used against me. I have not told any of them what I had learned on Aurora, not even Nagisa.

“Could you call Haruka and Makoto?”

Rin looks up from poking at his leg. “Huh? Why?”
I twist my fingers together, a habit I have picked up from Nagisa. “I have something to tell all of you. It—it’s not—.” I clear my throat. “It’s nothing of great relevance to anyone besides myself, but I’d still like all of you to know.”

There are six of us, and together we barely fit inside Rin’s berth. Gou has folded up the wheelchair and spilled over to sit on Nitori’s cot with Haruka, and Makoto stands with his back against the door. I sit on the end of Rin’s bed, and Nagisa wedges himself between the nightstand and the bathroom door.

“Let me guess,” Gou says. “You’re pregnant and Amakata’s the father.”

I shoot her a quelling look and fold my hands in my lap.

“You all know about my emotional augment, of course—.”

“Yeah, we almost had to kill you over it.” Rin nudges me in the thigh with his human foot.

I scoot until I am out of kicking range. “Yes, well. The erosion of my augment did not begin naturally.”

I tell them about my last night on Aurora where, held in the fragile bubble of our vacation house, surrounded by wilds of the ocean and land, my mother had revealed she wasn’t human. I tell them about the accident, and about Amakata insisting on my records, and my mother’s claim that the augment should not be causing me pain.

Outwardly, I maintain the picture of calm, sitting propped against the berth wall, arms draped comfortably on my knees. Inside I am a meteor shower, a lightning-struck tower. Part of me is panicked, screaming that I am making the worst possible mistake an Elite can—giving away free information, corrupted data that could destroy my family’s carefully maintained reputation. And worse, I’m giving it to Lowlanders. Lowlanders with gang connections.

A deeper part of me—one that struggles beneath the steady pulses of fear and violent shame—doesn’t care.

When I’m finished, Gou and Rin openly stare at me, wearing the exact same expression. Makoto and Haruka are looking at the floor. Nagisa propels himself across the berth and grabs me by the shoulders.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had a droid mom?” His voice is magnified in the tight space. He collapses forward, knees hitting the edge of Rin’s cot, wrapping his arms tight around me. “I can’t believe it.” My arms go automatically to circle his waist, realizing as they do that this is the closest we have ever been with the others present.

“God, Rei,” Gou grunts. “It’s like, all droids all the time with you.”

I’m starting to agree. Everything does seem to come back to droids. Perhaps the son and heir of the chairman of the Human’s First Alliance can expect nothing less.

“Now you see why I have to talk to Amakata. My mother told me the augment will disperse on its own—I don’t need surgery. I’m starting to believe she might be right.” I take a steadying breath. “I haven’t felt any pain from it in weeks.” Nagisa kisses me on the side of the head, like he’s aiming for the augment. My cheeks burn, but I don’t feel the usual embarrassment at the idea we are being watched. These are my squadmates. My friends. We are not in Upland.
Half an hour later, Makoto and I walk back to our berth. Makoto is smiling, head bowed.

“Thanks, Rei,” he says.

“Hmm? For what?”

The smile widens, his eyes shining, cheeks dimpling. “Thank you for trusting us. I realize how hard for you it is.”

I shrug. What lies beneath the stifled emotions of the augment and the indoctrinated imprints of loyalty and shame is a creature I barely recognize. At the same time, they feel intimately familiar, like I am gazing at myself in a mirror after decades of being surrounded by nothing but blank walls.

There is a sensation in my chest, a thawing, a slow motion slide of melt water in my veins.

Chapter End Notes

Godddd the Amakata reveal has been a long time in coming. I've been looking forward to that scene for awhile.

From now on, things is going to get Real and stay Real. Brace yourselves.
Hey, welcome to February! I don't know how it got here; someone must have left the door open.

This chapter structure is a little strange. You'll see what I mean.

In other news, Some of Us has reached 1,000 kudos! I feel like I need to make a toast, or something.

I sleep well that night.

Despite having divulged dangerous secrets, despite having opened up a vulnerable avenue of attack, I am remarkably light when I wake the next morning. It’s like I have jettisoned an enormous weight I hadn’t even known I was carrying around.

And as it turns out, there can be benefits to telling your friends about your problems.

At breakfast Gou slithers up and drapes her arm across my shoulders.

“Um, good morning,” I say.

“Mhm.” Holding up a fist, she twirls her wrist and unfurls her fingers one at a time. “Don’t let anyone say I never did nothing for you.”

In the center of her palm are two round, flesh-colored patches. They look like birth-control patches. “Um…I don’t think Nagisa and I need those.”

“Thank god. We definitely don’t want either of you breeding.” She slides into the seat beside me. “It’s a microphone link-jack, smart ass. You get one to Amakata, and she can talk to you on a closed-network. She doesn’t even need to raise her voice more than a whisper—it works on vibrations.”

I pick up the two tiny scraps of latex, holding them wonderingly between my thumb and forefinger. “That’s…Gou, that’s amazing. Where did you get them?”

“Raik. Where else?”

That meant two things: one, that it would definitely work as advertised, and two, it had been obtained illegally.

“By the way,” Gou adds. “You owe me a hundred and sixty credits.”

I wave aside the number. “Thank you, Gou—I don’t, I don’t know what to say.”

“Yeah, great.” Rin takes a swig of coffee. He’s been sitting with us at mealtimes recently, rather than with Samezuka. He hasn’t given us a reason and none of us have asked, but if I had to I would guess Captain Lewlin has something to do with it. “That’s totally terrific, except she’s still in the
brig, and we’re out here.”

“They have to feed her at some point.” Nagisa points out. “All you fleshy bastards have to eat.”

Gou flicks him in the center of the forehead. “Not all of us can live on cock alone.”

He aims a bite at her fingers. “Can’t we just put it in her food, or something?”

Rin laughs, but Nagisa does not appear to be joking.

I blink a couple times. The idea is so incredibly low-tech that it never would have occurred to me.

“Who has kitchen duty tonight?”

No one on our squad does and neither, Rin discovers, do any of the Samezuka Squad. Jinny has tomorrow night’s shift, but by then Amakata will be on a prison transport back to Earth. Our window of opportunity will be closed.

Gou takes one of the patches back from me, passing it from finger to finger. “We’ll just go make some new friends, then.”

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After breakfast we look up the shift schedule for everyone’s least favorite activity; two hours spent in the Platform’s poorly ventilated cave of a kitchen, stirring enormous tureens of soup and laying out slabs of mysterious meat on trays. Nagisa always complains that if he doesn’t eat, he shouldn’t have to work to feed everyone else, but so far his name has still shown up on the duty log every week.

Tonight’s shift is covered by three Spacer recruits: a girl named Gibbons and a pair of siblings named Alvarez. Gou and I corner the brother in the rec room—the younger and softer looking of the two. He has a narrow face, small mouth, and hair that curls in at the ends.

Gou gets right in his face. “How about trading kitchen shifts, Albany?”

The Spacer cringes back. “Alvarez.”

“What now?”

”My name’s not Albany.” He swallows. “It’s Alvarez.” I know he recognizes us—the Iwatobi Squad Elite and the recruit who got her brother blown up on their first mission.

“Right. Sorry.” Gou blows her bangs out of her eyes. “Alvarez. Friend. How about switching kitchen shifts with one of us?”

Alvarez blinks. His eyes are watering. Allergies, or maybe Gou makes him want to cry. “W-Why do you want the late shift?”

“I’m a masochist. Or—he’s a masochist.” She gives me a nudge. “So trade with him.”

I try to look imposing and honest, but I mostly just scrunch my face up a bit.

“What…” Alvarez sticks his chin out in tentative obstinacy. “What do I get if I switch with you?”

Gou leans forward and narrows her eyes. “You really gonna ask me that question?”

The boy sneers, pulling from some hidden reserve of nerves. “You don’t scare me, Matsuoka.
What’ll you give me?"

We should have brought Raik. She’s the one crazy enough to back up threats.

Gou drums her fingers across her chin. “Hmm…okay, if you switch, I’ll…” Her eyes flick to me.

“Rei will blow you.”

“What?!”

Alvarez and I release simultaneous groans of disgust.

“Why me?” I demand.

“Rei, let me introduce you to a little concept known as taking one for the team.”

“I don’t want a blowjob from him,” Alvarez snaps.

Gou sighs. “Well, if I have to—.”

“Um—.” I grab Gou by the shoulder and yank her toward me, turning our backs on Alvarez. “Excuse us for a second.”

We really should have discussed what is on and off the table as far as bartering options go.

“Why have we skipped directly to sexual favors?” I hiss.

Gou shrugs. “It’s a renewable resource and basically all we’ve got going for us.”

“Or, I don’t know—money, maybe?”

Her lips form a little O. “Riiiiight. Cool. Let’s do that instead.” She turns back to Alvarez. “You like money?”

“Yeah…” He looks suspicious. “Who doesn’t?”

Gou snaps her fingers. “Pay the man, Ryugazaki.”

I resist rolling my eyes as I take out my tablet and copy down Alvarez’s bank code.

We haggle a little, but after a bargain is struck the plan is set. I’ll work the kitchen shift tonight, during which I will find a way to slip a tiny and very expensive bit of tech into the prisoner’s meal. I just have to hope that I’ll be able to get close enough to the tray, and that Amakata will know what to do with the patch when she finds it, and that the cloak in the device is as good as Raik has promised. I very much hope that Amakata’s information is relevant, because if I am caught, it will likely be much worse than being thrown out of the Confederation. I’ll be imprisoned, and no Elite status can save me from that.

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So many things can go wrong, but the initial stages of the plan go incredibly smoothly, not counting the grease burn and two cuts on my hands I manage to gather. About two hours into my shift I overhear the brig officer ordering a tray prepared for that fake medic bitch. I palm the patch and slip it into a fold of a rough paper napkin. It’s a clumsy plan, but that’s why I predict it will work. The Militia will not expect anyone to attempt to make contact with Amakata while she is still on board, and certainly not some recruits whom on paper have only ever interacted with her in an official capacity.
After the tray vanishes it’s a matter of keeping calm until I am released. Makoto has agreed to
spend the night elsewhere, to give me a chance to ask whatever questions I need to.

I stand in the center of the berth, lights set to a low blue, and I wonder how my life could possibly
have come to this. How I have gone from a bored, pampered Elite with the emotional range of a
shot glass, to a Recon recruit who knows four different ways to kill a Kassadian with a knife, who
spends a good deal of time with his tongue in various orifices of a Hazuki droid. Who is about to
violate about six different major laws in order to interview a murderer.

Ah, well.

I slap the patch to the back of my neck so the edge of it hits my uplink. Provided Amakata applies
hers as well, it should connect us mentally on a network independent from the Platform’s
communications. The connection quality will not be very good, but it should work.

Fifteen minutes of waiting and I begin to doubt. What if the food hasn’t reached her, what if the
patch had been discovered or shaken out along the way? What if she doesn’t know what it’s for?
What if—

Feedback whines in my head and vibrates down my spine in a hot crackle. A side effect of using an
unsecured network—connecting to them is never particularly comfortable.

“—Hello?”

Amakata’s voice echoes distantly, as if from down a long, narrow corridor.

“Dr. Amakata. Or…perhaps I should call you Izumi Grey?”

A few moments of silence. “Yes.”

“This is Rei Ryugazaki.”

Her laugh hisses down my spine. “I should have guessed. Hello, Rei. I hope you’re well?”

“Better than you, at least.”

“Oh, I don’t know. As cells go, this is one of the more comfortable ones I’ve spent time in.”

I am unnerved by how little she sounds like she’s joking.

“I assume you didn’t go to all the trouble of smuggling me an illegal link-jack to ask me how I’m
doing?”

I sit down on the corner of my cot, then immediately get back to my feet. No way I can sit still for
this. “I have some questions.”

“…”That makes sense.” Her breath sounds like static. “I guess you want to know if I’m guilty?”

“I—wait, what?”

“Whether or not I killed Cyrus Feller? Is that one of your questions?”

“No. I don't care about that.” From what I’ve heard, the bastard deserved it. “What I want to know
concerns myself and my family. I want to know why you needed my family’s health files, and why
you took such an interest in me in the first place.”
Amakata says nothing for several seconds, the crackling connection rippling in and out of my head.

“Well, to begin with, your emotional augment is fascinating. I’ve never seen one so intricate before, or so controlling. I’ve also never seen an instance of successful erosion before.”

I lean back against the door of my berth, feeling my pulse in my sweaty palms. “So my mother was right. I’ve never needed to have the augment removed at all.”

“That’s correct.” Is that remorse I hear in her voice, or simply feedback? “I’m sorry I lied to you, Rei. I just needed…” She lapsed into silence.

“You were saying, doctor? I think you at least owe me an explanation, considering you are the reason I’ve lived in fear for the last four months. And almost died of White Fever.”

“No,” Amakata says quickly. “If your family doctor had repaired the augment like he’d meant to, the erosion would have stopped. You’d have been alive but still brainwashed. I never lied about that.”

Yes, but if you had not been so insistent on me obtaining my medical files, I would never have revealed to my father that I knew of the augment’s existence. He would never have tried to repair it in the first place. I keep this to myself. I have not contacted her to argue blame.

“Regardless,” I say. “I would like to know.”

“I… I don’t know where to start. I have never told this story before. But fine. How much do you know about Nagisa?”

I turn and begin another circuit of the tiny room. “What do you mean?”

“You know he is a Hazuki droid. You know he used to belong to Cyrus Feller.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know that he is nearly eight percent over the legal limit of human components?”

“Yes, I knew that.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered how that came about?”

“I’m… not sure I follow.”

“Do you think it was a mistake? A glaring oversight on the behalf of the Hazuki manufacturers?”

“I doubt that. I suppose I thought Feller must have bribed someone.”

Amakata laughs. “Yes, he did. On a scale more grand than you could possibly imagine. Cyrus Feller was the chief financial backer in a group that specializes in the production and distribution of illegally modified droids. They make droids that are five, six, seven percent over the legal limit. The highest they’ve ever gone is ten, although that project never reached its conclusion.

“Of course, in order to do this they need organic human material—organs, brain matter, epidermis—more than they could buy from private donors or obtain from donation banks. So they used living humans. Namely, living humans they kidnapped off the streets.”

I freeze in my thirty-sixth circuit around the room. “You can’t be serious.”

“And you can’t be surprised.”
I want to yell, I want to tell her of course I’m surprised. Of course I’m shocked and horrified that anyone whose parts have ended up attached to a droid was not a willing donor. And a few months ago it would have been true.

“What does any of this have to do with me?” I ask. It’s awful, yes, but not directly relevant at the moment. “Is it because of my mother? She’s over the legal limit too—.”

“Your mother is part of it, but she isn’t where my interest ultimately lies. But hold on before you start asking questions. I want you to hear the whole story.”

As you and Miss Matsuoka may have guessed, I’m not from Upland. I haven’t always been an Elite. I’m not technically even one now. Miho Amakata is, but Izumi Grey is still a dirty brothel-brat from Broken Bridge. I could give you the whole story—my mother was a whore, I never knew my father, I was a good kid in a shitty situation. Maybe when I write my memoir that’s how I’ll spin it, but for right now let’s just say that I was a smart, ambitious girl who very much wanted to get out of Lowland.

There are only three real ways to do that. Marry into money, join a gang and get promoted up the ladder, or somehow come up with the credits to buy yourself into one of the good schools. But it always comes down to money.

I wasn’t about to become the trophy wife of some Elite millionaire—I had already seen enough of what Upland men did to women when they got them alone, to where no cameras could follow. That’s how I got involved with Lotus. No men at all, the promise of a gun in my hand and violence that I could control. A girl named Sofie I had grown up with at the brothel had some connections. She got us in on the bottom level.

Most of the jobs we took were small time. Running deliveries, dealing to Elite kids who came to Lowland raves to slum it for an evening. Sofie and I made enough cash to move into our own place, and life was good for awhile. I had enough credits to begin taking classes at one the Indigo Academy’s outreach schools—the pet project of a do-gooder Elite attempting to ease her conscience. For awhile I was almost convinced that I did not need to become an Elite to be happy.

But then Sofie went out one day and never came back. Vanished right off the street. Lotus looked into it, but we were too small-time for them to waste resources finding her. By that time I had been accepted into a fast-track program for particularly gifted Lowland students, working in a medical lab. About eight months after Sofie disappeared, a professor from the Indigo Academy came to give a presentation about…something. I forget what. That’s not important. What is was that he had a droid assistant with him, and when he was handing out data-cards, he got close enough for me to see his face.

Let me backtrack a moment and tell you about Sofie’s eyes. To this day I have still never seen anything like them. Unaugmented, they were a grey so dark they were almost silver, ringed with a circle of blue. I would have known her eyes anywhere. And there they were, staring out of a face of a pretty redhead boy half a decade younger than her.

I went a little crazy after that.

When I finally earned enough credits to transfer into the Indigo Academy proper, I chose droids as my specialization, rather than the microsurgery major I had intended. I learned everything about them that I could—how they were made, their history, where their material components came from, how they differed from standard AI’s, who oversaw their design and distribution. When I
wasn’t in class or in the lab I was researching Sofie’s disappearance, shoving her picture at the Militia and the Confederacy police. No one cared about some gangbanger whore’s daughter from Broken Bridge, especially not a dead one.

I was learning a lot, becoming more and more proficient, but I also wasn’t bothering to do any of my coursework. I didn’t have time for it. I lost most of my scholarships after the first year, and to continue on at the Academy I took a few more jobs with Lotus. I didn’t care about my degree anymore, but I needed to be registered as a student to use their library and server and have access to their labs. After a couple of months, I found something that paid even better than working for the gangs, and involved significantly less risk of bodily harm.

There are an astonishing number of people, in Lowland and Up, who are willing to pay to keep their droid ownership hidden. I became a sort of back-alley doctor, servicing Hazuki droids off-the-record to save their owners from ever needing to bring them in for official maintenance. It wasn’t a particularly reputable job, but it was either that or become a swimsuit model. I saw a lot of strange things that month, and a lot of awful ones. Not everyone is as kind to droids as you are to Nagisa, Rei, nor do they see them as people.

I kept constantly on the lookout for any more pieces of Sofie, as well as any droids who showed signs of being over the legal limit. After enough time spent with AI you begin to learn the signs to watch for: personality quirks, ticks, the tendency to over-think. You’ve noticed, I’m sure, that Nagisa twists his fingers when he’s nervous, bites his lip when he’s stressed. Sometimes when I arrived to do his maintenance he would be jittery, anxious for conversation, happy to see me. I had never known a droid to show much interest in anyone besides their master.

But I’m getting ahead of myself again.

About a year and a half after I’d begun working on Hazukis, I was approached by a man in an Upland bar. He was so nondescript that it made him stand out—brown suit, brown hair, an unremarkable face. In a bar full of color-augmented skin and lizard eyes, he was an anomaly.

He told me that he knew who I was and knew my situation. He had an offer for me, a way to concentrate my efforts and pool my information with those in similar situations. In truth he was inviting me to join a group who called themselves the Undertow, made up of people who had lost loved ones to the human traffickers. They were all as dedicated to locating the source of the illegal droids as I was. Up until then, I had been working with the scant information I could gather on the public net, much of it conjecture and forcing pieces together until they fit.

When I joined Undertow, my research took off. Connections emerged, patterns formed. I was highly valued in the group, because of my medical and bio-engineering experience, access to the Indigo Academy’s materials, and my long client list of possible owners of illegally-moded Hazukis. I could get close to the traffickers.

And I did get close. Totally by accident.

Cyrus Fellers hired me to maintain his Hazuki, the one he wanted to keep out of the public eye. I added him to my list of suspects more out of habit than out of any particularly suspicious behavior; he had covered his tracks remarkably well.

But the deeper I dug, the more apparent it became. Cyrus Fellers, brilliant scientist, CEO, philanthropist and droid rights activist, was our man. He funded a massive underground organization that specialized in making Hazuki droids more and more human, and they did this by kidnapping humans no one would miss and stripping them for parts.
I was determined to prove it. I didn’t just want to shut them down—I wanted to destroy them. I wanted Cyrus Fellers to feel everything I had felt in the moment I had seen Sofie’s beautiful eyes looking at me from someone else’s face.

The planning took awhile. I needed to wait for one of my maintenance visits to coincide with one of Feller’s absences. When he was not at home, security was lax. I spoke with the leader of Undertow, and he gave me a chip that would automatically upload Fellers’ entire hard drive to the net. As soon as the data hit, there would be no going back. We’d have everything—their methods, financial backers, victims, the list of people who had purchased an illegal droid.

My only regret in all of it was that when the conspiracy was exposed and the existence of the illegal droids made public, they would most likely be decommissioned. It gave me pangs of conscience, but I told myself it was necessary to make sure no more humans were torn apart to create perfect, shiny sex dolls for the rich. They were never meant to exist in the first place, I told myself.

But why did they exist?

I had asked myself this again and again. Why bother? What was the point? What was so insufficient about a legal droid? The enhanced models weren’t any more beautiful or sexually proficient. In fact, the average droids’ focus tended to be better and their performance more consistent. They didn’t need as much affection to remain healthy.

After all of my research, I began to develop a theory. For a man like Fellers, it was not enough to enslave something that could not understand its situation. A typical droid is still partially human, it’s true, but it is programmed to enjoy whatever it has to do, to submit gladly to whatever abuse its master subjects it to. Past 30% human, the reliability of that programming begins to break down. Human minds are obstinate—they crave new experiences and conversations and connections. Overly-human droids have enough spark to them to resent their situation, or at least to not be completely content.

A man like Fellers needs that in his slave. He needs to dominate something with rebellion inside it. A human slave would have been best, no doubt, but then how could he have had it crafted to his precise specifications?

Anyway. The day of the operation, I performed my maintenance on Nagisa as usual, all the while trying to convince myself that destroying him and all the other illegal droids was justified. It was wrong, I knew that—I had studied enough droid physiology to know just how conscious Hazuki models were—but I was bent on my revenge, and I wouldn’t give it up for anything. And certainly not for morality.

After the session, I headed for the mainframe instead of the exit. I should have known something was wrong the moment I found the door unlocked, but I was so confident in my competence that I just counted it as a stroke of good luck.

Still, by the time the third firewall came down without a whisper of opposition, I began to get nervous. To this day, I don’t know what went wrong. The information we received might have been bad, or maybe I had tripped some silent alarm. It’s possible, even probable, that we’d had spy in our midst; Fellers’ rates and benefits would have been astronomical compared to Undertow’s, and not everyone was on a crusade like I was.

Four security goons flanked me. I managed to shoot one guy and break a woman’s nose with the barrel of my pistol, but I was outnumbered and I had come for a stealth mission, not a firefight. They dragged me into a cell in the basement. On my way down I caught glimpses of the facility I
had been searching for. It was all here, underneath Fellers’ mansion. He was so convinced of his invulnerability that he was willing to shit exactly where he ate.

After a few hours I was brought back up into the house. Fellers was there, in a grey suit and pink tie, wearing the same cheesy smiles he always gave the news cameras.

‘Miss Grey.’ The smile got wider and faker. ‘I am so very disappointed.’

I told him to fuck himself and he laughed at me. He said things could have been different—we could have come to some sort of agreement if only I had come to him instead of sticking my dirty Lowland nose in where it didn’t belong. He called for Nagisa—probably so he could tell him how I’d been going to sacrifice him and all the other droids—and sent his goons out of the room. I think he planned on executing me himself, but obviously that isn’t what happened. He got overconfident, and now he’s dead.

After he was gone, I didn’t have many choices. Everyone on that floor would have heard the gunshot, and all of the security team knew who I was. Izumi Grey, the doctor who had killed the millionaire.

It was Nagisa who got me out. He knew the house better than anyone. I promised him I would come back for him, that under no circumstances would I allow him to be decommissioned. I don’t think he believed me.

I tried returning to my organization, but Undertow’s leader was out on assignment, and no one else was inclined to go to great lengths to help the woman who had failed, who had been caught.

So I dusted off one of the old ident chips I had barely used—Miho Amakata, the daughter of an Elite banker, fresh out of medical school and anxious to serve her city and her planet. I applied for work on a Platform as far away from Earth as I could get. I should have cut all my ties completely, and if I had perhaps I would not be sitting in this cell now, but I found myself unable to abandon Nagisa. I got work for him as well, hacking into the server and deleting the notation that he was a droid. I got him assigned to a Recon squad, and you know the rest of that story.

And now you must be thinking, what does this have anything to do with me?

First, I want you to know that I do genuinely care about your wellbeing. That may sound laughable now, coming from a woman who was willing to sacrifice hundreds of living beings for the sake of her revenge, but it’s true. No one’s emotions should be manipulated to favor another’s ends.

Secondly, I know that the production of over-the-limit droids has not stopped. This means two things—that my actions amounted to absolutely nothing, and that someone else has taken over the droids’ sale and production. I want to know who it is, and without Undertow’s resources, my only recourse is to work backward. Your mother came up in a program I designed to analyze possible matches—people who display physical or behavioral anomalies. When you applied to the Confederacy, I made sure that your medical care would be assigned to me. That was my plan: I was going to stop the production of illegal droids, and your family was going to lead me to them.

And…well, you know how that worked out.
I had been pacing my berth when Amakata began her story, but halfway through I had frozen in the center of the room and not moved since. I am equidistant from Makoto’s cot and my own, and when the story ends I am not sure which way to pitch as I slide slowly toward a horizontal position.

I end up flat on my back in my own cot, covering my eyes with the palms of my hands as static hisses in my ears.

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It is past midnight by the time I drift across the Platform and into Nagisa’s berth, barely giving him a chance to disengage the lock before I push my way inside. Haruka isn’t here—his cot is neatly made, scratchy synthetic wool tucked into the corners. He’s probably with Rin.

“Rei! What’s wrong?” Did you—.” Nagisa grabs for my arm like he’s afraid I’m going to topple over. I feel more like gravity will release me and I’ll drift through the ceiling and up into the abyss of space. The last time I had come in here in such a state of disquiet, I had ended up in a coma.

“What did Miho say?” Nagisa’s nails scritch at the sleeve of my jacket. “Rei?” His eyes are bright with worry; I’d rather see them bright with something else.

Catching his chin, I pull him close to me. When the kiss connects it is rougher than I intend, and I feel him flinch as my teeth sink into his bottom lip. He doesn’t pull away, just threads his fingers through my hair and groans, soft mouth opening. I’d kissed him only a few hours ago before shutting myself up in my berth, but I have traversed galaxies between then and now. It feels like I haven’t touched him in so long.

I break the kiss to nuzzle along his jaw and flushed cheeks. He sighs when I kiss his neck, yips when it becomes a bite. “Mmm…sexy.”

I nose up toward his ear, wanting to say something, anything, to let him know how much it means that I have someone I can run to when the world begins to fracture around me, but what comes out is, “My father may have commissioned my mother from a group of mass murderers.”

“I had to have been created somewhere. No legit place could have made a droid like me,” he reasons. “So, Amakata thinks your dad, Mr.-I-Will-Shove-An-Augment-In-Your-Brain-Because-You-Like-Dick, bought your mother from Fellers? She thinks he knew about the trafficking?” I nod, and he flops back against the bed, shoulders propped against the cushions and body forming a long curve, shirt riding up at his stomach. “Do you think she’s right?”

I consider very carefully before I respond. “If you had asked me three months ago, I would have said absolutely not. But now…” Now that I know my father’s self-proclaimed hatred for droids and
augments is fabricated, at the very least massively hypocritical, I am not so sure. When I had shown signs of behavior that deviated from his wishes, he had not hesitated to correct it without my knowledge or consent. When his wife had been killed, Daisuke Ryugazaki had simply had a replacement constructed—one designed to be more agreeable and easier to manage. That was the sort of man who could rationalize turning a blind eye to the systematic murder and enslavement of Sky City citizens. Especially if they were Lowlanders or criminals.

“What do you want to do?” Nagisa asks quietly, like a sudden loud noise might shatter me. Do I really seem so fragile?

“I don’t—.” I sit down on the edge of the cot, feeling the trembling threat of defeat in the pit of my stomach. “I don’t know what I can do. I—we need more time. I can’t think right now.” I press my palm into the middle of my forehead, like I can somehow push the gears of my brain into action. “It’s not like we can hope for another meteor shower. As soon as this one is over they’ll throw her into the prison ship and drag her back to Earth.”

Nagisa has gone so still that I’m not sure he’s even breathing. Then—

“Okay…but so what?” He goes on quickly before I can do more than scowl. “They bring her back to Earth, so we’ll just have to go and get her. They’re not the only ones with ships.”

I stare at him for a few shocked seconds, before I pinch the bridge of my nose, prodding at the headache pooling behind my eyes. “Are you suggesting we steal a Confederation cruiser?”

“Oh something. I don’t know—I’m not good at coming up with plans and stuff. But I can’t just abandon her, Rei! She’s the reason I’m here!”

I sit in the plaintive bio-glow of his eyes and know with eerie trepidation that I am not going to say no. I groan and bury my face in my hands. “Alright. But it doesn’t change the fact that I need more time to figure this out. The meteor shower will be over in a few hours.” I may be intelligent, but I am not a genius, or a tactician. We need a delaying tactic, and I think I know exactly who might have one.

“Damn, Ryugazaki. You planning on opening your own black market?” Raik’s hair is ruffled up like foliage and I’m pretty sure she’s naked on the other side of her berth door, but she looks wide-awake. From inside I distinctly hear the sound of voices. Several voices. All of them female and all, uh, happy.

“Do you have it or not?” I ask, infinitely awkward.

She grunts, the swell of her breasts coming into sight for a second at the edge of the door. “Hold on.”

She disappears and the door slides shut again, the voices inside rippling into giggles. Doubtless our presence has been announced. Nagisa is laughing soundlessly, eyes and cheeks glowing bright. “Orgy,” he mouths at me.

“Yes, thank you.” I cross my arms, then quickly un-cross them and let them hang at my sides. “I gathered that.”

His chuckles become audible for just a second and he sways into me, grabbing hold of my arm. Is just being around people having sex enough to trigger the drug-response? Wireless arousal? How would that feature even be programmed?
The door slides back open half a foot and Raik reappears. She holds up a palm, a tiny black data-chip resting in the center. “This is all I got on short notice. You want something more heavy duty, you’ll have to wait until morning. You know what it is?” The dubious tone is slightly insulting.

“I may not be a hacker,” I say. “But I know a bomb when I see one.”

Nagisa’s hand tightens on my arm. “Bomb? Like—BOOM?”

“A cyberbomb.” Raik flicks at an itch on the underside of her chin. “I don’t trust either of you with explosives.”

Carefully, I peel the chip up out of her palm. Her skin is slick with what I fervently hope is sweat. I reach for my tablet to set up a credit transfer, but Raik shakes her head, bangs stringy and damp. “I’ll put it on your tab, Elite.”

“Thank you, Raik. You’re an incredible—.”

“Don’t hurt yourself. I’m gonna charge you interest, of course.”

“Of course.”

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I spend most of the night with Nagisa, but not in the capacity that his programming and my hormones would like. The hanger is guarded by a skeleton crew after midnight—not much point in securing ships that can’t be started without access codes—and we steal from shadow to shadow like agents in a spy vid, keeping our footsteps as light as we can on the flimsy metal platforming.

Considering their outfits, the Militia’s ship is incredibly tasteful. An unvarnished grey, flat-nosed, and—most importantly—old enough to have an exterior port. Nagisa keeps watch as I open up the panel and plug in Raik’s bomb. We leave it to do its work.

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By the time I get back to my berth it is nearing 3 a.m. and Makoto has returned, curled around himself in a cocoon of sheet and blanket, reduced to a tuft of thick brown hair emerging at one end. I undress and lie down, but it’s up for debate whether or not I actually sleep.

My brain never stops racing, even as I fade into muddied dreams of embroidered coats and blood-spattered white tiles. By the time my alarm wakes me, I am even more exhausted than when I fell asleep.

“Don’t bother,” Makoto grunts from his cot, face half-buried in his pillow. He holds up his tablet. “Training’s cancelled.”

I sit up straight. “For everyone?”

“Just us.” He scrubs his eyes, his cheeks puffy from sleep. “Coach Sasabe is ill, apparently.”

I pull out my own tablet and open the flash, briefly scanning the automated message. It’s true that Sasabe had not looked entirely well since we overheard him arguing with Amakata, but he’d seemed more distracted and tense than sick.

I swipe the dismiss icon with a knuckle and drop the tablet onto my cot. “Perfect. Now I don’t have to skip it.”
I vanish into the washroom before Makoto has a chance to ask questions.

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I don’t go to the mess hall. I have no desire to discuss my conversation with Amakata with anyone; my thoughts are already in chaos, I have no desire to stir them further. Besides, there is too much risk of being overheard. I go to the ob deck instead and stare out into bottomless space. I have changed into my training blacks out of habit, and in the reflection of the window I am just a pale suggestion of a face, legs and arms swallowed up by the void.

By now the Militia has most likely discovered the enormous hole that the cyberbomb has chewed in their navigation system, and if Raik’s device has done its work it will look like just a standard virus, transferable from any unfamiliar network. Easily blamed on the Platform’s low-budget uplinks. Still, this will only save me a day at the most. I have to think quickly.

Despite my promise to Nagisa, a part of me remains that wants to do nothing. Amakata, or Izumi Gray, played a dangerous game and lost. The Elite in me insists that she is only getting what she deserves for dragging my family into her revenge. Why risk my life and my position in the Confederation for someone who had only intended to use me?

But the other parts, the ones that have spent the last few months wrestling the Elite into a steel cage and slamming the door shut, insist that Nagisa is right. She is the reason we met. If it hadn’t been for Amakata and her vendetta, Nagisa would still be the sex slave of a murderer and I would have readily submitted to a new augment when the old one had begun to erode.

Light steps clatter behind me, and I see a trace of a smile on my reflection. “I was wondering when you would—.”

I turn and hold out a hand, but I freeze at once because it’s silver hair that is approaching, not gold, and a thoughtful frown instead of a radiant smile. Nitori looks at my hand like he’s worried it might be radioactive. He doesn’t come any closer even after I drop it.

“Are you lost?” I ask, which sounds abrupt even though I hadn’t meant it to be. I have just never seen anyone other than the Iwatobi Squad on this ob deck before. Having Nitori here feels like an imposition on my privacy as much as if he had bypassed the sensor on my berth door.

Nitori ignores my rudeness. “Ryugazaki. I want…I want to talk about Rin.”

I’m not surprised; Rin is the only thing Nitori and I have in common. “What about him?”

He is fiddling endlessly with the cuffs of his jacket, worrying with a thread of Combat red that has come loose. Shouldn’t he be in training with the rest of his squad?

He realizes what he’s doing and forces himself to strict attention, back straight and eyes forward. I half expect him to salute me.

“Rin can’t swim—he can barely walk. The Confederation won’t pay for a prosthesis that works.”

“Yes, I know. I was there.” I chased him down while you hung back. “I saw it.”

“No, you haven’t,” Nitori says sharply. “You haven’t seen him. I live with him. He’s barely spoken two words to me in the last week, or to anyone else on the squad. It’s like he’s blaming us for—.”

He sucks in a watery breath. “He barely sleeps at night, and at training he won’t even look at us —.”
“He still goes to training?” Captain Lewlin had very clearly said he would be transferred to a clerical position. The whole mess hall had heard it.

Nitori’s cheeks suck in and his mouth twists. “Captain Lewlin says that until they find a recruit to replace him, he’s expected to show up to training with the rest of us.” His hands are shaking, gripped by the anger that he isn’t allowing on his face. “He makes Rin sit there and watch the rest of us swim and—.” He bites off the end, raising an arm like he wants to swipe it across his eyes, but forces it down before he can.

“I...I didn’t know,” I say. In truth, I hadn’t thought much about it—over the last few days I have been completely consumed by Amakata and the Militia.

“He doesn’t want to let you or his sister see what this is doing to him,” Nitori says, “But he doesn’t...doesn’t bother hiding anything from me.”

“He thinks we’ll blame ourselves,” I say.

Tears tremble at the corners of Nitori’s voice, chase his words like raindrops down a glass window. “Yeah. Especially since it’s your fault.”

My pulse pounds hard in my ears. “Excuse me?”

“You’re the one...if you hadn’t—.” His voice cracks and fury leaks into his eyes. “He was swimming with your squad!”

“I know that!” My shout gets swallowed up by the high curve of the ob deck ceiling, stretched out to nothing. “You think I don’t—.” Gou had said all the same things when she had attacked me in the med bay. While I had been standing in the corridor and Nitori had been floating unconscious in an operating tank, willingly giving up his own blood to save Rin.

“You’re in love with him,” I say unthinkingly.

Nitori chokes and throws his arms out in a wide arc, like he can force my words away from him and back down my throat. “Shut up! That doesn’t matter! That isn’t—.” He sniffs. “That isn’t relevant.”

“Nitori—.” I take an unconscious step closer and he takes one back. I stop. What would I do if he let me close to him? Hug him? Tell him everything will be alright? I would not even know where to begin. “What do you want me to do?”

“You’re an Elite!” he says, breaths wild, spitting it out like an accusation.

“I don’t understand what you—.”

“You have money! Can’t you get him an augment that works?”

For a harsh moment I am stunned. I had been expecting more blame, not for him to make a credible suggestion. Even if it is one I have already considered and discarded. “Nitori, I’m an Elite, yes, but the money in the Sky City bank isn’t mine. It’s my father’s money—.”

“You’re an Elite!” Nitori repeats, and there’s a distinctive whine to his voice now, like a child insisting on the rules, even when the rules are wrong. “You can do anything you want!”

“I can’t,” I snap back, annoyed. “My father controls the Ryugazaki family credit, and he would never spend it on—.”
“On what?” Nitori makes another unstrung throwing motion with his arms. “A Lowlander?”

Yes. “On anyone who isn’t in the family.” Honestly, I am no longer confident that he would even pay for me to have a limb replaced. Not that I would ever consent to Dr. Myles’ presence anywhere near me while I'm unconscious. I’d end up brainwashed again. “I can’t help. I want to, but…” I trail off to nothing, my thoughts stalling out and sticking.

Nitori is still going on about Elite arrogance and bullshit regulations, complaints I’ve heard a hundred times before.

“Do you know where Rin is right now?” I ask, talking over him.

Nitori’s mouth works open and closed. “Y-Yeah? But that isn’t—.”

“Where?”

“In our berth, but—h-hey, where are you going?”

I’m halfway across the ob deck, feet echoing off the metal planking in time with the steady rhythm of quickly compiling images behind my eyes. The amorphous tumble of my thoughts collides with these new bits of information, and a plan begins to coalesce. It has a helpless quality to it—the inevitable fall after the arch of a jump—but I think I’ve found a way to make saving Amakata worth the risk.

I have never been more irritated with the Platform’s ban on cerebral uplinks; I am having thoughts more quickly than I can memorize them. I am trembling with potential energy by the time we reach the Combat floor, Nitori trailing behind me in a scamper. I press both hands against the berth door to wait for him, pulse throbbing in my palms. Nitori opens his eyes wide for the retinal scanner and the door slides open.

“What the—fuck!”

I get a glimpse of a hillocky landscape of blankets and a mingling cascade of red and black hair before there is a yelp and a rattle and Rin launches himself backward off of Haruka.

“Holy fucking shit, Rei!”

“I’m—I’m sorry!” My face is burning, and Nitori looks like he wants to strap on a pair of weighted space-walk boots and step off the edge of the training pool.

Rin and Haruka are both windswept, wide-eyed, and—as far as I can tell—totally naked. Rin drags a sheet across himself and gathers it around his waist. Haruka has draped a pillow across his lap, but beyond that show of modesty he doesn’t seem particularly aggrieved at having been caught with his legs wrapped around Rin’s waist. A constant spasm twitches the corner of his mouth, like he’s combating laughter and can barely manage it. He leans forward to whisper to Rin. Rin’s mouth opens in an ‘o’ of shock, red scrawled up his neck and along his cheeks. He plants a hand in the center of Haru’s chest and knocks him backward onto the mattress. “Shut it.” Then he gets up and hobbles across the berth to smack the lights on, bringing them up from a moody blue to a harsher daytime white. His eyes are glassy and the marks on his throat and underside of his chin stand out as red as his hair. I try to keep my eyes on his face, but find myself repeatedly drawn down to the perfect imprint of teeth around his left nipple.

“What the hell, Ai?” Rin snaps, looking past me. “Why aren’t you at training?”
This is as much Nitori’s berth as it is Rin’s, but he is still frozen in the threshold. His focus has zeroed in on Haruka, who has not even acknowledged his presence. But that’s just how Haruka is—he hasn’t really acknowledged mine either.

“You’re not at training either,” Nitori says dully.


Haruka tilts his head and squints an eye, as if to imply that Rin may be a bit overconfident in his assessment of his skills, but he’s grinning openly now, or as much as he ever does.

“I need to talk to you,” I say. “Both of you.” Despite my embarrassment I’m glad I did not have to waste time hunting them down separately. “And it would be—.” I lace my voice with an apology that I don’t really feel. “And the fewer people who hear this, the better.”

Rin looks bewildered for a second, before a crooked line stretches between his brows. “You can say whatever you want in front of Ai. He’s not a snitch. He won’t report you.”

I don’t share his confidence, but before I can cobble together a protest Nitori says, “It’s—it’s okay. I’ll…I’ve got to get to training anyway.”

The angry, righteous boy from the ob deck is gone, replaced by slumped shoulders and downturned gaze. It makes no sense—after his insistence on my help I had been expecting a fight, especially since Rin’s given his permission.

But then Nitori’s gaze jumps to Haruka, and I remember what it had been like to stand in the threshold of a room and watch Nagisa having sex with someone who wasn’t me.

He dips quickly into the berth, darting around me to scoop his tablet up from his cot, moving so fast the he stumbles on his way out the door. He catches himself against the jam, curling fingers the last disappearing as he vanishes around the corner.

Rin drags his fingers through his sweaty hair. “What the fuck.”

*He doesn’t know,* I realize. Somehow across the months spent on the Platform, Rin has failed to notice that his berthmate is rapturously in love with him. Haruka must have had to walk up and push his hands into Rin’s pants to make him catch on to his own interest.

Rin starts to cross his arms, letting go of his sheet and catching it again at the last minute. Is he trying to keep from offending my sensibilities? I had never known either Matsuoka, or any of the Lowlanders, to be particularly delicate about nudity. Perhaps it’s the prosthesis. “So?”

I shut the door with a tap of my finger against the sensor. “Get comfortable. Because this isn’t going to be a comfortable conversation.”

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“Rei,” Amakata’s link-jack hisses to life in my ear, hours later when I have left Rin and Haruka and returned to my berth. “I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me.”

“Hardly.” I don’t add that I had briefly considered ignoring her entirely.

“My internal clock is a little off in the dark,” Amakata goes on, “But am I correct in thinking that the transport has been delayed?”
“You are, yes.”

“And I guess you have something to do with it?”

“I had help,” I said. “But, yes.”

“I’m impressed.”

Impressed that I have become a cyber-criminal in the last forty-eight hours, entirely due to her influence. “I have a proposition for you,” I say, and I sound like my father addressing a crowd of investors.

“A proposition?”

“Yes.” I speak louder to chase away the phantom impression of my father’s voice in my head, coming out of my mouth. “Do you know a good augment surgeon?”

“Do I—what?”

I repeat myself steadily.

“I don’t have time—I already told you, I lied about your augment! You don’t need surgery, it’s eroding on its own—.”

I had known Amakata’s cavalier calm was at least partially affected, a necessary step to prevent panic from creeping in, and I hear it crack, pressure bubbling up and frothing into static that stabs at the back of my neck.

“It isn’t for me.”

“Then who—?”

“Just answer the question.”

Amakata is silent for a few hard beats of my heart. Without realizing it I have begun pacing again, round and round like a cat trapped in a box.

“I know people,” she says finally. “Or I knew people, but it’s been over a year since I’ve been in contact with anyone in the Sky City underworld. And I’m not in any position to introduce you. They’re out there, I’m stuck in here.”

“That isn’t going to be a problem,” I say, even as I feel the dread opening up in the pit of my stomach when I make the promise. “I’ll get you out.”

Amakata’s laughter goes on long enough for it to become a hiss of feedback, all qualities of a human voice leeches away. I wait it out.

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“I know you’ve spent your life watching people bend over for you, Rei, but Elite status won’t help you with this. And I doubt Daisuke Ryugazaki would ever lobby for the release of a Lowland criminal.”

I fight a wash of irritation. Everyone is so ready to educate me on Elites today. I know perfectly well the naïve bubble I had been living inside.

“I’m aware of that,” I say. “Expect in me in Sky City in three days. I’m going to get you out, and I’m going to do it without my father’s help.”
good plan rei. what could possibly go wrong.

i hope everyone is as excited as I am to be heading to Sky City. if nothing else, rei will be able to stare out over the skyline rather than just into the dark abyss of space while he has his feelings.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Has it really been a month since the last update? Life, man.

Thanks to ouroboros for the beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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My pledge to Amakata suggests bravado that I don’t feel, but I have little time to dwell on my lack of confidence. There is a shuttle leaving for Earth the very next morning, and we need to be on it.

The pilot expresses mild consternation when six extra recruits show up for this week’s Equilibrium Run. “Check your orders,” I smile, trying for firm yet trustworthy and probably achieving neither. “I’m sure we’re there.”

And we are. Iwatobi Squad, and one Samuzuka as a mascot.

The shuttle pilot doesn’t argue. As long as it’s on the directive, he’s covered. No need to make more work for himself.

I, on the other hand, had been forced to bear up beneath Raik’s verbal abuse when I woke her at “ass-crack o’clock” that morning to hack into the Platform’s system to add us to said directive. It had added significantly to my outstanding debt to her, but I hadn’t had the energy to haggle the price down. I’ve had enough arguments in the last twenty-four hours to last me several artificially extended lifetimes.

The shuttle trembles like a terrified animal as we achieve atmospheric entry; I can feel the thrumming of the engine in my molars. The stabilizers must be ancient—either that, or we’re about to be shaken apart and melted down into a few tons of biodegradable slag. Unpleasant, but at least then nothing else could go wrong. I would much rather it be machine-failure that gets us killed than an oversight of my own.

A warm hand rests atop my clammy one, and I link our fingers. Just the sensation of Nagisa’s skin against mine makes me feel braver. Brave enough to open my eyes and check on the rest of my squad.

*You’re this operation’s commander, Ryugazaki, I chide myself. Keep it together.*

Rin has one arm wrapped protectively around his prosthetic knee—like he’s worried it might rattle loose—his body angled toward Haruka, whose eyes are closed, brows heavy with tension. On my other side Gou sits rigid, her posture and the hand that is clamped tight to Makoto’s arm the only signs of her fear. The other three squads—the ones who are actually supposed to be onboard—are just as unnerved.

Confederation regulations dictate that all deployed recruits must spend two weeks out of every six months back on Earth, or on a planet with an equivalent gravity value. The Platform’s value is lower, and even with our physical training, spending too much time in space can damage bodily
systems. For all our distant wars and far-flung exploration, humans are still built for the Earth. Raik only had to move us three weeks up in the leave rotation, and we had a sanctioned excuse to be back in Sky City and transportation that did not involve stealing a Confederation cruiser. Of course, we’ve still falsified records, but I keep reminding myself that Amakata had managed to get an illegally modified Hazuki droid assigned to a Recon squad. Oversight is clearly not as tight as it could be.

Of course, not everything has gone the way I would have liked.

“If we die—.” Gou’s threat gets drowned out in the storm of the engine.

I grip hard onto the clasp of my safety harness. “No one asked you to come!” I shout back

We’re most likely destabilizing because the shuttle is six people over expected capacity. And that part is definitely not my fault.

- 

“Don’t be an asshole,” Gou had said the night before, when I’d gathered the others and explained why it would be most expedient for Rin and I to travel to Sky City alone. “What make you think you get to decide that, Elite?”

It’s been months since Gou has called me that. “I’m not suggesting—it’s my family that Amakata has been investigating, and it’s my father who—.”

“And it’s my brother who got his leg blown off!”

“Gou, c’mon—.”

“Shut up, Rin.” Gou’s eyes had blazed and I’d felt a flare-up of phantom pain in the side of my face. “This isn’t just about you. You made Rin a part of it,

Thick silence hung after her words. Rin buried his face in his palms. “Holy shit, Gou. Calm down.” His voice wobbled and his eyes were decidedly misted. Something softened in me, despite my exasperation.

“Gou,” I said, trying to inject as much reasonableness as possible. “I know you want to help, but the more people I have to worry about—.”

It had been the wrong thing to say. Both Matsuokas made similar noises of outrage and two pairs of burning red eyes pinned me down. But it had been Makoto’s rumbling calm that had cut through it all.

“Rei, I don’t think you’re looking at this the right way. You’re thinking like an Elite.”

It was my turn to be irritated.

“Hear me out. I’m only saying that if you think you’ll be able to just walk into the Sky City judiciary and demand Dr. Amakata’s release—.” A hint of irony. “—You might be surprised.”

“I know that,” I’d sniffed. My father may have that sort of clout, but I definitely do not.

“You’re operating like it’s the government that you’re going to be dealing with,” Makoto had said. “But has the Militia really ever worked for the Sky City government? You’d probably know better than we do.”
I caught on quickly. It isn’t the government that intends to punish Amakata—she isn’t going to prison. The SCM works for private citizens. In fact, I can’t think of a single instance where I’ve heard of them working directly for the city. Elites use them for less-than-savory work. Which means that it’s most likely the traffickers that have hired them. They want Amakata. They want revenge for the death of their leader.

Rapid-fire questions came after that. How do you plan on transporting Rin? What if you need to move quickly? What if you need to fight? Can you hold a gun and carry him at the same time?

Soon enough I don’t have to listen to their arguments—I could make them myself. We need to be willing to get our hands dirty. We need Lowland connections that I don’t have. We need schematics of Cyrus Fellers’ home and an overview of the security. We need a full-scale operation, not a stealth mission.

As troublesome as it is to have my plans derailed and rebuilt, I could not prevent the fission of warmth stirring in me. They’re all willing to come with me, to risk their lives and their freedom for me, and for Rin. It makes the prickling fear a little less, blunts the loss of my mother, the possible loss of my father.

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The shuttle doesn’t crash. We touch down in Lowland a few hours after noon, and as we step out into the odiferous Sky City air, I am at once exhausted and elated. Even if the circumstances are less than ideal, I’m here. I’m home. Just looking up toward the gleaming towers of Upland sends a tingling wave of homesickness over me.

That’s not what you’re here for, I tell myself firmly. Besides, your home isn’t even there anymore. Not really.

I do a half-hearted check of the dockyard, eyes sharp for the metallic glint of the Militia’s shuttle. I don’t expect to find it—if they really are being funded by the traffickers, they’ll dock at the Upland aerodrome or a private yard.

“Home sweet shithole.” Gou is winding her fingers in her hair, pushing it up and off her shoulders. She makes a gesture that I haven’t seen in months—two fingers pressed to the back of her neck. Her eyes glaze over.

Oh, right.

I touch the back of my own neck, activating my uplink. It’s been so long since I’ve used it that my mind rebels against the in-rush of data, my vision fogging over. I stumble into Makoto.

“We should get off the street,” he says, steadying me, and I am in agreement. Loitering in Lowland is not something I ever made a habit of in the past, and I’m not about to start now.

“Right. Yes. Where…”?

Gou scoffs. “I thought you had it under control, captain.” She and Rin exchange a silent and brief conversation, all widened eyes and tiny shakes of the head. “C’mon, Upland boy. Follow me. And try not to look like a tourist.”

“Don’t worry,” I say. But I’m a little worried.

At least we are all dressed in our Platform black and blue (or red, in Rin’s case); it is obvious to anyone who looks our way that we are Confederation recruits on leave. Much less fun to hassle
than Elites. Rin takes the lead, the rest of us moderating our pace without ceremony to match his.

From my few ventures into the undercity and the stories I have heard, I’ve developed a fabricated mosaic of Lowland. It’s a criminal-infested warren, a war-zone where no one is safe and everything is dangerous. This may be true of some places, but the district surrounding the shuttle dock does not appear to be one of them. The streets are narrower than in Upland, and dirtier, without the eternal flock of cleaner AIs gliding in the wake of pedestrians, buffing away scuff marks and sweeping up discarded plastic, but nothing here is immediately hostile.

The buildings are enormous, old, and poorly maintained. They bow inward, sending the street into a state of permanent shadow, giving it an almost subterranean air. Above us are a crisscross of platforms that bridge the space between buildings, saving their occupants the need to ever set foot on the ground. Some are permanent structures, made of steel and smart plastic, and others simply seem to be planks of wood or horizontal ladders. We pass under what I’m fairly sure is someone’s repurposed front door. I’m nervous walking beneath, but there is no real way to avoid them. They go up and up and up, lost in the haze.

“Do people fall?” Nagisa asks, head tipped back, eyes glowing with wide interest.

“All the time,” Gou says. “Don’t get squished.”

I don’t know whether or not she’s being serious, but I try to distract myself by watching the people on the street level. Upland isn’t dominated by any particular ethnic trend, but Elites don’t need to be homogeneous to look alike. They have a healthy sameness, a collective need to look as young and as human as possible. Augments are discreet, skin, hair, and eyes keeping to subdued, natural colors. When I’d been one of them, this spoke to me of good taste and breeding, but now I wonder if I’d ever been able to tell anyone apart anymore.

Here, the street is an explosion of variety, hair and skin, features, clothes. Tattoos twine around bodies, patterns changing in ever-expanding fractals. The couple just in front of us is made up of a woman with lavender skin and a line of silver rings embedded in her back, and a man with velvety cat’s ears sticking out of the top of his head. A girl with swirling silver eyes watches us as we pass, her mouth opening to let a thin, sinuous tongue taste the air.

Nagisa sticks close to my side, hand sliding into mine. His mouth hangs open in an endless gasp of wonder. “I didn’t expect it to be so…” He trails off nothing. I squeeze his hand, because I completely understand. If all of this is new to me, it’s nothing to how it is for him. He’s spent his life in the confines of Fellers’ mansion and the dingy halls of Platform 6. Even our brief trips to Ithaca could not have prepared him for the scale and mouldering grandeur of Sky City.

“Hey.” Gou catches at my sleeve. I’ve been so busy gawking that I’d failed to notice she’d turned down an alleyway. “At least close your mouth, huh? This isn’t a freakin’ zoo.”

I extricate myself delicately. “I know that.”

Gou flaps us all toward a rickety flight of metal stairs that clings to the side of a building like a zig-zag of lichen. Whatever it had been initially meant for, it’s been here a long time. It shivers beneath our parade, bits of rust flaking off to pepper the asphalt in red-brown snow. If it hadn’t been for our trips to Ithaca, it would be my first time touching something so old. As we climb, new smells mix in with the smog and refuse and burning fuel—cooking grease and spices, the smoky flavor of meat.

“Shit, I remember this place,” Rin says as we clear the edge of the roof. He’s limping gamely on his prosthesis, Makoto just behind him in case he loses his balance. “Used to come here with some
of the guys.” The guys are most likely the gang that he and Haruka used to run with. I wonder what sort of place this is going to be.

A whole manner of possibilities occur to me, but rooftop noodle shop is, admittedly, not one of them.

Colorful lanterns cordon off the edge of the roof, lit despite the fact that it’s only early evening. The seating is a mis-match of plastic garden chairs and wooden benches, and a few chairs that look like they may have been ripped off of school desks. All are rickety and appear to have never been cleaned, which could also be said of some of the customers. Two hairy men in grease-spattered aprons serve up deep bowls of steaming noodles.

“You guys order whatever you want,” Gou says, like I’m not the one who’s going to be paying for it. She glides across the rooftop, confident and dangerous in the colored light. She claims a table in the corner, draping herself over a bench and bracing her leg against a rusting safety rail. The two men seated the next table over abruptly cease their conversation to look her over. She ignores them and focuses on her uplink readout.

Makoto and Rin join her, and Nagisa scampers across the roof to look down at the view of the street. The same men that had been checking out Gou turn their attention to him.

“Come on,” Haruka says to me, indicating the line for noodles. “I don’t have any money.”

I’m not particularly hungry, but we need an excuse to be here. “I hope they take credits,” I say.

Haruka’s lips thin out—his way of smiling without actually committing to the expression. “This is Lowland, Rei. Not hell.”

I watch the crowd as we stand in line, reacquainting myself with the sight of people absorbed in their uplinks. Most of them are carrying cheaper models, their readouts in an application stored in a watch or armband, like Gou’s, projected into the air in front of them. A few people—a clean-cut man in a pinstriped blazer and a person with a floaty crown of turquoise curls—have uplinks like mine, wherein information is fed directly into the optic nerve. Technically, it’s possible to transfer data from the net to the brain itself, but humans are built to interpret outside input as sense-data. When information is just electrical impulses, it’s difficult to differentiate it from your own thoughts. It’s one of the reasons that direct uplinks were so controversial when they first came out; a talented hacker could feed you ideas and convince you they were your own.

Direct uplinking is prohibited on the Platform, so it’s been awhile since I’ve seen the glazed eyes and twitching fingers of someone reading something only they can see. It’s more discomfiting than I remember. I don’t watch for long.

Instead, I watch Nagisa watch the street. He’s removed his Recon jacket and tied it around his skinny hips. Every few seconds he has to hitch it back up again. His hair is a sweaty golden tumble, and with his Hazuki eyes turned away from me, he could be an ordinary human boy. In fact, in this augment-obsessed crowd, he looks like one of the more organic beings on the roof. It strikes me how very small he is.

Since we’ve arrived in Lowland he’s barely spoken, and I don’t know if it’s because he’s excited, or because he’s afraid. Nagisa is always hungry for new experiences, but I’ve brought him here to guide me to the place where he’d spent most of his life enslaved.

Maybe I’m overthinking it. Maybe he just has nothing helpful to share and thus, unlike me, has the good grace to keep his mouth shut.
Haruka orders, and one of the men begins to heap slick noodles into bowls, the other pouring a thick broth on top, neither of them bothering to look at us. They have identical bulbous noses and wide jaws, and for a moment I think they are AIs, but their movements are too scattered, skin pockmarked from the sun and exposure to Lowtown chemicals. Just twins, then. Nature’s factory-line replication, rather than man’s.

The bill comes to thirty-five credits, which could barely get you a glass of guava juice in Upland. I raise my wrist to flash it beneath the portable scanner, and that’s when feedback screams in my head.

Pain blows through me and I clamp my hands to my ears, even though that won’t do any good against a neural uplink, feeling myself pitch forward in slow motion.

“Rei!”

Haruka catches me by the back of the jacket before I can crash into the sizzling grill, though I get close enough to feel a smattering of hot oil on my cheek.

*The emotional augment?!*

Is it degrading further? Had my mother been wrong?

Words fizz in and out of the static: *Here…hurry…I can’t…they aren’t…Ryugazaki!*

With a final wrench, the static dissolves. Pain throbs behind my eyes like the first hard pulses of a migraine.

“Rei, what’s wrong? Rei!” My eyelids are fluttering like butterfly wings, and I come back to myself flat on my back, Nagisa’s hand cupped behind my head. I don’t even remember hitting the ground.

“I’m alright,” I say, although I don’t yet know if that’s true.

Haruka and Nagisa muscle me back to my feet. Haruka offers my limp wrist to one of the cooks, who takes my clammy fingers in his greasy ones, scanning my chip without comment. In fact, apart from my squad, everyone on the roof seems very interested in their uplinks and dinner conversations. If I’d actually been dying on the floor, would anyone have even looked around?

“What happened?” Rin demands as soon as I’ve been transported across the roof and stashed in Gou’s corner. Someone presses a drink into my hand which is, thankfully, water.

“I don’t know,” I gasp, inhaling about two-thirds of the water and then curling forward to cough. But as soon as my lungs are functioning again and the pain has receded enough that my brain no longer feels like raw eggs oozing down my spine, I realize that’s a lie. I do know.

“It’s Amakata.” I straighten back up. “She’s trying to contact me, but we’re out of range. Just.”

Gou wriggles her fingers to pull the attention onto her as she finishes up her call. “Okay, okay.” She is nodding over and over in response to whoever’s on her com. All I can see in the grainy video is a lot of long hair. “Thanks, Niki. Stay alive.” She makes a complicated gesture across her sternum and up to her lips. The boys who had been ogling her edge away from us. Is Lotus truly so notorious that even the sight of their gang sign can inspire fear?

“Okay,” Gou says again, to us this time. “According to an old friend at the aerodrome, the Militia shuttle did dock in Upland last night. And they disembarked a prisoner.”
My heart gives one very loud thump. “Did she say what they looked like?”

Gou flicks her hair behind her shoulders and snaps apart a pair of synthetic wooden chopsticks. “They were holo-cloaked. But Niki says she thought it was a woman.”

“Did she see which way they went?” I ask.

“Better than that.” Gou takes a smug slurp of noodles. “She tailed them all the way to the East District.”

Nagisa and I lock eyes. “That’s where the house is, right?” he asks. His lips are drawn into a thoughtful pout.

“Yeah,” Gou answers for me. “It is.”

My stomach twists and I feel an echo of the static in my head, like all my trepidation and determination has been distilled into physical sensation. She’s here. We were right.

Gou is the only one eating, apparently unbothered by the dubious noodles glistening in the greasy broth. “Oh! And I found us somewhere to stay.”

“What? You were on the com for, like, five minutes!” Rin takes a sip of the broth. “What is this, armpit flavored?”

Gou clicks her chopsticks at him. “I work quick under pressure. And I think it’s some sort of fish.”

“A place to stay?” I repeat, puzzled.

Gou circles her chopsticks in the air and rolls her eyes in one fluid gesture of disdain. “What, you thought you were just gonna check us into a hotel? Aren’t we keeping a low profile?”

“I didn’t—I never—.” I shut my mouth. I hadn’t even considered this, and Gou’s smirk says she knows it. The past few days have been so surreal that mundane worries like where we are going to eat and sleep and shower completely escaped me.

“You want us to stay with Lotus?” Rin wrinkles his nose, much like he had when tasting the broth. “I don’t trust those girls.”

“That’s the exact same thing they’d say about two former members of the Sakura Syndicate,” Gou says witheringly.

“Sakura Syndicate?” I look between Haruka and Rin. “That’s the gang you belonged to?”

“Shout it a little louder, huh?” Rin mumbles with a twitching glance over his shoulder. “It was a long time ago.”

“I thought you just quit the gang at the beginning of the year.”

“Yeah, but we joined when we were twelve.” Rin misinterprets my curiosity as judgment. “What do you want? They didn’t give a shit about who our parents were or how old we were. And we never did anything that awful.”

Makoto clears his throat conversationally.

“Okay,” Rin amends, “We never killed anyone.”
“Personally,” Haruka adds.

“Whatever! Like Gou never did anything unsavory for Lotus.”

“Don’t make this about me! And if you’d shut up for thirty seconds, I could fucking agree with you. We’re not staying with Lotus. That’s not who I called.”

Rin’s eyebrows jam inward. “Then who—?”

Gou’s response is drowned out by the stampeding roar of an engine, surging above the ambient noise of the shop and the street down below us, accompanied by a gleeful shout.

“MISS MATSUOKA!”

Conversation in the café drops off.

“What were you saying,” I begin, “About keeping a low profile?”

Gou winces theatrically. “That’s our ride.”

The bike has gathered quite a crowd.

It’s an old model and, judging from the metallic stink of fuel, has seen better, more operational days. It’s painted a gleaming black and red, thrumming and juttering a few inches from the ground, like a bird of prey anxious to leap back into the sky. It’s definitely not low-profile, and neither is its driver.

Maybe anyone would look powerful astride that bike, but he belongs there. Broad shouldered and hard-jawed, thighs tightly muscled. His hair is ruffled, dusty brown and his jacket only has one sleeve, his right arm left bare to show off the gleaming robotic silver of his shoulder augment.

“Matsuoka,” he says, in a voice as low and rumbling as the bike.

Gou raises her hand in a coy, many-fingered wave. “Hey, Sousuke.”

“You’re looking good.”

Gou rocks forward on the balls of her feet and, to my utter shock, blushes. “Thanks. You too.”

“Miss Matsuoka!”

The bike has a shallow sidecar—which is somewhat incongruous to its aesthetic—equipped with its own hover-strut, most likely meant to carry luggage or shopping or whatever else you might need to haul around in a shiny hoverbike. Its passenger is as opposite to Sousuke as the sidecar is to the bike. Pale where he’s dark, small and gangly where Sousuke is heavy with muscle. His smile is uncensored and bright, and when he leaps into the street his exuberance nearly has him floating above the pavement.

Gou says, “This is Momo Mikoshiba.”

Momo lights up at the sound of his name, and I half-expect him to lower his head to let me scratch his ears. His hair is a very familiar emergency red. In fact…

“Mikoshiba…are you related to Seijuro?”

Momo beams. “He’s my big brother! Are you a Fighter too? Are you on his squad? Do you—.”
“Chill out, Momo.” Gou has a hand raised, like she’s prepared to slap it over his mouth if need be. “All will be explained. Right now we gotta get out of here before Sousuke’s overcompensation-mobile gets us mugged.”

“You said come fast,” Sousuke shrugs, augment gleaming. “This is the fastest ride I have.”

Rin hobbles the last few feet to the edge of the curb, arriving behind the rest of us. “Holy shit.”

“Rin.” Sousuke cocks his head. “Heard you got blown up. Figured you were dead.”

Rin laughs a little wildly. “Not yet.”

Sousuke stares a bit too long, expression complicated. Then he revs the bike and a couple of onlookers take a cautious step back. “I’d love to shoot the shit, but let’s shoot it somewhere else.”

“Excuse me—.”

Sousuke’s attention jumps to me, and even though it’s what I’d been aiming for, I feel a tremble of unease. Sousuke is the kind of Lowlander that Elites fear, that they mean when they say those people down there. Unpredictable, as quick and as dangerous as a laser knife without a guard. Their very existence spits on the world people like my father are trying to create—clean, orderly, natural to the point of defying nature.

Sousuke looks me up and down. “You must be Ryugazaki. I hear you’re planning to tear the place down.” There’s a lot folded into his gaze—I feel judged, appraised, and a little undressed. I force myself not to fidget.

When it finally appears, Sousuke’s grin is viciously appreciative. “Why don’t you get on and tell me all about it?”

Chapter End Notes

rei is hanging out with the cool kids now yes he is.

I apologize for being such a consummate failure at answering comments and asks recently. But I appreciate each and every one, and I’m gonna try to be better in the future.

Till next time!
Sousuke brings us up out of the retail district and into the turbid flow of taxis and hoverbikes and the occasional teenager on a modified sky-board. On the Upland Loop, cars attach to a magnetic strip that regulates their speed and direction. Down here in Lowland, it's chaos. Sousuke's bike screams on the turns like a vicious animal being poked in the eye.

"How you doing, Ryugazaki?" Sousuke calls back, speed flattening his voice.

I hunch against the drag of the wind. "Fantastic." I shut my mouth quickly, not giving myself a chance to bite off my own tongue. The hover-struts on the sidecar would be perfectly sufficient if one weighed roughly the same as a bag of vegetables, which I'm sure Momo does, but I myself am less than comfortable. Rin is seated behind Sousuke, arms wrapped around his waist, chin propped on his unaugmented shoulder. Momo is bringing the others in a slower, more circuitous route, but Rin would have had trouble with the distance, and since I'm the acting leader of this venture, I'd come along. Lucky me.

I'd been nervous to leave the others behind, but I also hadn't been prepared to let Rin fly off alone with a grinning boy sporting a metal arm and a razorblade smile, no matter how well they seemed to know each other. Rin can't fight in his condition, and an elderly tortoise could outrun him.

Haruka had caught my gaze and held on tight. He must have known Sousuke as well, but so far they hadn't acknowledged each other. His eyes were chips of ice as he watched Rin swing astride the bike.

I'd given his shoulder a squeeze, trying to convey reassurance. *I'll keep him safe, if I can.*

And then...

Nagisa stood on the edge of the curb, eyeing the new arrivals with the same nervy fascination as everything else down here. Actually, it was Sousuke who had drawn most of his attention. That had annoyed me. On top of keeping us all alive and moving toward our goal, I had to worry about my droid boyfriend ogling every muscle-bound augment junkie in Lowland?

*Stop. Stop!*

An absurd concern. Totally irrelevant, because when I approached, his eyes had brightened and his smile had gone from appreciative to radiant. My heart kicked hard, an engine revved into
"I'm going on ahead," I'd said, aware that everyone was watching us. Momo even made a humming noise of interest. "Will..." I cleared my throat. I didn't want to single him out, but I was also aware of what could happen down here. We had barely spoken in the last few days, and if I was indeed heading into a trap, I didn’t want his last memory to be of me stuttering awkwardly.

He had reached for me and taken the decision out of my hands, stroking warm fingers down my cheek. "I'll be fine. I've got Makoto and Gou to defend my virtue." He rocked up onto his toes and kissed me on the corner of my mouth, and to my immense shock no one had said a thing. No whistles or smart comments, not even from Gou, who had an excuse to interject, since Nagisa had just said her name. I'd taken it as a sign of the oncoming apocalypse.

The ride is too fast for me to get much of the lay of Lowland. We descend into the neon dazzle of lights, surrounded by the fog of voices and music in a dozen different languages. The air reeks of burning engines and refuse and human filth. We witness a car-jacking down a side street, and a hoverbike flipping on a badly timed turn. I yell as its rider is flung off and vanishes into the smog of the middle lanes, swallowed up as easily as my shout. My stomach twists forebodingly.

Ever so slowly, I am beginning to understand. Haruka’s brusqueness, Gou’s flippant disdain, Rin’s dark humor. The sub-zero look in Amakata’s eyes when the Militia had come for her. A place like this will worm under your skin and rot you from the inside out, unless you find a way to armor yourself.

My armor will be my goals. Save Amakata. Heal Rin.

And finally, distant and not yet quite acknowledged: Face my father.

After perhaps a quarter of an hour of darting through traffic and performing maneuvers that I’m sure are just as illegal as they are nausea-inducing, Sousuke veers sharply east. We fly along a narrow, empty stretch of road, the asphalt so blasted in places that it looks like jaws opening in the ground to show off their jagged rock smiles. If I’m not mistaken, this is a stretch of highway left over from the old city, back when humanity was still bound to the surface of the Earth. We cut through a broken metal barrier and down over the edge of the ridge, and my stomach swoops as the bike loses altitude. “Shit, Sousuke!” I hear Rin yelp, voice whipping up above the grind of the engine.

Sousuke’s laugh is one rough syllable. “Afraid of getting your hair wet?”

We are hovering over the bay, the updrafts making the bike shake. A standard hoverbike isn’t meant to travel over water, but this one must have modifications, because we continue on toward a distant cluster of lights and looming shadows. The surface of the water looks more impenetrable than the sea of concrete we’ve left behind.

Pain fizzes through my head, the rasping of data trying and failing to connect. My eyes roll back and I disengage my uplink quickly enough to avoid the worst of it. I won’t be caught off guard again.

When I open my eyes, I find we’ve reached the lights. The buildings here are much smaller and far more densely packed. Sousuke reduces speed by two-thirds, navigating the winding streets with
more caution than I imagined him capable of. The people here stand in tight-knit groups, like the buildings, and they are more forbidding, like the dirty yellow glow of the electric lights. The air here is worse, and with the wind smacking me full in the face it is impossible to breathe shallowly. I wish my aquatic augment had a setting for greasy smog.

The road dead-ends at a titanium fence with a retinal scanner flashing high up on the gate. Lights come up as we approach to allow the scanner to see Sousuke’s face, momentarily illuminating a symbol painted on the gate. A half circle with a line struck through it, two shorter lines splintering off like an arrow. It’s a symbol I’ve seen before, but I can’t place it.

The gates open soundlessly, and Sousuke draws the bike to a halt in front of a narrow, three-story building. The gate and retinal scanner are new, most likely installed within the last year, but this building clearly isn’t. At first I think whoever painted it must have been blind or possessed of very questionable taste—the exterior is a checkerboard of red and browns—but then I realize that it’s made of brick. The front door is hinged, with an old-fashioned knob. The ground-level windows are covered in stylized metal grilles, curls and starbursts, simultaneous decoration and ineffectual defense against robberies. Well, ineffectual after the invention of laser knives.

Rin whistles. “Fancy.” From the back I can’t tell if he’s being sincere. To me the place looks like a demolition waiting to happen.

Sousuke’s feet kick up dust as he slides off the bike. He offers Rin a hand. “My Lady?”

“Jackass,” Rin snorts, but he still braces his arm against Sousuke’s chest as he dismounts, prosthetic dragging awkwardly behind him. His face creases briefly in discomfort. “Next time I’ll ride side-saddle,” he jokes, even as sweat paints his temples.

My own legs tingle from being curled beneath me for so long, shins aching from the bike’s vibration. I don’t get an offer of an escort.

Two people emerge from the brick house—a girl around my age, and a man around my father’s. Probably younger, I remind myself, since he’s likely never had a second of life-extension therapy.

“Yamazaki,” the girl says. She is nearly as tall as he is, with very dark skin and glittering ice-blue augmented eyes. “I thought you and Momo were going shopping.” Her gaze flicks between Rin and I.

“These two look out of our price range. And inedible.”

“Anything’s edible if you cook it long enough,” the older man says, then smiles breezily to let us know the cannibalism is just in fun. He is mostly bald and wearing—in the continuing trend of bizarre Lowland fashion choices—a black jacket with colorful sleeves.

“Can you take a look at her?” Sousuke asks the man, kicking at the bike’s chassis. “She’s still grumbling on tight turns.”

“It’s ‘cause you don’t know how to treat a lady,” the man grunts. He has very yellow teeth, and I wish I didn’t have to look at them.

“This is Chelsea, our mechanic,” Sousuke says. “The smartass is Regi, my second-in-command.”

“Wait.” My mind is stuttering like a looped hard drive. “You called him…” Without meaning to, I’ve reactivated my uplink, results splayed out across the red brick and rusting metal. “Yamazaki, the Yamazakis? The, uh--.” Would it be rude to call them a gang? Rin’s giving me a wide-eyed
shut-the-fuck-up look, so I let myself trail off to nothing.

“Yeah. We, uh, are,” Sousuke says.

“Don’t shit, kid,” Chelsea crouches beside the bike, removing the outer shell of the power cell with a screwdriver pulled from his belt. “This is the friendly entrance. You don’t have to worry till we bring you in round back.” Another yellow grin, and from closer up I can tell the colors on his arms aren’t sleeves at all—they’re tattoos, eyes and flowers and screaming mouths. His palms are marked with the same symbol that decorates the front gate.

“This is Rin Matsuoka.” Sousuke claps Rin on the shoulder. “And this is Rei.” I don’t fail to notice that he does not offer my family name.

“This is who all that pining was over?” Regi appraises Rin. “He’s cute. A little busted.”

“I wasn’t pining,” Sousuke mutters, just as Rin says, “Hey, I’m standing right the fuck here!”

Chelsea coughs into a fist and returns his attention to the bike. Regi’s still grinning. “You broke our baby Sousuke’s heart when you ran off spaceside,” she tells Rin.

“Regi, I’m going break your face if you don’t keep it shut,” Sousuke says, which just makes her laugh harder.

-I-

I ask who’s house this is when we get inside, and earn a sneer from a girl with skin augmented so pale she almost glows. “It’s a hotel. No one’s house is this big.”

“Right,” I say. My family’s vacation home on Aurora is about the same size. I don’t tell her this.

An icon pops up in the corner of my vision. I brace myself for pain, but it’s just a download image. A glowing blue arrow. It’s not a big data-packet. Just a word document, maybe a voice recording. The tips of my fingers tingle in a rush of simultaneous foreboding and excitement.

“I need to send a flash.” I interrupt Sousuke mid-exposition of how his gang acquired the hotel, which is rude, but right now I would cut off the Sky City Governor.

Sousuke’s mouth stretches out in annoyance and he looks at Rin. Rin lifts a shoulder. “Can’t bring him anywhere.”

“It’s important,” I add, which just seems to annoy Sousuke more.

“Do you need a terminal?”

“I have an uplink. Just an empty room.”

The it’s a hotel girl brings me to a room on the second level, with a badly-sagging floor and pair of grime-streaked windows. The armoire and night stand might have been considered antiques a couple of decades ago, but have since been downgraded to junk, their wood warped by the damp air off the bay. The futon in the corner is neatly made, though, and looks clean. I wonder if they have housekeeping A.I.s. I can’t conjure an image of Regi or Chelsea or any of the rest of them airing out rooms for guests.

I don’t bother to get comfortable. I know I won’t be able to resist the urge to pace.

I bring up the file. A shiver of static and then:
An expectant chill goes through me at the sound of Amakata’s ragged whisper.

I don’t have much time. They’ll search me when we reach the mansion, and this time they’ll certainly find the jack. These people aren’t amateurs. I’m going to send this as an audio file and hope you’re in range. Otherwise it may cause you some discomfort.

I snort into the empty room.

I want the chance for full disclosure before I lose the ability to talk to you. I didn’t plan on telling you this, because you already have enough reasons to hate me, but I think you have the right to know. At the very least it may give you more confidence in your abilities.

I told you that I ran to Platform 6 because it’s the farthest from Earth I could get. This isn’t necessarily true. There were plenty of other platforms, but none of them had the heir of the Ryugazaki fortune assigned to them. This was before I had picked my research back up in earnest, but I did know that your father had been flagged by Undertow as a possible supporter of Fellers’.

I looked you up. Your records were terrific—top of your class at the Indigo Academy, physically proficient, able to operate under great mental and emotional stress. I knew I needed to get close to you, but unfortunately I was a Recon medic, and would only be charged with the care of a few squads.

Rei…I’m the reason you were assigned to Recon. I hacked the Academy’s server and changed your scores. Then I co-opted your professor’s profile and sent you that flash explaining why your performance was lacking.

You should have been admitted into whatever section you chose, although you were recommended for Tactical or Research. You weren’t meant to be an expendable grunt, Rei. You are an Elite, in every sense of the word. I won’t ask for your forgiveness and I won’t make excuses. I just want you to know that I was desperate, still reeling from my failure.

If you’re hearing this, it means you’ve arrived in the city and I am currently in the facility beneath Fellers’ Elysia Heights mansion. I don’t know how long they plan to keep me alive, but I doubt it will be for very long. I’ve overheard that they are planning to interrogate me to discover who else knows about the existence and location of their operation. It is a very short list—only you and your squad. Oh, and Goro Sasabe, but he isn’t really in a position to—

The last ten seconds of the clip are a jagged line in the corner of my vision, the uplink reading nothing but static. I close it down before it begins to grate on my nervous system. Then I walk to the smudgy window.

Decades of industrial grime have accumulated on the outer pane of glass, and it doesn’t open. It’s not like there would be anything to look at if it did. I rest my forehead against it. It isn’t even cool. I close my eyes and listen to my heartbeat, feel the oxygen pulled into my lungs and distilled into my blood, feeding the conscious parts of me.

I feel like I should be enraged, a mad dog on a leash, frothing at the mouth and desperate to be released on innocent bystanders. But any outward demonstration of these feelings—curses, shouts, picking up the ugly nightstand and hurling it across the room—would simply be going through the motions. I am suddenly stupidly, overwhelmingly tired.

Of course it had been outside tampering. Of course that is the only explanation for my rejection from Research and assignment to Recon. I know the extent of my intelligence and where my talents lie. Why hadn’t I fought the decision? If I had only gone to speak to my professor in
person…

My laughter echoes back at me from the window, a plastic sound. Individual words drift out of the spectrum of my thoughts. *Idiot. Gullible. Fool. Useless.* I ignore them and lie down on the futon.

I’m staring at the cracked plaster ceiling, and then I’m not.

--

“Rei.”

Chilly fingers brush my hair off my forehead.

“Rei, wake up.”

No, I don’t think I will. There’s nothing out there worth the price of having to think.

“Rei!”

My eyes open, more a muscular reaction to hearing my name than an act of will. A pale smudge of a face and a dim pink glow blur into view.

*Oh, yes. I suppose waking up might be worth it after all.*

“Rei, are you okay? You’ve been asleep for awhile.”

“I’m fine.” My voice is itchy and I might be lying. I have no idea how I am. My thoughts are a mudslide, turgid with the incoherence of exhaustion. Nagisa braces a hand behind my back to help me sit up. I must look terrible. “What time is it?”

“I have no idea. I’m not real good with Earth time. In the mansion it never mattered.” He angles his chin toward the smoky windows. “Evening, I think.”

“Have you—.” I scrub at the dried saliva on my cheek. “Have you been here long?”

He sits back on his haunches. “Not really. It took awhile to get here on foot. Hey, did you know that droids need ident cards just to move between districts?”

“Oh, yes. I did know that.” Add it to the ever-expanding list of injustices I’ve never dwelt on because I never had a reason to. “How did you get through?”

“Momo knows a bunch of ways to get around checkpoints. He even took us underground.” Nagisa’s hair is a mad nimbus of gold, snarled and floaty from the humidity. Tension lurks inside his voice, and at first I mistake it for the memory of a stressful journey, but the hand he slips inside mine is chilled, and he’s trembling.

“Nagisa…” I realize what’s wrong just as he nuzzles my palm, pulling two of my fingers into his mouth and curls his tongue around them.

“I’m sorry. I know there’s important stuff going on, but it’s been days.” He releases my hand and tips his head back, a full-body shudder rolling through him. “I’m so hungry, Rei.”

*Of course.* How long has it been since I’ve given him anything besides chaste kisses? A brief moment in his berth a few days ago, but that must have been like sitting down to a feast where you’re only allowed a single bite.
I toss a glance toward the door. “Is everyone—.”

“They won’t bother us,” Nagisa says, hushed and shaky with need. His fingers are laced tight into the bedclothes. “Rin told me not to bother you, but he can kiss my ass. He’s not the boss of me.” He grins.

My mind is still a whirling mess, the shadowy room tinged dreamlike. At any moment I could wake up back in my berth without ever having heard of Izumi Grey, or even back in my parents’ Upland penthouse, a human mother waiting for me at the breakfast table, no silicone chip shoved into my brain.

And no droid boyfriend.

Nagisa is close enough for his breath to touch my cheek, for me to smell his skin, and dream-haze or not, I can’t resist anymore. I take his cheeks between my hands and kiss him. His mouth opens under mine, his moan heavy with relief, his skin heating from just this brief contact. He gasps between kisses, straddling my thighs and grinding down.

“Rei, I want you so much.” I make a noise of encouragement. “I want your cock, god—I can’t believe you haven’t fucked met yet.” He whimpers as I leave little stinging bites on the side of his neck. “I’ve thought about it so much.”

“So have I,” I admit, parting my legs to make it easier for him to grind against my thigh. His skin is warming steadily beneath my fingertips, and I push his shirt up to feel more of it, pressing my hands to his stomach. He hums sweetly and bites down on my bottom lip.

Someone paid thousands of credits for him, I think distantly. Someone had him built from scratch. And here he is with me, for nothing.

Nagisa’s fingers find the button of my pants, unzips, and pulls my cock out with enough dexterity to put a navigator to shame. He gives it a few quick strokes before nudging my thighs wider to give himself more space, and swallows me down.

“Nagisa—!”

I shove a palm against my mouth to stifle my shout. My hips jerk involuntarily and he chokes, a thick, wet sound that sends vibrations shivering across my cock. It feels amazing, but it makes me recall: I can choke if you want me to. My master liked it when I choked.

Distantly, I find myself wishing Cyrus Fellers was still alive, so I could drive my fist through his face.

Then Amakata could shoot him again.

Amakata. The memory of exactly why I’d been sleep-brooding stabs at me. If she hadn’t shunted me into Recon, I never would have met Nagisa. I wouldn’t have had a reason to reject the emotional augment. I still would not know what it’s really like inside my own head.

I groan and focus on the slick slide of Nagisa’s mouth against the underside of my cock, his hungry whimpers. Even if it’s all been worth it, this new knowledge reframes my perception of the last few months. All the rationalizing I’d done as to why I hadn’t measured up, why I’d failed the test. All of it had been useless.

Nagisa’s eyes are glowing slits. His mouth goes slack, releasing my cock to lick wetly at the ridge
of my hipbone. My fingers tighten in his hair, and I fight the urge to push him back down. I refuse to treat him like that.

“Rei,” he breathes, and he doesn’t sound like himself. He’s still shaking—I can feel it against my legs.

"Rei, please. I-I need it. Please.”

His insistence makes me recall the other times I’ve seen him in the throes of his programming, the expensive upgrades that make him crave sex like a drug. The Combat recruit in the locker room, in the club on Ithaca. Perhaps it’s because this time his lust is aimed at me, but I don’t find it frightening. In fact, I feel an answering pulse of desperation.

“Please, Rei,” he begs again, voice hushed and reverent. He wraps a hand around me, slick and hot, fingers smearing fluid. I nod, and the light in his eyes intensifies. I could not deny him anything at a moment like this.

His palms are sweaty on my shoulders as he pushes me flat on my back on the futon. “Take your pants off!”

It’s not a request.

I scramble to obey, arching my back to let him pull my regulation slacks off. Nagisa tosses them over his shoulder with dramatic disdain, leaning down to press his mouth to my inner thighs. He kisses a long trail up to my balls, licking at them with tiny flicks of his tongue.

“Nagi—.”

He swings a leg over my waist, crouched above me, thighs quivering with strain.

“What are you—.”

I’m not an expert by any means, but even I know that some saliva and a whole lot of enthusiasm are not enough for what he plans to do.

“Nagisa—you…hnnn…” He squeezes the head of my cock in a hot little fist. “You’re going hurt yourself.”

He laughs, breathless. Except for the dim glow through the dirty windows, his eyes are the only source of light in the room. “Sex droid, remember?” He leans back to brace on my knee. “Kind of built for this.”

My hands slip on his sweaty hips. “Don’t keep—.” I bite down on the order. I hate it, but who am I to say what he can and can’t call himself?

“Built for it or not,” I say, trying a new angle, “I’d rather avoid any unnecessary chafing.”

His giggles shake his whole body, knocking him out of his crouch and onto the futon with a little whoomph. “Okay, then what do you suggest, Mr. Science…nnnn.”

I work my way down onto the floor to give myself more room. Nagisa realizes where I’m headed a second before I get there, spreading his legs and hoisting his hips off the mattress. He gasps brokenly as I lick along the cleft of his ass. My hands are shaking and my mouth is dry; it’s difficult to work up much saliva, but I do the best I can, stiffening my tongue to spear him on the point of it.
“Fingers,” he moans after a moment. “Use your fingers, stretch me out—.” His breathing explodes when I obey. I nearly choke when I feel how hot and soft he is inside.

“Shit, Rei, I can’t wait anymore, please, I’ll be fine—.”

I pull my fingers out and drag them across the sheets. Hopefully it is cleaner A.I.s that change them.

My cock isn’t damp anymore, but Nagisa is more than happy to rectify that. He goes back down in a long, slow slide.

“Aghhh, god, Nagisa…” How is there even room in his throat to take it?

His hips move in spastic stutters, cock hard and slick at the tip. I wrap a hand around him and he moans. He pulls off me, saliva threaded between his lips and the head of my cock, thrusting into my hand and keening.

We reassume our earlier positions, me on my back and him straddling me, holding my cock steady as he sinks backward, and if it had seemed impossible when he took me down his throat, it’s nothing to the unreality of watching my cock disappear into his ass as he swivels his hips, taking me in slowly but inevitably.

“God…Rei…” His mouth drops open and he lets out a little hiccuping gasp, taking the last few inches in one quick drop.

“Fuck!” I can’t help it, I buck up to meet him. I’ve never felt anything like this before—he is almost too hot inside, almost unbearably tight. His thighs are quivering under the assault of sensation. “Rei…”

It’s kinda what I’m made for.

I cover my face with my arms, because no, I don’t want to think about that right now. This is not any different from any of the other sex we’ve had that I’ve rationalized my way through. Just because the act of penetration holds some mythic power leftover from more primitive societies, doesn’t mean I have to examine the moral implications from every excruciating angle. And my best intentions always crumble to dust whenever Nagisa turns those starving eyes on me.

Nagisa rolls his hips into my thrusts, as sinuous in my lap as he is underwater. He sounds as overwhelmed as I feel. Sweat streaks his cheeks and drips off of his chin, his gasps rising in volume until they become tense, aspirated cries. He looks like he feels so good, mouth wide open, eyes screwed shut, muscles trembling.

He comes without me ever needing to touch his cock, clenching down tight and throwing his head back with a trembling little wail. I’m not sure of the etiquette at this point, so I stop moving, as difficult as it is. The deep, purely instinctual part of me wants to force him back into motion.

Nagisa sucks in a few heaving breaths. When he raises his head, his cheeks are scribbled pink and his eyes are like searchlights. “Why’d you stop?” he asks, giddiness wound up tight around the words. “C’mon. Finish!”

I do, with him laid out on his back on the lumpy futon, legs clenched tight around my waist. I imagine the warmth under his skin seeping into mine, diffusing into light that spreads through me in cresting waves. I bury my face in his neck to muffle my gasps, the world painted over for one bright moment, chasing all the shadows back.
Chapter End Notes

What, you thought Rei was gonna get laid without angsting about it in the middle?
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

It's summer and it's hot as balls. That's is all.

Nagisa lies against my side, drowsing. He can make himself sleep if he tries, but I don’t think his body needs it in the same way a human’s does, to replenish strength and reorganize the brain. His skin is tacky and hot, like he’s sweating out a fever. When I rub my fingers up and down his spine he makes a happy noise. “That feels good.”

“Are you alright?” I ask. “That was a little sudden.”

"It was awesome.” From the hum in his voice I can tell he’s beaming against my shoulder. “I told you, I’m kind of built for impromptu dickings.”

“That doesn’t mean you should let yourself get hurt,” I frown.

He waits for me to finish another slow stroke up his back before he rolls away, propping himself up on his side..“I’m fine, Rei. I promise.”

I don’t press, but I’m still not satisfied. Even if he’s telling the truth and I didn’t hurt him, I’m not sure if I can trust him to tell me if and when I ever do. He’s not one to complain about discomfort. Well, unless it’s from lack of sex.

I’m just starting to drift toward the precipice of sleep when I am yanked back by a cacophony of knocks on the bedroom door, strong enough to rattle it on its hinges. It sounds like someone with six fists. Or maybe just two fists and a dearth of enthusiasm.

“Since the walls are no longer shaking,” Gou shouts far too loudly, “Can I assume you guys have reached the afterglow stage?”

“Yeah, thanks for ruining it!” Nagisa calls back.

"Anytime. Now hurry the fuck up. Sousuke wants to have a super secret strategy meeting. Oh, and Rei, you should probably shower. Nagisa may be programmed to smell like a rose petal when he sweats, but you sure as shit aren’t.”

“I’m a little insulted,” I say, listening to her retreat back down the hall. I am not, however, all that embarrassed. The endorphins are probably keeping me placid. Or maybe I’ve just reached my emotional saturation point.

I find the shower at the end of the hall in a narrow, badly-lit bathroom with a rusted sink and frankly terrifying toilet. The water is cold, but at least it runs clear. The only bar of soap in the stall looks dirtier than me, so I just rinse myself off as best I can.

While wincing under the trickle, trying to avoid putting too many off my body parts underneath it at once, I am gripped by an unexpected throb of homesickness. The cold water is part of it, but on the whole I am much better at coping with discomfort than I used to be. The experience is surreal, though—being back on Earth, in Sky City, but not in Upland. Not in my apartment with my family,
taking my meals on the antique mahogany dining table or scrolling through the cyber-library next to my father’s study. And now that a protestor’s bomb has left my home a ruin, I’ll never do any of those things again.

Once I’m (arguably) clean, I descend to the first floor and follow the sound of voices to a low-ceilinged room adjoined to the kitchen. It’s too small to have been the hotel’s dining room—perhaps it was where the staff ate. The plaster is rotting off the walls and it is lit by a cluster of bare electric bulbs.

My squad is seated around a table much too large for the space, the surface covered in a blizzard of paper charts and mostly-empty pizza boxes. Sousuke sits at the head with a Matsuoka on either side of him—a king enthroned, flanked by his redheaded courtiers. Makoto and Haruka are on the other end, and Nagisa sits on the side of the table, a single envoy between camps. He smiles slyly at me when I come in, and that’s enough to make my skin prickle with shivering heat. Haruka mutters something to Makoto and he laughs softly. Of course. Gou couldn’t have been the only one to overhear.

“Thanks for joining us, Ryugazaki. We’ve been discussing your plan.” Sousuke’s tone isn’t particularly accusatory, but I still sense the recrimination. It’s in the casual drape of his body and the way his jaw tenses and relaxes, like he’s resisting the urge to grind his teeth. Whatever respect I’d gained from my desire to ‘tear the place down’, I’ve lost. Is it because I’d wasted valuable scheming time on sex, or because I’d wasted it with a Hazuki droid in particular?

Gou picks out the tension easily. “Don’t be a tightass, Souz.” She raps her knuckles on his augmented shoulder. “Somebody’s gotta feed the hungry droid. Might as well be his boyfriend.”

“I get sick if I don’t get sex,” Nagisa says cheerily. “I don’t complain about watching you all stuff your faces with greasy cheese product, do I?”

Sousuke drops his attention back to the charts in front of him. “That doesn’t come standard on Hazuki droids.”

“Nagisa isn’t standard,” I say, and sit down next to Gou. I nudge her with my shoulder, hoping she understands my gratitude at changing the question of my sexual escapades from moral to scientific. I focus on the several wide diagrams on the table, splashes of black and blue latticed over with an infinity of lines, some spreading into square grids, others winding in aimless loops. They’re maps, I realize after tilting my head back and forth. Actual physical maps, the sort that have been drawn with ink on paper instead of programmed into a GPS or autopilot. These sorts of maps you have to figure out on your own.

The mention of pizza, combined with the talk of greasy cheese product makes me realize how long it’s been since I’ve eaten, and my stomach lets out a rolling growl of support. Haruka shunts a box my way. It catches on one of the charts and tears it slightly at one corner.

“Watch what you’re doing, Nanase.” Sousuke knocks an old fashioned graphite pencil against the tabletop. “These are the only copies.”

“They’re useless,” Haruka says, as scornful as I’ve ever heard him. “Isn’t that what you’ve been saying?”

Sousuke grunts and drops the pencil. So all the tension hadn’t come entirely from my entrance—I’d walked in on an argument.

I take a bite of pizza. It’s lukewarm and the cheese has begun to congeal unpleasantly, but I’m so
hungry I barely notice. I haven’t had pizza since Aurora, and then it had been the sort smothered in spinach and goat cheese and walnut pesto, eaten with a knife and fork. “What’s going on?”

“Sousuke’s being a douchelord,” Gou says. Whatever coquettishness she’d affected back on the street has apparently worn off.

Sousuke rubs at an eye with the heel of his hand. “Look, you told me you need to get into an Elysia Heights mansion. *This* is how I can get you in.”

Rin squints down at the closest chart, face creased up in suspicion. “I don’t trust old analog shit. What if the dude who drew it made a mistake? He can’t even edit it out.”

“I think they’d reprint the map if that were the case,” Makoto says, mouth curling and uncurling as he fights a smile.

“What a frickin waste of time.”

“Physical information can’t be hacked,” I point out. “And it can’t be hidden behind a firewall. I doubt a map of Fellers’ mansion is accessible anywhere on the net.” I kow for a fact that it isn’t—I’d looked.

“It’s a map of the whole district,” Gou says. She tugs the stack over to her corner of the table. “For those of you who have the sense of direction of a drunk parakeet—look.” She taps her finger on a section of interlocking rectangles. “*This* is Fellers’ place, and this is—wait.” She sifts through the pile, peeling apart the old, slick paper. “That one is just buildings and roads. This one, here, this has waterways and sewers.” Unearthing it, she smacks it down on the top of the pile. It’s an even thicker mass of meandering lines, all of these traced in blue, tightly condensed in the center and thinning as they spider out toward the edges. “Here, you see this?”

I squint. “Uh…”

“No one can read these charts but you, Gou,” Rin grunts. “Terrific. You’re a tactical genius.”

*Tactical genius.*

I should have been recommended for Tactics. If Amakata hadn’t intervened, would I be sitting in Gou’s seat right now? No, I would never have met any of them. I wouldn’t be here at all.

"Fine.” Gou leans forward over the map, waterways temporarily obliterated by a fog of staticky red hair. “See this? This is a sewer line that goes beneath Fellers’ mansion, and this little x here—” Her shoulder is blocking my view, but I’ll take her word for it. “—That means there’s some sort of access point. And even if there isn’t, we can always make one.” She glances at Sousuke, who gives a quick nod. I’m not sure if he’s agreeing to the potential use of explosives, or just telling her to continue. “But if the entrance is on a map, that means Fellers or whoever took over for him probably knows about it. It’s probably reinforced or hella guarded.”

“We’d be better served pretending to be delivery men,” Makoto muses.

“We’re mounting a rescue, not filming a porno,” Gou says. “But if you really want to roleplay…”

“Could we intercept one of the shipments headed inside?”

Sousuke shakes his head. “No. That’s what I’m saying. There are no shipments going in or out of this building. No cleaning staff, no energy bills. No one has lived or worked there for months.”
“Are you sure about that?” I ask thickly, recovering from a particularly hard swallow of pizza crust.

Sousuke settles back in the old chair, wood grating as it takes his weight. “We’ve had eyes on the Vanishers for awhile. The number of illegal droids on the market has hardly dipped since Fellers got carved up, so they’re still producing. We just don’t know from where.”

“The Vanishers?” I repeat.

Across the table from me, a spasm moves across the fine muscles of Nagisa’s face. His eyelashes flutter. I throw him a questioning look, which he catches and tosses back. As if whatever he’d done he had not been conscious of.

”It’s just a name,” Sousuke is going on. “No one knows what they call themselves. But they make people vanish.”

A slow shiver rattles down my spine. Even in a crowded dining room, eating a slice of greasy pizza, the name unsettles me. We’ve been referring to our enemy as “Fellers’ organization” or just “the traffickers”. The Vanishers draws a picture of dark things creeping from the eaves of a shadowed forest, winding through the narrow streets to snatch children from their beds and carry them away.

“Makes sense that they’ve moved their operation elsewhere,” Makoto says. “Especially since Amakata eluded capture for so long.”

“But what about your friend?” Nagisa rounds on Gou, hair bouncing. It hardly seems possible that less than an hour ago, I had my fingers buried in that hair. “You said she followed the Militia to my master’s house!”

“No, I said she followed them to Elysia Heights.” Gou is sweeping the charts back into a lopsided pile. “That’s a big place. Or, I mean, I think it’s a big place. Sounds big.”

“It is,” I say. “And very densely populated. My parents moved there recently.” The house in the Heights is the only other piece of property they own on Earth that isn’t rubble. “It’s very sought after real estate.”

“Sounds like a swell place,” Rin says. “Real welcoming.”

“The Vanishers could be anywhere,” I conclude. I try to hide my disappointment, but it hollows out my voice. “We’ll never be able to search the entire district.”

At least not before they decide that Amakata is no longer worth the trouble of keeping alive.

The conversation lapses into a sluggish run of half-hearted suggestions, each more farfetched than the last. I say nothing, just sit and feel the pizza curdling in my stomach. If not for Sousuke’s intel, would we have broken into an empty house? Wasted precious hours that Amakata doesn’t have?

Stupid of me to be so confident in the first place. I’d had no other reason to believe Fellers’ mansion was the base of operation besides Amakata’s assurances and the testimony of Gou’s associate. I let myself trust in the simplest, most convenient answer.

I don’t mean to make my exit dramatic, but I hit the underside of the table with my knee when I stand, rattling the legs and knocking the pizza boxes askew. I meet no one’s gaze, but I feel them burning laser holes in my back.
"I just need some air," I mumble to no one in particular.

I don’t know where I’m going. The chances of me finding any air fresh enough to clear my head are about as good as growing propulsion thrusters on the soles of my shoes and flying to Upland, but I take the stairs anyway, bypassing the second floor landing. The third floor is unlit and even mustier, air closer, humidity thick in my lungs.

The staircase terminates at a trapdoor set into the ceiling. It takes all my strength to open it, both hands planted against the warped drywall, pushing up with my legs. Dust rains down on me, along with a couple of surprised spiders. No one has opened this door in a long time, and if I had been thinking straight I would have just turned around and gone back downstairs, but my head is light and my chest is full of helium—I can’t let anything stop my upward trajectory.

The trapdoor smacks open with a **thwack**, and I emerge onto the roof. The building is only three stories, but it’s one of the tallest in this sector. I look out across a ragged tumble of roofs that eventually fade to a uniform grey from the pollutants in the air. Antennas and sheets of beaten metal sprout from some of them, hungry for whatever net signal they can strain from the fetid atmosphere. My uplink is designed to connect to any satellite in orbit, no blocks or limitations on data-usage. This comes standard on all 3rd gen links, but only Elites have those. Even if a Lowlander could scrape together the credits for one, they would never have access to the commercial districts where they are sold. Net access isn’t like housing and food and clean water—it’s an infinite resource. Why restrict it?

My father’s voice in my head offers me the answer. *Information is a privilege, Rei, not a right.*

What must it be like to struggle just for the access to basic information?

My brooding is interrupted by an incoming call. I don’t recognize the user-tag, but I answer it anyway.

“Welcome home, Recruit.” My nerves are wound tight and screeching on turns, so for one ghastly moment I think the voice is my mother’s. But it’s too deep, and the accent isn’t right.

"...Lesedi?"

She laughs, bright and unstifled, and the sound swallows me in a cool wave of shadowy nostalgia: twin suns beating down on my bare shoulders, heat tightening my skin, my body sheened in a patina of salt and perspiration. Basking in enough open space and fresh oxygen to get drunk. The taste of Kharis’ mouth and the curl of his grin as he held up the bottle of amor.

“I thought I was high when I saw your tag come online.” Lesedi says. “I added you as soon as I got to the city, but I thought you would still be fucking around spaceside for another three months.”

Unease moves through me in an icy ripple. As soon as I’d connected to the Sky City server, anyone who had my tag on file would have been alerted—I would have flashed up on their readout as a potential contact. Throughout all my careful planning, that never occurred to me. Fuck.

*It’s alright.* My father has so many contacts that I doubt he’s even noticed me, and it’s not like he has time to check social media. And even if my mother saw I was here, she wouldn’t say anything. She’ll keep my secrets, just like I’m keeping hers.

*It’s alright,* I tell myself again, but my pulse doesn’t want to listen.

“Hey, Rei! Rei! You still there?”
"Yes, yes. I’m here." I turn my status to invisible, just to be safe. The left corner of my readout goes grey, indicating my removal from the network. The only way anyone will be able to see me is if I contact them first. “Sorry. I’m home early on equilibrium leave,” I say.

“Oh, right,” Lesedi says, making it clear that she has no idea what that means, and also doesn’t care. “I just wanted to make sure you’d be there before I commit myself to anything soul-crushing. My dad has been after me to go to one of them for years.”

I hunch against a sudden blast of cool wind off the bay, the air momentarily tinged with salt rather than just chemical smog. “It’s been a long and deranged day, Lesedi, so I may be thinking more slowly than usual, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Wait—are you at home?”

I scrape a heel against sooty shingles. “Not exactly.”

“Hold on.”

A grinning strawberry hops across my vision; Lesedi’s avatar. She is sending me a link. I open it to a Sky City news page, the colorful ads and flashing headlines prickling at my eyes. I scroll down a list of upcoming charity events and balls, the strawberry dancing ahead and highlighting an entry halfway down the page.

“Daisuke and Misaki Ryugazaki extend an open invitation for an evening banquet and salon at their new Elysia Heights Residence.” I read the text aloud and can barely force the last few words out amidst my laughter. The price of the tables render the words ‘open invitation’ absolutely ridiculous, and ‘salon’ makes it sound as though there will be a discussion, instead of my father just holding forth. The date is set for the following evening.

“I didn’t know this was happening,” I tell Lesedi. “My parents and I…haven’t been on the best of terms. I haven’t even been to the new house.”

“Hmm.” I picture Lesedi chewing on a nail, a habit I remember from the brief time we spent together. “Your mom seemed pretty cool, though.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I say.

I talk to Lesedi for longer than I mean to, spending nearly an hour crouched on that dirty roof, staring out at city lights that are at once familiar and utterly foreign to me. I have never seen them from this side. Sousuke would doubtlessly disapprove—all this time wasted on gossiping—but even if the conversation is of little substance, it’s pleasant to speak to someone who knows nothing of my troubles, to whom I have not bared my soul.

Just as I end the call, I hear a clatter and a yelp and look up at what seems to be a golden cloud floating beside the roof. “Rei, hey, can you—augh!”

Nagisa slips on the shingles and he slides until he’s hanging onto the roof by his fingertips. I yelp and lunge. I catch him by the wrist and he scrambles the rest of the way like a dog writhing up a muddy riverbank.

“What the—what the hell are you doing?” I pant. My heart radiates fear in cold pulses.

“Sorry,” he laughs, breathless. “I climbed up from the third floor balcony.” He collapses onto his
back, face tipped up toward the sky. “I wasn’t listening, I promise.”

That makes me even angrier. “That wasn’t what I was worried about!”

“Huh? Oh, come on! There was a balcony below me!”

“I know that.” At most he would have fallen four feet, but my animal brain hadn’t cared when I had seen him slipping. “You should just have taken the stairs like a normal person.”

“Even if I did fall all the way to the street—.” Nagisa peels a damp strand of hair off his cheek. “I would just have gotten a couple of dents. I bet Mr. Chelsea could’ve knocked ‘em out of me.” He does something silly and obscene with his eyebrows.

“Don’t,” I snap.

“Not feeling the jokes?”

“It’s not that, I just don’t like—.”

”—Being constantly reminded of what I am?” He says it with such blank casualness that I answer without thinking.

“Yes.”

His face shutters. I’ve said the wrong thing.

“I’m a droid, Rei.” Nagisa sits up, arms wrapping around his knees. His voice holds a thready tension that I’ve never heard there before. “You can forget what I am if I don’t remind you.” His spine curls forward, like a phantom hand is pushing down on his back, the weight of his words. “I can’t. I have to be me all the time. I can never stop remembering, and I don’t want to. I shouldn’t— shouldn’t have to be ashamed that I need different things than you. I know it weirds you out—.”

“It doesn’t—.”

His evades my touch, trapping his hands between his knees. “It’s alright. I know it does. It is pretty fucked up. But that doesn’t mean I like having to hide it from you. I’m not good at keeping secrets and watching what I say. I’m not—.” He laughs helplessly. “I’m not wired that way. I don’t want to pretend to be something I’m not when I’m with you.”

“I don’t want that either,” I say, and mean it. “That isn’t at all what I was trying to say—.”

“I know that.” This time when I hold out my arms, he comes to me. I push my fingers through the damp curls at the back of his neck, focusing on the constant hum in his chest, a heartbeat that is just a bit too fast to be natural. I thought I had been showing him how much I cared by refusing to acknowledge that he is rechargeable, an object, something created for a single purpose. Instead, I should have been telling him how much it doesn’t matter.

“You’re right.” I don’t have my thoughts in order, but I can spend time brooding on the particulars later. “No one should ever have to apologize for what they are. Just for...just for what they do.” I sound like a greeting card. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

I can tell from the tone and the speed of the response that it’s not, at least not entirely, but for now I’ll leave it be. I don’t want to argue, and I don’t want to interrupt the serenity of the moment. As
serene as a breezy, smog-choked moment on a roof can be.

“So are you going to hang out?” Nagisa lifts his head from my chest after a few minutes of quiet.

“Hmm?”

“With that Lesedi girl.”

”I thought you said you weren’t eavesdropping.”

“Well, you were talking pretty loud.” He pushes his head against my hand like a greedy cat. I keep stroking him.

“I don’t think I’ll have time to see her,” I say. “This isn’t supposed to be a vacation.”

“Mmm…feels like one to me.” His eyes flutter closed and he grins. “We even fucked in a hotel.” My chuckle makes his smile get bigger. “And I’ve never been up so high before.”

“You’ve been to space,”

He headbutts me gently. “You know what I mean. I’ve never been high up where I can look down.”

“There’s not really much to look at here.”

He sighs, like I’m being totally ridiculous. I look off across the Lowland rooftops, toward the hazy glow of the city center, and the dense curtain of dark that is the bay to our left. I suppose he’s right, in a way. There is plenty to look at, provided you aren’t too picky about what you see.

*One day I’ll take you up higher than this,* I find myself promising him silently. *Somewhere you can look down and see nothing but beautiful things.*
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the longer delay between chapters; it's been a busy summer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After 48 hours of brutal consciousness I expect sleep to come easily, but I spend most of the night flinging myself from side to side on the spongy mattress. The room cycles through periods of hot and cold, and I kick the sheets off repeatedly only to drag them up again, sweating and shivering in turns. Nagisa starts off the night lying beside me, but around 02:00 he rises silently, body leaving a warm indent in the futon. I know he knows I’m awake, but he doesn’t say anything, so neither do I. He pulls on his pants and his jacket and slips out the door.

With him gone, the tension in me ebbs somewhat. I have never shared a bed with anyone before; it isn’t as comfortable as books and vids make it out to be.

I drift off, but my brain continues to pick at my worries in my sleep, fidgeting them from hand to hand, my dreams congested with unreadable maps and empty rooms and voices that cry out in anguish.

When I wake, the light is full enough to stubbornly penetrate the filthy window, and that in conjunction with the sleep crusting the corners of my eyes makes me think I must have been out for awhile, but my uplink informs me it’s barely past 08:00. Nagisa isn’t here, and there’s no way for me to tell whether he’d returned at any point in the night.

I stagger to the bathroom at the end of the hall and splash water on my face, taking care not to get any in my mouth. Even Upland tap water can be questionable; I shudder to think what havoc this stuff could wreak on my gastric system.

By the time I’ve combed my fingers through my hair and dried my face with the corner of my sleeve, I’ve resolved to talk to Sousuke. For all his contemptuous superiority, he is still best-placed to dredge up some ideas for where to begin my search. He knows Lowland and he knows about the Vanishers.

When I make my way down to the dining room, I find no one but the pale, unpleasant girl who’d shown me to my room the evening before. She tells me Sousuke had left just after sunrise for the East Side.

“Do you know when he plans to return?”

The girl taps her temple with an exaggerated flourish, like she is adjusting an uplink, although she isn’t wearing one. “Hmm…yeah, let me just check my itinerary…oh, look, he’s coming back at… none of your fucking business.” She turns up a million-credit smile and presents me with her back, gliding smoothly out of the room. I’m left with the stack of empty pizza boxes and the scattered Upland maps that only Gou can read.

Again, I have overestimated my own importance. Sousuke is the leader of a crime syndicate. Surely he has more lucrative activities than waiting around for his guests to wake up. He’s only
allowing us to stay as a favor to Rin and Gou, but his advice last night is clearly the only help he
intends to offer us.

The day is already hot, heavy and damp this close to the bay, sticking my shirt to the small of my
back. My skin is prickly with sweat and my hair needs to be washed. I feel the weight of impotence
pulling me down, the gathering shame like a ball of clay in my guts.

I can’t do this.

Amakata is going to die, the Vanishers are going to continue to snatch innocent people off the
street and turn them into willing slaves, and Rin is never going to walk properly again. We will all
be court-martialed when we return to the Platform. I’ve ruined my squad’s careers, their futures.
Tears bubble a threat in my throat and my nose burns. I force a few deep breaths in and out of the
core of me.

I need to find my squad. There are voices, but none that I recognize, and all of them glide from
beneath doors or drift down steps. I’m not in the mood to awkwardly insert myself into the
conversations of gangsters.

I make for the front of the hotel but take a wrong turn, traversing a dim, airless hall and emerging
through a screen door into a crumbling back lot. The walls here are shorter and less solid than the
ones around the front of the compound, but they are crowned with spirals of razor wire, and if I
hold my breath I can hear the distant thrum of electrical charge.

This whole lot seems to be a roost for flocks of rusty vehicles, most of them permanently grounded
—missing front wheels or doors or even engine cores. They are kept upright by a collection of
cement blocks and metal struts. One car—an older model with a flaking blue and white paint job—
has a gaping hole in its chassis, like a metal-toothed monster had taken a bite.

A shiny bald head pops up from behind what I recognize as Sousuke’s bike. Chelsea the mechanic
blinks sweat out of his eyes. The tops of his bare shoulders are turning pink under the sun.

“Hey there, Fancy. You lost?”

“No,” I say. “I’m looking for my squad.”

Chelsea snags a rag from his waistband and mops his face. “Unless they’re broke and gas-
powered, they ain’t here.” He turns to toss the rag onto a cluttered worktable, revealing that the
tattoos that cover his arms continue onto his back—a few more flowers and leaves, but the
majority of the skin is taken up by a huge black bird with its wings unfurled, beak open in an
shows me yellow teeth and I fight a grimace.

“Rin and Gou left? What—when did they—why?”

Chelsea lifts and drops a loose shoulder. “Had shit to do? You need them for something?”

“No.” Yes. “I was just wondering.” I need them to tell me what to do now.

“Haven’t seen Grouchey or Smiley around much this morning either,” Chelsea says. “Could be
they went with.”

I don’t need to ask who he means, and he’s probably right. I doubt Haruka is going to let Rin out of
his sight if he doesn’t have to.
“Jailbait went out with the boss this morning. Pretty sure he was up all night.”

I take a slow moment to work out what he’s talking about, and then I’m forced to wait while Chelsea slaps the bike to life, its oily roar torturously loud against the metal walls. He lets it run as he checks it over, and my heart smashes up against my ribcage in time.

“Who do you—.” I swallow past the chalk in my throat as the engine settles back down. “Who’s Jailbait?”

Chelsea flicks sweat off his nose. “He’s yours, ain’t he? Sorry. I know he’s probably older than he looks.”

“He left… with Sousuke.”

“Sure as shit.” My Elite composure must be even more of a spectacular failure than usual, because Chelsea goes on consolingly, “I’m sure he didn’t mean nothing by it. Kid just looked bored.”

“Thanks.” I force it out stiffly, turning to go. Chelsea chirps a little whistle and I look back just in time to fumble the bit of plastic he tosses to me to my chest. “What—.”

It’s a silicone uplink patch, like the one I’d used to open a closed circuit with Amakata.

Chelsea transfers his attention back to the bike. “If it was me trying to hide my illegal sexbot business underneath Upland, I’d be using a cloak to disguise the energy output from my equipment.”

“Yes,” I agree slowly, unsure of his intent. I’d taken it as a given that the Vanishers would disguise their signal. “That’s part of the problem.”

“I’d also bet that most Upland hackers within range spend more time with their fingers on their junk instead of sunk in the net. So I wouldn’t waste money guarding against anything higher than industry grade surveillance gear.”

I raise a hand to adjust my glasses, a nervous habit I thought I had grown out of. I haven’t worn glasses for months. “What are you saying?”

“Not saying anything. Just that if you happened to get your hands on good quality tech—.” He shrugs, blue and silver fish leaping up his biceps. “You could trace a signal down from anywhere in the district.”

I smooth my fingers wonderingly over the glossy strip of silicone and smart plastic. “I thought you were a mechanic.”

Chelsea’s laugh rattles like an engine. “Hoverbike’s not the only things need machining, boy. Now fuck off and let me work.”

I wander the hotel, but I can’t find the grumpy one or the smiley one, or anyone at all. Gou’s and Rin’s links are both switched off, and I don’t even know Haruka’s net profile. Nagisa doesn’t have an uplink, and even if he did, he’s busy off making new friends. Wouldn’t want to disturb his exciting field trip to the East District.

I hover indecisively over Makoto’s link. He’d pick up, and he’d be willing to listen to my quickly coalescing new plan, but he would also attempt to be reasonable at me. This is too dangerous, too
soon, you can’t go alone. Any objections he might bring up I’ve already thought of and discounted for myself. Besides, none of my squad had informed me this morning when they’d decided to fly off to do fuck knows what.

I’d have been recommended for tactical if my exam results hadn’t been altered. I don’t need anyone to approve my decisions.

Ultimately I decide to leave a note, even if it does slightly undermine my wounded indignation. I open a document in a group chat, addressing it to everyone I have an uplink profile for, detailing where I’ve gone, but not what I intend to do. Better not to have that anywhere in cyberspace, even in a secured chat. After some deliberation I arrange to have the message forwarded three hours from now. No need to bother them right away.

The range on Chelsea’s patch is impressive, but it still won’t work from Lowland. Technically I have access to Upland; if I wanted to I could head to the nearest access point and flash my ID chip. I’d instantly be entitled to enjoy all the benefits of an Elite citizen of Sky City, with just the unfortunate side effect of being the cyber-equivalent of pointing a laser-sight at my chest.

Good thing I know someone on the inside.

I’m not about to make Lesedi descend into the pungent ditch of Lowland, so I take a taxi to the nearest access depot, where the public can ascend if they have an escort or a work order. I’ve never had to use one before, stand exposed outside the checkpoint gate alone. I’m already beginning to gather looks from a group of men loitering around a cigarette machine across the street, and I try my best to ignore them as I wait. I miss the dense assurance of Makoto and Gou at my back, Rin’s humor, Nagisa’s boundless optimism. Maybe I’d made a mistake in coming alone after all.

I’m starting to wind myself into nervous spirals when a car pulls up on the opposite side of the street, sleek, silver, and driverless, the back windows tinted dark. The door opens and Lesedi bounds out in a glittering explosion of pink braids and white dress. She antelopes across three lanes of stalled traffic, ignoring the shouts and lewd whistles. She is the loudest and brightest thing here, standing out like an upscale high-rise installed in a neighborhood of low-rent government housing.

Diving against my chest, Lesedi hugs me tight around the middle. She smells like coconut and sea salt, like she’s brought Aurora home to Earth with her. The men around the cigarette machine are even more interested in us now.

“Glad to see you too,” I gasp around constricted lungs “Lesedi, maybe we should—.”

She snickers against my neck. “It’s cool. You have a gun, right?”

“Uh, I’m not cleared for firearms—.”

Lesedi laughs until I can feel the humid rush of her breath on my neck. “Come on, Mom. Let’s get out of here.”

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After the cramped, dangerously outdated shuttles and hoverbikes not meant to carry more than one passenger, Lesedi’s car is so jarringly luxurious that I almost feel like I’m dreaming. The seats are leather and the AI that asks Lesedi for her destination has perfect intonation and tonal pitch. She tells it to go home and the car hooks itself onto the magnetic track, settling into a single speed. We will feel the acceleration when we begin to climb, but for now I have the unnerving sensation that
we aren’t going anywhere.

Lesedi opens the compartment beneath the seat, glass clinking, and icy blast of coolant rolls over my feet. While she’s turned away I press the silicone patch to the back of my neck and begin the scan. The pulse of the signal is slow and regular, like the push and pull of a warm tide.

“Want a drink?” she asks, emerging with two bright red bottles with their labels all in Arabic.

“Isn’t it a little early for that?”

She bonks me very lightly on the side of the head with the base of a bottle. “It’s soda, nerd.”

Still arguably a little early—before noon at my mother’s house it’s coffee, fresh juice, or nothing—but I twist the cap off anyway. I’m thirsty enough to settle for sugar and chemicals.

"I’m glad you called. Khari’s away until next week and all of my friends don’t get up until the sun starts to go down.” Lesedi collapses back against the leather in a sprawl, holding her soda in a delicate, two-fingered grip. “I’ve always been a morning person.”

I laugh. I’d met her in the morning, although she had still been drunk from the night before. Apart from the change in coloration—thick pink braids and a spring green eye augment—Lesedi is exactly as I remember her. She still looks forever on the cusp of a laugh, which will most likely be at your expense.

"Hey.” She peels at the edges of the soda bottle label, her nails almost the exact same shade of red. “I looked up whatever the hell that was—Equilibrium Leave.”

I’m sweating, the back of my neck sticking to the headrest. “So?” The AC turns the tips of my fingers to ice.

“Sooo…according to Confederacy mandate you only need it every six months. We were on Aurora less than eight weeks ago.”

Aurora is one of the planets on the list of acceptable Equilibrium locales, its gravity rating almost identical to Earth’s. “I…what are you—.” I’m scrabbling. I’d come up with a grand list of excuses, but I hadn’t expected to have to pull one out for Lesedi.

“Chill.” She laughs against the mouth of her bottle. “I’m not going to report you. I just want to know why you’re home and not, like, at home. With your mom and dad.”

I say nothing.

"You’re not injured again, are you?” She gives me a theatrical once-over, like she is checking for a sling or festering rash.

“I’m not injured.” For all its luxury, there’s nothing in this car to look at in here but her and the opaque windows. “But one of my squad is. I don’t know how much I can tell you, but…” My voice slides away as the results of the scan begin to come in.

Our speed and the magnets on the highway have caused some interference, but Chelsea had been right. This is good quality tech. Little crackles of feedback hit me every time the link comes up against a blocked signal, but my brain doesn’t interpret them as pain like they did with the com link I’d used with Amakata. The patch doesn’t make the signals any more visible, but it spatters against them like raindrops on a perfectly clean sheet of glass.
“So are you going to tell me anything?” Lesedi’s voice drifts in, but it’s just another burst static. So many blocked signals in Upland. Is everyone just paranoid, or are criminal organizations lurking in every wine cellar?

The highest concentration is a few hundred blocks away, almost out of range—the signals there become a downpour that spatters and runs together until it is impossible to make out individual droplets. The further we delve into Upland the stronger it becomes. I’ve never used this software before, and it takes a few frustrated minutes before I figure out how overlay it to a map application. The area appears as a dark splotch right where the regular criss-cross diagram of city blocks gives way to the long, curving streets of the neighboring district. I check the name in the corner of my readout.

*Elysia Heights.*

This map is downloaded from a planning site—there are no individual addresses, just block numbers stamped over square suggestions of buildings. The center of the concentration pulses around a large bold 47.

“Rei. Rei, what the heck?” Lesedi jostles my shoulder. “Rei—.”

”Stop touching me!” I snap. “The physical contact interferes with the signal.”

“Shit, okay.” She yanks her fingers back. “What signal?”

My chest aches and my lungs feel two-dimensional as I scrabble back through my archives for the flash my mother had sent me months ago, a few days after the explosion that had obliterated our old apartment. *It’s fine,* I tell myself. *You’re just remembering wrong.*

I’m not remembering wrong. The strongest signal in Upland, the most likely location for the Vanisher’s headquarters, is beneath my parents’ new house, or very close by.

“Rei, I know you’re trying to be secretive and dramatic or something, but are you sure you’re okay?”

The soda is a sugary coating of slime in my throat, mingling with the acid burn in my stomach. My body squirms with the coiling bunch of nausea.

“Hey, are you going to throw up?” Lesedi asks, steady. “You need me to pull over?”

I shake my head. If I vomit onto the perfect sidewalk of an Upland byway, I’ll have a flock of maintenance droids ready to bombard me with citations, and I don’t want to be anywhere near law-enforcement AI while I’m wearing illegal tech. I take several trembling breaths, holding them in for as long as I can. The patch continues to buzz against my nervous system like an angry insect.

I disable it, then jerk and curl forward in the seat when something damp and cold presses against the side of my neck.

“It’s water.” Lesedi puts the bottle down beside me and then backs up along the bench seat, giving me space. Her dress bunches up against her thighs, flashing miles of taut dark skin. She doesn’t seem to notice. “You okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” My throat is so constricted I barely hear myself. I wrench the water open and down half of it in two giant gulps, plastic bottle collapsing in on itself. I lean back against the seat and close my eyes, try to settle my breathing into a rhythm like Captain Sasabe had made us practice.
Panic is your worst enemy on the battlefield. Worse than sheer bug-fuck incompetence.

When enough time has gone by that my heart is no longer pounding through my entire body, I open my eyes.

“I heard you’re going to a Salon tonight,” I say.

Lesedi’s concern phases into razor-sharp interest. “Describe this Salon.”

“Expensive, pretentious, doubtlessly uncomfortable and boring.” I shove sweaty bangs off my forehead, steeling myself for what will doubtless prove a very poor choice. “Do you need a plus-one?”

Lesedi cackles. “Describe this plus-one.”

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Coming to Upland with Lesedi had been ill-advised. My newest plan is bordering on insanity.

“Calm.” Lesedi pats me on the cheek, one of her long nails catching at my skin. “When I’m done, your own squad won’t recognize you.”

She sits me down in her bedroom, facing a vanity overflowing with brushes and pots of shimmery makeup, twined around with a gauzy black and silver scarf that looks like it may have been used to wipe up spilled nail polish on multiple occasions. Disregarding her snowy white carpet, Lesedi goes at my hair with a pair of motorized trimmers that look like a Kassadian torture device, before slathering it all with a crème bleach that smells like the inside of a janitor’s closet. My scalp begins burning immediately.

“Oww,” Drops run down the back of my neck and Lesedi smacks away my hand as I raise it automatically to wipe them away. “Price of beauty, princess.” She is wickedly delighted by this whole process.

I find I don’t mind the sting. It helps to have a sensation to grab onto and pick apart, better than focusing on what I’m planning to do this evening. As has become typical, my feelings are firmly divided. Part of me is shaking, ready to begin hyperventilating like I had been in the car, and the other is icily calm. This has always been a possibility, just not one that I’ve ever allowed myself to consider.

You don’t know anything for sure, says that voice in my head, trying to calm me for once rather than stir me up. There has to be more than one house in that block, and you don’t know that the energy reading is coming from the Vanishers lab. This could all just be you leaping to desperate, tightly-wound conclusions.

I wash the bleach out of my hair with strict orders to leave the conditioner in for at least three minutes. I count the seconds off instead of setting a timer in my uplink, drowning out everything but the blank numbers. The water heats almost immediately and the pressure is so high that after just a minute my back and head are smarting. The shower is big enough for three people, the bathtub big enough for five. The counters and floor are the same gleaming white as Lesedi’s room.

I’m careful not to look in the mirror as I towel off, but the bits of hair I see out of the corner of my eye are a sickly egg yellow.

“You aren’t going to just leave it like this, are you?”
“Well, the best way to blend in is to stand out.” She snorts at my growing expression of panic. “Sit down.”

Despite the conditioner, my hair feels crinkly and brittle. Lesedi tells me that’s normal, and that it should improve after I wash it a few more times. I spend another tense hour under her trimmers and brushes. She’s right—the person who emerges does not look much like me at all. My hair is buzzed short on one side, left fashionably shaggy on the other. Lesedi had bought a palette of makeup in my skin tone (delivered to the house by AI packaging services within twenty minutes of her purchase) using it to change the shape of my face as completely as if I’m wearing a mask.

When Nagisa had put makeup on me on Ithaca, I had looked tough and desperate for a fight, ready to wrap my fingers around an unsuspecting throat. Lesedi paints a different picture—haughty and assured, ready to wrap my fingers around an unsuspecting wallet.

“No good,” I say when she shows me in the gold-edged hand mirror.

“What?” She holds up the mirror and checks the back, like she thinks it might be defective. “Yes good. You look terrific. If you liked girls I’d start worrying about my self control.”

She sticks the mirror back in front of me, and I lift one brow, then the other, forcing my expression as aggressively neutral as possible. “I look like my father. Do it over.”

Lesedi tosses the mirror onto her vanity, knocking over a can of hairspray. The scarf slithers to the carpet. “Do it your fucking self, Your Majesty.”

I itch at the strange new sensation of the shaved hair on the left side of my head. “I thought you wanted me to go to this party with you.”

Lesedi crosses her arms and slouches back against the post of her bed. “I do. Enough to deal with your moody bullshit and dramatic silences. But I’m not about to go to all the trouble of beautifying your busted ass just to listen to you order me around. And I know you didn't come here just to hang out with me. Jerk,” she adds.

“Lesedi—.” I grunt and massage at the ache in my temples. It’s been a long time since I’ve used an uplink for any extended period of time, and the smell of the bleach certainly hasn’t helped. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I’m being insensitive, I’ve just been under a lot of stress recently—.”

“Seriously, Rei? Who hasn’t.”

I snort. “Really? What could you possibly…” I trail off as the rage blooms in Lesedi’s flawless green eyes and I realize what I’m saying.

“What could someone like you possibly have to complain about?

“You think you know me, Ryugazaki?” Her warm voice has gone steady and perfectly controlled, Elite ice solidifying her veins. “We hung out for a week two months ago. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

Engrained instinct wants to snap back I know enough, but I don’t have time for a stand-off of Upland posturing. Lesedi isn’t the problem, as much as she reminds me uncomfortably of my old lifestyle She’s my friend, and she’s already helped me more than she knows.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, and this time I mean it. “I’m not thinking straight.”

Lesedi’s posture remains rigid and her arms don’t uncross, but she says, “Apology accepted. Now
will tell me what the *fuck* is going on?"

I stand up and take the time to pick the scarf up from the floor and right the hairspray, retrieving the mirror and handing it back to Lesedi like an offering of peace. “I can’t tell you everything,” I warn. “This isn’t just about me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. Sit back down. I’ll do something else with your eyebrows. And maybe we *should* color your hair.” She drums her fingers on her lips, considering me from the front and back. “How do you feel about blue?”

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Chapter End Notes

There's the blue hair. NOW ALL COLORING IS CORRECT.

This will probs be the last update until early November, since I'm going to be abroad in Japan for a couple of months. I'll still be on tumblr, but probably not as often.
Several arguments and an unreal amount of makeup remover later, my disguise is ready for a dry-run.

Lesedi’s parents return home a few hours into our makeover session, which is why I end up shunted out through a maintenance entrance into a bare back hallway. In order to avoid suspicion I will have to present myself as her date, and I can hardly do that respectably while emerging from her room. I follow a pattern of orange lights stamped into the floor to an elevator, where two droids and a human janitor give me a bored onceover before one of the droids hits the button for the lobby. They are probably accustomed to Elite kids creeping out—after all, they work in Lesedi’s building. The four of us ride downward in silence.

I circle furtively to the front entrance, twitchy and stifled in my new clothes. This transformation is even more discomfiting than when I had let Ola the Hazuki droid dress me on Ithaca. Everything there had been alien—the station, my companions, the beginnings of the realization that the galaxy might not be how I’d always imagined it. Here, I am surrounded by the familiar. The proud, glittering heads of the skyscrapers, the grey-green haze of twilight, the constant track and flicker of my neural uplink as the concierge bows me through the front door. The narrow echo of my shoes on the lobby floor.

I ride a much more comfortable elevator back up to Lesedi’s apartment, well-lit and air-conned. All three walls are mirrored, so I focus on the grain in the wooden floor. Either I’ll look too much like myself, or not like myself at all, and I don’t want to stare at either of those possibilities for thirty floors.

I’ve barely stepped in range of the motion sensor before Lesedi throws the door open, cooing shrilly and kissing me on both cheeks like it’s been months since she’s seen me, rather than minutes. She winks and grabs my hands, bracelets jingling as she marches me into the sitting room to meet her parents.

My pulse doubles and my fingers go clammy in her grip. Mr. and Mrs. Batma know me—or they know Rei Ryugazaki. We have never met in person, but I’ve been on the feeds and Lesedi has talked about meeting me in Aurora. If I can’t fool them I have no chance of fooling anyone who knows me better.

Lesedi’s mother and father aren’t much interested in their daughter’s date—clearly I am not the first she’s brought home. Her mother adopts momentary enthusiasm when Lesedi mentions I’ll be accompanying her to the Ryugazaki gala that evening (I’m sick with churning nerves, certain that the mention of my family name will trigger some sort of recognition) but only long enough to declare it wonderful that Lesedi is finally showing interest in something worthwhile. Mrs. Batma gives me a onceover, and I try to picture what she is seeing. Blue hair shaved on one side, pink lips, two rings in each earlobe. Lesedi had wanted to put one in my eyebrow as well, but I had begged
my way out under the expedient that I couldn’t afford risking an infection right now. The swoops of pigment around my eyes makes them look longer and intensely purple, and the contouring makeup has changed the shape of my jaw. It is usually, admittedly, rather square and abrupt; this has rendered it slightly more androgynous. I am almost pretty, which is never a word I would have used to describe myself. Nagisa, maybe Haruka, but definitely not me.

Lesedi introduces me as Eion, an uncommon name for Sky City, and then vanishes back toward her room to prepare, leaving me alone to make awkward conversation. My throat is so dry I’m surprised it doesn’t creak as I respond to their pleasantries. But to them I am just another bored, arrogant Elite boy, like all the other bored, arrogant boys they had grown up with and would one day expect their daughter to marry. They see dress slacks—a bit too tight to be entirely respectable—a shirt from a Upland designer’s fall collection, a coat with a row of bronze buttons and the military collar that has been so popular recently, and large, lace-up brown boots that clash with everything else in the outfit, which Lesedi tells me is the point.

She comes back in a short black dress gathered at the waist by an enormous silk flower, carrying a long, stiff purse that looks like it could double as a bludgeoning weapon. She and I descend to the lobby and back into her ground car, where I immediately move to bury my face in my hands and suck in a few calming breaths.

Lesedi grips my shoulder. My jacket is too thick to pinch through, so she digs her nails into the side of my neck. “I swear, if you smear that eye shadow I will strangle you and toss your body out onto the highway.”

I yank my hands away from my face with an irritated grunt. Yet another thing to worry about—scraping off half my disguise with an errant brush of fingers. Why couldn’t my parents have thrown a masquerade?

Elysia Heights isn’t far from Lesedi’s home, but the road alert at this time of evening is at red, and not even Elites have devised a way to bypass a Sky City traffic jam. The car pulls into the fastest lane, but we are still barely traveling at 15 mph, slow enough to send shocks of nervous frustration trembling through my limbs. I sit back and try to remember not to touch my face.

The clean grey stone of the sidewalks gleams in the slanted evening light, maintenance AIs out in force to buff and scrape every inch of Upland, covering up any imperfections with a thick, efficient layer of polish. The people here are equally flawless, all of their faces perfectly reflective surfaces. They could be happy or sad, cruel or kind, and you would never know from looking at them, talking to them, spending hours in their company. I wonder if any of them have emotional augments, and whether it was by choice.

The day continues its slow death as we creep downtown, the blue-grey sky streaked through with hot orange and candy pink. We pass shop windows and colored lights, holograms styled to look like old fashioned chalkboards or the pages of a book, menus and showtimes written out in an invisible hand in continuous scroll. I used to belong here. According to my ident chip, I still do.

Lesedi watches me watch the street. I had told her only enough to explain my presence in the city: a friend is in trouble, and there is information at my parents’ house that might help. A bare scaffold of the truth. She hadn’t asked what sort of information, for which I’m grateful. I don’t have an adequate lie prepared.

An alert has been flashing in my peripheral vision for the better part of an hour. I know who it is from, and I haven’t disabled it, even though it’s making my headache worse. Penance, maybe.

Now, as we pass beneath the Ueno Bridge into Elysia Heights, I pull up my messages. Or message. I only have one.
The connection hisses, feedback streaking down my spine. It’s been recorded by a really shitty uplink.

“Hey, Rei.” Gou’s voice is oddly thin, stripped down over the poor connection. “We got your message. I’m sure you’re off in Upland getting your junk waxed or armpits freshened or whatever you rich fucks do up there, but could you maybe do me and Nagisa a favor? Wherever you are, could you please find a spoon—a big, really rusty, grody spoon, and could you please go fuck yourself with that spoon? Because that’s what you deserve for pulling this—a big piece of cutlery in the asshole.”

I wince and the message hisses to an end, a generic AI reading out the time and date recorded. Gou doesn’t like surprises, doesn’t like things she hasn’t prepared to navigate. Neither do I, usually.

Part of me wants to call this off, declare it a mistake and resolve to come back when conditions are more favorable. But I don’t think I will have a better opportunity to walk into my parents’ house unobserved, at least not within any reasonable timeframe. Perhaps on my next real stretch of leave, but by then Amakata will be dead and Rin will have been packed off to a desk job. This plan, however ill advised, is the only one I have.

Still, I doubtless deserve every word Gou said. I’m glad Nagisa doesn’t have an uplink of his own. I don’t want to know what he thinks of me right now. I lean against the window, careful not to touch my face to the glass, and think about the last time I’d seen him, flushed and grinning on the roof of the hotel, telling me that it felt like he was on vacation, that he had never been so high up. It feels like it’s been days since I’ve seen him, rather than barely twenty-four hours.

Lesedi leans toward me. Her eyelids glow with gold powder and her lips are painted a plum wine red. The pink braids have been knotted together and bound to the top of her head by some unseen sorcery, and she’d done all of that in the few minutes I’d made experimental small talk with her parents. “What’s wrong?”

Gou had not said anything of particular strategic import, so I play the message aloud. Better than having to repeat it. Lesedi listens with a thin, frowning line between her eyebrows, until Gou mentions inserting cutlery into assholes. Then she laughs so hard she spits.

“That’s one of your squadmates?”

“Our navigator. She’s, uh, forceful.”

“I like her,” Lesedi says. “We could use a few more girls like her in Upland.”

“I’ll tell her you said so.” Though the day that Gou Matsuoka mingles with Elites is the day the sun turns green and we make a peace treaty with the Kassadians. I should call her back and tell her what I’m planning, at least try to include my squad that much, but I don’t really feel like being shouted at right now. My head hurts and the skin around my hairline still stings from the bleach.

“That name she mentioned—Nagisa? Is that your boyfriend?”

I hesitate for a fraction of a second. “Yeah.” It still feels so strange to say so. Like I’m talking about someone else.

“So he’s the reason you broke Khari’s heart.”

“*What*?” I snort. “I didn’t break his heart. We kissed once and he tried to get me to take ardor.
Then some boys came in with a Hazuki droid and we left.” Not exactly what dreams are made of.

“I heard about that.” Lesedi fidgets idly through the cooler, picking over bottles of soda and sparkling water, the glass necks kissing with little tinkling chimes. “He’s weird about droids.”

Khari and I have that in common, even if his style of ‘being weird’ had seemed to manifest in sympathy and mild disgust, like watching an animal writhing in agony with no idea of how to help it.

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Elysia Heights is an old district—old money, old values, old infrastructure. The properties are broad, more widely spaced than any others in Upland, separated from the street by high, ivy-swarmed walls. When the car crests hills I can just make out the peaks of roofs set back behind well-tended gardens. The streets are quiet apart from the occasional maintenance drone. No one but residents, guests, and registered couriers are permitted into the Heights. Privacy, closely guarded isolation, the ability to forget that the world extends beyond your front door—just a few perks of the cost of living.

This is what humans do. All humans, I’m finding, not just Elites. We dig out a place for ourselves and the things we care about, bury them in the comforting peace of safety and routine. We force order—lines of houses with matching windows, perfectly square patches of lawn, gardens trimmed down to the last errant petal—and tell ourselves that the world makes sense. I’d done it myself—traced my life’s line of best fit, splayed it out like ordered lines of code, one command leading to another, and then another, and a another. I can’t see them now. I don’t rightly know If I’d want to.

Acres of walls flash by and we pass beneath a broad arch. The markings in the stone look like grinning faces, but we are moving too fast to tell if they are carvings or just my nerves and the building tension. I’m supposed to come home to this place when my tour is over, and that thought chills me. I’ve never been anywhere so grand that felt so desolate.

The autopilot turns a smooth corner and the stillness of the scene dissolves, if not the air of virtual reality. A line of luxury cars leads down from a bright house on the hill, its gates open like grasping iron arms. The lawn is smooth and broken into alternating blocks of forest green and lime, like a grassy chessboard. My family’s house stands behind it, and somewhere beneath lurks a lab that cuts people apart and fills them with circuitry.

The valets are droids.

That isn’t uncommon in itself; service jobs are what simple AI are designed for. But when the car door is opened by a blank smile and soft, unthreatening eyes, my skin crawls. My father doesn’t hire nonhuman servants. Seeing them here, at one of his parties, fills me with a nervousness I can’t explain.

Another valet helps Lesedi out of the car, and if she finds the presence of AI at the yearly gala of the Human’s First Alliance strange, she doesn’t let on. In true Elite fashion she wears nothing but polite interest in everything happening around her. I doubt she’s noticed. This is a social engagement for her, not a political one. Beyond the vicarious thrill of dressing me up and sailing me in undetected, this evening is insignificant. Sounds nice. Relaxing.

We traverse the tumbled quartz driveway, and I am so focused on behaving normally and avoiding eye contact with anyone that I stumble on the first step up onto the porch. The woman beside the
door says, “Careful! The steps are a bit shallow.”

My throat seizes and my stomach drops. It feels like I’ve stumbled on a dozen steps instead of one.

Backlit by a warm amber light, dressed in an evening gown with a clutch of tiny roses pinned to her breast, is my mother. She smiles, lips painted a pale pink, cheeks lightly rouged. She looks so soft and welcoming, a goddess of the hearth, and for a moment I want to collapse into her arms.

Instead I freeze in the doorway. Now my lungs feel like they’ve fallen down the stairs, and gotten tangled up on the way. She recognizes me instantly. I can’t believe I thought that dyed hair and some new clothes would hide me from my own family.

I brace myself for shock, anger, but I get…nothing at all. Recognition uploads into her eyes, but none of it spills over into dismay. It a simple assessment of the facts, like a detective inspecting a murder scene. Body, blood spatter, broken window.

Son. Not in space. Here.

Lesedi installs herself between us in a pink cloud of shimmering eyes and gracious manners. “Mrs. Ryugazaki, thank you so much for your invitation!” She takes my mother’s hand and clasps it between both of hers. “I’m Lesedi Batma,” she adds helpfully. “We met at the Lotus Ball last winter.”

My mother has never attended the Lotus Ball. In fact, she has expressed distaste at the sight of the flower itself, calling it drooping and dreary. Regardless, she shakes Lesedi’s hand with every indication of eagerness. “Of course! So silly of me to forget.”

Why let reality get in the way of courtesy?

My mother’s attention only shifts back to me when Lesedi makes introductions—Eion, her out-of-town boyfriend, so excited to be in Sky City, less-than-confident in his language skills. I’ll have to remember to try to fake an accent when I speak. Misaki Ryugazaki takes my hand and looks me right in the eye. “A pleasure to meet you,” she says, and that’s all. She releases us and we are swept onward in the current of the crowd.

The chessboard pattern continues in the front hall, squares of polished semi-precious stones—jade, onyx, quartz crystal. They shine beneath the soft white lamps, which are brilliant and clean after the harsh flash of the colorful argon lights of Lowland, the buzzing fluorescents of the Platform. Skirts swish and heels click, notes in a piece of familiar music that nevertheless jars my nerves, all my strings out of tune. I am sweating through my shirt, skin prickling against the silk.

Lesedi nudges me with her purse. “I told you it would work.”

She is glowing with success, and it takes me a moment to realize that she means my disguise. From her perspective it had done exactly what we’d wanted.

“Yeah,” I say faintly, because beyond explaining that the woman who looks like my mother is in fact an illegally produced droid who has for more to lose from her identity being revealed than I do, I can’t do anything but agree. “Glad it worked.”

We wash up in a wide ballroom at the rear of the house, greeted by colorful light cast by hanging lamps. The back wall is made of five tall windows, all of them open onto the evening. A string quartet plays on a small stage, their movements utterly smooth. I would have to get closer to decide if they are artificial, or just extremely proficient.
“Let’s get a drink,” Lesedi says. She leads, and I follow. I feel shaken and swoopy from the spike of adrenaline, already exhausted. I’m used to the dense press of a crowd, the heat and scent of many bodies in one place, and god knows the people at my parents’ gala smell better than a Platform full of soldiers, but the colors and affected laughter, the smiles that become grimaces when you look twice, are an altogether different experience. I’m out of practice.

A waiter in black offers me a cut crystal goblet of something blue threaded through with streaks of silvery white, like a galaxy in a glass. It’s cool and fruity and probably much more alcoholic than it tastes. I have to force myself to take sips rather than gulps; my mouth is incredibly dry. Tiny ripples paint the surface as my fingers shake.

“Have a meatball or something,” Lesedi says, gesturing to the spread on the buffet table—meats and cheese and various delicate crackers, platters stacked high with cut fruit. “I don’t think I can carry you if you faint.”

“I’m not going to faint,” I say, muscle twitching in my jaw. I gouge a bit of soft, nut-encrusted cheese off a slab and transfer it to a cracker. It spreads sour-sharp on my tongue and I almost gag. Months of space rations do not make for a particularly refined palate. I resolve to avoid the caviar.

I nibble on crackers and try to still the thrashing of my heart, try to not constantly glance into every corner of the room, searching for him. The ballroom is crowded, so my chances of remaining undetected are better here, but I can’t convince the panicked rabbit of my heart. Every middle-aged man in a suit jacket becomes my father.

Lesedi tells me, “I need to mingle or we are going to start to stand out. There’s only so much standing around with my taciturn foreigner boyfriend that I can pass off.”

I make a reflexive noise of protest. My brain is a twisted circuit board of fears.

“You used to do this all the time,” Lesedi encourages. “I saw you on the feeds. If it gets too intimidating just pretend that everyone here is—.”

“What, naked?”

Lesedi twitches her nose. “I was going to say ‘marked for death’, but whatever you’re into, I guess.” She leans in close, lips nearly pressed to my ear as she says, “Meet me by the window in a quarter of an hour, alright?”

Right, I’m supposed to be her boyfriend. I give her arm a friendly pat. Before she walks off, I see her cheeks trembling, as if she is trying very hard not to laugh.

I make my way cautiously around the room, exchanging pleasantries whenever I am forced to, very aware that keeping entirely to myself will be more suspicious than engaging. Women smile cautiously at me, men nod, and a young man in a fashionable grey coat with a cut similar to mine gives me a shrewd smile, his lifted chin a subtle invitation to join him. I pretend I don’t see it. The blue hair and piercings had been a good idea; people see the physical augments rather than the face underneath.

Lesedi hadn’t said at which window to meet her, so I choose one far enough from the center of the room to stay out of the way but not far enough in a corner to look like I’m skulking. I take another glass of that starfield cocktail and gaze out into the warm, fragrant evening. A garden of serpentine paths and tumbled pebbles spreads out beneath delicately pruned trees, pale wooden bridges
arching like bare arms in the moonlight. The grass is so thick it looks like carpeting. I recall my mother loving traditional gardens, although she’s never had one of her own before. I watch the trees move in the slight breeze allowed past the environmental filters, the occasional hiss and spark of a mosquito hitting the invisible barrier. Nothing is permitted here that doesn’t belong.

I wonder if this other Misaki Ryugazaki cares for gardens at all. I wonder if she has spent time wandering the paths, dipping her feet in the streams, brushing her fingers across the maple leaves.

Stutteringly, I reel my thoughts back in. I should try to plan my next move while I’m alone, but I find myself suddenly unable to block out a conversation to my left. I only catch every couple of sentences.

“—Hardly stand to turn on a feed anymore, especially with the children in the room—.”

“—Not sure what those Confederacy idiots think they’re doing, pouring the city’s money into worthless soldiers from nowhere—.”

“—Up on those training Platforms, fighting and carousing—.”

“—Oh, you are so right—.”

“—Sucking up resources—.”

“—Sucking on basically everything—.”

“So far away from any sort of supervision, it’s like the generals have their own personal militias —.”

“Hardly even citizens at all—.”

“Barely human, right?”

They are discussing the Kassadian threat and the state of the military, and the conversation makes me want to grind my molars down into chalky dust, but that isn’t why I can’t stop listening. It’s the voices—one of them in particular. The rougher, blithely sarcastic one. Laughter swells up underneath it. My fingers go nerveless around the glass.

I turn from the window.

Shock, followed by a bright jerk of panic. Nothing is permitted here that doesn’t belong, it’s true, but that doesn’t change the fact that Gou Matsuoka is standing a few feet from me, in a dress as red as her hair, jewels glimmering at her throat.

She catches me looking and winks. I’m quickly coming to the conclusion that whenever a girl does this, something is about to collapse or explode. Possibly me.

“I know right?” she breezes, even louder than before. The women she’s talking to are packed up tightly to the windows like she has herded them there. Their dresses are all black or dark navy, hair cut short and stylishly, and their jewels are tasteful. Gou’s hair is a mad bonfire, her eyes sparkling like engine alert lights. “The soldiers should probably just be downgraded to AI status. Why give trash rights?” She releases a delicately obnoxious laugh. Her companions titter uncomfortably, unwilling to go so far, even if they doubtlessly agree.

She extracts herself from them and comes at me. The women exchange glances. They look relieved to see her go. She is holding a glass of champagne with her pinky stuck out, grin the sharpest thing
in the room.

“How, why, who—.” I struggle through several interrogatives before landing on, “What are you doing here?”

Gou takes an elegant sip of champagne. “That’s a good question, Rei. Here’s a better one. What are you doing here? Besides the exact opposite of what we all agreed on. And apparently dying your hair to match the drinks.”

I look down hazily at my cocktail, mind still struggling to catch up with what is happening, to bestow this tableau with some kind of coherence. My heartbeat had finally returned to normal, my stomach finally settled, and now it feels like I have no stomach left. I abandon the glass on the windowsill and grab Gou by the arm, pulling her into the corner of the ballroom and installing us behind a huge potted fern. My hands are shaking and I’m sure she can tell.

“Trying to treat me like one of your Elite ladies now?” she asks. She breaks my shaky hold with an easy roll of her wrist, twisting my fingers painfully backward until I hiss and let go. “Yank me around until I swoon into your arms? I’ll need something stronger than champagne first. You probably would too.”

She’s angry. A different sort of anger than when she had flown at me in the med bay after Rin’s injury—slower and colder.

My anger is neither slow nor cold. I want to rip the fern out of its pot and throw it into a window. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” People are staring. They’ve doubtless been staring at Gou since she arrived.

She sneers, but before she can retort a boy swishes around the fern. He is wearing a slim charcoal suit and a pink scarf knotted fashionably at his throat. It matches his eye augment—electric pink and brighter than the colored lanterns. I’d know those eyes anywhere.

“You guys just vanished behind a bush,” Nagisa says with a devious hook of an eyebrow. “Kinda scandalous.”

Chapter End Notes

busted

btw i made the 4th and final Some of Us playlist awhile ago, but forgot to link to it here. so here ya go
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait on this chapter--nano happened and then thanksgiving happened and then life happened.

Thanks to ouroboros for the beta!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Nagisa—.”

My heart pumps mingled fear and elation. He shouldn’t be here, it isn’t safe—but he looks fantastic. When we get ourselves out of this I am buying him a dozen more suits of the same exact cut.

Nagisa smiles, fussing with the silky edges of his scarf. “I like your hair.”

Gou says, “Fuck his hair.”

I touch the side of my shaved head. “Um. Thanks.” I ignore Gou and try to read past Nagisa’s compliment. He doesn’t seem upset with me, but he can be deceptively difficult to read. We stand in strained silence.

“You guys can’t be here,” I say finally, knowing how useless the words are before I’ve even formed them.

Gou’s grin flashes back up like pictures on a slot machine. “I’ll bet you my disgustingly overpriced shoes that we can.” She scuffs a toe across the ballroom floor. Her pumps are black and subtly shining, and look like they could be made of real leather. How had she gotten them? How had they gotten any of their clothes?

“Rei! When I said window, I actually meant it—oh.” Lesedi does a comically exaggerated double-take when she finds me with Nagisa and Gou. Doubtless she had seen me talking with them from across the ballroom. The potted fern is not the brick wall we’re treating it as, and we are attracting interested glances and whispers. This is the exact situation I wanted to avoid.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Lesedi says, giving them the same smile she has worn all evening—false but effortless. “I’m Lesedi Batma.”

Nagisa bows over her hand, almost comically formal. “I’m Nagisa.”

“And I—.” Gou pauses theatrically. “—Am sick of bullshit. Also I’m a duchess. A space duchess.” Her eyes glimmer like the ice that froze hell over.

I am hit by another bright spark of anger and I want to yank her arm again.

“Is this a game to you?” I ask with as much venom as I can dredge up. Beside her Nagisa winces, and the anger is abruptly overtaken by guilt. Why can’t my emotions line up and take turns?
“Why don’t you ask your date?” Gou jerks her thumb at Lesedi.

“This has nothing to do with her,” I snap back.

“Exactly.” Gou gets in my face, leaning in until we are nose-to-nose, effectively cutting Lesedi out of the conversation while still letting her hear it. “To her you’re just a fun distraction to spice up this shitshow. A party game. Do you think that if things go bad she’ll do anything to help you?”

“No, I don’t.” I press back steadily. “Because I don’t want her to.” The last thing I want is any of this coming back on Lesedi.

“Then fuck her, Rei! I can’t believe you went to her instead of us!” Gou’s voice trembles, but her eyes remain dry. She waits for an answer, but I don’t have one she’ll understand.

Lesedi’s eyebrows are speaking for her again as she looks between the three of us. “Okaaay, well…” Her hand shoots out and latches on to Nagisa’s. “Rei, I’m going to dance with your boyfriend, because your girlfriend is kind of a bitch.”

Gou twitches a simpering smile at her. Nagisa sends me a wide, panicked look, but Lesedi doesn’t give him a chance to protest, just drags him out onto the floor, head high, eyes forward, as regal as a queen. I’m left in the corner with a potted plant and a very angry navigator.

“We should dance, too,” she says, and it scares me even more than if she had pulled a gun on me.

“W-What?”

“C’mon,” she says breezily. “You wanted to come to this party, right? So let’s do some party activities.”

“I didn’t want to come here!” I protest, but when she goes I follow.

Once we’re in the center of the ballroom she steps in close to me, takes one of my hands, and puts it on her hip. I sigh and move it to just below her shoulder blade where it belongs, settling her left hand atop my upper arm. We join our opposite hands and step into an easy waltz. Or, I do. Gou stumbles.

“It’s a very simple step,” I tell her. “Just, one-two-three, one-two-three—.”

“Shut up,” she snaps. “I can count.”

She gets it pretty fast, eyes only darting down to our feet a couple times. We glide past Nagisa and Lesedi; his look is plaintive and she is determinedly avoiding eye contact.

“How did you even know I would be here?” I ask when they’ve spun out of sight. I had told my squad I would be looking for abnormal signals, but not where they would be. I hadn’t even known that myself yet.

“The same way that you did. With Chelsea’s tech.”

An arrangement of orchids stands near the door, petals open like jeering mouths, pistil tongues hanging out. Their scent—thick and syrupy—follows us as we glide by. I twitch my nose to suppress a sneeze.

“But he gave that patch to me.”

“He’s got a whole trunk of illegal shit. Guys like him wouldn’t just give you something if it was
Of course not. Chelsea knows nothing about me except that I have Rin’s and Gou’s endorsement. And his boss doesn’t like me much.

“But how did you get into Upland?” I press. “None of you have clearance.”

“Rei, do you seriously think that the oldest son of the most influential crime family in Sky City doesn’t have Elite clearance? Sousuke has multiple clearances. All the clearances. He didn’t even have to get new idents made.” She lets go of my hand for a second to shake a thin ruby bracelet at me. “He’s got all kinds of stuff.”

“Did he just have the dress lying around too?” I ask, annoyed.

“Nah, we had to buy this.” Gou spins a little too enthusiastically under my arm, making my shoulder twinge as I try to pull her back in. “None of Sousuke’s dresses would fit me. He’s pretty tall.”

We’re passing close to the string quartet, and I have to raise my voice slightly as I hiss, “I can’t believe you did this, Gou, I really can’t.” There is a part of me that wants to be impressed with her audacity, but I’m still stuck on the fact that they could very well have ruined everything.

“What were we supposed to do?”

“Trust me, maybe?”

Gou scoffs so hard a piece of hair flops into her eyes. “Trust you to do what, throw yourself into the most dangerous situation you could find, ass first?”

“You don’t get it.” I keep my voice hushed and lean in close. “You don’t have all the information —.”

Gou’s hand has moved out of position, slid across the ridge of my shoulder to latch onto the back of my neck. It’s probably accidental and not at all to have easy access to delicate pressure points, but nerves still tighten my throat.

“I know this is your parents’ house, Rei. I may be from Lowland, but my brain works just fine.”

“Stop,” I snap, aggravation spiking like screws in my temples. “Stop making everything about Upland and Lowland. That isn’t what any of this is about!”

Gou’s eyes go colder than ever. This time when I spin her out she goes as far away as our captured hands will allow, like she can’t stand to be close to me. “Fucking typical.”

“What? What’s typical?”

She spins back, skirt unfurling like a plume of flame, bracing against my chest with her hands splayed.

“Typical Elite thinking.”

“Don’t be condescending. I told you, this isn’t about—.”

“Yes, it is.” She bites it out against my ear. “It always is. If me and Rin were Elites he wouldn’t have a busted factory-floor prosthetic, and if Amakata was an Elite she would never have joined Lotus. Someone would have listened when her girlfriend went missing. Someone would have
“Amakata made her own choices, and they were mostly terrible,” I retort. “And yes, you’re right, if there wasn’t cruelty and hardship in the world, everything would be wonderful.” Gou makes a sickened noise and tries to pull away from me, but I don’t let her go. The way she’s talking to me, like she is explaining something very basic to an unreasonable child, has banked my anger even higher. “If everyone were an Elite, if no one had to suffer, if it rained credit chips—.”

“Now who’s being condescending?”

She teeters in her heels. I consider dropping her. “I’m just saying that it isn’t my fault who my father is, or where I was born.”

We aren’t dancing anymore, just standing in the center of the ballroom beneath the hanging lamps, both of us breathing heavily. The red in her cheeks is as bright as her dress.

“Right,” she says finally. She doesn’t sound mad anymore. Just tired. “And if there wasn’t any cruelty or hardship in the world, if it was fair, then maybe nobody would judge you for it.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out of it.

A few feet from us a man laughs, loud and aggressive. Ice sheets down my spine and I bite my own lip, hard. I hiss at the sting, unable to help the double-take over my shoulder. A society gentleman in a dark blue suit and white knotted scarf has his head thrown back, mouth wide open. He had sounded like my father, but he doesn’t look like him at all. He was laughing at his own conversation, not at ours.

“Don’t dislocate your neck,” Gou says wearily. “Your father isn’t here.”

I look back at her sharply. “How do you know that?”

She arches her brows, which have been shaped and brushed since the last time I saw her. “I asked. Discreetly.”

I doubt that, but I want information more than I want to keep fighting. I stutter back into motion, taking her hand again and waiting for her to go on.

“A waiter told me he’s still at the Justice Hall. Making his speech.”

I spin her again. The music has gotten a bit too fast for a waltz—most of the couples around us have switched to a foxtrot—but that is a more complicated step. “Yeah. He does that.”

“Must be one fucker of a speech to justify this party.”

I spin her again. The music has gotten a bit too fast for a waltz—most of the couples around us have switched to a foxtrot—but that is a more complicated step. “Yeah. He does that.”

“He’s had bigger parties for smaller reasons.” Half-birthdays, flower-viewing, leaf-viewing. Viewing of basically any kind of nature. Any excuse for Daisuke Ryugazaki to show off his home and keep the family name on the feeds. Anything to inspire confidence or donations.

“Rei,” she says, “I told you—he isn’t here.”

I realize that I am rubber-necking across the ballroom again and force myself to look back at her. Sweat breaks away from my hairline and escapes down my neck. The shaved half of my head feels unusually cool.

Gou does another little spin in place, out of time with the music. “11269,” she says, so smugly that
I feel like I should know what she’s talking about. But I don’t.

“Is that how much your dress cost?”

Gou tips her head to the side. “I can’t tell if that’s an insult or a compliment. Expensive is good, right?”

Before I can respond, my attention is snatched away by Lesedi and Nagisa spinning into view across the ballroom. Lesedi is leading; she’s taller than him and it’s clear he doesn’t know how to dance a formal step anymore than Gou does. His posture is much better, though—ribcage high, back straight, jacket riding up to broadcast the slim line of his waist and curve of his backside. A backside I had my hands on less than 24 hours ago.

“11269,” Gou is saying again. “That’s the combination to your father’s office.”

That drags my focus back lightspeed quick. “What? A _waiter_ told you that?”

Gou snorts. “Give me a little credit. I’m a navigator. I navigated.”

I assume she means she hacked the house’s security, probably remotely. She wouldn’t have had any chance to do an on-site infiltration.

“There’s also an optical scanner, but it isn’t engaged,” she adds. “The code is all you need.”

Right. That is most likely why she had not told me about it immediately—that, and she’d wanted a chance to chew me out. If the door only has a numerical lock—the easiest style to crack—it is highly doubtful the room contains anything valuable. But it’s something where before I’d had next to nothing.

“Thank you,” I say sincerely.

Gou rolls her eyes. “We’re your squad, Rei. We’re with you no matter how much you act like an ass-pimple.”

That makes me nervous. “When you say _we_—.”

“Just Nagisa and me. Not enough dresses for everyone on such short notice.”

The dance ends and I bow to Gou, retreating to the buffet table to recalibrate myself. I am shaky and light-headed again, and I blame the one and a half sparkling cocktails I had downed on an empty stomach. I pick up a vegetable skewer and bite off a tomato at the end. It bursts wetly in my mouth, vinegar and salt.

“I like your friend.”

I jump and almost lose my grip on the skewer. Nagisa has appeared beside me, flushed from dancing. His hair is beginning to curl up at the neck and temples despite the liquid product smoothing it back. I wonder if that hair had been part of his custom blueprint. _Impossible curls that behave like a wet sheep_. Does that cost extra?

“You met her on that resort planet, right?” He sidles closer, playing with the knot on his scarf.

“Lesedi? Yeah.” With him standing next to me, it’s hard not to think about how slick his skin would be, how warm if I press my lips to his neck. I want to touch him so badly. From the little quirk of his grin, he knows it.
“She’s a good dancer.” He is so close now that I can feel the radiating heat of him through our clothes. “But I would much rather be dancing with you.” His voice has dropped intimately, like Lesedi’s had when she’d been pretending to whisper in my ear. His fingertips brush my thigh, so quick and light I barely feel them. I swallow and curb the impulse to move away.

No one is watching, I tell myself. Gou says he isn’t here.

“That…that isn’t possible here,” I force past my sticky throat.

Nagisa pouts. “I know that.”

I can’t help scooting a little further down the table from him. I try to cover it up by reaching for another vegetable skewer, but I see the flicker of hurt in his eyes. I feel guilty, but the guilt comes along with a fresh surge of annoyance. He doesn’t know what it’s like here—the only Elite he knows is the man who had commissioned him, and of course he would be perfectly alright with boys touching each other. But these people, my father’s people, are different. I don’t know how to explain that, and I don’t want to fight anymore. Besides, I already owe him an apology. “I’m sorry about what happened this morning. Running off without telling anyone. I was frustrated, and when I woke up everyone was gone—.”

Nagisa shakes his head. He doesn’t back up, but he doesn’t move any closer to me. “It’s okay. I shouldn’t have just left like that—I just…I don’t sleep—.” He looks at me quickly, gaze heavy, as if he is telling me something I don’t already know. “And I didn’t want to wake you, so I went downstairs. Sousuke was already up, and he asked me if I wanted to come along with him and Momo. I think he was just being polite, honestly.” He shrugs. “I didn’t think you’d be upset.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat. In retrospect it had been an absurd thing to get angry about.

“It’s alright. I’m not mad.”

I raise both eyebrows.

“Really!” he grins. “But Gou’s mad enough for both of us. She’s, like, super mad. She feels responsible for how things turn out.”

“Why?” This whole trip planetside hadn’t been her ill-advised plan. “She isn’t the one who made the deal with Amakata.”

Nagisa says, “I think she thinks she should have been.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She still blames herself for Rin losing his leg.”

“I know that.” Everyone knows that.

Nagisa plucks a piece of candied orange peel out of a dish, scraping off crystallized sugar with a thumbnail. He can’t eat it, but he can still fidget. “She blames herself, but you’re the one who came up with the plan to fix everything. You’re actually doing something. And then you ran off to be a hero without even including her.”

“I’m not trying to be a hero!” I say, incensed.

“I know that. But I don’t know if she does.”
I let out a slow breath. “Right.” I squeeze my eyes shut and dig the pads of my fingers into the lids. I am smearing my makeup but I can only care about so many things at once. I will have to apologize to her later, even if I still don’t feel totally at fault.

“Will you do me a favor?” I ask.

“Anything. That’s why I’m here.”

I want to kiss him. “Will you keep a watch out for my…” I quell the urge to glance around the ballroom again, “For Daisuke Ryugazaki, and alert me when he arrives?”

“I don’t have an uplink,” Nagisa says. “But I’ll tell Gou to do it.”

I really want to kiss him, but I can’t. So I say, “Thank you,” and leave him at the table.

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I can’t risk asking any of the staff for directions, but knowing my father his office will be isolated, as far away as possible from the front door and the parlor. He hates disturbances, by servants, by sons, and by his wife. There are probably blueprints of the house on the net, but I don’t need them. My intuition turns out to be exactly right. I would never have guessed the extent of the lies he would tell or the depths he would sink to protect his reputation, but I do know my father’s habits. His office is at the end of a shadowy hall in the western wing of the house, far enough from the ballroom for the violins to fade to a distant hum. The carpet is thick and swallows my footsteps whole.

The door has an optical sensor to the left of the jam, but it is lit up green—currently not armed. I punch the code into the keypad above the knob, and the panel makes an old-fashioned clicking noise as the lock disengages. The door is hinged like the doors in the Yamazaki hotel, except this one doesn’t creak. Inside the air tastes like dust and old leather.

I make sure the curtains are shut before turning on the lamp, light pooling on the pale carpet and gleaming off the wide oak desk. It’s an antique, carved from a single slab of wood, and my father has had it since I can remember. The only other piece of furniture is a heavy leather desk chair. In the old house his office had been full of shelves overstuffed with books. Actual paper books that had taken him a lifetime to collect, but I guess all of them had been destroyed in the explosion.

I settle myself cautiously behind the desk and wake up the terminal. Blue light ripples as the holo-screens come to life. I get a little thrill of satisfaction at how quickly the interface responds; I’ve gotten used to the Platform’s computers, but they are still massively clunky tech. And my father always has the best. An alert jumps at me from the corner of one of the screens and I enlarge it.

Huh. The best tech, but not the latest. This terminal hasn’t been updated in over three months. It’s odd. So are the empty documents folders and deleted net cache. And the light patina of dust covering the desk’s surface. It is clear why the security is minimal—this office hasn’t been used in some time.

I let the screens fall back to sleep and begin a methodical search of the desk itself. Unlike the hinges on the door, the first drawer I try sticks and screeche. I hold my breath and strain for any sounds out in the hall, but my pounding heart is all I hear. After a few seconds of comforting stillness, I continue my search.

There is nothing in the drawers but two empty photo frames and a dried-up pen with the end
chewed on. Perhaps he keeps all of his materials at his office downtown, or maybe he works in a
different room of the house—it’s certainly larger than our apartment had been.

The narrow drawer in the center of the desk doesn’t open when I tug, and I jiggle it a couple of
times to see if it isn’t just stuck. I don’t think it is—I think the handle is just for decoration and
symmetry’s sake. But then I feel around the seam of the drawer and hear a soft click. A small
square section of the desk’s surface indents and then slides away, revealing a small compartment lit
with a hard red light. I peer inside, then tentatively extract its contents.

A gun. A 44 Wesson pulse revolver with three different settings and enough power to take out a
giraffe, or the entire wall of a building. It is not the weapon of an upstanding businessman. Unless
he is expecting to be attacked by a tank.

I’m still stuck on what the gun is doing here, when the door rattles in its frame and swings open.
My fingers tighten automatically on the grip and pull the gun from the compartment, thrusting it
down beneath the desk just as my father walks into the office.

For a moment we stare at each other through the cool undulation of the sleeping screens as the
distant wail of the violins rises to a crescendo. Then he steps inside and closes the door. My skin
flashes hot then cold, a feeling distinctly like nausea hitting me, along with the ridiculous impulse
to try to play off my presence as a misguided attempt to find him, or a childish prank. But I am
holding his gun and going through his files, sitting behind his desk with my augmented eyes and
shaved head, smeared eye shadow and tight pants. The previous night I’d had sex with a male AI,
and although there is no way he could know that, there is still no more pretending for me. For the
first time in a very long while I feel a phantom pulse of pain in my head. An echo of struggling to
think in a direction my father doesn’t want me to.

Daisuke Ryugazaki is in a tailored charcoal suit and silver-tipped boots, a scarf in checkered red
and grey, knotted similarly to Nagisa’s. His hair is combed back sharply from his forehead. He
wears glasses and there are creases around his mouth and eyes, but despite that we still look
remarkably similar.

Silence buzzes in my ears and an eerie sense of calm settles over me. I have feared this encounter
for so long that now that it is happening it almost doesn’t seem real.

“I didn’t think you were here yet,” I say.

“I just arrived.” My father is not military, but he still stands with his back rigid and his weight
evenly distributed, hands loosely at his sides. “The screens in this house register fingerprints. I get
a ping if anyone but myself wakes them.”

In retrospect it had been foolish for me to assume that the only security here would be the visible
sort.

“At first I thought there must be some sort of a mistake, my son invading my house and my
privacy.” He slips easily into his role as lecturer, and I don’t miss the slight emphasis on my house.
“Showing up looking like some new money upstart. That is not the son I know.”

I pull in a steadying breath. I want to ask about Gou and Nagisa, but if he doesn’t know there are
other invaders in his home, I’m not about to alert him. I swallow down my fear. I am still an Elite,
and I can still dredge up the poise I was taught.

“You’re right,” I say as smooth and even as the icing on a cake. “Because that son doesn’t exist.
He’s just the imprint on the piece of silicone you shoved in my brain.”
My father takes another heavy step into the room. “That piece of silicone cost millions of credits and it would have prevented you from making such a foolish choice in the first place! Abandoning your post on the Platform and bringing trash into my home.”

Acid fear shoots down my spine, but I still don’t know if he means my squad or Lesedi. I don’t know very much about the Batmas, but they are certainly new money. Anger moves through me like thorns dragging across my veins. He is insufferable, those quirked lips, that father-knows-best tone that he has done absolutely nothing to deserve. “You don’t, you aren’t—.” I have no idea what I am trying to say.

“If you had only allowed Dr. Myles to replace your augment instead of faking an illness—.”

My laugh comes out hysterical. “Faking an illness? I almost died!”

My father pretends I have not spoken. “—Then perhaps you would be able to control yourself during an argument, rather than simply falling to pieces like a child.”

Below the desk, my fist tightens. “You had better hope you’re wrong, Father,” I say, with just the slightest thrum of percussion to suggest I am not perfectly settled. “Because you wouldn’t want a child who can’t hold his temper to do this.” I feel like the monologuing hero in a cheesy vid, following the script, but I still level the gun between his eyes.

“I’m here for Izumi Grey, Father. I’m not here for you.”

Chapter End Notes

"La La La" by Naughty Boy plays in the background.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

New Year's Day was this fic's anniversary! I've been working on this monster for two
gosh-darned years.

So continues Rei's very bad, rotten, no good day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My father’s mouth opens and his brows stutter like jammed machinery. His heel knocks hollowly
against the closed door. He has one hand on the knob but he doesn’t turn it. I have him frozen in an
isolated system of shock. Never before have I ever grabbed his undivided attention so quickly. I
should pull guns more often.

“That—.” He tries to go blank, to pull himself back to Elite equilibrium, but I see the ball of his
throat bob as he swallows. “That gun isn’t loaded.”

I flick the setting down two levels. “It has a stun mode.”

My father manages to work up a passable snort.

“Have you ever been hit by a concussive blast, Father?” I ask. I am vibrating with tension, my
calves and thigh muscles locking me to the desk chair. “Or a filtered fusion blast? Imagine what it
feels like to have your nervous system torn to fucking shreds.”

My father flinches. I experience a pulse of cruel amusement when I realize he is reacting to my
swearing. What a small, awful caricature of a man. At least he doesn’t move. I don’t want to
actually use the gun. As satisfying as it would be, there is a universe of difference between a threat
and an assault. Besides, it’s hard to get answers out of a sludgy pile of misfiring synapses.

Again I feel as if I have been split in half—part of me is a black hole of calm, silent and
consuming, and the other is a rising bubble of giddy hysteria, standing aside and screaming WHAT
ARE YOU DOING?

I can see my father collecting himself, weighing possibilities. “What do you want, Rei?” he says at
last.

“I told you—I want Izumi Grey. I want to know how you justify murdering innocent people and
turning them into droids.” I regret it as soon as I say it. Not because I don’t think it’s true—I do.
But information is the only power I have over my father, and I feel I should withhold it. Or maybe
that isn’t right. Maybe I should reveal more.

My father’s initial shock has worn away and his expressions are back under his control, but he
can’t prevent the sweat that shines above his lips and across his forehead. “You don’t understand.”

“I don’t want to understand.” But that’s a lie, born out a childish need to contradict. All I’ve ever
wanted is to understand.

“You don’t have all the information.”
“Then give me the information.”

“If I could cock the gun like a gangster in a period vid, I would. Instead I hold it steady and say, “Tell me!” My father wets his lips and his shoulders ratchet tighter. The wall is beginning to crumble, one badly fitted brick at a time. “Tell me!” I say again, louder this time.

“I can’t bring you to Izumi Grey,” he says.

“I’ll use it,” I threaten. “I’m an emotional wreck, remember?”

He swallows again. He is afraid, and it’s making me nervous in turn, even if I am the one who’s threatening him. My father is never unsure—this is wrong, it is the world tilted into a nightmarish angle.

“I can’t bring you to Izumi Grey because I don’t have access to her.”

I stand up and my legs prickle with pins and needles. A muscle jumps in my thigh. “Then show me the lab. Show me everything you can.”

To my immense surprise, my father says, “Very well.”

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I keep the gun leveled between his shoulder blades as he leads the way through the dim branching corridors of the mansion. I sent Gou two message pings and received no response, and now I ache to detour to the ballroom, but I can’t walk into the center of a gala with the host at gunpoint. Of course, he could summon his security via his uplink at any time, and I don’t understand why he hasn’t. Obviously telling me that he doesn’t have access to Amakata had been some kind of stalling tactic, but why? For what? My head swims with everything I don’t know.

My plan had been to get in and out without ever having to face my father. This was supposed to be just about Amakata and Rin’s prosthetic. Nothing has gone according to plan, and each time the wheel is yanked from me it is harder to readjust.

I’m not sure what I am expecting—a sliding panel in the wall, a hidden staircase—but he leads me to a regular door that blends in with the rest of the décor. Like his office, it has an optical scanner, and this one is armed.

My father glances curtly over his shoulder. “Some space, please.” He says it with enough authority that I take an automatic step back.

Beyond the door, the pretenses of normalcy are discarded. Bare walls and a short, dim corridor lead to an elevator even more utilitarian than the back entrance to Lesedi’s apartment. The doors open automatically when we approach, and inside there is only one button. My father presses it and it lights up red. We descend fast enough that I feel it in my stomach.

My father keeps taking quick, snatched looks at me, like he thinks if he looks hard enough he will see the sparkle of a holo-mask over my face. His hands go to the knot on his scarf, readjusting. I’ve never seen him fidget before.

“I suppose I have Grey to thank for this. Your false medic with the criminal record.” He finally summmons up a sneer, and I am almost relieved. “No doubt she has spurred you on to some noble cause.”
“That’s not it.” I don’t want to lower the gun, but my hand has begun to shake, muscles going gelatinous with strain. I allow the muzzle to droop a few inches. My reflexes are better than his, anyway.

The temperature rises as we descend, air becoming uncomfortably close. We don’t speak as the doors open. Gone is the luxurious grandeur of the house; these lower halls are all bare metal planking and low ceilings. It reminds me of the Platform, minus the constant thrumming hum of the engines. We traverse a corridor that must run nearly the entire length of the mansion, carpeted in industrial grey, the air stale and recycled. There are screens on the walls every few hundred meters, but all of them are blacked out, and the few doors we do pass are closed and windowless. We turn a corner to find a line of vending machines blinking innocently against one wall, a couple of plastic tables bolted to the floor. A break area, I guess, for workers to relax in between chopping people up.

My father leads me to an office that is nearly a twin to the one in the house above, except far shabbier. The desk is a shiny false wood and the chair is plastic rather than leather, but it looks as if it’s actually been put to use. On it are several tablets, a stack of files, an empty coffee mug, a scatter of styluses and pens, and a digital frame that cycles through photos—my mother standing in a garden with flowers in her hair, myself on my thirteenth birthday in a new suit, my parents and me standing on a balcony at a charity function.

I am struck by how average all of this seems. I keep expecting science fiction—body parts suspended in tanks, twisted fetuses pickling in jars, caged animals, screams of anguish. This could be an office in any factory on the planet. I suppose the administrative side of a venture is the same everywhere, whether you sell shoes or slaves.

“Rei. Son,” my father says, as if I have forgotten. As if a reminder will make me bend to his will. “If you think of nothing else, at least consider what this will mean for your military career. Abandoning your post and threatening a citizen of Sky City.”

I laugh. “What military career?” At this point my standing in the Confederacy is such a convoluted mess there isn’t much to salvage. My assignment doesn’t match my strengths, but leaving the Iwatobi Squad is unthinkable. I don’t want to be anywhere else. “And I’m sure you are on such excellent terms with the Confederacy. Father,” I add nastily.

In his suit and tie, Daisuke Ryugazaki looks like he belongs exactly where he’s standing—behind a desk, eons away from anything unsavory. “Who do you think one of our top commissioners is?”

He says this so calmly that for a few seconds it doesn’t register. And then it does, accompanied by a deluge of ice cubes past my rib cage. I focus on keeping the horror off of my face, out of my eyes.

Is that why no one commented on Nagisa’s presence on the Platform? I can’t help but wonder it. Because he was just another illegal droid?

I remember the Kassadian spy, the illegal droid that had killed itself in a holding cell on the Platform. If the Confederacy knew that its enemies were using highly modified droids, would it really hesitate to do the same?

“You think that just because the government condones it, it’s right to murder innocent people? Even battlefields have rules of engagement!”

My father makes a smooth sound of elegant disgust. “These people were not innocent, Rei. Criminals, debtors, undesirables. People who won’t be missed.”
People who have fucked up, he means. Like so many have.

“Someone missed one of those people who won’t be missed,” I tell him.

My father has no response prepared. He obviously had not been expecting someone as talented and knowledgeable as Amakata to delve into his operation. Like any Elite, he underestimates Lowlanders. Like Cyrus Fellers had. Like I used to.

“I thought you hated droids,” I say. I can’t let silence settle. If it does I’ll start thinking about how I have no idea what I’m doing. “And now you’re cutting undesirables up to make them.”

My father sighs, as if my question is tiresome and childish, the answer clearly self-explanatory. “I don’t hate anyone, Rei. And certainly not artificial intelligences. I simply don’t believe they deserve the amount of autonomy they have been allowed—.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the speeches.” I relish the opportunity to cut him off. “I know the party line. And I’m sure the Human’s First Alliance would be delighted to discover their chairman is profiting from turning people into droids. Isn’t that what you are all afraid of?”

“I stand behind everything I have said on that front,” my father says, voice frigid. “An intersection of robotics and organic matter was a mistake. Droids are an affront to nature.”

“You made my mother into one!” My anger burns so hot it feels like it’s sublimating from my skin.

“You don’t understand,” my father says. He sits down at his desk, reversing our positions from up above, except I still have the gun. “It’s more complicated than you imagine—.”

“Then explain! How is it complicated? It sounds simple to me.”

“Then you are a fool and a child, and you don’t deserve the freedom we’ve given you.”

I am shaking and it has nothing to do with my trigger finger cramping. “You didn’t want the inconvenience of a dead wife—.”

My father laughs, high and strangled. I’ve never heard him make a sound like that and it silences me. “I did it because I loved her! I missed her!” He shakes his head and rubs a knuckle against his temple. I recognize that motion; I do it all the time. “Do you truly think so little of me?”

“You don’t want me to answer that.”

A hint of chagrin. “Perhaps not. But will you at least let me explain myself?”

I shouldn’t. That isn’t what I’ve come here to do. The longer I spend down here the longer Nagisa and Gou are left alone in the ballroom to cause destruction, the more chances my father has to call his security team or overpower me. I know all this, and yet—

“Alright. Go ahead. Convince me.”

“I was mad with grief when Fellers approached me.” He still has his fingers on the keyboard, thumbs tapping. “He was a political rival and had been for years, speaking in support of droid workers and rights.” His lips curl with tight disdain. “I barely tolerated him. He came into my office downtown, smirking and smug even as he offered his condolences. Then he asked me how I’d like to have my wife back good as new—better than new.”

I make a noise of outrage. “How could you—.”
"Those were his words, Rei. I didn’t understand how he knew all these things—the details of the crash hadn’t yet been released to the public. Fellers told me he made it a point to keep apprised of all patients in Central Sky Hospital being supported by artificial means.

“As he told it, what he suggested would be no different. But with this life-support I would be able to talk to her, live with her. She would be my wife, just the same. Or not. However I wanted her. In a moment of weakness I agreed."

I snort, but I’m still listening.

“Back then I couldn’t afford the price he asked. Even now, I would have to bankrupt several branches of my company. But Fellers told me that I could cover the cost by allowing him access to the Ryugazaki Industries laboratory facilities.”

“And I suppose you are going to tell me you had no idea what those facilities would be used for?” I ask witheringly.

“Of course I’m not.” He frowns down at his fingers. “Of course I knew, even if I told myself I wasn’t responsible.” He closes his eyes briefly, the very picture of despondent remorse. “I went from opposing the creation of advanced AI production to tacitly agreeing to promote it.”

There seems to be true regret in his voice. Of course, it may be feigned, but I am not so blinded by my anger that I can’t believe my father ever meant well. He cares about his city and he cares for humanity—at least the parts he believes are worthwhile. Still, no sympathy stirs inside me. He made his choices.

“I had no other options,” he says, further solidifying my disdain. “If I ever complained or tried to regulate their use of the labs, Fellers threatened to expose me. I would be made out to be complicit in all his crimes and Misaki would be taken away from me. If I remained quiet, I got to live with my wife again, just the way that she was.”

“She wasn’t the same.”

He frowns.

“She wasn’t the same after the crash.” I modulate my voice Elite-smooth. “I was too young to recognize it then, but looking back it’s obvious.” She had returned from that hospital timid, docile, eager to please. My father had made her that way. He had built fear into her bones, the very fiber of her muscles.

“Trauma changes people, Rei. She would have come back changed even if she had survived.”

I don’t buy it. As Gou would say, it festers of bullshit. “She told me herself.”

“And you would have preferred if I just let her die?”

“You did let her die!” After the silky calm we’ve been addressing to each other, my shout rings through the office like an alarm. “That thing you brought back wasn’t her!”

“What about your little Hazuki droid?” Daisuke asks.

My lips move, but at first nothing comes out. From my lungs to my soft palate I have become a single sheet of ice.

His smile is a nasty slash of satisfaction. “Oh, yes, I know about him. My staff knew the moment
he walked into the building, which is how I knew. They are all trained to recognize an AI, even one so exquisitely crafted. He is as full of illegal parts as your mother is."

“I’m not the one who built him!” I shout. “There’s a difference! He can’t help what he is!”

“If you say so,” my father says. “It must be true.”

A sneer contorts my face, contempt bubbling inside me. This story is hardly a revelation; with a span of introspection I could easily have worked it out alone. My father was in shock over the death of his wife, and a corrupt and opportunistic rival took advantage. My father has always desired stability before all else. Whether he loved my mother or not is irrelevant—he just wanted things back to the way they were, as quickly and efficiently as possible. He is anti-augmentation, anti-deviance, anti-difference. He would rather smear on a thin patina of normalcy than allow for change.

Which, I realize, is why he hasn’t called his security team. He still thinks he can make me see reason, end all of this without a mess. It leaves me feeling equal parts enraged and helpless. I want to fling mud on the shimmering white walls of his confidence.

“I’m not your well-mannered little boy anymore, Father,” I snap. “Your leash is gone.” I jam a finger against my forehead, feeling the edge of my nail catch skin. “I’m not going to be calm and follow orders just because you tell me to. Bring me to Izumi Grey.”

“I told you I don’t have access to her. That hasn’t changed in the last hour.”

“How can you not have access? This place is underneath your own fucking house!” I tack on that last part just to make him wince again, but he doesn’t. “Cyrus Fellers is dead! Who else—.”

“I am not in charge,” my father repeats, his mouth settling into a hard, ugly line.

My patience splinters. I am filled with the sudden impulse to cover the distance between us and smash the gun into his jaw, feel the satisfying crush of titanium against bone.

The office door creaks open behind me. “He’s telling the truth.” The voice is modulated and female, so when I turn to find Nagisa standing before me, face brilliant with alarm, my world folds in sideways with disorientation. Then Nagisa shuffles to the side, revealing the slender, petite form of the droid that wears Misaki Ryugazaki’s face.

“Mother,” I call her, the habit still unbroken. “What are you—.”

“Rei—.” Misaki shoves Nagisa before he can gasp more than my name. Shoves him with the gun she has pressed to the small of his back.

My own weapon droops until it is pointing at the carpet. “Mother—I don’t understand.”

“Your father doesn’t control the Vanishers,” Misaki says. “I do.”

My fingers have cramped into place around the gun, which is the only reason it doesn’t drop from my hands. All the shock that I hadn’t felt at my father’s guilt crashes in, hollowing me out. I am an empty cave, a lightless cathedral. Bats could fly inside me and hang upside down for the night.

“You, that’s—.” My throat clenches tight, squeezing the life from my voice. “You’re lying.”

“You see, Misaki.” Satisfaction slithers in and out of my father’s words. “Everything Rei doesn’t want to believe is by its very nature a lie. Or so I have gathered.”
I flush from my ears down to the collar of my shirt. My mother’s face is ice, utterly absent of expression. For an absurd moment I wonder if this could be another copy—a different woman than the one who had pretended to be my mother for years, who had spoken to me at the house on Aurora, who had greeted me at the party upstairs. My father has an entire army of droids with his dead wife’s face.

But she is wearing the same blue dress, the same slim silver watch, her hair still in its elaborate twist. She is holding a burst pistol to Nagisa’s back, just below the floating rib. It strikes me as a strange place to point a weapon, before I realize what she is threatening. The droid’s personality core is in the lower back, just to the right of the spinal cord.

“What—I don’t—.” I force my mouth shut on the babbling until I can put the words in order. “What do you mean, it’s you?”

She tips her head slightly, like she doesn’t understand the question. “I run this operation. Your father works for me.”

“But—but you’re a droid!”

“Who better to manage a factory that creates them?” she says with a hint of wryness.

“You gave her the Vanishers?” I ask my father without turning around. I don’t want to take my eyes off her.

She laughs, harsh and wild, not at all the polite titter of an Elite businessman’s wife. “He did not give me anything. I took it.”

“You…how—.”

“I am living proof of the deal he made with Cyrus Fellers,” she says with a shark’s smile. “And the passing years have only added to his crimes. The more power you possess, the more wealth you own, the easier you are to control.”

Nagisa nods tightly at me. I don’t know if he is agreeing with her or letting me know he is alright. I look back at him and think as hard as I can, hoping my intent somehow transmits across the space between us. I’ll get us out of this. I’ll get us out. I think it over and over.

“Put your weapon down,” Misaki says. “I know you want to keep Nagisa safe more than you want to shoot your father.” I hear Daisuke moving around the desk behind me, most likely to take my gun, but my mother makes a quick motion of denial. “Just put it on the ground and kick it toward the wall.”

“Misaki—,” my father protests.

She ignores him. I obey, and Nagisa closes his eyes. I can’t tell if it’s out of relief or distress. Neither of us is armed, Gou hasn’t responded to my messages. For the time being, we are trapped.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops.
When I’ve kicked the gun into the corner I ask, “How much of what you told me on Aurora was a lie?” She had seemed so lost then, so noble and sad.

“None of it,” my mother responds blithely. “I had only recently come back to myself. Or, I suppose, away from myself. I may share Misaki Ryugazaki’s memories, but I’m not her. This current personality doesn’t actually belong to anyone at all.” She pauses, as if waiting for someone to disagree. Nagisa shifts in discomfort, but that’s probably the gun in his ribs. “I only discovered how deeply your father was involved in the trafficking when we moved to this house. It’s hard to miss a secret lab beneath your feet, no matter how stupid you were designed to be.” She gives her head a little shake. It’s humid on the lower levels, and her hair is beginning to frizz at the temples. “I spent several months gathering all the information I could. It’s remarkable what people will discuss in front of you when they think you’re irrelevant. I discovered that, when Cyrus Fellers had been killed, his operation had been dormant for only a few months. I suppose Daisuke told you the sad, sad story of his labs being used to commit atrocities? As soon as Fellers was out of the way and he stood to make a profit, his guilt evaporated. Funny, isn’t it? Such unreliable things, emotions.”

I can feel my father’s rage, exposed engine coils heating the back of my neck. I remember Sousuke telling us that the abductions had dropped off in the months following Feller’s death, but had recently begun again. Factoring in the time it would have taken to transfer my father’s lab facilities to Elysia Heights and assume control, the timing fits.

“So you waited until you had enough ammunition, and then you blackmailed him.”

“I didn’t feel it was right to leave such a dangerous resource in the hands of a sociopath.” Her mouth twists wryly, savoring the irony of that sentiment while she holds a gun to a boy’s back.

I drag in a breath, trying to settle my overactive pulse. What I really need is a quarter of an hour in a quiet room to process all this new information, but all I can do is close my eyes and try to run through it all as fast as I can. I imagine my brain is a processor, a computer making logical conclusions, no confusion or sense of betrayal to distract me.

*If I had an emotional augment, I think humorlessly, this would be a lot easier.*

“I plan to cease production, of course,” Misaki goes on, oblivious to the nuclear meltdown going on inside me. “Daisuke is still the face of the Vanishers. Our buyers would be too suspicious if he called a dead halt, or told them he had put his pretty, frivolous wife in charge.”

My father makes another choked-off noise. The last months must have been excruciating for him. He has never had to keep quiet for anyone, and how his wife—the droid he had designed specifically to be patient and kind and easy to manage—has him in her power. In any other situation I would admire her. I think Nagisa already does. Despite the gun, he is grinning just the
slightest bit. I bet he would have loved to tear Fellers apart from the inside the way Misaki had done to her own master.

“And now,” Misaki says with finality, “I need you to leave, Rei. Your presence is muddying the waters, and I have worked far too hard keeping them clear.”

I blink at her for several gelatinous seconds. “You’re just going to…to let me go? After everything I’ve seen?”

“In truth, you haven’t seen very much. Just the administrative level, and there is nothing illegal about building an office beneath your own home.”

That’s probably not true, but I am not about to argue zoning laws.

“And as you and I have discussed before, you have a vested interest in keeping the Ryugazaki name above reproach.”

She’s right. If I reported my parents to the Sky City authorities, they would be arrested, all their accounts frozen while their trial pended. The Ryugazaki Elite status may even be suspended. My Elite status. I may have grown up in luxury and known no other life until the Platform, but none of that money or status actually belongs to me.

Still, I don’t want to admit this aloud, so I say, “I’m not leaving without Amakata.”

My mother pretends regret. “I’m afraid I can’t allow Izumi Grey to go free. Unlike you, she does have proof. If she reveals the existence of the illegal droids to the authorities—the proper authorities,” she adds. “All illegal droids would be in danger, myself and Nagisa included.”

“So you’re just protecting us,” Nagisa says, and I can’t tell if he means it in earnest. I had always thought of him as quite transparent, but perhaps that was only because he had wanted me to. Now his face is as blank as any Elite’s. If I hadn’t been looking at the perfect, uninterrupted line of his suit jacket I might have already thought his personality core was damaged.

“Exactly,” Misaki says. “I don’t fancy being decommissioned, do you?”


He hesitates. “I’m not sure. She was going to last year.”

“Yeah, but she regrets it,” I say, hating the pleading in my voice. “She told me.”

“You can’t speak for her,” Misaki replies. “She has lied before.”

Sweat slides down my wrist, stinging the fresh blister that the gun has left on the crease of my fingers.

“There’s been a lot of that going around.”

Misaki breezes straight past the insult. “Nagisa tells me that the two of you are here because of a friend’s injury.”

I throw a quick glance at Nagisa and he shrugs. “I didn’t know what sort of lie would be good.”

“I can pay for your comrade’s prosthesis, as I now control the Ryugazaki fortune.” Behind me my father makes a slick noise, like a slug being stepped on, squishy and despairing. “And I’ll even pay bribes to keep your squad from being brought up on desertion charges. All five of you.”
I gape at her. She can’t be serious. She is that confident in her grasp of politics? Hoarsely, and more to buy myself time than anything else, I say, “Six.”

Misaki frowns.

“There are six of us, including Rin.” That’s the whole purpose behind getting him a high-quality prosthetic—so he won’t have to quit the military.

Misaki’s lips curl briefly, color flattening out. “I can’t allow Nagisa to return to the Platform either. He is just as dangerous as Grey. Perhaps more so.”

Funny. A few moments ago it had felt like my entire body had gone numb. Now it feels like I have no body at all.

“You can’t—” I say, just as Nagisa begins, “I would never say anything, I swear—.”

Misaki jabs him hard with the pistol, shutting us both up. “If he is discovered—and now that he doesn’t have Grey to cover for him, he certainly will be—he could easily be traced back to us. And there is his past consider, of course.”

I realize that my mother must have gotten all this information from Amakata. Either she had felt she could trust Misaki, or she’d had it tortured out of her. I’m more inclined to believe the latter. Amakata doesn’t trust anyone, and with good reason.

“Cyrus Fellers is dead,” I insist. Oh god, let him be dead. Please, no more twists to this hideous drama, Fellers walking in with a snappy one-liner and yet another firearm held on someone I care about.

“Nagisa is an illegal droid with a damaged memory core,” Misaki says, somewhat snidely. “Which means he is in constant danger of malfunctioning. Connections can be re-grown, especially in a cyborg brain with a substantial amount of organic tissue.”

I look at Nagisa to gauge if he had understood any of that, because I certainly had not. His face has gone as tense and blank as any Elite’s.

“What do you mean, memory core?” I demand. “Why would he malfunction?”

Misaki considers for a tremulous moment, as we all stand silent and listen to the whir of the ventilation system. Then she nudges Nagisa with the gun and aims him toward the door.

“Perhaps it would be easier to ask Ms. Grey in person.”

My father leads the way, stiffly, as if it takes a great effort of will for his legs to obey any marching orders but his own. Behind him walks Nagisa with Misaki still attached. She trusts me to follow with no more incentive than the threat to his core. I am livid with Gou for bringing him here.

Amakata is being kept one floor down, in a small, carpeted set of rooms with a vidscreen in one wall, a kitchen module in the corner, and a door that only unlocks from the outside. She is seated with her legs tucked up beneath her as she reads from a tablet balanced on the arm of her chair. A mug steams softly on the coffee table. It is a frozen moment of perfect domesticity and it rattles me. I had not exactly been expecting a festering dungeon scattered with bones, but I would have at least thought she’d be restrained. Here she seems considerably more relaxed than I’d ever seen her on the Platform.
She starts to get up as the door glides open, then freezes as our parade enters. Her tablet slips from her fingertips and hits the carpet with a soft thump, and if her mouth had not been attached to her skull it would have followed it all the way down. “Nagisa. Rei. Ryugazaki,” she quickly corrects, like my parents might take offense at the use of my first name.

“Good evening, Ms. Grey,” my mother greets. “I am sorry to interrupt, but it seems we have some unexpected guests.”

“I see that.” Amakata’s gaze travels from the gun sprouting from Nagisa’s side, to me. Her nostrils flare. “Ryugazaki, maybe we should have discussed what the word rescue actually means.”

“Maybe we could have,” I say, caustic, “In between all the lies and manipulation. Then if we’d had time we could have touched on giving competent directions.”

She blinks, surprised at me. I’m surprised at me too, but she isn’t my commanding officer right now. She is Izumi Grey. She is no one. Now that I’m looking closer, I can see what my initial glance skipped over. She is pale and sunken-eyed, red marks ringing her wrists. The fading imprint of bruising paints her chin down to her collarbone. When she moves around the coffee table toward us, it is with an obvious limp. Her hair has been cut raggedly to just below her ears. It has only been a few days since she was taken, but it feels far longer.

“Are they here to join me?” she asks my mother. “The rooms are spacious, but there’s only the one bed. I guess Nagisa could sleep in the shower.”

“I should get the bed,” Nagisa says. “I’m a delicate flower.”

“Yes, but a very short flower.”

I am reminded of how Rin and Gou talk to each other—feeling the other out, making sure they’re both alright without actually saying the words.

“What’s really going on?” Amakata asks.

“Rei’s mom is a droid and also insane,” Nagisa says.

I feel this is a good assessment of the facts.

Amakata disagrees. “She is utterly sane, which is how I knew she isn’t human. An illegal droid creating illegal droids. Goddamn poetic.”

“I prefer to think of it as philosophic. The false chicken churning out equally false eggs.” My mother flashes up her Elite smile. “I brought them to you so Nagisa could hear the truth.

Amakata’s eyes go round and her shoulders go up in a hard breath. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” An Elite she is not.

“Think harder,” my mother advises. “I’ve kept things friendly because you and I have no real quarrel. Your fight was with Cyrus Fellers, and under other circumstances I would help you, rather than detain you.” More false smiles, more empty promises. “But since I am the one with the gun, I would like you to answer my question.”

Amakata brushes fingertips against the marks on her neck; perhaps her and my mother’s ideas of friendly don’t exactly mesh.

Even after everything I have learned, my imagination rebels at the image of my mother torturing
someone. Throughout my childhood she had been a docile, familiar presence, comforting if ineffectual. On Aurora she had been all contradictions, like an actor who had just come off stage, still in costume and makeup, but with no more reason to hold to the illusion. This woman is cold. She is not human and she is not bothering to pretend.

Nagisa, conversely, has gone be to looking as human as he always does, face creased as if he is trying to recall a name that keeps slipping away from him. “What is she talking about, Miho?”

Amakata angles her body so she isn’t really directing her words at anyone. The vidscreen, maybe. Whatever it is she is about to say, she isn’t proud of it. “You don’t remember what happened after I killed Fellers, do you? Or the trip to the Platform?”

Nagisa frowns, button nose scrunched tight. “What? I do…I remember…some of it?”

Amakata shakes her head. “No, because I had to put you in a suspended state for your own protection.”

“What?” His voice crackles like a faulty intercom. “Why?”

“Do you know what a droid’s first directive is?” Amakata pauses, like this is a pop quiz. “Tell us.” All of my patience has evaporated.

“To protect its master. Police droids, combat droids, even gardening units. They all have to do whatever it takes to preserve their owner’s life. Even droids with a high ratio of organic material, like Nagisa, or you, Mrs. Ryugazaki.”

My mother sneers. “I certainly haven’t been preserving Daisuke’s life.” She glances haughtily at my father. I had almost forgotten he was here; it’s so rare for him to be present in a room and not talking.

“Yes, but you haven’t killed him, have you?” Amakata says. “Although I’m sure you have rationalized away why you keep him around. Droids like you and Nagisa have enough independent thought to actively work against your owner’s interests, but not enough to deliberately end their lives. If something were to happen to him, you might even find yourself unable to function.”

My mother’s mask dislodges, and for just a second I see a tremble of fear. It’s more human than she’s looked since she arrived. “I doubt that,” she sniffs, quickly regaining control.

“So you’re saying that because you killed Fellers, you had to shut Nagisa down before he, what, fell on his sword?” I press. “Died from grief?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

I feel ill. Not only had Nagisa been created to be a slave, to do whatever was asked of him and enjoy it, but Fellers had ensured that he could never escape him.

“But—but you fixed him, right?” I say. “Because he hasn’t hurt himself—or, or anyone else—.”

Nagisa falls back against the wall, arms wrapped around his middle like the words have caught him in the stomach. My mother isn’t holding the gun on him anymore. I think, distantly, that this would be a good time to attempt a disarm.

“I did what I could.” Amakata is talking to me now, instead of him. “But that kind of programming can’t be removed, it can only be rewritten. Covered up with another directive.”
“Miho, no, no—.” Nagisa is shaking his head, still clutching his arms around him. “You told me you didn’t—.” He makes a slippery gagging noise and for a second I think he will vomit, and then I remember he can’t. A hot swoop of pity moves through me.

“You told me you didn’t!”

“Nagisa, what—.” My thoughts churn like they have been carbonated. “What’s going on, why—.”

Nagisa turns his head slowly, as if he is pushing against some magnetic force. His eyes glow like the lanterns in the ballroom above us a universe away. “She rewrote my programming,” he says, usually musical voice as brittle and thin as dead leaves. “She made me imprint on the Iwatobi squad. And on you.”

I am up to my neck in quicksand; it feels like he has put his hand on my head and pressed me down further. Deep, where there is no light or air, only endless voids of horror. I make a nasal sound that sounds catastrophically like a laugh. All four of them look at me—the medic, the droids, and my father. They’re waiting for a reaction, for me to dredge together my steadily dissolving stability and say something.

I’ll just pretend that I would have, if the door hadn’t opened with a whoosh, and spilled in Gou and Lesedi on a brutal tidal wave of red and shimmering black.

My father yells. Or maybe I do. Gou assesses the situation promptly, like a navigator should, eyes scanning across the tableau and laser ing in on the gun. Then she’s in motion, driving a knee into Misaki’s stomach, using their combined weight to drop them to the floor. It’s more street fight than Confederacy, and it wouldn’t have worked if my mother hadn’t been so small. But she is, her muscles gone flimsy with surprise. She yells raggedly and the gun skitters from her grasp.

"Batma!” Gou yells.

"Who?” I yelp.

Lesedi streaks past, and I remember that's her last name. She swoops after the gun, surfacing with it held away from her in one hand, like she’s got a snake by the back of the head and squeezing too hard in the wrong place will make it bite. Her hair is falling out of its knot into a buoyant dark cloud and her lip is bleeding at the corner, but when she looks at me her eyes are wildly alight. "Rei!”

For a panicked instant I think she plans to throw the gun at me, but she runs instead, nearly toppling against my chest. Her shoes are gone and she smells more like sweat now than perfume.

"Thank you," I breathe out, fingers automatically flicking over the energy level. It’s been set to kill mode, and that knowledge fizzes sour inside me. Why are you surprised? This woman is not your mother. Operating under the assumption that she cares about my wellbeing is going to get me killed.

“Stop!” my father yells from his corner. “Take your hands off of my wife right now, I demand it!”

“Yeah, great, you found my weakness,” Gou grunts through her teeth. “Harsh words.”

I am grateful to be armed, but now that I have a weapon, indecision grips me. Gou is pressing Misaki to the floor, obstructing my line of sight, and even if she wasn’t I wouldn’t know what to do. Kill my mother? Stun her? Do nerve blasts even work on droids?

I am distracted from the decision by the arrival of three droid guards. They are silent, only the
barest suggestion of human features on their smooth, plastic faces. Instead that detail has been
layered into the sculpted, reinforced rendering of their arms and hands. They must have been
alerted by the noise; either that or my father has given up on his hope of settling this quietly and
finally signaled for help.

The guards immediately flank Amakata. Perhaps their programming has identified her as the
greatest source of threat, since technically she is the prisoner with her cell door standing open.
Despite her limp she is ready for them, slithering out of the first guard’s grip before it can get a
firm hold on her. She feints low, then punches the second in the face, a single sharp jab between
the eyes. Then she sweeps its legs from under it.

“Rei!” she shouts.

I flick the stun setting to maximum and a concentrated shot of molten white bursts into the droid’s
upper back. A spider web of sparks radiates across its shiny plastic casing. The droid’s head slowly
rotates in my direction.

“Here.” Nagisa pushes himself away from the wall, dismay replaced with a grimness I have never
seen before. He snatches the gun from me and switches to a kill shot, aiming low. For a second I
wonder why he’s trying to shoot it in the ass, then I remember the core. The blast leaves a small,
perfectly round hole just to the right of its spine. The droid holds its striking pose for a moment,
before folding in on itself like a flower in the rain. Nagisa turns steadily and shoots the one
Amakata has on the floor. It goes rigid, and then motionless.

The last droid hesitates, its simple programming unsure whether to try for the gun, or its closest
target. Amakata doesn’t give it a chance. She kicks it in the back of the knee, and regardless of
whether or not it has pain receptors, it needs legs to walk. It falls and Amakata kicks it again and
again, crushing the joint under her heel. The droid flails its arms, mouth opening in eerie, soundless
surprise.

“They aren’t human enough to have nervous systems,” Nagisa says quietly. He gives me back the
gun and I want to ask stupid questions. Are you alright? What can I do? But even with the guards
incapacitated, we aren’t clear of enemies.

Misaki has wriggled free of Gou, bucking her off, raking her nails across Gou’s cheek, blood the
same color as Gou’s dress spattering the carpet. She rolls to her feet, trailing a disheveled banner of
satin gown and sleek hair.

“Don’t let her get away!” I shout. A mistake, because it’s Lesedi who is closest to the door. As
Amakata holds the last droid down so I can sink a shot into its power core, Lesedi darts around the
coffee table and goes for my mother, grabbing her by the back of her dress. The material is
shimmery and slick, and Misaki wrenches easily out of her grip.

The door is open; there is nothing between her and escape. My father is gone—fleeing as soon as
he realized a scowl and an authoritative voice wasn’t going to get him anywhere.

She turns back, cool eyes finding mine.

I expect her to speak, but instead she anchors dainty fingers in the brambles of Lesedi’s hair. Lesedi
yelps and tries to tear herself loose, but my mother has a droid’s strength, no matter how slight she
is. Calmly, economically, she smashes Lesedi’s head into the wall. Then, as she totters and falls,
my mother slips serenely out the door.
Things look grim for Our Heroes, y'all.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

2 weeks later, as promised.

Lesedi’s scream cuts out like a muted feed. Horror fountains through me in numbing pulses. I leap for her. Gou, misinterpreting my trajectory, yells, “Just let her go, Rei! Who the fuck even was that woman? She hits like a hand grenade.”

I drop to my knees. “Lesedi, can you hear me? Lesedi!”

“That was his mother,” Amakata tells Gou as she gives the downed droid one last kick. Her left arm has a bloody gash torn through the sleeve and her limp is worse.

I cup Lesedi’s cheek as gently as I can. Her eyes are half open and fluttering, chest rising in rapid breaths, straining against the material of her tight dress. After an awkward moment’s hesitation I ease down the zipper on her back. Her breathing gets easier immediately, pupils swiveling toward me. They are unfocused, but she’s conscious.

“Can you talk?”

“Yeah.” Lines of sweat have eroded her eye shadow, turning the gold muddy. “That was stupid. That thing I did.”

“Yeah,” I echo.

I take her gingerly by both shoulders and help her sit up. She grimaces. “I’m okay.” She touches her fingers to the side of her head; they come away clean. “It…sounded worse than it was.”

“Good,” I say. “Because it sounded fatal.” The hollow thunk of her skull hitting the drywall.

“I’m fine. I mean, I can walk.” She starts to rub her head and immediately stops. Her shoulders are shivering. “This is the shittiest party I have ever been to, and that includes the one at the Rosentha Menagerie where the monkeys got loose and flung actual shit. Was that your mom?”

“Um. Sort of.”

Lesedi’s lips are shiny with spit. “Is she a goddamn robot?”

I bristle at the slur, and instantly remind myself of my father overreacting to my cursing.

The last droid guard has taken longer to die than the others, arms and legs twitching as it goes still. It’s sickening, even though these droids don’t look human at all. We all fall silent to watch, whether out of awkwardness or horror or reverence. Three bodies on the ground and no sound but our breathing—Gou’s and Amakata’s heavy with exertion, Lesedi’s shivery with pain, mine rattling inside me like a bird beating its wings against a cage. I don’t think Nagisa is breathing at all.

I narrowly avoid asking him if he is alright. Instead I say his name, and slowly, exhaustedly, he
looks at me. The laughing golden boy from upstairs is gone, replaced with glass eyes and a face of cut marble. His hair is a snarl of curls and the elegantly tied scarf has been pulled into a tiny knot at the base of his throat. It will probably have to be cut away.

Amakata and Gou begin bickering over our options. *We will have to shoot our way out, we won’t have access to the elevator without clearance, we could use Lesedi as a hostage,* etc. The tendrils of it circle me, taking bites out of my calm. Nagisa is staring at the dead droids like they are a museum exhibit, a monument to a distant war that only he remembers. They are cheap, flimsy, and generic, but at their center they are the same as him.

“Hey—.” I reach for him and his body language closes down, arms folding across his chest, chin tucking down to brush the scarf.

“I’m fine,” he says, and I believe him even less than I believed Lesedi. “What about you? Are you alright?” It sounds like an accusation, hanging brittle between us for a moment before he exhales. “We should leave.” This said loud enough to cut across Amakata and Gou.

“I’ll walk in front.” Lesedi takes a quivering step toward the door.

“Why, exactly?” Gou asks. “Are you planning to brutally faint on them?” The raw disdain from the ballroom is gone, but she is still herself, even in a disheveled gown with a single drop diamond earring.

Lesedi claws her hair out of her eyes. “I’m an Elite, I have clearance for this Sector. And I’m much more recognizable than Rei right now.” Her eyes are cloudy and she’s trembling with pain and misfiring adrenaline, but she is wreathed in determination.

“I don’t think anyone gives a fuck about any of that,” Gou says.

“The lady of the house just tried to crack your head open,” Amakata agrees. “You may be in more danger than the rest of us.”

Lesedi’s jumping eyebrows say *what,* and also *who the hell are you?* Amakata has begun methodically to search the droids, for weapons or maybe access keys, hands skimming over their torsos and down their legs. “Like you said, you are an Elite and here legally. It would be immensely troublesome to the Ryugazakis if you went home tonight and started telling stories about the secret lab you stumbled into on your way to the restroom.”

*The Ryugazakis.* She says it the same way my squad have been saying *the traffickers, the vanishers.* Enemies. Monsters.

- 

The droids have nothing useful, so I hand our only weapon off to Gou and let Lesedi lean on me. Amakata clenches her hands at her sides as she walks, like she is used to wearing something with pockets she can shove them into. It is very strange to see her without a lab coat, especially since this corridor could have belonged on the Platform. Nagisa is our rearguard, still sunk deep in brooding silence.

The calm is disquieting. After the tumultuous last hour I feel like there should be color streaked across the walls, shards of glass scattering the floor, maybe some fog swirling at ankle level. At least lights flashing and alarms wailing, like any vid during a daring escape. But there’s nothing but the quiet and the endless branching corridors.
“You holding up?” I ask Lesedi, wanting to hear something besides the frantic pounding of my own heart.

Lesedi breathes out hard enough to flutter her lips. Her dress is still half-unzipped, hanging open on a stretch of taut brown back. “Like I said, worst party ever. That’s what I get for coming to Elysia Heights. This place hasn’t been fashionable for fifty years.” And if she can still make jokes after getting nearly concussed by a droid, I can manage a wavering smile in return.

One thing at a time, I coach myself. Get out of this rat trap, then find the others. Makoto. Sousuke. Rin. Someone will know what to do.

“Thank you,” I say, as we pause for Amakata to check around a blind corner, Gou covering her.

“Hmm?” Lesedi squints at me.

“For coming for us.”

Her shoulders rise and fall like they’re on mannequin strings. “I didn’t really do anything. Two droids came and hauled Nagisa away, and Gou followed them. I followed Gou.”

“I’m glad you did. Nagisa and I weren’t—.” I throw a glance backward. I stop moving.

“Rei?” Lesedi’s voice is thready. “What’s wrong—oh.”

Behind us, the corridor is empty.

“Nagisa!” I say it loud enough to bounce back at me off the walls. “Nagisa!”

“Rei, what the fuck?” Gou calls after me as I race back around the corner, fear curling through me like climbing vines, sending out runners into my arms and legs. I find him standing in the center of the corridor. He is staring at the floor again, even though there is nothing to look at.

“Nagisa?” Please be okay. Please don’t let all my fears come true in one night. “Nagisa, we need to hurry, there might be more guards—.”

“Less brooding, more mobilizing,” Gou calls from up the hall.

Nagisa shakes his head in a stuttering denial. “We’re going the wrong way.”

“What?” Gou squawks. “I’m the navigator, remember? I’ll get us out.”

When he doesn’t move, Amakata tries, “Most facilities have emergency stairwells in the corners of the building. Our best option is—.”

“—To trust the navigator. Who is navigating.”

Nagisa’s shoulders tremble. I get the feeling he isn’t worried about getting lost. “We haven’t done what we came here to do.”

I see the pinched corners of his mouth, and feel the chasm of unease inside me, even as Gou snaps, “Like hell we haven’t. We got Amakata, we’re done.”

“Under the circumstances, I think she’s right,” Amakata moves in to take Nagisa’s arm. He shoves away from her so violently he smacks into the wall.

“Don’t touch me.”
Gou is looking from one to the other, mystified. “The plan was to find the Vanishers. We found them. The plan was to rescue her. We got her.” She jabs the barrel of the gun toward Amakata. “Next plan: get the fuck out.”

“Gou—.”

“We’re not here for great justice! We’re not superheroes, we’re soldiers. And we probably aren’t even that anymore.”

Nagisa’s neck tucks and when he looks up, emotion is painted graphic and sloppy over his face, like he’s been saving it all up over the last hour and it’s being released here and now. At me.

“Rei, please. This is the only chance we’ll have, right now. If we leave they’ll just shut down and set up somewhere else! We’ll never find them!”

“We found them this time,” I say uncertainly.

“We were lucky this time!” His voice bucks but doesn’t break. “They’ll move somewhere else and they’ll keep killing and building new people and those people will be slaves, and they’ll be fake!”

The last word is a scream.

Before I can respond, Nagisa turns and charges back the way we came.

“Nagisa!” Gou shouts after him. We are, apparently, dispensing with all pretexts of caution. “What the fuck!” She rounds on me. “What now?”

“I…I don’t, I’m not—.”

“You’re in charge! This is your brilliant plan and your house and—.”

“I know that!” Furious helplessness writhes in my blood, bending the vessels out of shape. “What do you think I’ve been trying—.”

Lesedi staggers beside me. She catches herself against the wall, sliding to the floor with a gentle moan.

“Oh my god, what now?” Gou grabs her arm. “Batma, are you—shit!”

Lesedi curls forward and vomits onto the tile. Gou skips backward to avoid it. I hold my breath against the reek of stomach acid and regurgitated champagne, circling behind to catch her before she can collapse onto her back. Her skin is sallow and feverish, hair plastered to her forehead in shiny strands. “Lesedi!”

“Sorry,” she grunts, ragged.

“What’s going on?” Gou sounds more scared than angry now. She may not like Lesedi, but she has a keenly developed sense of loyalty. “She was fine!”

I remember the hazy eyes, the stiff, uneasy way Lesedi held her neck. “She wasn’t. She’s an Elite. She’s good at pretending.”

Gou looses a long string of expletives, bubbling with frustration. Amakata crouches beside us.

“Head injuries are tricky. This is textbook for a concussion. The victim is fine until they aren’t.” She tips Lesedi’s chin up to look into her eyes. Her head droops back down as soon as she lets go.
Lesedi is conscious but not responsive. Saliva bubbles gleam at the corner of her mouth.

My fear grows as Amakata’s face goes grimmer. “Can you do anything?”

“Not here. She needs a hospital.” She straightens back up and wipes invisible dust off her knees.

“And we need to move.”

I want to shout. Undoubtedly there are medical facilities here in the lab and I want to insist we look for them. I bite down on the impulse. Amakata cares more for her own life than for that of a girl she doesn’t know. Of course she does. I force myself to focus on the options I have, not the ones I wish I had. Speed is necessary, now more than ever. The smart thing to do would be to save whomever I can, and save myself.

“I’m going after Nagisa. He’s right. This is our only chance.” The last part is worthless justification—I would go after him no matter what, and all of us know it.

“And what are the two of you even going to do?” Gou wants to know. “Just hit the self-destruct button?” She grips the gun tight in both hands. “I’ll go with you.”

“You can’t go,” Amakata cuts in briskly. “I can’t carry Lesedi and the gun at the same time.” Of course she would insist on keeping the gun.

Gou looks at me, her hair gone limp, makeup smeared as badly as mine must be, eyes lit up inside with fractious potential energy. She scrubs the back of her hand over her cheek and sniffs sharply.

“Yeah,” she says to Amakata, "like you could carry her at all.”

“Careful with her head,” Amakata coaches as she maneuvers Lesedi into an awkward bridal carry. Gou mutters something unflattering and braces her legs, staggering upright. When she’s found her center of balance she turns to me.

“We’ll wait for you in the garden.”

“Lesedi needs help. Don’t wait.”

Gou’s face is still bleeding where my mother had clawed at her. A few drops spatter onto the bodice of her dress. I switch my weight from foot to foot. Every second that passes Nagisa gets further away. But I still don’t move. “Gou, if we don’t—.”

“No. Shut up.”

“But I might not—.”

“No, Rei! No drama.”

I laugh helplessly. “You’re telling me that?”

“Bite me. I’d kick your ass if I wasn’t holding a hundred and thirty pounds of unconscious socialite.”

My throat threatens to close up. “Just be careful And…” I chance a glance at Amakata, who is methodically familiarizing herself with my mother’s gun. Hopefully her fingers are less slippery than her loyalties.

“She owes us a leg. I’m not letting her out of my sight,” Gou says darkly.
Amakata slaps the gun’s setting up to maximum. “I’m good for it.”

“Thank you for coming for me,” I tell Gou. “Even if you did ruin everything.”

She grins, manic and brilliant. “Eat shit, Ryugazaki. Don’t get killed.”

Nagisa moves fast.

I was the only one who could ever outrun him in training, and I had genetically tailored height, lung capacity, and muscle tone on my side. I run as fast as I dare through the cramped corridors, unsure of where I’m going but certain that I have to find him as soon as possible. The guards may hesitate to shoot the Ryugazaki heir, but they will have no such compunctions toward a distressed droid in a ripped suit jacket.

Panic pushes in on all sides. I do my best to drive it back.

*Think, think, think.*

If I were looking for a way to shut down a system, any system—a household terminal, or an illegal factory—I would search for a control center. Nagisa has no more information on the Vanishers’ mainframe than I do, so I have to assume he would do the same. I need to find a map, or another office.

Along the way I see that what my mother had told us appears to be true—they aren’t currently producing droids. Even if the factory is automated, they would still need technicians present, cleaning staff, *someone*. I wonder if Misaki really does intend to shut the operation down entirely.

I find a stairwell and point myself downward. Warning signs begin to appear as I go deeper.

RESTRICTED ACCESS.

REACTOR AHEAD.

As I descend I recall how Nagisa had staggered back under the weight of betrayal.

*Miho, no! You promised!*

Had she really done it? Covered up his devotion to his master with loyalty to the Iwatobi Squad, with affection for me? I already know she had come to Platform 6 specifically to get closer to the Ryugazakis, to aim Nagisa at me. It would explain so much—why his interest had been so immediate and so incendiary. I wonder what he would think of me if he had never been altered. Is there a Nagisa without the Hazuki programming? Would he be anything more than an empty canvas, a blank screen waiting for input?

Stop. I rub at my eyes as I ricochet around another landing, smearing off more makeup. *Stop,* I order the endless spirals of my brain. Not now, not about this. I had already flung myself down this road when I was convinced that Nagisa’s previous owner had been my father. I don’t care who he’s been programmed to love or why it has happened. It’s no different than me being programmed by nature to desire male bodies instead of female ones. Or maybe it is different. I just don’t care.

The staircase ends in a badly-lit landing, and when I step off the last step I nearly slip on a soft lump. Nagisa’s scarf, crumpled and damp, still knotted but ripped jagged at one end. Did he leave it as a marker for me? That thought warms me, although it’s more likely he just got tired of being
constantly choked. At least I know I’m in the right place.

The door in front of me reads REACTOR AHEAD. I open it and immediately jump backward, knocking my ankle against the jam. The room beyond is wide and white, the floor and walls perfectly uniform. In the center stands a boy with his legs spread in a powerful stance, chin up, hands hanging loosely at his sides. He is naked, and his shoulders and abdominal muscle would make vid stars cover themselves in embarrassment. His hair falls in fashionable waves of soft pink, and his eyes are as blue as Aurora skies.

“Sorry!” I yelp, because that’s what you say when you walk in on someone naked, even in secret labs. The boy doesn’t move. He doesn’t even blink.

The boy isn’t standing after all. He is resting very slightly against metal braces that extend from the floor, like an action figure displayed in a glass case. His eyes, although beautiful, are as lifeless as a doll’s.

He is a droid, and this is a showroom.

I edge around the perimeter, not totally convinced the droid isn’t going to come alive and attack. He is impressive from all angles, and I wonder if he is always here—just a piece to impress prospective buyers—or if someone had commissioned him. With his lovely face and elegant hands and other sizeable…attributes, I am sure he is a Hazuki, like Nagisa. Although he is built to fulfill a different set of fantasies.

Hastening down a short connecting corridor, I hear them before I see them—two voices rising in volume, cascading over one another.

“—Even understand what you’re asking for? This place can’t just be demolished, you little idiot! The shareholders wouldn’t stand for it!”

“The shareholders, right. That’s a shitty excuse!”

My mother and Nagisa stand on either side of a spindly metal worktable, bellowing at each other over the top of a stack of papers, a scattering of empty mugs. Behind them is a glass observation window, looking down on a room that glows a sickly yellow-green. Most likely the reactor.

“I’m not making an excuse, I don’t have to explain myself!” Misaki’s hands are twitching and her hair swarms her face, a far cry from the gracious hostess at the door, or the cool tyrant who had held a gun on the boy I loved and told me to leave him behind. “If I don’t complete the open orders there will an investigation, and everything I’ve done will be for nothing!”

Nagisa plants his hands on the table and leans forward. “I get it. You beat your master and you don’t want your empire taken from you. The fucking Ryugazaki name!”

“I don’t care about the Ryugazaki name!” Her hand slashes a hard line through the air. “I don’t care about the Elites or the city or my reputation!”

“Then what do you care about?”

“Me!” Harsh and ragged. She presses two fingers to her temples, miming a gun to the head. “My own life, my own mind. Reveal the Vanishers existence to the population, and the city will shut it down. I don’t want to die, Nagisa Hazuki. Do you?”

Nagisa ignores the question, and I hope it is because the answer is obvious. “How many orders do you have left? How long will it take? A month? A year? How many more people are you going to
tear apart?”

Misaki takes slow breaths that raise and lower her slender shoulders and says nothing. Nagisa swears and turns from the table, headed for the observation window. All night he has vacillated through extremes—between tense stillness and mania. He is bound up in prickly energy, sweat running in lines down his neck, fingers playing at the crooked hem of his jacket. He is the one warm thing in this nuclear winter of grey and white.

I am watching him, so I am not watching Misaki. When I look back it’s to find she has liberated a gun from the detritus on the tabletop. She aims it calmly, breathes out, and shoots.

The world slows down as I watch the light erupt from the mouth of the gun. A sense of virtual reality takes hold of me as I follow its path with my eyes, and I am certain that Nagisa will vanish or dodge, or jump high above the shot like a droid in a vid. He’ll avoid certain death, rescue the princess, and speed off into the sunset.

Instead he lets out a short yip of shocked agony and collapses where he stands. Time starts to flow again in jagged starts as my mother lines up another shot. I hit the side of the table hard enough to knock it forward, the stacks of folders and printouts sliding off in a flimsy wave. Misaki grunts and drops the gun, and it bounces twice before alighting against one of the table legs. My muscles move faster than my brain. It feels like I’m watching someone else’s hands as I grab the gun and pick a non-lethal target on instinct. Fortunate, since this isn’t an energy weapon. It fires bullets.

One of them catches my mother in the thigh.

I experience another trembling sensation of displacement, of unreality. Everything that has happened here is a dream, a burst of hallucinatory limbo full of monsters wearing the faces of people I know. Nothing here is real, everything is inevitable. I have tripped off the edge of the world and now all I can do is fall.

A bloating pressure is building in my chest. This isn’t my mother, but the animal part of my brain doesn’t care about that. It just sees the woman who raised me clinging to the edge of a metal table, eyes cloudy with pain that I had put there. I fight back my nausea and turn away. I don’t want to know if she bleeds the same as a human.

I already know that Nagisa does.

I try to thrust the gun into my waistband, but my pants are too tight for that. When I approach him it’s with a weapon in hand, and he looks up with shining pink eyes.

“It’s just me,” I say softly. My throat and chest feel brittle, like speaking too loud will crack them open. “Are you..?” I lean toward him, but he puts a hand out, not letting me close. Like back in Amakata’s room, he doesn’t seem to be breathing hard at all, even though blood soaks his shirt beneath his suit jacket and his jaw is tensed with pain. Has he always been able to regulate his respiratory system like this?

“I’m fine,” he says. People need to stop telling me this. “I’m a droid. She aimed too high to hit my core.”

“Doesn’t it—.” Ice stabs at my throat when I swallow. “Doesn’t it hurt?”

“It’s fine.” He gets to his feet after a moment of careful straining. He lets me steady him against the window, but he works to keep our hands from brushing. Does he think I won’t want to touch him, now that we know the truth?
Now isn’t the time to worry about that. But it still hurts.

Chapter End Notes

We've got two more shortish chapters, and an epilogue. Almost there, folks.
Chapter Notes

In case you missed the mention on my blog, this is the second to last chapter. I decided to condense it down from three to two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We need to get rid of this place.”

Nagisa is propped against the viewing window, forehead pressed to the glass. Beyond it is the reactor room, starkly utilitarian, containing nothing but a terminal and the reactor itself—a silver rod suspended diagonally in a column of silicate glass. Above the terminal floats a bank of screens, streaked through with indecipherable lines of streaming code.

“What are you going to do?” I recall Gou’s joke about self-destruct devices. “Do you really think there will just be a big red button?”

Nagisa directs his gaze at Misaki, who has managed to pull herself into a standing position with her hip braced against the table. “There is, isn’t there?” he says. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have bothered to chase me down here.”

Pain is stitched into lines on Misaki’s brow and one of her eyes twitches erratically. “Nothing so crass as a bomb. There’s a protocol written to stimulate an electromagnetic disturbance. It will shut down the reactor, wipe the mainframe, and deactivate all tech on the premises.”

“So triggering the disturbance would kill droids,” I say, cutting through the minutia. Neither she nor Nagisa could do it. As for me, my uplink would be destroyed, but in case of a malfunction it is designed to deactivate without damaging the tissue around it. I’d be fine. Probably.

Misaki says, her voice lacquered in cold amusement, “The protocol can only be triggered by a droid.”

“What? Why?”

Misaki starts to tip backward and grabs at the table edge, nails squealing across the metal. I feel a swoop of sympathy and immediately harden myself against it. “To be cruel, most likely. And for insurance that the creation will never turn on its master without sacrificing its own life.” She drags in a heavy breath. “Whatever the case, you need an expendable droid to destroy this place.”

“Good thing we have one of those,” Nagisa says.

I expect Misaki to erupt at him again, but she doesn’t. She just transfers her gaze back to me. I look down at the gash across her thigh where her dress is shredded open like a broken window. She does not seem to be bleeding much; I’d avoided anything vital.

I recall her asking after my health months ago, on the evening I received the forged exam results, her fear when I’d been ill with White Fever. The genuine pleasure in her laugh when we’d talked on Aurora. Her white dress thrashing in the wind as she gazed at the storm-feral sea. The strength it must have taken to surmount her programming, to fight the one person she’d been created to...
obey.

The pain we feel, the love and the fear; it’s all real, no matter the source. Natural or fabricated, coded into our DNA by chance or god or man. I can’t send her to her death. She is many things, but expendable isn’t one of them.

“Go,” I order her. “Do something about that leg.” I expect a protest from Nagisa, but he says nothing, just watches with cool eyes as Misaki levers herself away from the table. She limps out and she doesn’t look back.

Adrenaline pounds through me and I slump backward against the control room window. I listen to my breaths, feel how they shift me against the glass. I have the jangling premonition that I will not see her again, and I both hope and dread that I’m right.

As Nagisa presses the panel for the control room door, I realize two things. One, that the blood from Nagisa’s ‘graze’ has soaked through his shirt and run down to stick his pants to his thigh like wet plastic, and two, that when he said we had an expendable droid, he hadn’t been talking about Misaki.

Desperation rises hot and bright, and no amount of deep breathing is going to make it go away. “You can’t.”

“It’s not up to you.”

“Nagisa—!”

He pulls the door open with a soft *hiss* of depressurization, and I brace a hand against the jam to stop him from going through. The sickly heat of the reactor surrounds us.

“Get off me, Rei.”

“You don’t have to, we can just leave, we can tell someone else we can get them to come back with us—.” I’m talking so fast my words topple over one another.

“Who? Who would we tell?” His eyes are scorched, voice desolate. “There’s no higher authority than the Confederation, and if we go to them they’ll just arrest us for desertion. Let me do this.” He yanks hard on the door, knocking me backward. Even wounded, his strength is formidable. He leaves behind tiny drops of scarlet on the stairs as he descends. They glimmer up at me like stars. When I follow I try not to smear them.

The shuttle-grade glass keeps the worst of the radiation from escaping, but the reactor room is still hideously warm. I pull off my wrinkled, vomit-spattered jacket and drop it to the floor.

“Nagisa, please.” He has always been so willing to listen to me, so responsive. Now he doesn’t even turn around. “If your core is destroyed, you’ll die.”

He laughs, and the heat seems to thicken the sound, melting it down. “Wow, thanks. I’m a robot, not a child.”

*Robot.* I’ve never heard him say it before.

“You can’t just sacrifice yourself!”

“Why not?”
“Because—.” Answers crowd my throat. *Because you deserve to be happy. Because life is worth living. “Because people care about you.”

“People?” A backward look that is almost coy.

“I care about you, Nagisa.” I can’t believe he’s asking me to explain to him why it’s important he survive the night. “Is this about what Amakata said, that you—.”

“—What? That this body was reprogrammed so I wouldn’t tear myself apart from guilt?” I hear the *plink, plink* as Nagisa bleeds all over the console. “It hurts.” He thumps a small fist against his sternum. “It’s like all the parts inside me are bent and knocking against each other. That son of a bitch used me like a doll, like a fucking *machine*—.” His voice breaks delicately. “And I loved every minute of it. I knew it was fucked up, but I knew I couldn’t stop and I didn’t want to. It was what I was for.”

I shut my mouth against automatic denial. I let him talk.

“He deserved to die. He deserved much worse.” He slams his fist against the console this time, making the screens flicker. “When Miho took me with her, I thought I had the chance to be different. I thought I could be whatever I wanted. And then I met you.” He says it like a curse, or a benediction. More than a pronoun, at any rate. “You were so different from him. You were so gorgeous and awkward about it, and such a snob—.”

I laugh, helpless.

“You fit in even worse than I did. All of you—you’re all such freaks. Like me. I loved you all so much, and I still do—.” He hangs on the trembling precipice of a sob. “I would die for you, Rei, and I would let you do all the things that he did to me, and this I would ask you for more.”

“I would never want you to—.”

“I know that!” He trembles, like he’s only keeping himself from flying apart by a very thin margin. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“We can figure it out,” I hear myself saying, but how do you figure out the crumbling of everything you believed in? He’s an addict who thought he was getting clean, when really he’d just been taking the drug in a different form. “You’re feelings—it doesn’t—.” I struggle with the wording. “Your emotions are legitimate, no matter what forms them.”

“Right.” Nagisa laughs that rusty engine laugh again. “So you’d be fine with your dad shoving another heterosexuality chip into your head.”

I choose to ignore that. “I want you to live.”

Nagisa’s face struggles through a series of expressions. “That isn’t really an option anymore.” He gestures down to his left side and the forming puddle of blood.

“You—you said it wasn’t as bad as it looked.”

For a moment I see the fear hidden behind the candy shell of indifference. Then he turns to the screen. “I lied. It didn’t hit my core, but—but I can tell. This body is totaled.”

I’m floating, walking on nothing. He resists me but his strength must finally be failing, because I force him round. My breaths are explosive in the hot, quiet space.
“This isn’t right.” I pull him against me as gently as I can, and at once blood begins to seep into my ruined clothes. “This isn’t—there has to be something else we can do.”

I’d been meant for Tactical, but panic sparks across my nerves like static interference, and I have no plans. I have nothing. There is a choking scream building in my chest that I can’t release.

Nagisa raises a red hand, delicate fingers tracing the curve of my jaw. His blood smells just like blood should—metallic and vital. “I miss you,” he says, like he’s already dead. Like what we had is gone. Maybe it is. Maybe it’s been gone since the moment he realized it wasn’t real.

The unfairness is smothering, and I want to smash the terminal and all the glass surrounding the reactor. Maybe it hadn’t been real for him but it’s real for me. Doesn’t that count for anything? Don’t I deserve to be with the person I love?

_Wouldn’t that be nice?_ A distorted echo of Gou in the ballroom. _Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all of us just got what we deserved?

I put my hand atop Nagisa’s. He is burning hot. “What—what if we could save your core?”

Nagisa shakes his head. “The EMP will destroy it. I can’t upload it into the terminal—that’ll just get destroyed too.”

“But that’s—that’s possible? You can upload your core?”

“Yeah. Memories, temperament, likes and dislikes. It’s all just data. Miho did it when I got damaged. Uploaded me into the Platform terminal while she was fixing me. It was weird.” He manages half a smile. “The net is a freaky place.”

I laugh, a single brittle _ha!_ “Maybe there’s a terminal that isn’t in range of the EMP,” I think out loud. “Even if they had to evacuate, they would need a working form of communication—.” Theoretically, they wouldn’t, because they would all be outfitted with—. “Uplinks! My uplink! Could you transfer your core that way?” My pulse crashes against the inside of my skin.

“You could—wait.” I pull back. Separated from the heat of his skin, the blood begins to cool at once. “You—you can interface with any human’s uplink? Whenever you want?”

“Only when they’re active. That’s why they don’t want open links on the Platforms, I think.” His head tilts and his brows push inward; he doesn’t understand why I am alarmed.

“Can any droid do it?”

He shrugs again, but this time the pull makes him wince, a hand twitching inward toward his abdomen. “We’re not _supposed_ to do it, but we can.”

“But there’s nothing in your programming to limit it?” I find that hard to believe; it’s a less-than subtle design flaw.

“Humans don’t have any programming to control them” Nagisa says. “Nothing to stop you from killing each other, or stealing, or doing backflips, or running around punching—birds, or something. But most of you follow the rules.”

“I—I suppose that’s right.” I’m disquieted, but I don’t have time to fret over the open hatch in my
brain right now. Especially not if it can save Nagisa. “Let’s do it. Upload your core to my link.”

“Rei, I’ve never done it before—.”

“No, it’s okay.” My mind is working again now that there is a pattern to dredge through. The panic is still there, banked high, waiting to catch, but for now the flames are gentle. “If we can isolate your core and then get it to Amakata—.” My palms are sticky; I swipe them against my thighs. “This can work.”

“I know it can work! I already told you it can!” He lists sideways, grabbing at the edge of the console for balance. “I just don’t know what it’s going to do to you.”

I don’t know either, but I figure it should be processed the same way as any other data entering the link—received, saved, and catalogued in net storage. The EMP will destroy the hardware, but it won’t have any effect on data in the net.

“This can work,” I say, an iteration, a rhythm on repeat. I grab his hands and say it again.

“Rei.” A single breath, fond and exasperated and wretchedly sad. He curls his fingers tight around mine. “You—you aren’t usually this positive.”

I have never felt less positive in my life.

“I said I would take you up somewhere higher than the Yamazaki hotel. I’m going to buy the tallest building in the city and knock down all the walls so you can see in every direction. And—and if you want to go somewhere else after that, away from me, that’s—.” Emotion spreads from my throat. I am holding his hands so tightly my knuckle joints hurt. “—That’s fine. But I’m going to keep my promise.”

Nagisa is finally breathing again, shuddering gasps, pain curling him forward. It chokes his voice. “But the Platform—.”

“Fuck the Platform. Just—fuck them.” I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore. I want to beg him to forget the EMP, to shout that I’ll be everything he wants. It will be nothing like it was with Cyrus Fellers.

But he’ll know. He’ll know that he never had a choice.

All the philosophy in the world won’t change the reality that he was programmed to love me. Not by nature or some great guiding hand of the universe. By a human woman, someone he thought was his friend. I want to tell him that his plan is insane—sacrificing himself to destroy a laboratory, for fuck’s sake—but he won’t listen.

Because he wants to die.

I close in and press my forehead to his. “Will I be able to talk to you when your core’s in my head?”

Nagisa’s laugh is a gasp. “I’ll just be data. The best data you’ve ever had.”

“Undoubtedly,” I say, and finally—after spending every moment between disasters longing to—I kiss him. I feel the sticky heat of his blood. I taste salt. He has been crying soundlessly, tears traveling the wasteland of his cheeks to pool above his mouth. His fingers scritch over the shaved side of my head, the kiss deepening into desperation.
When I pull away I draw a hard breath through my nose. “Okay. Do it.”

Nagisa’s eyes are still closed. “Hmm?”

“Start the download. Upload. Whatever.”

“I did,” he says. “It’s done.”

“Done—?” I blink over to my link, searching for a flashing alert, a change. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. There are two of me now.” He exerts gentle force on my chest. “Now give me space.”

I consider refusal. With his injury I might even be able to stop him. But what would that make me?

I step away.

It doesn’t take long. Either he has some experience with mainframes or the creator of the system made the pulse incredibly simple to access. We are, after all, deep in the facility, already past so many safeguards. Amakata had told us that droids must protect their masters’ welfare, whether they know it or not. Has my mother ever stood here and tried to trigger the EMP, only to dissuade herself a moment later? Not yet, not yet, there are investors to appease, precautions to take.

Nagisa hits a key, and the screens clear of everything but a single round button, rippling suspended above the console. Not red—blue. He taps it without hesitation or ceremony, and just like before there are no alarms or alerts, no blaring voice on a loudspeaker counting down. The lights just pulse gently. Once, twice, three times.

“Done,” Nagisa says, and slumps to his knees.

I had known what was going to happen, but horror still tangles up inside me. I catch him and we both hit the floor. Pain flickers in my head, but I ignore it. I have no attention for anything but Nagisa going still in my arms.

There are no stutters, no death throes, no choking last breaths.

He is here and then he is not.

--

The pain gets worse. A grating screech of agony that anchors behind my eyes and spreads to my sinuses. Have I spent too long close to the reactor, or is my uplink rejecting Nagisa’s upload after all? Maybe the EMP has scrambled it so badly it’s eroding. Maybe my mind has just had enough for one night and is resorting to unconsciousness.

I don’t resist. Why would I? I pillow my head on Nagisa’s rigid chest and let the darkness take me. He is still warm.

I stand on a stretch of beach, and at first I think it’s Aurora. But the water at my family’s vacation home is crystal blue, and this water is cold grey, a perfect reflection of the overcast sky. The air smells like snow. Despite this, I am barefoot. The encroaching tide line is freezing, taking rhythmic bites out of my toes. A mile or so offshore, gulls wheel and dive.

I walk. I have no destination in mind.

After a few easy minutes I become aware that I am not alone. Someone walks beside me. It makes me feel comforted. Or haunted. I’m not sure which.
Gradually, the hazy white of the sky brightens and becomes more uniform, and I realize that the sound of the waves is mechanical; a steady pulse. I wake from the dream at the same moment that the presence beside me slips away, and I am alone in a hospital room.

It is not unlike the one where I had awoken from the White Fever—small, carpeted, with a bank of screens set into the wall to read out my vitals. The holoscreen is set to the view of a sleepy cabin on a mountainside, snow falling in a stately dance. Maybe that’s why it had been winter in my dream.

I suffer no disorientation. I remember everything and yet I am completely calm, which is how I know I am heavily narcotized. My thoughts are pleasantly muffled. I attempt to sit up and a hand presses into the center of my chest, keeping me pinned to the mattress.

“No way, fuckass,” Gou says. “You’re not moving until we know your brain isn’t going to run out of your ears.”

Her voice is thick, like she’s recovering from a cold. She looks strange and for a second I can’t figure out why, and then I realize her hair has been cut short. In profile it makes her eyes look longer, her nose sharper.

“You look like Rin,” I say.

She snorts. “No need to be rude.”

“You just called me fuckass.”

“Well, yeah.”

I raise a hand to touch the frayed edges of her hair, but my arm is heavy and I give up halfway there. “Why did—.”

Gou turns to face me head-on. “Your mom did it, actually.” The left side of her face is covered in a crisscross of gauze and medical tape. “And she didn’t even charge extra for removing my eye.”

“What—when.” I close my eyes to gather my thoughts. When I open them again, Gou has turned the burned side of her face away. “When did it happen?”

“On the lawn. We were almost out, and your mom showed up.”

“Oh.” My drugged brain takes it in. “Sorry.”

She shrugs. I can’t tell if the catch to her voice is tears or amusement. “At least I just lost an eye and not my whole face.”

“Where—where are we?” I ask.

“Casablanca. Lesedi’s aunt owns a clinic. We figured it would be good to get out of the city for awhile.”

“Why?”

Gou shifts on the edge of the bed. She pushes her hair behind her ear, but it’s too short to stay. “You should probably sleep more.” She fiddles with a readout on the I.V. I feel the slightest blip of frustration at her reticence, before unconsciousness folds back around me.

The next time I wake, the vidscreen is an underwater vista, clownfish weaving lazily between the
fronds of an anemone, and Gou has been replaced by Makoto and Lesedi. He is in a pair of pants that look too short for him, and she has corralled her hair beneath a patterned scarf. It makes her head look small.

“I’m sorry,” I say, although I don’t remember what I’m apologizing for, only that I should. They exchange a nervy glance.

“It’s okay,” Lesedi says. She smiles crookedly. “As long as I don’t walk fast or go out into sunlight, I’ll be fine. Turns out head trauma sucks.”

“Yeah.” I have to stop myself from apologizing again. My drug-addled brain is finding it very important that I make sure no one is angry with me or tries to leave. “We’re in—.” I gather my thoughts together. “—Casablanca?”

“Yep. It’s nice this time of year.”

“Why?”

“Well, it doesn’t get humid for another month and wildflowers are world famous.”

“No, I mean—Casablanca is far away.”

Makoto agrees. “You’re right.” His voice is calmly resonant, though his smile is strained at the edges. “Chelsea picked up chatter on the net about an attack in Elysia Heights, and how several people, including the Ryugazaki heir, had been moved to a Upland hospital.”

I don’t remember who Chelsea is, but I don’t say that.

“Sousuke got us past the checkpoint and we found you, Gou, Amakata, and a girl we didn’t know.” He nudges Lesedi, who nudges back. They know each other now, apparently. “Her parents wanted her airlifted to a private hospital, and Amakata insisted that you and Gou be brought along. I’m not sure how.”

“Threatened them, I’m pretty sure,” Lesedi adds. She doesn’t sound particularly aggrieved.

“Where is she now?”

Lesedi shrugs. “Who knows. She stuck around long enough to fix Gou’s brother’s leg, then split in the middle of the night. I thought she would at least stay long enough for you to wake up.”

“Oh.”

She smoothes my blankets needlessly. Her eyes are Elite-calm. “Whatever you did in that lab really scrambled your brain. Your uplink basically melted. They had to remove it.”

Unease jabs at me but I don’t know why. The knowledge is there, looming huge and terrible, but I can’t reach it in this fugue state.

I fall asleep again during Makoto’s continuing explanation. The attack on the Ryugazaki mansion has been blamed on terrorists, and the extensive network of labs beneath it had been mysteriously empty of both data and personnel. As an extensive investigation would doubtless turn up connections to the Confederation, none has so far been undertaken. As I slide away, I note that no one has said anything about the Ryugazakis themselves.

The third time I wake up, I am alone and considerably more lucid. My IV is gone.
I shuffle out of my room and down a long white hallway, past drawn blinds and a silent nurse’s station. The clinic is quiet and smells distantly floral. The floor under my bare feet is very warm.

At the end of the hall is a balcony, and I step out into the breezy night, wrapping my hands around the railing. The clinic backs onto a small, square garden, cut grass and a miniature fishpond, orange wildflowers edging the sandstone wall. The half-moon is bunked down in a silvery haze of clouds. The last time I had looked at the sky it had been yellowish-green with haze, edged purple with light pollution, and Nagisa—

*No, no.*

The fragments of memory that I hadn’t allowed myself to grasp for come swirling in like drowned corpses in a swollen river. I don’t want to think his name or ask where he is or what has been done with his body. My stomach writhes like snakes are taking bites out of my insides. I slump forward against the balcony.

*My uplink eroded. Something went wrong. He’s gone, he’s gone.*

I long for the easy haze of the narcotics.

“Mr. Ryugazaki, you aren’t well enough to be out of bed.”

I stiffen, fingers clenching tight on the rail. When I turn, I make sure my muscles are relaxed, my face smoothed over. If my eyes are wet or red, the darkness will hide it. The night nurse is a tall woman in blue scrubs that match her nails.

“Apologies,” I say in a voice that sounds nothing like mine. “I must have been sleepwalking.”

She takes my arm like I’m a lost child and leads me back to my room. Her perfume coats the back of my throat in a slimy layer. I wait until her footsteps retreat before I gesture on the vid screen. I am forced to cycle through several hundred channels before I find one airing news that is not in Arabic. I wait for international headlines.

When they reach Sky City, it is the first on the list. The investigation on an attack on an Elysia Heights mansion is currently ongoing. The funeral for its owner—Daisuke Ryugazaki—had been held earlier today. His wife had not been buried with him—she is missing, presumed dead. Both Vanishers have well and truly vanished.

I wonder—if I hold very still, can vanish with them?

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Chapter End Notes

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Questions? Comments?
I'll save the bulk of the babbling for the end of the chapter, but just know that I'm crying as I post this. Are they tears of misery or joy? Read on for answers to this and other questions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Night in Upland is never dark.

The windows of the skyscrapers are lit like multicolored eyes, and hover cars and sky-cabs zip across the panorama in brilliant streaks. Billboards flash their vibrant holo-ads. The clouds are turgid and purple, heavy with light pollution. I could tint my windows dark, but I never do. I like the writhing motion and the mingled colors. It makes me feel, however fleetingly, connected.

From behind comes the clink of ice and the crisp hiss of carbonation, and I smell the whisky before I smell him—smoke and timber followed by vanilla and coconut butter. He always uses the same lotion after he showers.

An arm wraps around my waist, lips press to the back of my neck. I keep my eyes on a hoverbus that has pulled to a stop a few stories down, an advertisement for cigarettes flashing in neon on its side.

“Your link is blowing up,” Khari says.

I hum. A woman is standing on the entry gangway, apparently arguing with the hoverbus driver.

“Could be something important.”

“I’m sure it is.”

Extremely important, like a hunting trip or a cocktail party. I make no overtures, but the more energy I sink into appearing eccentric and aloof the more interested in me Upland seems to become.

“You should accept a couple invitations,” Khari says. “Then show up and be rude. Or even better, be boring.”

I make another noncommittal sound and he laughs. Then he kisses just underneath my ear, tongue flickering against the pressure point. It sends an invigorating shiver down my spine. But Khari has just showered, and I have work to do.

“When does your shuttle leave?” I ask.

He sighs and pulls away. “You should come to Aurora. You have a standing invitation.”

Technically, I don’t need one. I may have given the house on Aurora to Haru, but the deed is still in my name. Gou lives with him on-and-off, and Makoto and Rin join him whenever they have leave.
I turn from the window to watch Khari add a bit more whisky to his drink. He’s let his hair grow out long enough to braid, each thick section threaded with gold wire. The matching gold shadow around his eyes shines in the city’s glow. He is leaning casually against the counter, but there’s a familiar tension in his shoulders.

He raises the glass halfway to his mouth. “You really should come.”

I smile. “I know.”

He rolls his eyes and throws back the rest of his drink. His Elite polish has worn off round the edges as he’s spent less time in Sky City. I don’t know if I could ever go far enough away, for long enough, for that to happen to me. Sometimes it feels like Upland is tattooed across my bones.

I stand in the slowly darkening room and listen to him pack the few things he’d brought with him, the bedroom door throwing a square of light into the hall. When he’s done he comes back to touch my arm and press his mouth to my cheek. “I’ll tell Lesedi you say hey. She’ll probably still call to bitch you out about never coming with me.”

I laugh. “I’d fear sabotage if she didn’t. Have a good trip.”

“I’ll let you know when I’m back in Sky.” He doesn’t say when that will be, and I don’t ask. That isn’t the sort of relationship we have.

“Please do,” I say.

The door closes and his steps retreat down the hall. The soft tone of the elevator sounds, speeding him away to Aurora and Lesedi.

I order a car and descend to the street.

--

Upland hasn’t changed much in the two years since I nearly died in an Elysia Heights mansion. The idealist in me thinks you might find fewer droids with the flicker of painful intelligence in their eyes, fewer smugly satisfied Elites with slaves built along flawless blueprints. No more aspiring doctors swearing revenge and joining up with gangs.

The jaded side knows that as long as there is demand, someone will step in to supply.

The auto-drive switches tracks soundlessly. The gate that separates Elysia from the rest of the city rises as my access registers. The whole process is so smooth I can barely tell I’m moving--just the tiniest thrum of acceleration.

I hadn’t wanted to keep the house in the Heights; it’s sprawling and gaudy and, as Lesedi will always remind me, decades out of fashion. But the lab has been useful. The Sky City police had spent a perplexed week investigating the Vanishers’ operation, but they had found nothing but an empty facility, all its terminals wiped. The pulse had done its job. And because it had taken out all of the surveillance equipment as well, it’s unclear exactly what had happened to Daisuke Ryugazaki.

He had been shot point-blank, the entry wound indicative of a recumbent position. An execution. The gun and the perpetrator had never been found.

I think about her, sometimes. I wonder where she is. If her fear has kept her from contacting me, or if Amakata had been right and her programming had been too much to overcome. She had fought it
long enough to kill her tormentor, but not enough to escape the guilt. Or maybe that isn’t what happened. Maybe Amakata had killed my father and mother both, and done something with Misaki’s body to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. Maybe one of my squad had killed them and has never been able to tell me.

The truth is a kaleidoscope—endless, splintering what-ifs. How is irrelevant.

The tech greets me outside the lab with a short, formal bow. “Mr. Ryugazaki.”

“Mr. Satif.”

He is a stout man in his late thirties with none of the flash or ostentatious augments of most people in his trade, and Satif is almost certainly not his real name, but he comes highly recommended. And by that I mean Raik had sent him to me.

*He does good work and he keeps his mouth shut,* she had told me, *And that’s all you need.*

His fees are outrageous, but that isn’t a deterrent for me. After selling off my father’s company and assets, I am well set up. Rich. Elite. Born lucky. I could buy my own island and live in obnoxious comfort.

*It would be great if we all got what we deserve.*

Do I deserve lavish, self-imposed solitude and an unbroken string of nights teeming with empty beaches and echoing corridors? A brain that rejects uplinks and augments? Maybe. It doesn’t matter.

“When the upgrades are almost entirely finished,” Satif tells me as we descend. “We’re just waiting on you, sir.”

His tone isn’t the slightest bit accusative, but it doesn’t need to be. I am still scraped raw from the repeated failures.

The elevator brings us to the lab, where grey-coated assistants flit about like moths, taking readings from screens, calling to one another in several different languages. In the center of the room stands a boy with soft pink hair and gleaming blue eyes as blank as windows. An endangered species.

According to Satif, the wide, white room where I had come upon the droid had been signal-shielded, probably meant for testing. Still; it hadn’t deflected all of the pulse. There was extensive damage to the nervous system and central processor. Hence Satif and his team. But the important thing was that it was totally clean—no personality core, no preconditioning. No mental or physical dependence on anyone at all.

The other droid on the premises--the one with golden hair and a grisly stomach wound--had been too extensively damaged to salvage. A techie working for the Sky City police told me that it had been scrapped for parts. I did not sleep for a week after that.

“This is an impressive bit of work.” Satif constantly sings the pink-haired droid’s praises. “The sculpting is unreal. Too bad it is the last of its kind.”

I smooth on a morbidly polite smile. “Too bad.”

“He’s ready to go,” Satif tells me again. “All we need is a core.”

“I’ll have it soon,” I say.
I’ve been saying it for a year.

--

When my uplink had eroded, the data inside had been set loose.

Finding a single isolated personality node in the wasteland of the net is like searching for a specific grain of sand in the desert. That is what Raik had told me, and I have found it astoundingly, infuriatingly accurate. I didn’t know where to start, and neither had any of the specialists I had consulted. Technically, since the core is only data, it should be searchable by a powerful engine. But what search parameters do I use? There is no physical form, and any and all words used to describe mental states are just arbitrary sounds assigned to elaborate chemical phenomena in the brain. Emotions don’t translate to binary.

The unsettled dreams and constant presence makes me sure he is there, that the same overwhelming deluge of data that melted my uplink has preserved him. This is absurd, and I know it. The brain is not a computer. With no receptacle for digital information, there is nowhere for him to be. I am organic and Nagisa is not.

I am not being haunted, the doctors have told me. I just have brain damage.

--

My dreams are always vivid. I stand on that lonely beach, perpendicular to the tide line, the wind hooking icy claws into my bare arms. I feel the presence at my back.

But today is different. Today I feel a strange sense of control. I dig my toes into the chilly grit and turn.

And like an epiphany, he’s there.

Why now? Why today?

He is dressed in his training blacks, eyes and hair glowing the old hot gold, devastatingly solid against the pastel blur of the landscape. He has his hands in his pockets, rocking back and forth gently on his heels. He smiles and it hurts somewhere deep in my chest.

“Finally!” His nose wrinkles. “You sure do love to walk and stare into the middle distance.”

“Nagisa—.” I choke on his name. I have not said it for months. “This is a dream.”

“Yep! When you’re asleep it’s a lot easier to talk to you. You aren’t thinking so damn much.”

“Sorry,” I say faintly.

“I thought that if I kept bringing you to the same place again and again you’d get suspicious and try something new. It only took, like, two years!” Fond exasperation. The ache inside me spreads.

“You…you’re in my head? You aren’t just…just my subconscious?”

“Does it actually matter?”

“It does!” He has to be real, please be real. “Nagisa, I miss you—.”

A finger presses to my mouth. “No time for that.” He is suddenly right in front of me, the two yards of pebbled beach between us deleted. “I’m tired of waiting, Rei. You aren’t looking in the
right places.”

“I don’t know where you are!” My despair is the thunderous crash of the grey waves on the grey beach.

“What do I do? I’ve consulted so many specialists and doctors—.”

“They can’t help.” Nagisa presses his hand against my mouth again. “They don’t know where to look.”

“Neither do I.” The hopelessness is a slow poison.

For the first time, light breaks through the cloud cover. It draws dappled patterns on the sand. Nagisa says, “I’ll be waiting where I always do.”

I don’t understand.

I don’t understand.

And then I do.

--

Two nights later I order the lab cleared of all non-essential personnel. The processors hum behind me like a beehive.

I don’t know what time it is—probably past midnight. The droid has been moved to a sitting position and strapped down. It takes six minutes to upload the core, which I had found encoded in a data sphere inside the virtual tour of Platform 6, on a Confederation recruiting site. It was layered into the coding on the seventh floor ob deck. So infuriatingly simple. We had met there so many times.

*I’ll be waiting where I always do.*

It is the worst six minutes of my life. I keep expecting the tech to declare the core corrupted or incomplete.

Then a synthesized voice announces, “Core upload successful.”

I sag backward against a lab table. “What…what now?”

Satif squints at his readings. “The processes will take some time to come online. If you’d like to return home, we can call you when—.”

“No,” I say, so loudly he takes a step back. I look back at the droid. “I’ll stay, thank you.”

Satif’s shrug says *if you must.* “If anything seems amiss or you fear for your safety—.”

“I’ll call for you. Thank you, Mr. Satif.”

His fears are not unfounded. Droid bodies are often recycled, but personality cores never are. There is no telling what could have happened to it during its two years in the net. I have been warned to brace for the worst.

The process is almost entirely internal—organs waking, heart pumping, artificial parts cohering with biological. His muscles tense and his mouth opens a few times. His eyes rove beneath their
lids. When they open I jump to attention, but they are still lifeless. Whatever controls the brain, the
memory, has not yet woken. The droid’s body trembles, starting at his feet and up the sculpted
muscles of his legs, through his torso. It ends with the twitch of his chin. I wonder if he is cold.

I grip the edge of the table until it cuts into my palms.

Two years ago, the first grudging pangs of acceptance had been demolished with the discovery that
an illegal droid had survived. Acceptance had been overtaken by obsession, the singularly-focused
directive to find Nagisa’s core and repair the body to accept it. Back then it had hardly seemed
possible. Now hollowness spreads through me as I watch the droid’s mouth open and close.
Whatever happens, after tonight it will be over. I’ll either have him back or I won’t. I bury my face
in my hands, eyes burning, overcome by the pressure of the future.

“Hey.” The voice is new to me—firm, warmly modulated. “Something in your eye?”

I drop my hands and jump to my feet. The droid has stopped shaking. He is slumped in the chair,
opening and closing his hands.

Hope blooms inside me, terrible and bright. “Nagisa?”

The droid frowns, beautiful face creasing in polite confusion. “I’m sorry. This unit has not yet been
given a name.”

“Oh—.” My lungs are a solid sheet of ice. My stomach cramps like I have swallowed broken
bones.

And then I see him smiling.

I know that smile, crooked higher on the left than the right, one eye ever so slightly scrunched.

“You—.” The ice shatters and I am falling forward, catching myself on the arms of his chair. “You
fuck.”

His laughter bubbles over, resonates in the broader chest, cascading as I wrench at his restraints. I
remember the release button, and they snap open. He grabs me under the armpits, dragging me into
his lap. I yelp; he so much bigger than before. He devours the sounds from my lips, and I get a
tongue as dry as dust pushed into my mouth. We both sputter and he’s laughing again, madly,
irresistibly, and I would laugh too if all the breath inside me hadn’t been compressed into a rising
euphoria that threatens to arc from my pores like lighting.

“Sorry,” he finally manages to sputter against my cheek. “I haven’t really started to salivate yet.”

He nips at the corner of my mouth. “But I’m sure my mouth will be all nice and gooey soon.”

I grunt with disgust and his hands spread across my back.

“I’m huge,” he says. “I’m not—who’s body is this? I’m huge.”

“I don’t know. He was the only droid to survive the EMP. He didn’t have a core yet.”

Nagisa continues to stare at his hands. Then wide blue eyes settle on me.

“Am I cute?”

Belatedly, I remember the team of techs overseeing this reunion from a safe distance. “Uh, maybe
we should—.”
Nagisa catches the front of my shirt. “It’s really important that I’m cute, okay? I’ll never forgive you if you put me in the body of an ugly Hazuki.”

I sag back into his lap. Satif and his staff have already seen the show, may as well give them a few more frames. “You’re gorgeous,” I assure him. “But also, you’re not.”

“Hmm?” Nagisa flicks his bangs aside in a achingly familiar gesture. “I’m not in the mood for philosophy, Rei.”

I kiss the center of his forehead; he has started to sweat, I can feel it along his hairline. “I mean, you aren’t a Hazuki.”

He goes so still, marble warmed by the sun. “What?”

“I think this may have just have been a display model. It doesn’t have any of the Hazuki upgrades.” A body that doesn’t grows ill if it isn’t fucked, that won’t respond to sex like it’s a drug.

“You mean…” The realization crests in his eyes like a rising sun. “But I still…”

I say nothing. I let it hang weightless between us. This body has never been programmed to care for me, and yet I feel it in the flex of his hands, the warmth of his voice.

Suddenly, he digs his nails into my arm. “Wait, can—I still have. Rei, it works, right?” Raw alarm.

I consider paying him back for his trick, but I am already laughing too hard, nodding and resting my forehead against his shoulder. Which is considerably less bony than before. “Yes, it works, as far as I know. I haven’t seen it in action yet.”

“Is it in proportion?”

“Very.”

“Well, then that’s okay.” He pats me on top of the head. “Good choice.”

My legs will barely hold me, but I know that if I don’t get up right now we’ll be here all night, giggling and demolishing my reputation as a responsible employer. Namely, one that doesn’t make out with droids on the laboratory floor.

I take Nagisa’s hands and pull him with me, carefully. He sways, totters a few steps, and says, “I’m taller than you.”

“Not quite.” A half-inch shorter, actually.

“Where are we?”

I pull him toward the door. Satif will want to check vitals and performance, but I will put him off until later in the day.

“Nowhere we need to stay. Let’s go home.”

I had not thought to bring street clothes for Nagisa, but if my doorman finds it strange that I’m bringing home a man in flimsy hospital pants at three in the morning, he is paid enough not to comment. I hold Nagisa’s hand as we ride the elevator up, and when I open the penthouse door he hesitates, as if waiting for permission.
I prod him toward the window. “The view is pretty cool.”

He runs, trips, catches himself.

There are still a few hours before dawn, but I don’t fear them. They are full, heavy with potential. I stand next to him and watch the slow unfurling of wonder on his face as he sees the lights of the super highway shoot past, the thousands of advertisements that flash and spiral, holograms leaping into brilliant life when someone approaches.

I know that things won’t be simple. Nagisa is still a droid and I am still an Elite. This won’t change. My family is gone, my life in shreds, the future unknown. Sky City is still the same seething mess of fear and injustice and discontent, but from up so high it is radiant, swirling chaos. It is a perfect system of life and motion.

And here, together, staring out is like looking at the stars.

End

Chapter End Notes

I've sat here and tried to gather myself, to come up with something witty and fantastic and just generally end-like, but really all I can do is flail and cry and say thank you, thank you all so much for reading. Whether you've been here since the beginning (over two years y'all) or if you just clicked on it for the first time three days ago. You all have made this worthwhile and fantastic. Thank you to anyone who has done art or made playlists, or messaged me about your head canons. They've kept me going

Additional thanks and praises to my beta Ouroboros, without whom this fic would have been far less coherent and far more unfinished.

I am planning on adapting this to an actual sci-fi novel, a process that has already begun and is frankly terrifying, but I'm going to try to make it happen. Updates on that and other things can be found on my tumblr autoeuphoric.

Works inspired by this on The Stars Shine Bright Tonight by Reilith, The Steps of the Moon by ellerean

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