Elevated to the Point of Static

by Cici_Nota

Summary

Hino Eiji goes missing. No one notices.
Prologue: Gentaro, Shotaro, and a Request

Gentaro:
The Fourze Driver was covered in dust. Kisaragi Gentaro pulled it out of the drawer where it had been not quite thoughtlessly stashed; he’d put it there so that he’d be able to take it with him when he left home, but over the past few months it had been neglected.

“Sorry I haven’t been paying much attention to you,” he murmured to it, wiping the surface clean with his fingers. Between one thing and another it had been neglected; he’d graduated, and then suddenly he hadn’t known what to do with himself, even with a full course load as a college freshman. Keeping the Driver around in case of extraterrestrial incursions had been important at first, and then nothing had shown up, and he wasn’t sure how it had already been nearly six months since it had been used.

“I wasn’t even the one that put you on,” he said to it, sitting on the raised step next to the door. “I lent you to my older self. Allegedly.” The dust was stubborn, and he dug into one pocket for a handkerchief to get into some of the crevices. He was willing to accept that his five-years-older self had gotten booted into the past and needed to borrow the Driver; he was even willing to accept that another Kamen Rider had returned it after his future self had gone back to – well, the future. “Still, that’s no excuse.”

Something appeared to be stuck under one of the switches. Gentaro frowned; he didn’t think he was the type of person to damage an item and then return it damaged without saying something, even if he was returning it to himself. He tugged at the offending material, which turned out to be a folded piece of paper, and not something broken after all.

“A note?”

His future self had had a message to pass on that he hadn’t given to the new Kamen Rider. Come to think of it, the new Kamen Rider had been awfully cagey about everything, all but going out of his way to be mysterious. See you in five years, indeed. Gentaro unfolded the note.

Yo, past me –

I didn’t have time, what with all the, uh, well, I’m not going to – look, there was stuff that happened. But anyway, I called OOO for backup and he came and helped, but I didn’t get a chance to see him later. Do me a favor and say thanks? I know, I know, Riders help each other out, but I kinda feel bad that I didn’t get to tell him in person.

Anyway, everything is awesome and you’re going to be awesome. Stuff might seem kind of up in the air after you graduate, but I promise you’re going to come out of it on the other side doing just fine. Good luck!

Gentaro, I mean, present me, I mean future me to you, oh you know what I mean

Not that Gentaro had ever really doubted he would find a purpose in life beyond being a Kamen Rider, but it was nice that his future self had faith in him. Of course, his future self was speaking from experience. Gentaro narrowed his eyes at the note and wondered if his future self remembered reading it as a college freshman, or remembered lending out the Fourze Driver to himself at all. Then he shook his head and decided that thinking about time loops was enough to drive someone crazy.

“Eiji, huh,” he said, looking at the first part of the note. Eiji had shown up to help the last time there
had been weird things going on, come to think of it. Wherever he was, if someone called him, he came. “I really should say thank you.”

A phone call was easy enough to make. Gentaro dug his out of pocket, searching his address book. The first number he called was disconnected, but a recording informed him that the account had been associated with a separate number. Gentaro rolled his eyes and programmed the new number into his phone. That was the second time Eiji had changed his number and failed to tell anyone. The second number was disconnected with no forwarding number at all. Gentaro frowned at his phone.

“Oh, fine,” he said. “I know how to use a search engine.”

Except that Gentaro wasn’t getting any hits on Eiji’s name, and he didn’t know where he lived.

“Wasn’t there a Hina?” He had vague memories of a girl who’d spent some time around Eiji during the whole mess that had involved ridiculous numbers of superheroes and faked deaths right after he’d become Fourze, but he didn’t know her last name, or the writing for her first name, and that was no help at all.

Most people would have given up after a disconnected phone call, no mutual acquaintances, and a fruitless internet search, but Gentaro was not most people. He’d also remembered that they did in fact have a mutual acquaintance who stood a shot of actually being in the phone book. Gentaro found one disconnected phone number with no forwarding information and a recently-updated website with further contact information.

Unfortunately, the second phone call went unanswered, and Gentaro left a rather awkward message before realizing that when he’d picked up the Fourze Driver to begin with, he’d been on his way to a class that he’d now nearly missed entirely. He stuffed the Driver and his phone into his bag and ran out the door.

Shotaro:

“Phone tag is my least favorite game,” Hidari Shotaro said to his land line. It was just that he ended up playing it far too often; the agency got enough work that he didn’t spend a lot of time actually in the office, and Philip never answered the phone. Akiko didn’t spend much time in the office, either, not after getting married. Shotaro made it a point of pride to always get back to people who tried to reach him while he was out, which made it no less a pain in the ass, and once again considered and rejected hiring someone to man the desk. The agency was his and Philip’s, and Akiko’s, and Terui’s, and it didn’t feel right to bring in someone else.

“You’re getting stuck in the past,” Philip said, wandering into the room. He left the door ajar behind him, moving almost aimlessly. He was between interests, and felt almost bored in the back of Shotaro’s head. “Hiring someone to stay here while you’re out doesn’t mean you’re going to dishonor anything.”

“Sometimes I miss being alone in my own head,” Shotaro said, because Philip had hit the mark dead center, and he’d been trying not to think about it.

“No, you don’t,” Philip told him. He wasn’t wrong.

“I wouldn’t have to do this if you just answered the phone,” Shotaro said, but they both knew that having Philip available to crunch data took precedence, and Philip just rolled his eyes in response.

“Just hire someone,” he said.

“You hire someone.” Shotaro reached for the retro answering machine. It didn’t use actual cassette
tapes, but it looked like it might have.

“Really?” Philip said, and his obvious delight at having more company around the office was enough for Shotaro to at least pretend to ignore his reservations.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. Philip vanished through the door, feet clattering down the stairs. “Hey, I get to interview whoever you pick, too!”

There was muffled agreement from downstairs. Shotaro rolled his eyes this time, and went back to the answering machine. He still had messages to listen to today, regardless of how Philip’s attempt at the hiring process went.

There wasn’t much on the machine; two of the messages were brief thank-you notes requiring no response and one was a telemarketer attempting to sell him a cruise, but the last message made Shotaro sit up straight. He’d been contacted by a junior member of the Kamen Rider clique, so to speak, who had left his given name but not his Rider identity. Still, Shotaro thought he remembered that Kisaragi Gentaro was Kamen Rider Fourze.

“Oh?” he murmured at the name. They’d met briefly during an incident involving Foundation X and sentient cosmic energy; Gentaro thought Shotaro might have contact information for Hino Eiji, the Rider who’d introduced the two of them.

I needed to thank him for some help a few months back, the message ran. But his phone’s out of service and I don’t know where he lives or how else to get in touch.

Because the universe was laughing at Shotaro, Gentaro did not answer the phone when he called. Shotaro rolled his eyes again, left a brief message with Gentaro that he would let Eiji know Gentaro was trying to contact him, and twirled a pen around his fingers. Gentaro had thoughtfully included two separate numbers he’d used to try to contact Eiji, one of which Shotaro recognized as no longer valid. He checked his phone for Eiji’s current number, which matched the one Gentaro said he’d tried.

“Primary data,” Shotaro said, and tried the number himself. It was disconnected. “Of course it is.” Because Eiji was really not good at keeping in touch with people, although given how much time he spent traveling he should have been an expert. “Maybe that cute little Hina knows where you are.”

Mentally reminding himself not to call her cute little Hina to her face – Eiji was contagious, dammit – Shotaro checked the time and dialed. Early evening was a reasonable time to call, he thought. Sure enough, Hina picked up almost on the first ring.

“Mr. Hidari!” She sounded surprised and pleased to hear from him. “How are you?” She paused for too briefly for him to begin answering the question before blurting out, “Oh, no, has something happened to Eiji?”

“What?” Shotaro said, the words so far from what he expected that it took them a second to register.

“It’s just been so long,” Hina said, and that was a fair point. It had been well over a year since they’d met, and that had been less of a meeting and more of a bizarre confluence of villains and heroes attempting to destroy reality. At least, that was how Shotaro chose to see it.

“It has,” he agreed. “I’m well. How are you?”

Hina paused for a moment. “Oh, you know,” she said. “Classes are interesting. I’m up for an internship abroad over the summer. That sort of thing.” She paused again. “So what does Eiji need?”
“Why do you –“ Shotaro stopped himself. “I’m actually looking for Eiji.”

“He’s not with you?” He could almost hear Hina blinking.

“It’s kind of a long story. I’m trying to pass on a message from someone else, but his number has been disconnected.” For the third time in ten minutes, Shotaro verified Eiji’s most recent number. “Yes, that one. You haven’t heard from him?”

“It’s been…” Hina’s voice trailed off. “He was in Japan in March, but we didn’t see each other. I haven’t really talked to him since then. Maybe a text?” He could hear her fumbling a little with her phone. “There’s a reply to a text I sent him in April, on the fourteenth, but that’s it. Oh, no, it’s been over a month.”

“Is there someone else who might have a more recent number?” Shotaro prompted.

“My brother would have told me,” Hina said. “Maybe Mr. Goto?” She sounded audibly distressed.

After promising to let Hina know when he got in touch with Eiji, and successfully calling her Miss Izumi despite the insistent tug of cute little Hina in his head, Shotaro hung up. “Hino, you are causing trouble,” he said to the phone.

From Goto – first name Shintaro, yet another member of the Taro Brigade, as Gentaro had at some point dubbed himself and Shotaro – came exactly the same information regarding Eiji that Shotaro had gotten from Hina; there was a text from mid-April and a distinct lack of face to face contact with Eiji when he’d allegedly been in Japan a little over two months before. Shotaro hadn’t actually met Goto in person, but he thought he’d seen him at least once or twice and that he was another Rider, none of which was particularly relevant.

What was relevant was that Goto was currently part of the Tokyo Police Department, partnered with one Izumi Shingo, the brother of Izumi Hina, and therefore might have access to a little more information.

“I’ve been meaning to call,” Goto said slowly. “But somehow I just – I keep thinking maybe tomorrow. Is this the disconnected number?”

Shotaro knew the number by heart now. It was therefore with some surprise that he heard Goto reel off an entirely different number. “No, wait,” he said, scrambling for a piece of paper. “That’s a new one.”

“Yeah, I got a notice that he lost his old phone,” Goto said. “Sometimes he changes the number entirely.”

“This is kind of a weird request,” Shotaro said, after confirming the number. “Would you mind staying on the line while I call it? It’s just that I’ve been playing phone tag with way too many people trying to get hold of Hino, and I don’t want to have to call you back if he doesn’t answer this one either.”

Goto laughed. “Sure,” he said. “Gives me an excuse not to do paperwork.”

Balancing the land line between his ear and his shoulder, Shotaro set his cell phone to speakerphone, added the new number to his address book, and tried calling Eiji again. This time, the call went straight to voice mail, before an automated voice informed Shotaro that the mail box had not yet been set up. He resisted the urge to bang his forehead against the desk. Usually I get paid for doing this much work to find someone, he thought, although to be fair he hadn’t spent a great deal of time so far. “Did you hear that?” he said instead to Goto.
“That’s odd,” Goto said. “You know what, let me text Akira real quick and see if he’s heard from Hino.”

“Akira?” Shotaro said.

“Ah, Date Akira,” Goto clarified, sounding vaguely embarrassed for some reason. “I don’t know if you met him? He’s the other one that used the Birth Driver.”

“I don’t think I did,” Shotaro said. “But I do vaguely remember there being two of you.”

“Yeah, he has the prototype, or he had it, mostly in case I needed backup,” Goto said somewhat absently.

“Do, uh, do you need me to call you back?” Shotaro said; apparently Goto was sending the text right at that moment, but there was no guarantee that he was going to get any sort of answer.

“Oh, no,” Goto said. “We were chatting before you called. He’s in Africa right now with the Red Cross, so there’s a bit of a time difference. Though he might have had to go back to work.”

“I see,” Shotaro said, not sure how else to respond. It was nice, he thought, to see that some people knew how to keep in touch with each other.

“No, he hasn’t heard from Hino either,” Goto said, and Shotaro got the impression that he was frowning. “Hang on, he’s sending me another message. Uh, he got a text sometime in April, but he hasn’t actually seen him since February.”

“Of this year?” Shotaro asked, now starting to sketch a little timeline in the margins of his notepad.

“Oh, no,” Goto said. “Last year. He was in Italy for a conference and saw Hino passing by on the street, but by the time he got out there, Hino was gone. Didn’t answer his phone then, either.”

“Great,” Shotaro said. His attempts to perform the simple task of passing on a message were beginning to strongly resemble the first stages of a missing-person investigation. “Thanks for your help anyway, Mr. Goto.”

“Hang on,” Goto said. “Let me give you Erika’s number.”

“Erika?” Shotaro repeated.

“Uh, Satonaka Erika.” Goto didn’t sound the least bit flustered that he kept giving Shotaro the familiar given names of people and making him ask for clarification. “She works for the Kougami Foundation.”

That, at least, Shotaro had heard of. “Didn’t it –“

“Develop the Birth Driver, yeah,” Goto said. “And some other, uh. Things. I don’t know how familiar you are with the OOO driver. Or other, uh. Things. You know.”

Shotaro knew less than he would like about whatever it was that OOO had spent his fighting, but he wasn’t about to start asking questions now. “Thank you, Mr. Goto.”

“No, thank you,” Goto said, and repeated Hina’s request to let him know when he got in touch with Eiji. “Oh, and Akira says thank you, too, but I’ll tell him, you don’t have to.”

“One more thing,” Shotaro said. “Would Miss Izumi’s brother have any information?”
“Izumi?” Goto said, for once not referring to someone by their given name. “I don’t think so. He’s my partner, I’m sure he would have told me if something had changed.”

“Of course,” Shotaro said, not bringing up the fact that either Goto hadn’t told Izumi about Eiji’s new phone number or Izumi hadn’t told his little sister. He looked at the clock after hanging up; it was far too late to be harassing anyone else about a case that wasn’t technically a case, and he really wanted to take a shower and spend some time relaxing in the bath. He picked up the phone again anyway, mentally making a bet with himself that Satonaka Erika was going to tell him exactly the same story about a mid-April text and no contact for over a month.

Shotaro lost the bet with himself; Satonaka Erika did not pick up the phone. He was sent to voice mail, apparently a work-related inbox for the personal assistant to Kougami Kousei. It occurred to him that every other person he’d contacted had given out personal phone numbers just as the system beeped for him to leave a message.

Name, message, and contact information – both his personal cell and the office phone – left for an apparently sane personal assistant who was not at work at obscene hours, Shotaro left his cell phone on the desk and went in search of Philip and a shower, not necessarily in that order.

Not that Shotaro had forgotten, precisely, about his Not A Missing Person Case by the following morning, but it wasn’t at the forefront of his mind. He spent several hours tying up loose ends for his current case, sending the last of the information to the client and feeling in general relieved that most of his cases were mundane affairs that involved use of his mind and creative problem solving skills rather than beating monsters to a pulp from inside a suit of super-powered armor. The bike was still pretty cool, though; he rubbed at a spot as he parked it in front of the office.

“Philip,” he said, “we don’t have anything lined up at the moment, right?” It might be nice to spend an hour outside in the lovely May weather washing the bike by hand. It had been a while since he’d had time for that.

“Er,” Philip said, as Shotaro walked in the door. A strikingly attractive woman with long, straight hair and a very short skirt was standing impatiently in front of the desk. Perfectly manufactured fingernails clicked against the decorative stripe down the arm of her jacket, as she stood with her arms folded.

“Mr. Hidari,” she said. “I’m Satonaka Erika. You have a meeting.”

“I have a what?” Shotaro jerked his gaze from where it had inexplicably gotten stuck on the woman’s stunning legs to her face, which was set in a very unimpressed expression. For a moment, he couldn’t place the name, and then, “I got your number from a Goto Shintaro.”

“He’s distressingly indiscreet,” Satonaka said, which could have been interpreted in a few ways, none of them flattering. “However, my employer has taken an interest in your investigation.”

“It’s not exactly an investigation,” Shotaro hedged. Satonaka raised an eyebrow at him. It spoke more eloquently than any number of people Shotaro had actually heard speak. “I’m just looking for Hino Eiji,” he said, capitulating.

“Yes,” Satonaka replied.

Shotaro threw up his hands. “Philip, I have a meeting. Would you please make the final arrangements for the Tanaka case? I’ll forward you the rest of what I sent him.”

“The what? Oh. Oh, right.” It wasn’t really that Philip was airheaded, Shotaro reminded himself;
Philip was very intelligent, and capable, and competent, and had once managed to make a utility payment to a company in Ukraine instead of the actual company that had sent them the bill. He’d gotten better.

“Miss Satonaka,” Shotaro said, giving her his best professional smile. Her expression did not alter by a single hair. “I would be delighted to confirm the details of the meeting with your employer.”

“Sir,” Satonaka said, and reached into her oversized bag. The tablet she pulled out was also oversized, screen polished to a high gloss, and she held it in front of her chest like a shield. The moment it stopped moving, the screen blinked on to reveal the face of a middle-aged man who looked vaguely familiar.

“Hidari Shotaro!” the man roared.

Shotaro staggered back slightly. “Mr. Kougami, I presume,” he managed.

“Exactly as I would expect from a detective,” Kougami said. “I understand you’re on a mission to find one of my employees.”

“I wouldn’t say mission-“ Shotaro started. “Did you say employee? Do you know where Hino is?”

“Tell me everything,” Kougami said in barely accented English.

“Everything,” Shotaro said, just to make sure he’d gotten the meaning correct. *Hino, you are going to owe me a massive favor when I finally figure out where you are,* he thought.

Kougami didn’t just want to know what Shotaro had learned; he wanted the story broken down into its composite parts and people, and the impressions Shotaro had garnered from talking to all of them.

“And do you have any conclusions?” he asked, when Shotaro had finished speaking. By this point, Shotaro was sitting on his desk. Satonaka, for her part, appeared to be standing comfortably enough to keep up the pose she hadn’t changed by so much as a whisker since holding up the tablet. Shotaro suppressed the urge to ask if she were perhaps a particularly life-like robot.

“Before I draw conclusions, I’d like to know what you or your company know about the whereabouts of Hino Eiji,” Shotaro said cautiously. “I was unaware that he was working for you. That didn’t come up.”

“Ah,” Kougami said, waving one hand in a dismissive gesture. “It’s not entirely in an official capacity.”

Shotaro wanted to know nothing about potentially illegal hiring practices and declined to inquire further as to the exact nature of Eiji’s employment with the Kougami Foundation. “As his employer,” he said instead, “do you know where he is?”

“You’re not asking the right questions,” Kougami said. “One more time, Mr. Hidari. What conclusions can you draw from what you already know?”

Shotaro bit back a sigh. He was beginning to recall an impression that painted the head of the Kougami Foundation as eccentric – brilliant in a number of ways, but also definitely not quite fitting into the mold of what one expected in a successful businessman, much less one in control of a company as diversified as the Kougami Foundation.

“Something odd happened in the middle of April,” Philip said, drifting up to Shotaro’s side. “It’s as though someone wanted to make very sure that date was fixed firmly in Hino’s narrative.”
Kougami nodded. “You’re not looking past the surface!” he proclaimed, loudly enough to shake the windows but somehow not actually shouting.

“The visit to Japan in March,” Shotaro said. “Did anyone know he was coming home?”

“There we are,” Kougami said, so softly that Shotaro almost didn’t hear him. “Mr. Hidari!”

The change in volume was so abrupt that Shotaro flinched backwards. “Yes?”

“I would like to hire you,” Kougami declared. “To find Hino Eiji.”
Shotaro’s first idea was to see if throwing enough keywords at Philip could get him to spit out Eiji’s current location. “It’s perfectly reasonable,” he said in response to Philip’s dubious expression. “You do this sort of thing all the time.”

“I do this sort of thing in this city all the time,” Philip said, but he tried anyway. Shotaro fed him keywords and the last known GPS coordinates for Eiji’s phone, and waited for Philip to sort through the data. “I have an answer that has 78% certainty,” Philip said finally. “But you’re not going to like it.”

It was Shotaro’s turn to frown. “Because it’s only 78%?”

“No,” Philip said. “Because Eiji’s most likely current location is the Sea of Japan.”

“On a boat?” Shotaro hazarded, but he didn’t need Philip’s minute headshake to tell him that wasn’t the correct guess. “Oh,” he said. If that were the case, there was very little chance that what was left of Eiji would ever be found, even if it washed up on a beach somewhere. “No.”

“No?” Philip said.

“No,” Shotaro repeated. “I have a gut feeling.”

“Right,” Philip said, expression going blank again. “There are too many variables to gauge any other potential result with any sort of certainty.”

“It was worth a shot,” Shotaro said, and then his phone rang. Satonaka was punctual to the second, it appeared, and resigned when he told her that the possibility that they’d be able to solve the case with a simple data analysis wasn’t viable after all.

“If that were possible, we’d know where he was,” she said.

“One question,” Shotaro said, and asked her whether anyone had known that Eiji was returning to Japan the previous March.

“Miss Izumi headed up a welcoming committee at the airport,” Satonaka said.

“But you missed him,” Shotaro hazarded, guessing that Satonaka had been part of the group.

“He evaded us,” she said flatly.

“Evaded.” Shotaro tapped his desk. “Can I verify some information with you?”

“All of the information in the file is correct, Mr. Hidari.” Satonaka hung up before Shotaro could tell her what data he wanted verified.

“Cold doesn’t even begin to cover it,” he muttered. The file the Kougami Foundation had sent over held a not insignificant amount of data. Shotaro looked at the screen of the office laptop and set the file to printing. There was no way he could visualize a proper pattern if all he could see was what was currently on the screen, and he had the sneaking suspicion that there was something useful hidden in the mound of information, beyond the most recent data.

Although, Shotaro thought, there was something to be said for the most recent data. He scrolled through the file until he found the information he wanted; Satonaka had located the second most
recent phone on the date of Eiji’s most recent report via GPS. As far as Shotaro could tell, Eiji sent reports mid-month, at which point Satonaka made a note of where the report had come from.

“Hammerfest, Norway,” Shotaro read from the file. “April 15th.” Eiji had apparently gotten a new phone at that point; the file noted no contact for the following two weeks and Satonaka had pinged the GPS again. It had moved to Lake Baikal in the interim, although there was no information for how quickly it might have gotten there. “What were you doing in Russia, Eiji?” The next note on the file was that a GPS ping the following week had turned up nothing. “Philip!”

“Now what?” Shotaro couldn’t tell if Philip was irritated or not.

“If I give you a phone number, can you tell me where the phone went on certain dates?”

“Probably,” Philip said after a brief pause. “If you want Hino’s phone, I can tell you right now where its last known location was.”

“Wait,” Shotaro said. In the back of the office was a huge world map; Akiko had bought it shortly after Philip had returned from his year away. She’d had some sort of project involving Philip, the map, and darts, but she hadn’t touched it in months. Shotaro found Hammerfest on the map and stuck a pin with the date of Eiji’s report in it, followed by a pin with the date of Satonaka’s successful GPS ping. He opened his mouth to call Philip, closed it again, and added the year to both dates. “Okay, where was it on May 7th?”

According to Philip, the phone had been in the general vicinity of the world’s largest freshwater lake for several days before it had moved slowly across the Russian mainland toward the eastern coast. It had been on or near said coast on May 12th, the day before Satonaka had tried to ping it again. There was no further information.

“What the hell,” Shotaro said. “Philip, you have access to this file, right?”

“If you’re asking whether I can search it via keyword, the answer is yes,” Philip said. “What do you want to know?”

“Are there any periods of time during which Hino was out of touch with the Foundation?” He could practically hear Philip blinking. “Besides the last month,” Shotaro amended.

“He went radio silent for the last two weeks of March,” Philip said after a moment.

“Any other times?”

“Three weeks in November of 2012, all of August and September, same year, and two weeks in January, also 2012,” Philip said slowly.

“Damnit.” Shotaro crossed his arms and stared at the pins in the map. “Then it’s a pattern,” he said in response to Philip’s unasked question. “It’s harder to get him declared a missing person, if this behavior is consistent with a previous pattern.” He tapped his toes a few times. “Has he missed a report before? There’s a note in there somewhere about the report for this month being late.”

Philip answered almost immediately. “Negative. Every month, without fail, on the 15th, he sent something. Even if he’d sent information the previous day.”

“Ha,” Shotaro said. “There’s the abnormal behavior.”

Attempting to get Eiji declared a missing person was a headache all on its own; Shotaro contacted
Izumi as his most likely shot at getting what he needed done. Izumi, for his part, was as accommodating as he could be, but apparently did not feel that fellow Kamen Rider was appropriate for Shotaro’s relationship to Eiji on official police paperwork.

“Has anyone tried asking his parents?” Izumi asked, after several frustrating minutes.

“They’re still alive?” Shotaro sat up straight, knocking his hat right off his desk.

“You didn’t know?” Shotaro could all but hear Izumi dragging a hand over his face. “It’s not outside the realm of possibility that they just – dragged him home, like last time.”

“Like last time.” Shotaro felt he was spending far too much time repeating the statements of everyone else who knew Eiji.

“You didn’t know,” Izumi repeated, this time without the question. “Okay.” He paused for long enough that Shotaro started to open his mouth to ask a question. “Okay,” he said again. “I’m going to contact Eiji’s parents; I’ll forward their information to you, just in case, but I think it would go better if they received an inquiry in an official capacity that does not imply that their son is missing. I’ll get things kick-started on the Russian side, see if he’s anywhere near where the phone was.”

“Understood.” Shotaro retrieved his hat from the floor and twirled it around one finger. “I’ll keep working on this end,” he said, although an official investigation would technically have to be carried out by the Russian authorities and neither he nor Izumi had any real part in that.

“Good luck,” Izumi said seriously; he had just about as much faith in the Russian police as Shotaro did.

Eiji’s file had finished printing; unfortunately, the temperamental machine had simply dumped each sheet onto the floor. Shotaro gathered it up, depositing the pile on the desk. Some of it was the information Eiji had gathered while doing whatever it was he’d been doing while working for the Foundation; Shotaro set those sheets aside as he found them. There were bank statements as well – apparently Eiji had been paid through a company account, which circumvented the strict laws against accessing someone else’s financial or ATM information.

“Handy to be working for a company that owns stock in banks all over the world,” Shotaro muttered. Most of the statements were half in an impressive variety of foreign languages and half in stilted or outright incorrect Japanese.

The rest of the file consisted of a mishmash of plane tickets, the cover sheets for each of Eiji’s reports – or lack thereof – plus Satonaka’s notes on where he’d been when he sent them, and stacks of emails requesting either travel arrangements or meetings. By the time Shotaro had them in some semblance of order, his eyes were burning and the light outside was dimming. Philip stood in front of him with a cup of what smelled like coffee.

“Have you moved more than two feet since the last time I saw you?” Philip asked.

“I – yes,” Shotaro lied, stretching and taking the coffee.

“This is usually my part of the job,” Philip said, as Shotaro gratefully sipped at the hot liquid. “And I think you need a bigger map.”

“I think I need a bigger map,” Shotaro said. “I think we might have to go past the raw data on this one,” he added, not because he thought Philip’s ego needed soothing, but because a lot of the information wasn’t adding up.
“I might have one downstairs,” Philip said.

“Of course you do.” Sometimes Shotaro found it prudent to just not ask where Philip got some of the toys he casually just so happened to have on hand; for all he knew, they were stable projections of data, much like Philip himself.

“It can wait until tomorrow,” Philip added, when Shotaro moved toward the nearest messy stack of paper. “A few more hours probably won’t make any difference.”

That he was trying to be sympathetic was a world of difference from the Philip Shotaro had first met; he’d grown and changed over the intervening years, and it was this display of empathy that led to Shotaro abruptly hugging him tightly.

“He, uh, Hino might not be,” Philip started, missing the point entirely, which was exactly what Shotaro would have expected.

Shotaro barked out a short laugh, though he had to admit that Philip was right on both counts. He shook his head at Philip’s quizzical glance. There were some things he just couldn’t teach.

The following morning yielded no information from Izumi, but Shotaro did succeed in migrating the ridiculous stack of printouts from the front office to Philip’s lair in the basement. There was indeed a large map opposite Philip’s wall of whiteboards, tacked onto an actual corkboard, complete with several boxes of multi-colored pins.

“You want to make one of those conspiracy theory walls, don’t tell me you don’t,” Philip said when Shotaro reached for one of the boxes of pins.

It wasn’t like he was wrong. Shotaro moved his labeled pins from the map upstairs, connecting them with red thread. Philip raised an eyebrow. “So I can see where he went,” Shotaro said, and started working in reverse chronological order. If the official Russian investigation didn’t find Eiji, and the official Japanese investigation didn’t find Eiji, Shotaro might be able to guess where he’d gone from the coast of Russia based on a reconstruction of what he’d been doing.

“If I’d known you were such a goddamn ghost,” Shotaro said, far too much time later, “I wouldn’t have started doing this at all. No. I would have told Kougami Kousei to take his job offer to someone with a snowball’s chance in hell of actually finding you. Someone psychic.”

Eiji had somehow gotten from the extreme norther part of Norway to the extreme south of Russia; how he’d done it wasn’t important, but the three weeks in between were a total blank. There was a slip of paper on the string denoting the time frame, because otherwise it was going to drive Shotaro slowly insane.

“Do you even speak Norwegian?” Shotaro jabbed another pin in the map. Before sending the report from Hammerfest, Eiji had been radio silent for nearly a week, but he’d apparently spent the entire first week of April in the city of Tromso before making a substantial withdrawal from the Foundation account and migrating farther north. He hadn’t so much as accessed the account in Hammerfest, or when he’d presumably crossed into Russia. “What were you even doing there?”

“Buying coffee,” Philip said from behind Shotaro, looking over his shoulder at the list of transactions. “Going to a museum. Buying more coffee. And shoes. Renting a bicycle.”

“That was a rhetorical question, and since when do you speak Norwegian?” Shotaro eyed Philip and drank his own coffee.

Philip gave him a blank look. “I shouldn’t speak Norwegian?”
Shotaro rolled his eyes and turned back to the map. “He asked to speak to these three people.” He showed the names to Philip, not even bothering to try to pronounce them. “What do they do?”

“Biotechnology, broadly,” Philip said after a moment. “All three of them are associated with the University of Tromso, though their specialties are quite different.” He paused, and then added, “The university has a campus in Hammerfest, which might be why he went there.”

“Biotechnology?” Shotaro blinked. The mental image of Hino Eiji’s brightly patterned clothing inhabiting a laboratory was disorienting, to say the least, not to mention Eiji’s projected image of cheerful and flighty idiocy. He added text to the sticky note inhabiting Hammerfest, and scribbled more notes on the bank statements associated with Tromso. “I guess Kougami wasn’t kidding when he said Eiji was actually working for them.”

“Kougami rarely jokes,” Philip said, eyes still closed and fingers flicking rapidly over imaginary pages; it was how he visualized the act of accessing and crunching the huge amounts of data he could process.

“Uh huh,” Shotaro said, not really listening. He noted the last gap in Eiji’s communication with the Foundation, before he’d surfaced in Norway; Eiji had flown from Japan into Copenhagen, only to vanish for two weeks. Shotaro made another note and stuck another pin into the map. That had been Eiji’s last trip into Japan, the one where Hina had attempted to welcome him back.

Satonaka, Shotaro remembered, had said Eiji had evaded them; Shotaro wouldn’t have thought Eiji would have deliberately missed seeing his friends and loved ones, but he duly recorded Satonaka’s assessment. He reached for the one sheet of paper with a date between Eiji’s flight to Denmark and his first ATM withdrawal in Norway. It was email, sent from the Foundation to Eiji, which Eiji had never opened. Shotaro frowned at it. It was a brief statement, telling Eiji that the most recent report contained enough information to recreate Core Medals.

“Philip, what, exactly, is a Core Medal?” he asked. He knew they were part of Eiji’s Rider transformation system, and that they could be switched out for different capabilities; in that way, they weren’t that different from the Gaia Memory system that Shotaro himself used. “Besides a way to transform a Kamen Rider, I mean.”


“What?”

“I can’t – I don’t know,” Philip said, and while he wasn’t as distressed as he might have been at his failure to retrieve information, Shotaro could still tell that he was annoyed. “I can’t get to that information. It’s locked down.”

“Great,” Shotaro said, and sighed. “Because I can’t tell if the Kougami Foundation being able to make them is good news or not, even if the tone of the message trying to tell Hino that is annoyingly upbeat.”

“How important is it?” Philip asked.

“Table it for now.” Shotaro stretched, cracking his elbows and shoulders. “Hino didn’t know anyway.” He hung the email from the string between Copenhagen and Tromso, just for reference. “Now, this is interesting.”

Eiji had arrived from Beijing late on the evening of March 14th, which was in the general vicinity of when people Shotaro couldn’t be bothered to list at that particular moment had all said they’d gotten
their last text from him.

“Reconstituted Core Medals,” Philip read. “Reconstituted?”

Shotaro hunted down the blue thread and looped it between Beijing, Tokyo, and Copenhagen. “Philip, I need a phone number.”

The case Eiji had handed over during his less than twelve hours in Japan had been placed in the hands of an intern, essentially in the middle of the night. Shotaro called the extension of the department where the intern had been working; with any luck, the kid was still there.

Luck was, for once, on Shotaro’s side; not only was the kid still there, the kid was answering the phones. After ascertaining that this was, in fact, the employee he was looking for, Shotaro began to ask questions.

“I, uh, I don’t know how much I’m really allowed to say,” Yamamoto the intern said, sounding more nervous than Shotaro felt she should be.

“I’m not asking you to divulge trade secrets,” he said in what he hoped was a soothing voice. “I just want you to tell me about Hino Eiji.”

“Hino?” the intern said, and started to talk.

It was late – far later than Yamamoto had wanted to be at work. She’d jumped at the chance to work at the Kougami Foundation, particularly in one of its biotech research divisions, but the work they were doing was all sorts of weird. Not only was it weird, she wasn’t actually allowed to talk about it. This was just one of a number of nights where someone had to stay to keep an eye on something for specific reasons that she was not allowed to talk about.

“Go on,” Shotaro said, when Yamamoto paused to apologize for being so vague.

Security gave no warning before someone Yamamoto had never seen before showed up at the door of the lab. She’d been under the impression that the building was locked at night, that there was staff on site around the clock to prevent strangers from wandering in. And yet, someone was standing at the lab, looking at her with an expression of surprise. He really wasn’t the one who should have been surprised, Yamamoto found herself thinking.

" Uh," said the intruder, and looked around the lab. “Are you the only one here?”

“Of course not,” Yamamoto said.

“But you’re supposed to be here, or you wouldn’t be here,” the stranger said, not quite looking at her. Since he wasn’t really acting threatening, Yamamoto had time to notice a few more details. He was dressed oddly, in loose dark pants and mismatched boots. The laces on one boot had clearly broken and been knotted together at some point, while the laces on the other were an incongruous fluorescent orange. Despite the relative chill of the air, he wasn’t wearing a jacket, just an oversized shirt over a gray t-shirt. His hair looked as though he’d slept on it and then ignored it entirely, and he was carrying a stick with a brightly patterned piece of cloth hanging off the top end. Except for the orange shoelace, the cloth on the stick was the only thing he had that had any color to it at all.

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to aim for somewhere between polite and authoritative and reaching behind her for the silent alarm. The lab was supposed to be more secure than the rest of the building, requiring biometric data to access; either the stranger was part of the research team and she just hadn’t met him or he was really good at getting into locked places, but Yamamoto didn’t want to take chances. “Who are you?”
“Hino,” the stranger said. “Just Hino.” He glanced down at a box in his hands; it was dull silver, and locked with a combination. “This is for Kougami,” he said, holding out the box. Yamamoto noticed that Hino didn’t add any sort of title or honorific to the CEO’s name. She blinked, looking from Hino’s face to the box and back again.

“What is it?” she asked, because she knew better than to accept strange packages from people she didn’t know.

“Just take it,” Hino said, shaking the box slightly.

Yamamoto’s phone chose that moment to chime a message; its distinctive tone said it was work-related. She ignored it, but it chimed a second time, and then a third. “Excuse me,” she said, taking her hand away from the silent alarm that she had not yet managed to reach, and pulled her phone out of her pocket. There were three messages from CEO Kougami, who would on occasion send personal messages to his employees, but had never sent one, let alone three, to Yamamoto. She opened the first one, then the second, then the third, all of which told her that if someone calling himself Hino Eiji showed up with a package, she was to take it.

“I’m so sorry to ask,” she said, looking back at Hino, “but what’s your given name?”

He blinked and tilted his head a little sideways, as if he hadn’t understood the question, and then flicked his eyes sideways at nothing before answering. “Eiji,” he said finally. “My full name is Hino Eiji.”

“Oh,” she said. “Then I am authorized to accept the package.”

Despite his insistence that she take the box, Yamamoto had to tug on it to get it out of Hino’s hand. He stared at his hand for a moment after she had stepped backwards with the box, flexing his fingers as though they were stiff or numb or both. “Thank you, Ms. Yamamoto,” he said, although she hadn’t introduced herself. It took her a moment to realize that he’d read her name badge, prominently clipped to her shirt. “Excuse me.”

He was out the door before she could put the box down or ask him any questions, and it wasn’t until the door had almost slid shut behind him that she could see just what the cloth he had strung up on a stick actually was; it wasn’t a flag, it was a pair of underwear.

“Of course it was,” Shotaro murmured. Eiji had been carrying his underwear-for-tomorrow around on a stick the last time Shotaro had seen him, as well, rather than in his pocket. “How did he get that thing on a plane?”

Out of sheer morbid curiosity, Shotaro called the airport to see if Eiji had actually been on his scheduled flight to Copenhagen – there had been no activity in the city to indicate that he’d arrived – only to find that Eiji had left a significant impression on the gate agent. He had expected to have to wait while the agent first determined whether or not information should be given out and then searched through records, but once Shotaro had been connected to the airline employee who’d been on duty the morning of Eiji’s flight out, the man was only too happy to talk.

“He was crazy,” the gate agent said.

“Could you elaborate?”

The gate agent hadn’t wanted to check Eiji’s staff as luggage, which wasn’t entirely unreasonable in and of itself; it hardly constituted standard traveling equipment. Eiji had insisted. Not feeling that violence was in Eiji’s nature, Shotaro pressed for further details.
“He wasn’t rude,” the gate agent said. “But something there wasn’t right. If he’d been coming into
the country instead of leaving, I would have called security. But he got on the plane, staff and all.”

Shotaro forbore from pointing out that the man wouldn’t have been interacting with an arriving
passenger, or that if he’d really felt Eiji was a danger to someone, he wouldn’t have allowed him to
board a flight full of vulnerable people, and hung up the phone.

“So he arrives, drops off a box of ‘reconstituted Core medals’ along with his monthly report on a
thumb drive, and goes right back to the airport.” Philip was leaning against Shotaro’s back as he
spoke, a warm and comforting weight.

“Looks like.”

“And then he goes to talk to people in Norway about biotechnology.” Philip reached out to touch the
pin stuck in Tromso with one graceful index finger.

“Right.” Shotaro looked back down at his stacks of paper. “I’m beginning to think this may not be
helpful after all.”

“Instead of starting at the end,” Philip said, “why don’t you start at the beginning?”
Interlude: Blade, An Airport, and A Question

Kenzaki Kazuma hated airports. There were very few things he had actively disliked during life, and his seven years wandering as one of the Undead hadn’t added to that list in any meaningful way. Except for airports. He’d never left Japan while he was alive, but there was no way he could stay in the country while he (Kazuma refused to so much as whisper the name, even in his thoughts) was still there, and he had the right to be near his adopted daughter. So Kazuma had left. He couldn’t feel him from across an ocean, or at least not as more than a vague and easily muted buzz in the back of his head. It hadn’t changed in the intervening years. Kazuma shook his head. He wasn’t usually given to introspection; it only made things worse. It was the plane load of Japanese tourists trickling through the halls, he thought, after looking around; they reminded him of home. He still couldn’t help but think of Japan as home, although he didn’t think it likely that he would ever return.

Ever was a long time.

Kazuma deliberately drew in a deep breath and let it out. He wasn’t going to let his thoughts go in that direction. He had just arrived in Frankfurt, simply because he’d never been in Germany before, and he’d taken a plane because he’d crossed the Atlantic on a ship twice already and it had been a less than pleasant experience both times. Now that he was here, he was – as always – at a little bit of a loss for what to do with himself. He didn’t speak a word of German, but that was part of what he was starting to enjoy about new places – the challenge of communication. The more he connected with people, the more human he felt.

Someone jostling into him from behind awakened a very human flare of irritation, which faded before it really had the chance to shine. The muttered apology first in Japanese and then in hasty and accented English turned the lingering ire into some amusement.

“It’s fine,” Kazuma said in Japanese, turning around.

The kid who’d bumped into him – and for all that he was probably technically an adult, he couldn’t have been much more than twenty – looked up from a sheet of paper with wide eyes. “Oh,” he said. He looked absolutely exhausted, and the only luggage he appeared to have was the paper in his hands.

“First time abroad?” Kazuma asked sympathetically, and was taken aback when the kid actually flinched.

“Not, um, no,” he said. “I’m sorry I bumped into you.”

Well, it wasn’t like he had anything better to do. Kazuma bowed politely and introduced himself. The kid flinched again, slightly, and gave his name as Hino Eiji. He eyed Kazuma warily for a moment, clearly wondering something and then dismissing it.

“Where are you trying to go?” Kazuma asked.

“I, uh, I’m supposed to – I don’t think anyone’s coming to meet me, but I’m supposed to join an archaeological dig near Haslach im Kinzigtal.” Hino blinked a few times, fumbling for an envelope tucked between his papers.

“Okay,” Kazuma said, and gently steered him out of the center of the thoroughfare; the two of them were already getting some irate glances from people who had to walk around them. “Do you know
“I’m…” Hino’s voice trailed off and he stared at the map with a blank face for a moment. “I’m supposed to get on a train,” he said, voice low. “There’s a ticket.”

If there was one thing Kazuma knew how to do, it was follow signs in an airport. “That’s probably this way, then,” he said, and started off. After a few steps, he glanced to the side, but Hino wasn’t there. Kazuma stopped and turned around. Hino hadn’t moved; he was just staring at Kazuma. “You coming?”

“Uh, you don’t have to – I mean, you have somewhere to be, right?”

Kazuma went back. “I don’t have any immediate plans,” he said. He wouldn’t have touched the other man, except that he’d just spent the past year navigating a far higher level of tactile contact than he’d ever experienced in Japan, and he didn’t think before putting a hand on Hino’s shoulder. Hino was shaking, fine tremors invisible to the naked eye. Kazuma left his hand where it was. “Are you all right?”

Hino put his right hand in his pocket before answering and the tremors stilled, although Kazuma could feel the tightness in the muscle under his hand. “I’m fine. Thank you for your help.” He bowed hastily, hand still in his pocket and all but ran.

Kazuma blinked, half-tempted to go after him. Chasing down random people who seemed nervous after running into him seemed like an excellent way to provoke antagonism, though, and it wasn’t an odd reaction. Something about Kazuma made some people just a little nervous. “Or it has nothing to do with you,” he said to himself. “The world doesn’t revolve around you, no matter what role you play in it not destroying itself.”

The thought that he was engaging in a villainous monologue made him chuckle, and now it was his turn to garner wary looks from passersby. Kazuma looked one more time in the direction Hino had gone, but he could no longer see the kid. He silently wished him luck and walked the other way.
“It looks like the Foundation hired Hino in September of 2011,” Philip said. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, leaning on the wall under his whiteboard. Despite how quiet his voice was, Shotaro had no trouble hearing him.

“Wasn’t there some sort of natural disaster in Tokyo at the time?” Shotaro said. He seemed to recall hearing something along those lines; a number of skyscrapers had been severely damaged, and there had been a significant death toll.

“The tornado?” Philip said, uninterested despite how out of the ordinary a tornado was for the region.

“Sure. The tornado. We’ll go with that.” A tornado that had flung all its debris out to sea somewhere, so that the remains of the missing had never been found. If that didn’t have the hallmarks of a Rider battle all over hit, Shotaro didn’t know what did.

“Hino stopped whatever it was,” Philip reminded him.

“Right.” Shotaro tapped his map and stuck a pin with the date in it in Tokyo. “So the Foundation hired him.”

“For research?” Philip sounded dubious, and Shotaro couldn’t blame him. Research did not seem to be one of Eiji’s admittedly eclectic skills. “What kind of research?”

“Biotech,” Shotaro said slowly; Eiji had had meetings with biotech researchers in Norway the following year, which had apparently indeed been connected to his employment. The file the Foundation had sent had a significant amount of detail blacked out, and most of it wasn’t accessible by Philip either. When he’d asked, Philip had looked at him as though he were asking for information that didn’t exist.

“Hino Eiji,” Philip said flatly, as if they hadn’t gone over this. “Biotechnology.”

“Don’t look at me.” Shotaro tacked the relevant document onto the map. “It looks like they sent him to an archaeological dig a few weeks later.” He could feel the skeptical expression on Philip’s face from clear across the room. “A medieval site,” he added. “See what you can dig up about a site near Haslach im Kinzigtal.”

“I see what you did there,” Philip said in his best your-jokes-are-not-funny voice, but he obliged. “It’s a pet project for the Foundation’s CEO,” he said. “Apparently one of his ancestors is from the region. The site was first uncovered in the late 90s, and he’s been funding it ever since. Not a lot, just enough to keep it running. It looks like they sent occasional shipments of, uh, cultural artifacts to Japan.”

“The German government didn’t object?”

“Do you have any idea how many similar sites there are?” Philip sounded almost exasperated. “You can’t walk down the street without tripping over something historical.”

Shotaro was fairly certain Philip was quoting someone else. “Okay, so he had stuff sent here. What kind of artifacts?”

“Uh, that’s hard to – the customs documents aren’t really that specific.” Philip frowned. “Wait, there
was a shipment in September – no, wait, that was 2010. Went to the museum that exploded.”

“Was there perhaps a connection?” Shotaro said. It was a rhetorical question. That was right about
the time he’d first met Eiji, when the then-new Rider had chased what Shotaro now knew was a
Core Medal across a rooftop and defeated one of Shotaro’s opponents. He’d gone looking for him
afterwards, to thank him, but he hadn’t seen him again for months, not until the time travel disaster.
Shotaro didn’t want to think about the time travel disaster; it gave him a headache. He’d gotten Eiji’s
contact information out of it, that was the only positive part of the entire mess. “So he went to
Germany, to an archaeological dig that may or may not have been connected to Kamen Rider OOO,
after being hired to do biotech research.” He paused. “It sounds ridiculous when I say it out loud.”

Philip didn’t dignify that with a response. Shotaro wasn’t entirely sure Philip wasn’t napping.

Intuition chose that particular moment to club Shotaro over the head. “Reconstituted Cores,” he said.
“The Core Medals were broken. It wasn’t a biological system after all. It was biotech, like the Gaia
Memory. They came from Germany in the first place.” He paused. “Shotaro, what you’re trying to
tell yourself is that someone created a biotechnological Kamen Rider transformation system in
medieval Germany.”

He’d heard weirder things, to be fair.

“Running theory, then.” Shotaro scribbled some notes on the paper tacked to Tokyo regarding Eiji’s
hiring. “So Eiji – or Kougami – thought he could learn something by going to the archaeological
site.”

Shotaro searched the stacks of paper for anything relevant, but all he came up with was reports sent
back to the Kougami Foundation with an increasing list of Core Medals. He duly noted that they did
not say reconstituted; in fact, the first report distinctly noted that Eiji had found them, and had said
something about a wormhole and time travel.

“Not again,” Shotaro muttered. He didn’t want to know. The Core Medals hadn’t been broken,
they’d been scattered? “Then why were you trying to reconstitute – oh, fine.” He glared at the sparse
reports. “I’m just going to assume half of them broke, and half of them were lost, and then I don’t
have to think about paradoxes.”

The paper might as well have been mocking him. Shotaro tacked it onto the map, stringing red thread
between Tokyo and Eiji’s multiple confirmed locations in Germany. There was a lot of contact
between Eiji and the Foundation, particularly compared to a year and a half later; Eiji had rambled in
his emails to Satonaka, telling her that he went running daily and mentioning a few times that found a
medal almost every time he picked a new route. Shotaro wanted to know how artifacts that had
allegedly been lost in Japan were showing up on German roadsides, but no explanation was
forthcoming.

One email from Kougami caught Shotaro’s eye.

Eiji:

You’re resonating with the medals! Splendid! I knew you’d find something you wanted. Keep
searching, and don’t give up hope even if it doesn’t seem like you’re making progress.

It was unsigned.

“It doesn’t sound like he found what he was looking for,” Philip said.

“Hang on.” Shotaro checked the date of Eiji’s next recorded trip. “This was me.”
“What was you?” Philip stretched, but didn’t cross the floor.

“Remember the incident with Foundation X and the Seeds of Life from the Universe?” The incident in question hadn’t involved Hino until it was halfway over; despite having apparently been in Japan for a couple of days before meeting up with Shotaro, it had taken Hino a while to get in touch with him. He’d said something about having some business to take care of, and Shotaro hadn’t pushed. He’d also been the one who’d said that he knew the Kamen Rider likely to be involved with Foundation X’s partner in crime, and the one who had introduced him to Shotaro.

“Oh,” Philip said. “That was when we met Fourze. Gentaro. I told you you two were similar.”

“Something was off about Hino,” Shotaro said. “He was quiet.”

“That wasn’t quiet,” Philip said. “No part of that was quiet. They blew up a space shuttle.”

“I didn’t know when I asked him for help that he’d be flying in from Germany.” Shotaro ignored Philip’s commentary and added blue string from Frankfurt back to Japan and a sticky note reading SOLU.

“Weren’t you annoyed that he didn’t stick around long enough to say goodbye?” Philip observed neutrally.

“Well, I was,” Shotaro said, looking at another one-way plane ticket. “No, wait, he left for Egypt and couldn’t take five minutes to say, Nice to see you, Shotaro? I’m still annoyed.” More blue string went on the map, this time from Tokyo to Cairo.

“He was in Africa in December of 2011?” Philip asked, all the neutrality gone from his voice.

“Looks like it, why?” There was nothing in the stack of papers except a note that Eiji had gotten a new phone and that the number had changed near the end of December; Satonaka had pinged the phone’s GPS location and it had shown up somewhere in the less inhabited parts of Sudan. She’d pinged it several times over the following month, and as far as Shotaro could tell, Eiji had just been wandering around the African continent.

“There are a couple things in the news,” Philip said. “That was right after I, um, got back and I was trying to catch up on what I missed.”

Shotaro remembered Philip’s resurrection better than he wanted to, but the salient point Philip was trying to make here was all the time he’d spent reading newspapers. Shotaro had had to remind him to sleep, and they’d had more than one argument about what Philip’s data-generated body did and didn’t need. “What was in the news?” he asked.

“Here.”

A projection blinked to life on the blank whiteboard behind Philip; the headlines were loud and colorful, and the only actual photograph was so blurry that it could have been anything. “You said news, not tabloids,” Shotaro said, but he paced close enough to the board to read it anyway.

The article was an account of a minor civil war interrupted by an unidentified lunatic in a flying suit, one who’d changed appearances rapidly and used highly advanced technology to destroy all the weapons being used in the war in question. At least, that was the gist of what Shotaro extrapolated; what the article actually said was a lot of nonsense about alien invasions and dictator states and forced nonviolence. The individual in question had vanished shortly after the hostilities had ceased, but the truce hadn’t lasted long. Within a few weeks, conflict had resumed in the area.
Shotaro shook his head. “So Hino tried to stop a war,” he said. The descriptions of the individual’s advanced weaponry matched what Shotaro had seen Eiji do as a Kamen Rider.

“Not successfully,” Philip said. “The area is still classified as being in a period of civil unrest.”

“Don’t tell Hino,” Shotaro said, only half joking. “Did you say a couple of things?”

“Here’s the other one.”

The second news article hadn’t been specifically published in a tabloid, but it was an opinion piece that purported to describe an event experienced by the author under the title To The Man Who Saved My Life: Thank You. It was dated within the first week of February. The date tugged at Shotaro’s memory until he looked over his notes; it was right after Date had said he’d seen Eiji on an Italian street corner. The article itself was written in English, but Philip had included a helpful line-by-line Japanese translation, presumably for Shotaro’s benefit.

I don’t expect you to believe a word of this, it started, but it’s all true. I’m publishing my account of what happened because I need to thank the man who saved my life and vanished without every saying goodbye.

“That’s becoming a theme,” Shotaro observed.

Not to be cliché, but it started on a dark and stormy night, just off the southern coast of Sicily. I had rented a boat for the day, but the weather had changed without warning. I’d been swept up in a current and didn’t know where I was, and my radio wasn’t working. I had strobe lamps at either end of the boat and every reason to believe that I would be able to contact someone on the radio when the storm let up; none of the waves seemed big enough to cause damage to my boat, so I started out just waiting.

Then I heard a thump on the deck, almost like a very large bird. I went out to check, more out of boredom than anything else. What I found on my deck was not a bird; it was a man. He was mostly dry, although as I stood there staring at him, the rain slowly drenched him. He was lying on the deck as though he had fallen out of the sky.

I don’t think I stood there that long, staring on shock, before going to check to see if he was either alive or dangerous. Before I got farther than a few steps, he sat up and scrambled backwards. Something metallic fell off of him, and he grabbed it with an expression I can only describe as panic. He ran his fingers over it and then shoved it into one of what would turn out to be many pockets.

This was still all before he acknowledged that I was there, much less that he was on my boat.

He reached inside another pocket, and the panic melted away into relief. Then he seemed to see me, and got to his feet. The boat, while in no danger of capsizing, was none too steady, and neither was he as he slowly made his way across the deck with both hands clearly visible.

I spoke to him in Italian; he frowned and shook his head. He said something to me in what I later learned was Arabic. We ran through a few sort-of local languages before settling on English as the language we had the most of in common; his English was better than his Spanish, and my Japanese and German are as nonexistent as my Arabic and his French.

“Is this going anywhere?” Shotaro asked, looking up. “There’s nothing here that points to this as being Hino, much less anything particularly weird.”

“Keep going,” said Philip.
The man didn’t want to tell me his name, just kept repeating that he was sorry and he’d be going as soon as he could. I thought at the time that something was seriously wrong, since we were on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean in a storm. I was right, but not for the reasons I thought I was.

Not long after Mystery Man fell onto my deck, we saw a ship. And I don’t mean it was just any sort of ship, it was huge and old-fashioned. It was built out of wood, and it didn’t look like it should be floating. At first I didn’t think that it was; I thought we’d drifted up to a shipwreck. Then we got closer, and I realized that not only was it floating, it wasn’t actually made of wood. The image of a wooden galleon was superimposed over something shiny and metallic.

The ship floated closer to us, actual lanterns hung from the railings, nothing electric at all that I could see, and also no one on board. I thought for a moment it was going to run my boat over, but then it just stopped and a ladder came over the side. I still couldn’t see anyone, but Mystery Man was staring at it with horror. He said, very clearly, “Ittai nokotteta.” Later I found out it means, “There’s one left.” (One what? Doll, human remains, statue, android, something like that. Something human-shaped that isn’t human, or isn’t human any more. That’s what that word means.)

I moved toward the ladder. Mystery Man stepped between me and it, but for some reason I needed to see what was on that ship. I had to know. To this day, I will swear that it was playing some sort of music, and although I couldn’t sing the tune now, if I hear even a few beats of it again, I know I’ll recognize it. I slipped around him and put my hand on the ladder. I was on the deck of the boat almost before I realized it, and there was something or someone standing in front of me.

It was dark blue, like the deepest ocean on a sunny day, fading out to turquoise at the edges of its fantastically shaped limbs. Its hair was the green of algae, drifting around its pure white face. I don’t mean white in the sense that it had pale Caucasian skin. I mean white, like paper, or something growing underground. It was calling me.

Behind it, I could see that the deck of the ship was piled high with pale spheres, almost like eggs. They were covered in gauzy webbing, untouched by the now-pouring rain. I walked toward the figure on the deck, and then Mystery Man tackled me from behind. He sent me skidding across the deck, until I landed hard against something and had the air knocked out of me. When I could breathe again, Mystery Man was gone and in his place was someone wearing dark armor and a mask. It was fighting with the blue figure on the desk.

I still wanted to go towards it, but that desire was mostly overwhelmed by a sense of horror; why on earth had I wanted to go near that thing? The spheres around me now looked dank and unhealthy, instead of pale and pure, and if I looked closely enough, I could see a pretty young woman inside each one of them. I kept low to the deck and tried to move around the fight; the armor had changed colors, and Mystery Man seemed to be defeating Sea Creature, but I didn’t want to stick around for the end of it.

Just as I got to the front of the ship, I heard a horrible crunch and felt the ship shudder. I looked over the railing just in time to see my boat disappear below the waves. I was now trapped. I was tempted to leap overboard and swim for it, but I stupidly wasn’t wearing a life vest, and I still had no idea where I was. I made myself as small as possible and tried to stay out of the way.

Mystery Man’s suit was all red, now, and some kind of aura flared out behind it. It reminded me strongly of a peacock spreading its tail, except this peacock rained flames down on the sea creature and the boat. The sea creature – and I do not exaggerate in the slightest – screamed and exploded, and then the boat caught fire. Mystery Man looked around at the eggs, reached out one hand, and let it fall heavily to his side. Then he shook his head slightly and looked around again until he saw
me. I was frozen, not knowing if I should jump. He pulled me off the boat and then we were airborne.

You see why it sounds like I’m either lying or crazy.

The ship burned below us, but I could see the lights of a harbor not far away, and that was where Mystery Man headed. It wasn’t the town I’d set out from, but it was on the island of Sicily. Mystery Man landed us on the beach, just as the rain stopped, and set me down. The clouds thinned and vanished, the sun just breaking over the horizon, and the armor he’d been wearing – black, edged in red – melted away. He put something metallic in his pocket and smiled at me. Then he passed out.

The rest of the article described the aftermath of the author’s experience; Shotaro skimmed through it. She’d called the authorities, requested an ambulance, and reported the boat missing. The paramedics had taken Eiji to the nearest hospital, but he’d vanished the moment he was left alone; the rest was irrelevant. Shotaro put another pin in the map and studied the winding red thread tracing a route that went across three continents.

“So after going to Germany to an archaeological dig in connection with biotechnical research on his own transformation system, he makes a side trip to Japan because I called him, and then just leaves again, after which he tries to stop an African civil war, spends some time wandering around, ends up in Italy somehow, and then takes out some sort of monster off the coast of Sicily,” Shotaro said. “Right. Because all of that sounds perfectly reasonable.”

“He’s your friend,” Philip said.
Interlude: Blade, A Beach, and A Bike Ride

Someone or something was kidnapping women – ones who were young, pretty, and traveling alone. Kenzaki Kazuma looked at the string of reports – from different countries, different time zones, in several different languages – and thought he could trace a fifteen-month route starting in Kyushu, going through Okinawa and past the Philippines before going through Indonesia and looping up to the Maldives, and then skating along the southernmost parts of the Middle East. It had gone up the Red Sea before crossing into the Mediterranean Sea, although Kazuma had no idea how whatever it was had gotten through the Suez Canal without being challenged. Maybe it had been.

Kazuma had only noticed the pattern because he’d seen a number of recent posters with the word *missing* along the coast of Cyprus, and he’d noticed the same thing when he’d been in Egypt. He knew that people went missing all the time, sometimes of their own volition. The posters caught his attention because of their similarity, and out of idle curiosity he’d started looking for connections.

The pattern, once he’d worked it out, seemed unmistakable; that or it was a series of amazing coincidence, and either way, Kazuma had nothing but time. While he’d been figuring out where the thing had come from – and it had taken dozens of women, an average of one a week since the first one he was sure of, in Kyushu – it had moved on to Greece. Kazuma followed it.

He’d almost caught up to it, had seen a wooden Spanish galleon of a type that hadn’t been used for close to two centuries, but he hadn’t been able to reach it from the shore. It had brought clouds and thunder with it, unexpected rain whipping the waves into froth. He thought it was heading in the general direction of Italy; if its pattern held, he had perhaps six days to find it.

Exactly one week later, Kazuma was on a Sicilian beach when a lightning storm knocked someone out of the sky. He didn’t know at the time what had drawn him to Sicily as opposed to Italy, other than a general sense of *wrongness*. It wasn’t an Undead, but it was something that wasn’t supposed to be alive, something that had had its link to the real world severed and yet refused to lay down and die. Unlike anyone else who might have been watching, his eyes were good enough to see the light show that came bare moments after the lightning strike. A few minutes later and the ship-that-wasn’t caught fire, and Kazuma could actually see someone take to the air.

The flying person was carrying someone else and heading for the beach – almost right towards Kazuma himself. Kazuma wasn’t particularly surprised to see a Kamen Rider landing on the beach, pretty young woman in arms. He was a little surprised that the rider turned out to be the young man he’d seen in a German airport a few months previously, and more surprised when Hino – that had been his name, hadn’t it? – promptly collapsed.

Kazuma debated briefly whether he should go give Hino a hand, or at least get him off the beach, but before he could make a decision one way or another, paramedics and police showed up. Kazuma called discretion the better part of valor and followed them at a distance. He found Hino asleep on a gurney in a hallway, handcuffed to the rails. Kazuma broke the handcuffs and woke Hino enough to get him out of the hospital and away from probably unwanted attention.

It took three hours to drive across Sicily and board a ferry for mainland Italy; Hino was limp against his back during the drive and slept on Kazuma’s shoulder during the ferry ride. Kazuma gave up trying to drive any farther away and checked them both into a hostel. It took Hino another six or seven hours to wake up, during which time Kazuma seriously debated just leaving him where he was.

“He’s a Rider,” he said to himself, just as Hino finally opened his eyes.
“This isn’t a beach,” Hino said groggily.

“You’re welcome,” Kazuma said. “What was it?”

Hino blinked at him uncomprehendingly, squinted, and said, “Mr. K-Kenzaki?” He sounded as though he was surprised he’d dredged Kazuma’s name out of the depths of memory.

“Yes,” Kazuma said. “And your name is Hino Eiji, and you’re apparently a Kamen Rider.”

Hino flinched at that, trying to move away from Kazuma and getting tangled in the blanket Kazuma had thoughtfully draped over him so he wouldn’t freeze. “A-are you?” he asked.

“I used to be,” Kazuma said. “It’s a long story that I see no value in telling.”

“I used to be,” Hino said. “Used to.”

“You say that, but you were wearing armor twelve hours ago, killing something, and rescuing a damsel in distress.” Kazuma tried to smile reassuringly, but he wasn’t sure it was actually working.

“It was left over,” Hino said. “From before. I think it was Mezool’s.” He said that as if Kazuma had any idea who that was. “There were eggs, and I couldn’t – the people who were already in there, it was too late for them. Once she puts them in the eggs, there’s no way to get them out, not unless she takes them out, and she’s gone. She’s been gone for months.” His voice broke at the end, and he didn’t look Kazuma in the eye once during the entire speech.

“If there was nothing you could have done, then you did the right thing,” Kazuma said softly. He didn’t know if that was true or not, but he did know it was what Hino needed to hear. Hino stared at him with an expression Kazuma couldn’t identify, and then his face crumbled into fear. Kazuma started and looked behind him, but there was nothing there. “What? What is it, Hino?”

“Where is it?” Hino reached under the blanket, frantically tugging it away until he could reach into his pockets. Right hand deep in one pocket, his shoulders sagged in relief. “You’re still here,” he said, so softly that Kazuma didn’t think he was supposed to hear it.

Kazuma blinked, the vague misgivings he’d had before suddenly returning to the forefront of his brain.

“Thank you,” Hino said suddenly. “I don’t know exactly what happened, back there, but thank you.” He looked Kazuma in the eyes for the first time, sincerity evident in every line.

“It was nothing,” Kazuma said, uncomfortable with being on the receiving end of quite that much intensity. He hadn’t thought Hino had it in him. “You, uh, want some coffee?” he asked, to change the subject. “I think there’s a –“

“Yeah,” Hino said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Kazuma was halfway to the coffee stand in question before it occurred to him that he hadn’t told Hino where it was, and Hino had been asleep on his feet when Kazuma had half-carried him into the hostel to begin with. He went back to the room, but when he got there, Hino Eiji was gone.
The bell above the entrance chimed, startling Shotaro. He didn’t remember unlocking the door that morning. Come to think of it, he didn’t remember locking it the night before. He thought briefly that it was lucky that no one had wandered into the office while he and Philip were asleep before it occurred to him that he would never know. He put the thought out of his mind and jogged up the stairs.

“I’m so sorry, we’re not actually open,” he started, but the person in the shop turned to smile at him and the words dried up. “Miss Izumi,” he said.

“Mr. Hidari.” She greeted him politely.

“Would you like some coffee?” Shotaro asked, remembering his manners after an unforgivable lapse.

The adorable Hina – he had to remember not to call her that – smiled and shook her head. “I heard you’re the one looking for Eiji,” she said.

“Ye-es,” Shotaro said, tilting his head to one side. “I don’t suppose you know where he is.”

Hina looked at the floor. “I feel like I should have started asking questions sooner,” she said. It wasn’t uncommon, when someone disappeared, for the people left behind to feel guilty; particularly when the people in question were separated by as much distance as Hina had been from Eiji. Telling her as much, however, wouldn’t help; Shotaro had found, through trial and error, that carefully returning to a previous topic of conversation helped provide at least momentary distraction. In this case, he actually had a pertinent question to ask.

“Miss Izumi,” he said again, this time to get her attention. “What can I do for you?”

“I don’t know if these will be helpful.” Hina had jumped, just slightly, when he said her name, and then started digging through her purse. She pulled out a thin stack of envelopes, most of them marked as airmail. “None of them are even close to when Eiji disappeared.”

Shotaro took the stack of envelopes, just glancing over them at first. Eiji had written Hina physical letters, none of them dated but each presumably still in its individual envelope. “Hino sent these to you?” he asked, just to be sure.

“Mostly for the first few months, and then he just stopped. He’d send texts instead,” Hina said. “Once in a while, he’d call.”

“Thank you,” Shotaro said, and meant it.

“Do you really think they’ll help?” Hina asked.

“I think that if I understand what Hino’d been doing and what frame of mind he might have been in, it might help me figure out where he decided to go,” Shotaro said.

“He wanted Ankh back,” Hina said softly.

“Ankh,” Shotaro said, trying to place the name. “The blond?” He vaguely remembered him, from the time travel mess, but he’d been gone the next time Shotaro had seen Hino. “Why did I think that was your brother?”
“Ah,” Hina said. “It’s a long story.”

It turned out to be a shorter story than Shotaro was expecting; Ankh the monster had become Ankh the friend, and sacrificed himself during the fight that had led to Eiji leaving Japan again. “Hino thinks if he can repair the Core Medal, that he can get Ankh back,” Shotaro said finally.

“Oh, he was sure of it,” Hina said. “Ankh came back from the future, just for a little bit.”

Shotaro closed his mouth with a snap. He was absolutely not going to ask about time travel. “And his research for the Kougami Foundation,” he said instead. “He’s trying to figure out how to put the Cores back together.”

Hina nodded. “My brother says to tell you that Eiji hasn’t had any contact with his parents,” she said after a moment.

“Recently?” Shotaro asked, mentally shifting gears.

“Since before he met us,” Hina said. “Right after you know. When they brought him back to Japan.”

“Right,” Shotaro muttered; by this time, he was familiar with the incident that had kick-started the civil war Eiji had tried to end so many months later. Before he could say anything else, Hina looked at her watch and exclaimed that she was going to be late, and Shotaro politely showed her to the door and thanked her for her help, and then he locked the door firmly behind her and leaned on it.

The thing was, he couldn’t blame Eiji for either part of it; if someone had told him when Philip had vanished that there might be a way to get him back, Shotaro wouldn’t have stopped until he’d found it or died in the attempt. Shotaro very much hoped that he wasn’t going to find out that Eiji had followed Ankh instead of figuring out how to bring him back. Knowing what Eiji had been searching for and knowing how close he himself had been to a similar path, it was a few moments before Shotaro could make himself go back downstairs, to where Philip was waiting.

Hina’s letters he left alone, except for checking the dates; he didn’t want to open them before he had to. It seemed like a gross invasion of privacy, even though Hina had handed them to him. He returned to the file instead, looking for the next step in Eiji’s quest to bring back his lost friend.

“I didn’t see him,” Shotaro said, looking at another plane ticket several minutes later. It corresponded with the date of the insanity that had involved far too many people wearing far too many colors.

“I feel,” Philip said, “That there is perhaps an inordinate amount of cross-generational conflicts.”

“Uh huh,” Shotaro said absently. He wasn’t entirely sure the event in question had actually happened; they’d all been pulled into a massive fight against villains with whom Shotaro wasn’t particularly familiar. Oh, he’d seen bits and pieces of Shocker during the time travel debacle, but the vast majority of what he remembered from this particular fight was like a fever dream (pirate ships in the sky, giant fighting robots, being temporarily dead), and when it had been over, he’d been all too happy to just collect Philip and leave.

If Philip hadn’t remembered it, too, Shotaro would have put it down to a nightmare. Given that Philip did remember it, Shotaro was tempted to label it a mass hallucination. But there was Eiji’s plane ticket, the date lining up with what Shotaro kept trying not to think about.

“Did you say you didn’t see Hino?” Philip said, blinking and actually looking over at Shotaro.

“During that thing, with the thing,” Shotaro said. “And the other thing.”
Philip just kept looking at him.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Shotaro said, stabbing a finger in Philip’s general direction. “Apparently Hino was there, but I’m not the one who told him about it.” Come to think of it, he had a vague memory of seeing several of Hino’s suits fighting simultaneously, which was one of the reasons he kept leaning towards ascribing the entire thing to the realm of the imagined.

“February is the worst month,” Philip said. “Where did he go from Japan this time?”

“Brazil,” Shotaro said, tying off the blue thread and labeling it. “He took the remains of the Core Medals with him.”

“I thought he had a box full of those things.” Philip reached past Shotaro and plucked the printout of the relevant email out of the pile. Shotaro felt this was monumentally unfair, as Philip could literally have read it in his head.

“He did,” Shotaro said. “Does. He does. He has a box full of them.” He didn’t look at Philip trying and failing to be sympathetic. He didn’t want to tell Philip what Hina had told him; he thought it might color Philip’s analysis of the situation. That is exactly the type of information that you were trying to get, in order to more closely analyze the situation, he reminded himself, but he still didn’t want to tell Philip.

“Of course,” Philip murmured.

Two of the letters had been dated before Eiji’s flight to Brazil, and one was post-marked three days after Eiji’s arrival there. Reluctantly, Shotaro pulled them out of their envelopes and began reading. None of them said much, other than friendly chatter about the weather and the people he’d met, how some things were so different from Japan, and how some things were the same. They sounded perfectly normal, not at all like a man on a quest to resurrect the dead.

“Who’s Marvelous?” Philip said, chin resting on Shotaro’s shoulder as soon as he finished talking.

“Ah,” Shotaro said. That was the only thing out of place in the first few letters; the previous two were already tacked onto the map in the appropriate places. The third letter, the one from Brazil, was mostly more of the same, until the very end.

I don’t know what Marvelous did to them, Eiji had written. I saw them change, and the Gokaigers used them like Ranger Keys, but Marvelous still had the – the Rider Keys, I guess, when he gave me the Cores back. If Joe contacts you, Hina, please. Please tell me. I don’t have any other way to get in touch with any of them, and I have to know what he did. It might help me fix

The letter ended abruptly, without punctuation or a signature at the bottom. Shotaro frowned at it. “He wouldn’t have kept looking, if this Marvelous had been able to answer his questions,” he said, finally.

“Probably not,” Philip agreed. “Fix what?”

Shotaro took a deep breath and told him.

“That makes a lot more sense,” Philip said, completely skating over the emotional ramifications. “For what he was doing in Brazil. Look at this.”

The whiteboard shimmered and crystallized into thousands of lines of text, barely separated by the suggestion of pages, one on top of the other, interspersed with graphs representing things that meant absolutely nothing to Shotaro. He looked at Philip expectantly.
“Here,” Philip said, and pointed to one of the pages. It was written in something that wasn’t Japanese and didn’t resemble English, which meant that Shotaro had zero chance of figuring out its significance. “That’s the base substance, the Core Medals. These samples were subjected to exhaustive analysis, but nothing indicated where the samples had come from or why they were so important.”

“He was analyzing the core medals?”

Philip tilted a hand back and forth in a sort-of gesture. “I don’t know how much Hino was doing, but he’s listed as co-author on some of the papers. He was only there for five months, though, and there’s a paper with his name on it that was published last week.”

“You’re sure he’s not there now,” Shotaro said.

“Positive.” Philip narrowed his eyes. “There’s probably some sort of agreement that I could find explaining –“

“No, that’s okay.” Shotaro held up a hand to forestall his partner. “What else were they doing with the Core Medals?”

Philip closed his eyes and the whiteboard blurred. Shotaro looked away; the way the images moved around on it made him vaguely dizzy and nauseous. “Analysis of the chemical composition, analysis of what kind of radiation they emitted –“

“Radiation?” Shotaro said sharply.


“That’s not reassuring at all,” Shotaro said.

“Radiation,” Philip continued, ignoring him, “and they tried to break some of the intact ones. Eiji had a full set, but none of them were breakable. The initial set? It was different than the orange Medals. There’s a list of differences in radiation emitted from the broken Medals and the intact ones, but Eiji was reluctant to let those out of his sight, and that limited what could be done. No one was able to explain the difference in emissions.”

“Philip,” Shotaro said, because the gist of what he was hearing was that Eiji hadn’t learned anything helpful in Brazil.

“There’s a note in one of his reports about purple Cores,” Philip said, and frowned. “They’re never mentioned again, and I can’t find them in any of the rest of the Foundation’s data.”

Shotaro made a note to ask someone about purple Cores, and then looked at his own handwriting. “This gets weirder every year,” he muttered under his breath.

“This is when he disappeared the first time,” Philip said.

“I thought he went radio silent a couple times before that.” Shotaro risked looking at the board, which was now blank. He leaned against his temporary desk.

“That was for a couple of weeks at a time,” Philip said. “This was for two months. The only indication the Foundation had that he was still alive was the two reports that still went in on time. Both of them consisted of the sentence nothing to report, but the Foundation couldn’t tell where they came from.”
“Let me guess,” Shotaro said. “You know exactly where they came from.”

“I don’t know why you think you have to ask,” Philip said. “Hino asked for introductions to a number of people, some of whom were reputable and some of whom weren’t.”

“Where?” Shotaro asked patiently.

“Ah, the Foundation flew him to New Delhi,” Philip said.

“India?” Shotaro put a pin the map and labeled it. “What was he doing there?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Philip said, which was such a blatant lie that Shotaro shook his head. “He was there for the entire time the Foundation couldn’t find him. They did try,” he added.

“Of course they did,” Shotaro said.

“New phone in October,” Shotaro said. “He sent that number to a lot of people, actually, the Foundation was billed for a lengthy video call from the middle of the Gobi desert to Japan.”

“The desert.” Shotaro put another pin in the map. “Where did he go from there?”

As far as Philip could tell, Eiji had wandered around aimlessly; his reports were the same, and he barely touched the account the Foundation had set up. The video call from the desert was the last actual phone call for that particular line. Shotaro checked the number; it was the same one that he had as the most current, with no voice mail set up – the one he’d gotten from Goto, not Gentaro. “There’s a plane ticket back to Japan, but it doesn’t look like there was any contact with the Foundation while he was here.”

“Hold on,” Shotaro said, sitting up straight. “This is what Gentaro was talking about.”

“Fourze,” Philip said.

“He wanted me to forward Eiji’s contact information so he could thank him for something,” Shotaro said. “Eiji gave him some help with something.”

“Probably Rider related, then, right?” Philip said.

“Could have called me, too,” Shotaro said. He was absolutely not sulking about it.

“Are you jealous?” Philip asked.

“What? No,” Shotaro chewed on his bottom lip. “So Gentaro called Eiji for help, Eiji showed up, and then – how long was he here? Don’t tell me. He left as soon as he got here.”

“Two days,” Philip said. “Less than 48 hours.”

“So does it bother you,” Shotaro asked, “that apparently Gentaro could reach Eiji using the number he didn’t have when he needed his help in December, but couldn’t get in touch with him six months later? Now? In May? When Eiji allegedly has the same number?”

Philip opened his mouth and closed it. “Time travel?” he said, finally.

“I don’t even know why I ask,” Shotaro said, and put the issue aside. It was possible that Gentaro hadn’t used a phone, or that Eiji had gotten in touch with him instead of the other way around, or something else ridiculous related to whatever Rider business Gentaro had gotten tangled up in that time. “So after wandering around aimlessly for over four months, Eiji goes back to Japan for two
days and then goes where?”

“Um.” Philip wiggled his fingers as though he were paging through something. “China.”

Shotaro looked at the date he’d just written on the pin demarcating Beijing, and at the date of Eiji’s most recent visit to Japan. “I’m going to make some guesses, and you tell me how right I am.”

“Go for it,” Philip said.

“Hino handed over a box of reconstituted Core Medals in March,” he said. “That’s where we started with this whole thing.” He waved a hand at the map. “He spent between December and March in Beijing, which is where they put the broken Medals back together. But.” Shotaro paused. “Clearly they didn’t work the way they were supposed to, because if they had, we wouldn’t be here having this conversation. He already would have repaired the Medal he thinks will bring his friend back. Ankh.”

“This is why you’re a detective,” Philip said.

“Hard-boiled,” Shotaro said.

“Half-boiled,” Philip muttered.

“You have no room to talk.”

“He tested the reconstituted Medals by putting them into his belt,” Philip said, changing the subject.

“He what?” Shotaro blinked. “That’s reckless. He had no idea if they’d been repaired.”

“Spectroscopic analysis wasn’t conducted until after he tested them in the belt,” Philip said. “Though the first three attempts only resulted in error messages.”

“First three? How many times did he-“

“Five,” Philip said. “Post-test analysis led to different reconstitution methods for each medal.” He gestured, and a report materialized on the whiteboard.

“Philip,” Shotaro said. “I can’t actually read Chinese.” He could parse together some of it, though, based on the symbols. “Does that say electric shock?”

“That was the fourth test.” Philip pointed at one line. “No ill effects on Hino, apart from minor arrhythmia that sorted itself out.”

“You said there were five,” Shotaro said. “Stubborn bastard that Hino is.”

“He managed a transformation with the fifth reconstituted Medal,” Philip said. “For less than a minute. He was unconscious for three days afterwards. That was when he flew back to Japan.”

“And that’s where we came in,” Shotaro said. “That was when he went to Denmark, and Norway, and then across Russia. After every attempt to resurrect his partner failed.”

“It looks like he was trying to get back to Japan without the Foundation knowing.” Philip leaned across Shotaro and traced the red string across Russia. “Can you think of another reason for him to travel this slowly, across Russia?” he asked, when Shotaro didn’t answer.

“I can’t,” Shotaro admitted. “But why not tell anyone?”
Philip shrugged. “He was planning something,” he said. “Don’t look at me like that, Shotaro, that’s not what I said. I think he tried to enter the country by boat.”

“If he didn’t want anyone to know unless it succeeded,” Shotaro said, rubbing his chin. “But why not just buy a plane ticket? Why sail?”

“Not enough funds left to buy a plane ticket?” Philip guessed. “And if he accessed the Foundation account to buy a ticket, there would have been a paper trail.”

“None of this is reasonable,” Shotaro said, glaring at the map as though if he looked at it long enough it would tell him whether the story he and Philip were concocting was correct.

“That’s why I told you you weren’t going to like the results of my analysis,” Philip said softly, and then when Shotaro tilted his head questioningly, Philip clarified. “78% probability of Hino Eiji’s location being the Sea of Japan. It’s not an easy trip to make illegally.”

“I don’t accept that,” Shotaro said, resolutely pushing away the fact that he’d had the same thought, when Hina had told him what Eiji was trying to do. “I don’t.” He wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince Philip, or himself.
“I never got to thank you for Nepal,” Kazuma said, sitting on the bench. It was nice, not to be on his feet for once.

“Nepal?” Hino blinked and looked over at him. Kazuma hadn’t been entirely sure, until that moment, that Hino was actually aware of anything outside himself. He’d been watching, out of curiosity, for a few hours. “Oh.” His face cleared. “Nepal. Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“It’s not every day someone gives me an official alibi with the local law enforcement,” Kazuma continued. He’d put his phone number in Hino’s phone, back in Italy, in case Hino wanted to call, but Hino had vanished before Kazuma had the chance to tell him. He’d been somewhat surprised to get a message informing him that Hino had changed his number, and then realized Hino had just sent out a mass text to his entire phone book. He’d texted Hino anyway, periodically, about where he was and what he was doing. Somewhat to his surprise, Hino had occasionally texted back. Kazuma had been in the general area when Hino had said he was hiking through parts of the Gobi desert, and had suggested they perhaps meet.

“You’re a good guy,” Hino said tonelessly. He’d gone back to staring at the horizon, right hand in his pocket as it had been since Kazuma had first seen him on the bench.

“Telling them we were on our honeymoon was inspired,” Kazuma said. “Although it’s a good thing they couldn’t tell the difference between Spanish and Portuguese.”

“Can I do something for you?” Hino asked. There was a little bit of the spark that Kazuma had seen during their last encounter, the self-assured confidence of the man who’d dramatically walked into a local police station and informed the officers that Kazuma had been with him the entire previous night. Kazuma had no idea how Hino had known, specifically, that he was at the police station for questioning simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hino had, however, produced a receipt for a local motel, who had verified that Hino, at least, had been there the previous night. They’d spent a few days together, after that, but Hino hadn’t said why he was traveling.

“Honey,” Kazuma said, just to see if he could coax that spark back out. Hino had vanished without a word, and Kazuma’s texts had gone unanswered. Then he’d gotten a brief message, garbled and incoherent, and then Hino had sent him another text telling him to ignore what he’d just sent. Hino had told him where he was with very little coaxing, but still told Kazuma to stay away; all of that just made Kazuma think Hino wanted to be dissuaded from something, and so he went.

“I shouldn’t have….” Hino trailed off. “I’m sorry I made you come here,” he said. “It was inappropriate.”

Kazuma cocked his head to the side. “I’m here, either way. You might as well tell me what’s going on.”

“I can’t save him,” Hino said. “I’ve tried, and I’ve tried, and nothing – none of it works. Putting them back together ruined them, and I can’t do that to him. I can’t do it, Kenzaki.”

Kazuma blinked, parsed what he could out of the less than adequate explanation, and turned to face Hino. “Do you think he’d want you to keep trying?” he asked.

“What?” Hino finally looked at him.

“Do you think he’d want you to keep trying?” Kazuma repeated. “Or do you think he’d want you to
“Want,” Hino repeated, with a bitter smile. “All he wanted was to be alive.”

“And what do you want?” Kazuma asked. He wasn’t sure why that particular word was getting a response, but he wasn’t about to look the proverbial gift horse in the mouth.

“I want him back,” Hino said. “I just want him back, but I don’t know how.”

“Do you know that it can’t be done?”

“I know that it happened,” Hino said. “Or that it will happen. I don’t know when. But I know that it happens. I just don’t know how.”

Kazuma blinked. Hino had sounded absolutely sure of himself, his tone so different that Kazuma was now not entirely sure that there wasn’t something wrong with Hino. “So he wouldn’t want you to give up,” Kazuma said.

“No,” Hino said. “No, he wouldn’t.” He smiled, warmth in it now. “He’d call me an idiot for even considering it.”

“Do you want to tell me about him?” Kazuma asked. Hino seemed more relaxed now, and Kazuma thought that whatever Hino had wanted him to talk him out of doing, Hino wasn’t about to go and do.

“I’ve caused you enough trouble,” Hino said, sheepish. “You’re out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“You don’t know that I wasn’t here already,” Kazuma said, and then laughed as Hino looked pointedly at the miles of nothing around them. It wasn’t even a pretty beach. “Point taken,” he said. “I’d say you owe me a beer, at the very least, Hino.”

“I would agree with you,” Hino said, “if there were a decent bar in – is this even a town? I don’t think this is a town.”

“It’s two stoplights and one paved road,” Kazuma said. “It does not qualify as a town, no.”

“We should probably go find something that does.” Hino stood, stretching. Kazuma could hear his spine and shoulders pop. “Come on.”

Hino had had the foresight to acquire a bicycle, which Kazuma balanced on the back of for far too many uncomfortable miles. There was something about being in Hino’s company, though, that eased the sense of loneliness that came from knowing so few people shared his experiences. Hino, for all he knew, didn’t share them either, but he’d felt the same sense of responsibility as a Kamen Rider, and since Kazuma couldn’t go back to Japan, this was the closest he could get.

The nearest actual town was full of unexpected light and warmth, and Hino smiled and laughed as they shared stories of the unexpected that happened so often while traveling. Kazuma almost hoped that Hino would actually stick around for a little longer this time, or that he would at least say goodbye before leaving, but predictably, Hino had vanished without a word the following morning. He’d left the bicycle behind, though, and Kazuma looked at it for a long moment. Good luck, Hino, he thought, and felt suddenly that he wasn’t going to see Hino again. He was miles away before he found the passport and phone wedged into the bottom of the bike’s rusty basket.
Shotaro, Hokkaido, and A Morgue

Sending a report to the Kougami Foundation with Philip’s analysis of Eiji’s most likely current location as the bottom of the Sea of Japan was one of the more uncomfortable things Shotaro had done, on a professional level. His recommendation that the next step include inquiries of morgues on the Japanese side of said ocean, just in case, was as much to put the ball in the Foundation’s court as anything else. Shotaro had no desire to start contacting morgues.

Shotaro later felt he should have seen Satonaka’s presence on his doorstep coming; she looked even less pleased to be there than she had on the previous occasion. “You have a meeting,” she said.

The tablet she’d used to contact Kougami was nowhere in evidence.

“With me,” she clarified. “The Kougami Foundation does not accept the results of your investigation as entirely accurate.”

“I don’t want to think they are, either,” Shotaro began, but Satonaka just kept talking.

“While Mr. Kougami finds contacting morgues in the specified range to be acceptable, he also feels that contacting hospitals would be prudent.”

“Of course he does.” Shotaro resisted the urge to throw up his hands. “Of course he does.”

Satonaka was gone almost before he finished speaking, closing the door with more force than necessary. Shotaro made faces at it and went to start contacting the facilities in question, which meant shouting for his partner.

“No, I do not know what I’ve learned over the last week?” Shotaro asked, staring at the ceiling.

“How many unidentified men in their early 20s show up in morgues?” Philip asked. Shotaro didn’t think he was being sarcastic, but sometimes it was hard to tell.

“That too,” Shotaro said. “I was going to say that I don’t like morgues.”

“Nobody likes morgues,” Philip said absently. “At least you didn’t have to learn how to match dental records.”

“I will forever be grateful to you for fielding that one,” Shotaro said. The man in question had washed up on a beach, without identification, and had probably drowned. The body hadn’t been identifiable through either fingerprints or facial recognition, but it had been similar enough to Eiji that Shotaro had had to hunt down Eiji’s dental records for comparison.

“I’m glad it wasn’t Hino,” Philip said softly. “I’m glad it wasn’t the last time I saw him.”

“Yeah, me too.” Shotaro sat up straight for a moment, stretching his spine, and then leaned forward to fold his arms on top of his desk. He rested his chin on his forearms. “I’m beginning to think you might be right,” he started to say, but he hadn’t gotten more than a couple of syllables out before the phone rang almost directly in his ear. “Gyah!”

Philip reached over and picked up the receiver, answering smoothly and professionally. Shotaro
narrowed his eyes. Philip never answered the phone; the least he could do would be to sound awkward when he did so that Shotaro had some sense of satisfaction. That he sounded pitch perfect was oh so slightly obnoxious. “Shotaro?” Philip waved a hand in front of Shotaro’s face.

“What?”

“Open the laptop. A hospital in Sapporo has a picture they want to send us.” Philip poked Shotaro’s shoulder.

“I am, I am.” The machine booted up more slowly than Shotaro would have liked; then again, if it was just going to disappoint him, it could take as long as it liked. “Wait, did you say hospital?”

“Open it,” Philip said impatiently instead of answering the question.

Shotaro threw him what he thought was a sufficiently quelling look, but Philip just made impatient motions with his free hand. Laptop finally responding, Shotaro opened the email with the attachment in question. “It’s him,” he said. The picture was undeniably Eiji, unconscious or asleep, covered up to the neck with a white blanket. “Tell them we’ll come pick him up, or identify him, or whatever they need.”

“There’s, uh, there’s a problem with that,” Philip said.

The message Shotaro sent to both Detective Izumi and to the Kougami Foundation was not prefaced by the statement Well, there’s good news and bad news. Shotaro had more sense than that, no matter what the temptation. The good news, such as it was, was that Eiji had been admitted to a hospital in Sapporo on May 15th, unconscious and unresponsive but not needing life support, with no identification and very few personal possessions. The bad news was that Eiji had apparently simply gotten up and walked out of the hospital ten days later, a bare few hours before the phone call Philip had taken.

Slightly better news was that at some point, Eiji had designated Detective Izumi as his emergency contact and next of kin; Detective Izumi thought that had happened while Ankh had been using his body, although he felt Hina would have been a better choice. The end result was that both Shotaro and Detective Izumi were on a plane to Hokkaido a few hours later.

“So,” Shotaro said, a few minutes into the flight.

“So,” Detective Izumi said. “Can I assume that your partner is reviewing available footage from the surrounding area?”

“Um,” Shotaro said. He liked to think that Philip’s ability to access essentially any information that had been or could be transmitted via an internet connection was a morally gray area, but he suspected it was technically entirely illegal.

“If that were to happen, it could be helpful,” Detective Izumi said. “Of course, I have no idea where information regarding Eiji’s whereabouts might come from.”

“If anything like that comes up,” Shotaro said, “I’d be sure to share it.”

“Of course,” Detective Izumi said, settling back. “He wasn’t caught on camera in the hospital itself,” he added, sounding more relaxed. It was an odd combination with the clear worry. “He did take his clothes and personal possessions with him.” He reached in his pocket for his phone, glancing up and down the aisle for a flight attendant before powering up the phone.

“Did you get his file?” Shotaro asked. Sensitive information wasn’t something that Shotaro himself
would have had access to, as a private detective, but Eiji’s official next of kin was a different story.

“Yes.” Detective Izumi nodded and spoke quietly enough to avoid being overheard. “He was found unconscious in a national park last Wednesday. The OOO driver was next to him, and he had several Core Medals and some Cell Medals in his pockets, although neither the EMTs nor the hospital staff knew what they were.”

“Of course,” Shotaro murmured.

“The hospital started filing paperwork to make him a ward of the state a week later, presumably to make decisions on his behalf, as no identification could be found and no one came looking for him.” Detective Izumi paused. “That’s probably irrelevant now.”

“So that would have been just this past Wednesday,” Shotaro said.

“Right.” Detective Izumi nodded. “He’d been unconscious since he was brought in, vitals normal but very little electrical activity in the brain. Then, this morning, he and his belongings were gone. The hospital staff has no idea how, since he hasn’t been responsive, much less awake or alert.”

Shotaro glanced over to see Detective Izumi staring at his phone. “That’s in the file?”

“It feels wrong to hope for a miracle,” Detective Izumi said.

“Hope is never wrong,” Shotaro said.

He had news to share of his own, once the plane landed and he powered up his own phone; Philip had gotten a short and grainy clip of Eiji walking down the street perhaps half a block away from the hospital, but he’d appended a question mark as if he weren’t entirely sure it was Eiji. After watching the footage, Shotaro understood. “Detective Izumi,” he said, and showed him.

In the footage, Eiji was stalking – and that was the correct verb – down the street, a small bag over one shoulder. His body language was all wrong; it was different enough that Shotaro kept having to look at the face to confirm that it did match what he remembered of Eiji. As if that weren’t quite enough, between having his photograph taken to be sent to the Narumi Detective Agency and walking down the street, he’d inexplicably stopped to dye his hair blond.

Next to him, Detective Izumi froze. Shotaro glanced over at him, and then gently pulled him out of the center of the walkway. “That’s not Eiji,” Detective Izumi said, expression unreadable.

“You mean we came up here for the wrong person?” Shotaro’s heart dropped.

“Not exactly.” Detective Izumi looked up at the ceiling and then started walking rapidly toward the train station. Shotaro jogged to catch up. “It’s Eiji’s body,” Detective Izumi said after a moment.

“I don’t follow,” Shotaro said.

“It’s not Eiji in control of his body,” Detective Izumi said. “It’s Ankh.”
True to his nature, Shingo felt he should have been more prepared; who had more experience than he did with mortally wounded bodies getting up and simply walking away? He hadn’t believed that Eiji would actually restore Ankh, though, no matter what Hina said about Ankh coming from the future. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe his sister; it was more that he knew how much Eiji wanted Ankh to come back, and Eiji’s enthusiasm was contagious. He was willing to believe she thought she’d seen Ankh more readily than that the projection of the monster that had worn his body for a year had followed a Kamen Rider into the past.

Truth be told, Shingo wasn’t sure how he felt about Ankh; there were days he actually missed having someone else inside his head, days when the silence felt unbearably lonely. It wasn’t something he could readily explain. His first reaction to seeing what was clearly Ankh wearing Eiji was something he would never admit; it had been *now Eiji knows what it feels like*.

Partly for that reason, Shingo suggested that Hidari start the legwork of looking for Ankh in the surrounding neighborhood while he went to the hospital to speak with the staff. He wasn’t ready to see Ankh, not yet, and he knew Ankh wouldn’t have returned to the hospital. The look Hidari gave him said that he knew perfectly well Shingo was avoiding said legwork, although Shingo didn’t think Hidari knew why.

The hospital was precisely as productive as Shingo thought it would be; he learned nothing he hadn’t known from the file, except that several people had seen Eiji leaving. They just hadn’t connected the blond wearing too much eyeliner with their comatose Yamada Taro. He caught up with Hidari outside a convenience store a few blocks away. “Yo,” he said.

“Anything?” Hidari asked.

“Nothing,” Hidari said, disgust evident. “It’s like he was trying to disappear.”

Shingo didn’t think Ankh was trying to disappear, necessarily, but even having had Ankh in his head for a year didn’t make him easy to predict. “Try the local parks,” he said. “He still needs to sleep.”

“Parks,” Hidari said flatly, clearly doubting Shingo’s insight.

“He likes trees,” Shingo said.

“Of course he does.” Hidari did not look reassured.

“Because he’s a bird,” Shingo clarified.

Hidari’s look of skepticism deepened.

“Did no one explain this to you at all?” Shingo rubbed the bridge of his nose with one hand. “The Greeed, the Yummy, any of it?”

“The Kougami Foundation is reluctant to share some of their information,” Hidari said.

“Then please take this on faith,” Shingo said. “Ankh’s base is avian, and when he was possessing me, he spent more time than not sitting in trees. Or on something else high.”
“Your sister may have mentioned possession,” Hidari said.

“It’s a wild story,” Shingo acknowledged. “Let’s try the parks.” It was dark enough out that Shingo didn’t think they’d necessarily be able to see Ankh even if they walked past him.

Not finding Ankh meant that Hidari only looked at Shingo more skeptically; he wasn’t even trying to hide it. Shingo didn’t necessarily care. He’d handled too much skepticism when he’d first gone back to work to be uncomfortable seeing it on the face of a man Ankh had only met briefly while wearing Shingo’s body and whom Shingo hadn’t met at all before the previous week.

Morning brought with it a thought that Ankh might possibly go looking for something familiar, particularly if Eiji wasn’t conscious enough to answer questions. Shingo headed for the nearest train stations, Hidari following him without much objection. It was more or less Shingo’s case now, he felt, no matter what the Kougami Foundation had to say about it. Eiji was his family before he was their employee.

The second train station brought their first success – one of the employees not only remembered Ankh’s distinctly spiky hair, particularly coupled with Eiji’s salt-stained and worse-for-the-wear clothing, but knew what train he’d boarded. “We’re lucky,” Shingo said. “Next stop for that one is Sapporo Station.”

“Oh, good,” Hidari said.

They weren’t that far behind Ankh, and his eccentric combination of clothes and hair still stood out in the relative crowd of people making their way through Sapporo Station.

“Let me guess,” Hidari said. “He’s on a train bound for Hakodate. He’s headed back to Tokyo.”

Stretching his authority just slightly, Shingo contacted the appropriate personnel at Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto to see if anyone matching Eiji’s description had shown up, sending a picture along.

“Oh, that guy,” came the immediate answer.

“I’m sorry?” Shingo said.

“He tried to walk across a set of train tracks.” There was a brief pause, and then, “He’s in custody right now, but we were about to let him go with a warning. You want us to hang on to him?”

“Please,” Shingo said.

“He part of an investigation or something?” The tone said what the man did not, that Shingo was just a little ways away from Tokyo.

“We think he may have some information,” Shingo said, which was of course answering without saying anything at all while at least pretending courtesy. It was exactly the kind of condescension that made interregional coordination so difficult. “We’re looking for a missing person,” he amended. “This man may know where he is.”

“Oh.” The tone of voice that came back was warmer than Shingo would have expected. “We’ll hang onto him until you get here, Detective.”

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” Shingo replied.

“Don’t mention it.”
“I knew it,” Hidari said as soon as Shingo hung up the phone. “He was heading for Tokyo.”

“Might have been,” Shingo said. “He illegally crossed some train tracks and got picked up for it. They were about to send him on his way when I called.”

“Fate is on your side.”

Shingo twitched. The rest of the several-hour trip was almost silent, with Hidari tapping away on his phone. Shingo assumed he was either reporting to the Kougami Foundation or talking to his partner, and either way Shingo was oddly nervous about meeting Ankh. He found himself straightening the cuffs on his jacket and adjusting his tie more times than he could count. Hidari declined to either overtly notice or comment, which made Shingo like him a little more.

Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto hadn’t changed since the last time Shingo had seen it, which meant he knew exactly where to go. The room where Ankh was being confined was in part of the station that most travelers never saw; Shingo made his way through the maze of people more or less on autopilot, with Hidari stubbornly glued to his elbow. At the final door, his breath caught, and he couldn’t quite make himself move forward.

“Do you want me to go in first?” Hidari asked, quietly enough that Shingo was the only person who could hear him.

Shingo took a deep breath. “No,” he said, and found that it was true. He opened the door to see Ankh sprawled across an uncomfortable chair.

At some point between Sapporo and Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto, Ankh had found the time to find new clothes; he was wearing dark jeans and a red t-shirt under a white button-down shirt. As he turned toward the sound of the open door, Shingo vaguely noticed that he’d even had the time and motivation to replace the left sleeve of the button-down shirt with a red one. “Eiji,” he said, even though he knew better.

Ankh’s mouth twisted in a familiar grimace; Shingo had never seen it, but he’d felt it dozens if not hundreds of times. “Tch,” he said. “You know better, Mr. Detective.”

“Ankh,” Shingo said, and then he frowned. There was a subtle sense of disorientation; the feathered blond hair was on the wrong side, he thought, and then he realized he’d always seen Ankh’s face in the mirror. The red sleeve, though, that should have been on the right.

Ankh tilted his chin up, eyes flashing, mouth stubbornly shut.

“What happened?” Shingo asked. Ankh leaned back insolently, one foot tucked up under his hip. Red scales glittered very briefly across his left hand before melting back into soft pink skin. “Ankh,” Shingo repeated, aiming for an authoritative tone.

Ankh refused to answer, glaring at him for another full second before looking away.

“Um,” Hidari said, from behind Shingo. Shingo moved farther into the room and was rewarded with the sight of Ankh leaning slightly away from him. “We’ve met,” he said to Ankh. “Hidari Shotaro.”

Ankh looked him up and down, slowly, and then stood. He held out his right hand. “You had a partner,” he said, deliberately ignoring Shingo.

“Philip is doing well,” Hidari said, taking Ankh’s hand with an uncertain glance at Shingo. “I’ll tell him you asked after him.”
“Hn,” Ankh said, withdrawing his hand with a very precise amount of courtesy at odds with his words and tone. “You can tell him whatever you want.”

“How’s Eiji?” Hidari asked, and it was the first time Shingo had heard him refer to Eiji by his given name.

“I like you, Hidari, but not that much,” Ankh said. “Are we done here?”

“There are people worried about Eiji,” Shingo interrupted.

“Are there,” Ankh said flatly. “I don’t care what you tell them, either.”

“Ankh,” Shingo said, but Ankh turned his back on both of them, sitting on the table as though he intended to remain there forever.

“You still owe me ice cream,” Ankh said suddenly, voice tight.

“On the train to Tokyo,” Shingo said, and Ankh’s shoulders loosened slightly.

“Fine,” he snapped, and strode out of the room. “I’ll go with you as far as Tokyo,” he said over his shoulder.

Shingo had to jog to catch up, and didn’t notice until they were actually on the platform that Hidari wasn’t still with them. He was about to curse at the unexpected obstacle when Hidari showed up with popsicle in hand. He handed it to Ankh with a questioning look. Ankh snatched it, glaring at both of them. He stalked down the platform and made himself comfortable on the back of a bench.

Shingo opened his mouth to tell Ankh to please sit like a normal person, and then thought better of it. He also considered cuffing Ankh to his own wrist, but what he knew of Ankh told him that there was no better way to ruin even the tenuous rapport he’d managed. Shingo leaned against the other side of the bench and checked his watch while Ankh slowly ate the popsicle. The train couldn’t come fast enough.
Ankh, A Costume, and A Gathering

Being at a loss for what to do next was a new sensation, and it was one Ankh was finding he absolutely hated. The popsicle stick in his hands had been shredded down to splinters, more than one of which had lodged themselves in Eiji’s callused fingers. Ankh left them there, dropping what was left of the stick to the train platform when the train arrived and boarding the train with enough of a sense of dignity to make a mockery of the whole situation. He saw Hidari look uncertainly at the detective before they both followed him.

Ankh chose a window seat; the fact that the row was otherwise fully occupied had, of course, no bearing on his selection. Somewhat to his annoyance, Hidari settled next to him with the detective on the other side. Ankh grimaced, the motion feeling oddly unfamiliar on Eiji’s lips. The people who’d been displaced didn’t even look annoyed. Ankh crossed his arms and stared out the window at the supremely uninteresting station platform, which was then replaced with less interesting scenery. He meant to pointedly ignore both men the entire way to Tokyo, but his plan was thwarted by a hand on his shoulder shaking him awake.

“Stop harassing me, Eiji, I’m awake,” he said, before memory came flooding back and he sat up straight. The something warm he’d been leaning against turned out to be Hidari, who was also the one poking at him. “Hidari,” Ankh said, aiming for cold and aloof. He didn’t think he’d succeeded, gauging by Hidari’s suddenly sympathetic expression. Ankh shoved his way past both Hidari and the detective, not stopping until he was thwarted by the turnstile demanding his ticket before it would let him out.

“Here.” The detective had caught up with him in the brief time Ankh had paused to decide to just leap over the ridiculous thing, and the infernal machine let him through. Ankh walked through the gate as though the detective weren’t there, heading for the nearest exit. “Ankh! Wait!”

Ankh just walked faster, until he could see the sky above him and for the first time since finding himself in a body again he felt as though he could breathe. The sensation was abruptly disturbed by a surprisingly strong hand closing around his left wrist. Ankh manifested his own hand and yanked his arm away, spinning around to glare at the detective. “I said I’d go with you as far as Tokyo,” he hissed. “This is Tokyo. Here I am. And now I’m leaving.”

“Ankh,” the detective said again. Ankh waited, against his better judgment, against the instinct to walk away, letting the small voice of humanity tell him that he should listen. The detective said nothing, though, his mouth slightly open for a little too long before he closed it with a snap and looked away.

Disappointment flooded through Ankh and he snarled once before shoving past the detective and stalking down the street. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting to hear, but this was why he didn’t waste his time on other people. People had their own selfish ideas and agendas, and trusting them with any part of the self was just another way to lose what was important. And yet, part of Ankh didn’t want to walk away.

“Stop crying, Eiji,” he muttered under his breath. The sensation didn’t abate.

Ankh was so distracted by trying to shove away the ridiculous emotional reaction that he didn’t notice he’d gained company until he reached a busy intersection and couldn’t go any farther without getting run over. Hidari was somehow right up next to him, ridiculously feathered hair peeking out from even more ridiculous hat. He gave Ankh a half-smile and a little wave. “Yo,” he said.
“What,” Ankh said flatly.

“The Kougami Foundation is looking for Eiji,” Hidari said, and Ankh rolled his eyes.

“Of course they are,” he said, and then blinked. “They what?”

“If you’re…” Hidari paused and made some sort of handwave. “If you’re inside someone, can you see their memories?” he asked.

“Yes,” Ankh said shortly, looking past Hidari at the street. It was still full of vehicles; Ankh considered walking across it anyway. He was fairly sure he had enough agility not to get hit.

“So you know what Eiji’s been doing for the Foundation.” Hidari glanced at the light, then at the crosswalk. As if on cue, the light changed colors and the intersection emptied of cars. Hidari started across, clearly assuming Ankh was going to go with him. The only reason Ankh didn’t immediately go in another direction was the time he’d already spent waiting for this stupid light to change; it would have been wasted otherwise.

“Is that what he was doing,” Ankh muttered. “Working for those idiots.”

“Trying to help you,” Hidari said mildly.

“Why are you following me?” Ankh stopped walking and turned to face Hidari, garnering glares from the people who now had to step around him. Hidari maneuvered them to the side of the walkway, getting his own share of dirty looks in the process.

“Ah,” Hidari said. “Well, the Kougami Foundation hired me to find Hino Eiji. Which I have now done, and I’ve told them where you were, as of the time when my business with them concluded.”

“And where was that?” Ankh asked.

“Tokyo Station,” Hidari said, brightly. “I’ve also informed you of the Foundation’s desire to set up a meeting to discuss the last several weeks of Hino’s employment.”

“Right,” Ankh said, and shifted his weight in preparation to start walking.

“Is he going to be all right?” Hidari asked, and Ankh stilled.

“I don’t know why you even care,” he said. “Or why I should answer you.”

“Eiji’s my friend,” Hidari said, shrugging with one shoulder. “I might not talk to him often, but if he called, I’d come. I think he’d do the same.”

“Friend,” Ankh snorted. “He’s fine, Mister Private Detective, which you can also pass on to the Kougami Foundation and anyone else you care to tell.”

“Can I talk to him?” Hidari asked, apparently unaware of when to stop being persistent.

“No,” Ankh said, and this time he did start walking. Hidari, stubborn as ever, just kept pace with him.

“Because he doesn’t want to talk, or because you don’t want to let him?” he asked.

“Because he’s unconscious,” Ankh spat. “It’s not like it was with the detective.”

“Izumi?” Hidari asked. “You two talked to each other?”
Ankh buried his face in his hands, still walking, and felt Hidari move him out of the way of some unseen obstacle. “You just never give up,” he said, glancing off to the side.

Hidari just smiled.

“I’m going to say this once,” Ankh said. “The detective and I are not friends. We were never friends. Eiji is not my friend. They were – are – bodies that I have a use for.”

“But you could hear the detective?” Hidari wiggled his fingers in the general vicinity of his ears. “In your head?”

Ankh sighed. “Not at first. Later. After he got better.”

“And you can’t hear Eiji.” Hidari was giving him a speculative look, and Ankh didn’t like it. The only time he’d seen Hidari was a brief and ill-advised trip outside Tokyo to practice with the OOO Driver that had somehow ended with Eiji running into another Kamen Rider and fighting its opponent; he didn’t know when or how often Eiji had seen him after that, but it hadn’t been while Ankh was still alive.

“No,” he replied anyway. The thought that he wanted Hidari to relay what he was saying to the detective was stamped out before it really had the chance to form. Ankh wanted nothing to do with the detective. He didn’t miss him. Eiji didn’t miss him, either.

“How bad is it?” Hidari asked in a low voice, sympathetic in a way he hadn’t been before.

Ankh reached up to find wetness welling out of one eye. “He’s fine,” he snarled, and blinked to try to clear his vision. It took longer than it should have. “He’s fine,” he repeated.

“You want to tell that to Detective Izumi?” Hidari asked, stepping to the side so that Ankh could see the detective hovering a few feet away.

“Ankh,” the detective said. “Come home. Please.”

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Late afternoon sunlight streamed in through the windows of Kougami’s ridiculously ostentatious office, backlighting Kougami himself. He stood behind his desk, lighting an absurd number of candles on a deceptively small cake; the closer Ankh got to it, the more elaborate he could see it actually was.

“Happy Birthday,” Kougami declared, and gestured to the cake.

“What do you want,” Ankh said, not blowing out the candles.

Undeterred, Kougami sliced into the cake and handed Ankh a plate; it proved to be mostly ice cream sandwiched between layers of pastry and was therefore an acceptable offering. Ankh took it.

“Welcome back, Ankh,” Kougami said, more quietly this time.

“Hn,” Ankh said, and focused on the cake. It was delicious, and he ate it slowly enough to savor it the way it clearly deserved.

“I was under the impression,” Kougami said, after Ankh had finished, “that the previous attempts to repair the Core Medals had failed.”

“They did,” Ankh said shortly, not because he actually knew, but because he wasn’t about to give
out any new information.

“Wonderful!” Kougami boomed. “And yet, here you stand. Incredible.” His eyes gleamed, and Ankh knew before the next words came out of the CEO’s mouth that he finally had something that the other man wanted. He finally had some sort of leverage. Kougami’s expression shifted ever so slightly, and instead of asking Ankh how Eiji had done it, he put a hand on Ankh’s shoulder and peered into his face. “Remarkable,” he said. “Please convey my well-wishes to Eiji.”

Ankh did not sputter. He had more self-control than that. He gave a short nod, eyes narrowed. He wasn’t going to negotiate from a position of power after all, it seemed; not that he knew what he wanted out of Kougami, if he were really going to be honest with himself.

“I’ll see you when you know what your desire is,” Kougami said, not unkindly, and flicked his eyes back and forth over Ankh’s shoulder. Satonaka materialized out of absolutely nowhere, handing Ankh a box that was unexpectedly cool to the touch. “I’m curious to see what you’re going to do,” Kougami said, smiling normally now, or at least normally for him, which was what mania looked like on anyone else. “Ankh!”

Ankh’s hands closed convulsively on the box. It was not a flinch. He glanced at the desk, verifying that the cake had in fact vanished.

“There are ice packs in it,” Satonaka said, sounding as bored as she usually did. “But try not to let it sit out for more than an hour.”

Ankh did not give her a reply, but she was turning away before he could make it clear that he wasn’t interested in talking to her. He resisted the urge to glare at her retreating back. “Fine, then,” he said, and left, unsure who had really come out on top in what hadn’t been the normal sort of negotiation.

There was a car waiting for him in front of the building; Ankh walked past it. It would just take him back to the detective’s apartment, full of awkward silence and unspoken expectations. He’d spent the previous night there, sleeping on a platform bed that had clearly been designed with him in mind and just as clearly unused. Below it was a small desk, which did show signs of regular use, and a carefully folded futon stacked on a low couch.

“I didn’t ask for it,” Ankh said in a low voice. Hina and the detective had made a space for him and for Eiji, space that they hadn’t had to make, space that didn’t come easily in a city as crowded as Tokyo. The room in which the bed had been built was barely bigger than the bed itself, true, but it was still there.

Hina hadn’t been there; the detective had said something about a class trip that had clearly been a lie, and gone to sleep early. Ankh had silently prowled around the not-large apartment; the space clearly marked as Hina’s was full of half-finished projects and sharp pins in the floor. Ankh had wondered briefly if it was a form of defense to prevent intrusion in her absence in the midst of regret for leaving his shoes at the door.

Realizing his feet were carrying him in the general direction of the detective’s apartment anyway, Ankh deliberately turned off to the side and went looking for high places. There weren’t many, but he found a suitable tree in a park before the sun set entirely. Climbing it while carrying a box was a new type of fun, but he made a point of slowly eating the entire thing while the sun set around him.

The color was brilliant, reds and pinks fading to orange and then blue before the light of the city reflected itself into a golden fog obscuring the stars. In Hokkaido, Ankh had been able to see the stars. The cake gone, he let the box drop and licked his fingers carefully clean. Each sight, each sensation was so clear. He had been surprised at the clarity when he’d woken in some sort of closet,
feeling the lightness of a body that didn’t have the right number or type of Core Medals, and expecting the world to be at one step’s remove. It had been almost painfully sharp instead, and that sharpness hadn’t changed when he’d chosen to use a human body again.

Not that Ankh hadn’t had a body; he’d had all six of his surviving red Cores and enough Cell Medals to revive as himself, to disguise himself as the familiar shape of the detective, or to create a new human guise altogether. He’d felt odd, as though he’d been coming back to himself for days, and this unease had driven him to seek answers.

“What did you do to me, Eiji?” he murmured, rubbing a no-longer-sticky hand against his – Eiji’s – chest. He wasn’t sure he wanted to dive into Eiji’s memories to find out, and they weren’t leaking across into Ankh’s mind the way the detective’s had with just a little encouragement.

Eiji hadn’t been hard to find; Ankh had unfolded himself out of what turned out to be a cupboard and not a closet after all in a less than graceful manner, eyes automatically adjusting to the semi-twilight of the room with a readiness that was startling when he thought about it. He had appeared to be asleep, but no matter what Ankh had done, he hadn’t opened his eyes.

Turning himself into an arm and wearing Eiji had seemed like a perfectly reasonable way for Ankh to get answers, but then Eiji had had the gall to not respond to questions asked from inside his head, either. Since Ankh hadn’t been about to wait around doing nothing, and had had no desire to be tethered to one particular location, especially when he hadn’t actually known where he was, he’d made the executive decision to just take Eiji with him. He’d given Eiji a chance to object, but there hadn’t been an answer.

Ankh blinked down at the city, one arm loosely curled around the tree and one foot swinging freely. It was tempting to simply stay in the tree, but that wasn’t going to get him what he wanted. “If I could figure out what I wanted,” he said softly, “it would be easier to figure out how to get it.”

The detective wasn’t in the apartment when Ankh let himself in through the unlocked balcony door. On the sixth floor, the building was surprisingly easily accessible from outside if one had leased an apartment in a specific column at one corner of the building. Ankh wasn’t sure whether that had been deliberate or a fortuitous coincidence, but given the extra space he’d spent the night in, he suspected it was another move that just put him farther in the detective’s debt.

“Eiji?” Hina said as he blinked in the suddenly bright light.

“No,” he said, finally able to see her clearly. She had a monstrous pair of scissors in one hand and a piece of red fabric slithered out of her other and hit the floor.

“Ankh,” she breathed. “It’s true.”

“And?” he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. Something in his chest had loosened when he’d come back to find Hina waiting; he blamed it on Eiji, but it felt nice. “I’m home,” he added, not looking directly at Hina.

A sunny smile spread across Hina’s face as his words registered. “Welcome back!” she cried, and started toward him. He flinched back, knowing exactly what her hug was going to feel like. She stopped, uncertain, and put the scissors down sheepishly. “Sorry,” she said, and stepped forward again.

There was no pain this time, when Hina hugged him, although after a moment Ankh found himself unable to breathe. *I don’t need to breathe*, he thought distantly, and then realized that he was light-headed and that breathing was probably a good thing to keep doing. He staggered when Hina finally
let go of him, and she steadied him with careful hands.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“I still don’t think you’re human,” he told her. Instead of getting offended, a delighted laugh escaped.

“It really is you,” she said. “Ankh. You’re back.”

There wasn’t really anything to say to that other than repeating the obvious, so Ankh stuffed his human hand in his pocket and went looking in the freezer. There was a box of popsicles in it, but he left it alone, closing the door and leaning on it. A deliberately casual glance over his shoulder told him that Hina was still staring at him, and he didn’t know what to do about it.

“Ankh,” she said again. “Are you okay?”

It was the first time anyone had asked him first how he was holding up, instead of focusing on Eiji. Ankh ignored the little feeling of warmth and glared. “Rude,” he said.

Hina’s eyes narrowed. “Asking if my friend is all right isn’t rude,” she said.

“Who said I was your friend?” Ankh didn’t want friends, didn’t need friends. All he wanted was… was…

“Well, fine, then.” For a moment, Ankh thought she was going to leave him alone, and he didn’t know if he felt relief or the beginnings of regret, but she just grabbed him by the back of his collar and dragged him into the center of the room.

“Hey! Hey!” Ankh staggered, arms windmilling in an attempt to remain upright. “I’m trying to fix this body, stop trying to make it worse! You haven’t changed at all.”

“Of course you are,” Hina said absently. She’d picked up the scissors in her other hand. “Stand there,” she said, gesturing. One eye on the wickedly sharp blades, Ankh stood where she pointed as though it were his idea. Hina held up the length of red cloth against him and nodded to herself before cutting it into two pieces. Ankh edged away. “I’m not done,” Hina said.

“I don’t see why that’s my problem.” The door was only a few meters away. He could probably make it past Hina and her ridiculous superhuman strength, but then she’d only chase him down. Ankh didn’t have enough resources to waste any unnecessarily; fleeing from Hina would be a pointless expenditure of both energy and time. The very small voice in the back of his head that wasn’t Eiji was humming happily at the idea of doing nice things for someone he liked. Ankh pretended it didn’t exist. He didn’t have to listen to crazy talk, no matter where it was coming from.

“You’re my model.” She carefully put the two pieces of red cloth in what appeared to be entirely arbitrary places, picked up a tape measure, and approached him with it. Ankh manifested his left arm in self-defense, holding the most durable part of his currently fragile body between himself and the clear threat. “Stop being so dramatic, Ankh.”

“I’m not being dramatic,” he said.

“And stop sulking.”

“I’m not sulking!” He tried to glare, but it was ruined by her determined efforts to get his overshirt off. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t measure you while you’re wearing so much,” she said, as though it were perfectly
reasonable and he shouldn’t have had to ask. “Take it off.”

Grumbling, Ankh took off the overshirt, leaving just the t-shirt and jeans behind. Hina gave his left arm a significant look, and Ankh let Eiji’s skin show through again. “Happy?” he asked.

“Hold still.” Hina kept scribbling things as she held the measuring tape across more parts of Eiji’s body than Ankh felt was strictly necessary, making notes in a notebook already full of them.

“Who was going to do this for you before?” he asked.

“One of my classmates,” she said. “You don’t know him.”

“So let him do it.” Ankh blinked as she reached toward his neck. Instinct kicked in and he moved backwards, bringing his left arm up again before she could strangle him with the ridiculous piece of numbered tape.

“Ankh,” Hina said, in a tone of voice that he’d heard used on misbehaving children. “Relax. It’s not going to hurt.”

“Tch,” he said, and watched her warily the entire time. Hina paid no attention to the sharp talons hovering near her defenseless midsection, just gently positioned the tape and took more notes.

“I’m not going to have to make too many modifications,” she said from behind his right shoulder. “Tanaka’s pretty close to Eiji’s build.”

“Wait,” Ankh said, the thought that she wanted more participation than standing there right that minute suddenly occurring to him.

Hina appeared in his field of vision, eyes wide, and scissors gone. “I’m presenting my midterm project at the end of June,” she said. “You’re not leaving before then, right? Right, Ankh?”

“You want me to wait for a month—“ Ankh started, and then froze, because he could suddenly feel Eiji’s sleeping mind. Hina, he said, and then, Ankh. “Eiji?” The pen fell out of Hina’s hands and hit the floor, but Ankh didn’t hear what she said. He was trying to listen for any sort of purposeful response, but there was nothing else.

“Ankh!” Hina’s voice finally penetrated his awareness, and Ankh looked down at her.

“He’s in here,” he said, surprised at the roughness of his own voice.

“You didn’t – he wasn’t – oh, Ankh.” Hina reached toward him, and Ankh flinched violently away. The last thing he wanted was anything resembling sympathy. “How is he?” she asked, voice a little too even.

“Asleep,” Ankh said shortly, and then stalked toward the balcony. He needed air. He wouldn’t have admitted it, but he took care not to step on anything as he made his way across the living room. He could feel Hina’s eyes on his back until he pulled the balcony door closed behind him and the lamp-lit sky filled his vision.

Ankh dreamed, that night, of cold water around his throat and sand underneath his toes. He remembered dreams, when he woke with the feeling of something pressing against his chest. The sensation faded, and he took in a shuddering breath. His right hand was pressed against the outside of his leg, searching for a pocket that wasn’t there. Ankh uncurled his fingers and pressed his hand flat against the mattress instead. The narrow window at the top of the wall was still dark, but he could see well enough out of it when he sat up. The city lights were disorienting from a stationary
perch so high off the ground, but Ankh couldn’t look away until the grittiness between his toes faded.

“It wasn’t there,” he said, out loud to the strip of glass. “I took everything, when I left, and it wasn’t there.” He’d taken the Core Medals, absorbing the ones he needed and keeping the rest in his pockets until he knew what he wanted to do with them. He’d absorbed the few Cell Medals that were mixed in with the myriad Cores, and he’d worn Eiji’s clothes. He’d made sure the OOO Driver was safe. He hadn’t noticed the lack of an extra pair of underwear, not even when he’d acquired new clothing and transferred the belongings of Eiji’s he’d wanted to keep.

Had there been some sort of stick? Ankh’s memories of the 21 months he’d been gone were hazy at best. He’d stuck close to Eiji, not entirely present but not really wanting anything to change, content to simply be for a change. He shuddered now, at the lack of drive and motivation, but it was still better than nonexistence. He thought he remembered a stick, though, from which Eiji had hung the boxers. It hadn’t been there, either, or he would have recognized it. He would have discarded it, but he would have known what it was. It hadn’t been among the possessions Eiji had had.

“What were you doing?” he asked, not expecting the answer that didn’t come.

The days after that fell into a sort of non-routine. If Hina was in the apartment at the same time he was, odds were that he would spend time as a dummy modeling whatever she was making for her midterms. The detective took to eyeing him cautiously, and making a point of making himself available on the rare occasions that he was home long enough to do more than eat and sleep. Ankh tried to spend as much time away from the apartment as possible.

It was just that he didn’t quite know what to do with himself; he’d wanted to live, and he’d gotten it, and now he had no further purpose. The human world hummed along around him, full of people doing human things. Ankh didn’t want things. He’d seen what that had gotten his fellow Greeed. Curious acquisition killed the cat, so to speak, and the shark, and the insect.

Sometimes Ankh wandered into and out of buildings, getting on and off trains at random intervals. After the first time he was rudely interrupted by an overly officious person in a uniform at a train station, the detective handed him a little plastic card and told him to use that if he was going to travel by train. Ankh rolled his eyes, but accepted the card. It made things smoother. None of it told him more about what it was that he wanted, although Eiji seemed happier if Ankh felt like he was going somewhere.

“Do you want to come with me?” Hina asked one morning.

“What?” Ankh looked up from the tea she insisted that he drink. She had a lot of opinions about what he should and shouldn’t be eating and drinking, which he took great delight in ignoring when she wasn’t looking at him. It wasn’t as though he strictly needed food, as a Greeed. He just liked it, and it did provide energy he was using, but he could ignore it entirely and still be fine. Hina had been unimpressed with that particular line of reasoning, which was why Ankh found himself eating and then somehow making breakfast before Hina went to class and the detective went to work. He didn’t think he was particularly good at it. Hina claimed he was improving.

“To some of my classes,” Hina said. “I mean, I have a meeting with my professor to show my progress, and it would be easier if you were there, but you could stay afterwards, if you wanted.”

“Are you asking me for a favor?” Ankh put the tea down and smirked at her.

Hina smiled sweetly at him, and Ankh suddenly remembered that she had done a great deal for him, and that she and her brother were still making sure that he had everything he needed that they could
provide. It didn’t occur to him that such a thing wouldn’t have mattered, before he’d spent so much time with them and with Eiji.

“Fine,” he said, sighing in resignation.

“Thank you!” Hina bounced up from her seat to give him what he was sure was going to be a very painful hug. He was right.

“Stop manhandling me!” he growled, but she didn’t even bat an eyelash.

The meeting involved a lot of standing there with half-made pieces draped bizarrely over him and not saying what he wanted to say every time Hina’s idiot professor opened his mouth. Hina listened and nodded as though he were saying something valuable. Ankh stared at the wall fixedly and concentrated on not rolling his eyes; if he was going to do something, he was going to do it well.

“Thank you!” Hina said, finally, packing away the last of her project. Ankh gave the professor a measured look and followed her out the door. “Ankh,” she hissed, as soon as the door closed. “You could have been more polite.”

“He’s lucky I was so well-behaved,” Ankh said. “He’s an idiot.”

Hina sighed, and looked as though she were rethinking her offer to try to show Ankh something new. By the time they’d been inside two separate rooms full of idiots asking stupid questions, Hina looked frustrated. She stopped outside the third room, turned around, and pulled him outside the building by his wrist.

“Is something wrong?” Ankh asked innocently.

Hina didn’t answer him until they’d gone three blocks over and he was sitting on the back of a chair with ice cream on a stick in his hands. He looked at it dubiously. Body language had definitely indicated that Hina was angry about something, and in Ankh’s experience, angry people didn’t hand out treats. He looked at Hina.

“Ankh,” she started. “You can’t just… say that.”

“Tch.” He took a bite of his ice cream. “I’ll say what I want.”

Hina opened her mouth, and then closed it, looking thoughtful. “Is there something you want to know more about? Something you want to learn about?” she asked.

“I already know everything I need to know,” Ankh told her.

The face Hina made very eloquently expressed her skepticism without her ever saying a word.

“Are you forgetting how long I’ve been around?” he said, leaning backwards.

“You spent most of that time frozen in a box,” Hina said tartly. Ankh nearly lost his balance. When he regained it, he glared at her. “I was talking to Mr. Goto,” she said, and the sudden light tone of her voice put him on edge.

“No,” he said.

“You don’t even know what I’m going to suggest,” Hina said.

“No, but I already know I don’t like it.” He stabbed toward her with the popsicle stick for emphasis.
“You’d get Cell Medals,” Hina said, and Ankh blinked.

“You’d get Cell Medals?” He didn’t have many; Eiji hadn’t had many, and with no Greeed running around making more, they were a little difficult to come by. Ankh had considered and discarded the idea of making his own Yummy more than once; only the desire to avoid a lot of unnecessary ruckus had stopped him. That, and he honestly wasn’t sure he could stop the Yummy once it had ripened. He didn’t want them running berserk forever, after all, and it wasn’t like he had Eiji around to transform into OOO. There was also the minor detail of not being entirely sure he could generate a Yummy.

“The Foundation,” Hina said, and Ankh rolled his eyes.

“They.”

“They,” Hina agreed. “Eiji sent them a lot of useful information.” She tilted her head sideways. “Do you… do you know what he sent?”

She was trying to find a kind way to ask him if he had Eiji’s memories, Ankh knew that much. He looked at her for a long moment, and she nodded slowly.

Sifting through memories wasn’t supposed to be difficult; it wasn’t supposed to be painful, and it wasn’t supposed to be something he was reluctant to do. Ankh had been telling himself for weeks that he wasn’t avoiding it, but he couldn’t lie to Hina. He took a deep breath and reached.

Some of Eiji’s memories were more vivid than others; Ankh tried to sidestep those, but he was out of practice. For a moment, a pit opened in his stomach, dragging his heart downwards. Ankh stilled, reaching through the sensation of crushing weight to pull himself free. He was more careful after that, touching as lightly as possible to determine whether or not a memory would be helpful. Association led him to what Eiji had learned in Beijing, and in India, and in Brazil.

“Mass spectroscopy,” he said, and when Hina frowned at him, Ankh realized that the words hadn’t been in Japanese. “All of this is in Portuguese,” he growled. “Or Mandarin.” His cheeks were wet, somehow, and he scrubbed them dry only for more to spill over and undo his hard work.

“Are you – um,” Hina said, and Ankh could see the wheels turning in her head as her face showed worry and then sympathy. “How many languages do you speak?” she finally asked, which was not the same question as how many languages Eiji spoke, or half-spoke.

“All of them,” he said, just to see her reaction. His traitorous eyes had stopped leaking, and he blotted them with a napkin.

“That’s very impressive.” Hina sipped at her drink for the first time, which had started out life as an impressively fluffy concoction and had now melted into three distinct layers. She made a face at it and set it aside. “So you know what he was – he was actually doing research?”

Something about Hina’s expression made Ankh laugh; she just looked so surprised. It was at least a distraction from his unexpected physical reaction to reaching for Eiji’s memories.

“What?” she said. “I expected him to figure out how to put the medal back together, I just didn’t expect that he’d actually…” She paused. “Learn anything science-y.”

“How else would you put a Core Medal back together?” Ankh let one of the Core Medals materialize in his hand and held it up. “They weren’t made by magic.”

“Well, no,” Hina said. “But.” She reached for it, and Ankh pulled it away. She made a hurt face, and he reluctantly handed it over. She turned it back and forth in her hands. “Is this the one?” She
sounded dubious.

“You know it isn’t.” He put it back where it belonged, with the other five. Six Core Medals out of the ten he was supposed to have meant that he would never be complete, but the nagging sense of a void was all but gone. Sometimes he even forgot that there had been more to begin with.

“Can I see it?” Hina asked, almost too quietly for him to hear.

Ankh hesitated for a long moment, but he couldn’t bring himself to pull out the Core that held everything that he was.

“It’s okay,” Hina said. “I understand.”

She didn’t, not really, but she was trying. Ankh let it go.

“Oh!” she said, a few seconds later. “I almost forgot to tell you, Date’s coming home for a few weeks.”

“Date?” Ankh honestly couldn’t place the name for several seconds, before the image of an obnoxious grin surrounded by barely-there-why-do-you-even-have-it facial hair surfaced. “Oh, him,” he said. “The one who kept stealing my Cell Medals.”

“He wasn’t stealing – Ankh,” Hina said. “He’s been in Sudan for months.”

“Better there than here, the thief,” Ankh said. Hina smacked him, and then immediately apologized when he nearly fell off the chair again. Ankh slid down to sit on the seat of the chair where it was marginally safer.

“We’re going to the café tomorrow,” Hina said, and the inflection she gave it meant a very specific meeting place. “Are you coming?”

The way she put it, Ankh wasn’t sure he actually had a choice in the matter.

The first sign that things were going to go irritatingly sideways was – well, technically, Ankh supposed his first sign that things were about to go wrong was walking in the door at all. Hina hadn’t specifically said or done anything that Ankh could put a finger on, but he still found himself following her through the doors of the Cous Coussier with a vague sense of misgiving.

Chiyoko did nothing to dispel that sense of misgiving. “Eiji!” she said, and swooped in to give him what would have been a bone-crushing hug if Ankh hadn’t been used to Hina.

“Um,” Hina said, and pulled the older woman off to the side.

Chiyoko returned with a slightly different smile. “Ankh,” she said, “welcome back. I’m glad you’re here.”


“Ankh,” Chiyoko said, with a very familiar expression. “The appropriate expression is ‘it’s fine.’ I know you haven’t spent that much time in Japan, but I’m going to help you with your language skills.”

Ankh wasn’t sure whether or not she was entirely serious, particularly when she sashayed off, giggling like a B-Movie villainess. It was, however, known territory, and he felt the same sort of release of tension that he sometimes did when Hina smiled or when he climbed far enough above the
The sense of warmth and relaxation didn’t last long. Goto came in, followed shortly by Satonaka wearing ripped jeans and boots. Ankh stared at her; he was used to such a specific set of aesthetics that what seemed to be casual Satonaka on her own time looked like a stranger. She saw him looking and frowned.

“Is there something on my face?”

“Shut up.” He turned away, just in time to nearly walk right into the detective.

“Ankh,” the detective said with one hand steadying Ankh’s shoulder after Ankh made a graceful dodge to one side. “Have you seen my sister?”

Ankh pointed her out among the crowd that wasn’t there. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Goto coming towards them, and he avoided the potential conversation by ducking into the back of the shop and slipping up the stairs.

The room he’d slept in with Eiji was full of boxes again, decorations for the themes Chiyoko had switched out a few times a month. The couch he’d made Eiji hoist up higher than anything else in the room was still there, although now it was full of plastic versions of some sort of plant. Ankh pushed them aside and sat cross-legged on the couch.

It was – he wasn’t sure what he felt, sure only that he felt something somewhere between pain and relief. It pricked at the insides of his eyelids, and he was suddenly hyperaware of Eiji’s quiet presence just below the surface of his mind. “This isn’t what I wanted,” he said, not sure if he was talking to Eiji or himself. The window he’d climbed in and out of was closed, blocked by a stack of containers, and the room was unbearably stifling. Ankh threaded his way through the maze of decorations, reaching for the window, when someone snuck up behind him.

Hina was absolutely unfazed by Ankh’s hand striking toward her throat, probably at least in part because Ankh pulled back before he so much as grazed her skin. He left his hand where it was, red scales dim in the shadows. “You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to,” she said. “But Date’s here, and I thought maybe you’d want to say hello.”

“That medal thief,” Ankh said, and the words came out a little more roughly than he’d intended.

“You’re not competing with him anymore,” Hina said, sounding almost resigned.

“Whatever.” Ankh pushed his way past her and moved lightly down the stairs. Date was at the center of the small knot of people, looking tan and healthy; no lasting effects, then, from the bullet that had been dug out of his brain.

“Hey!” Date grinned when he saw Ankh and maneuvered his way to standing in front of him. “Hina told me you were here. It’s good to see you.”

“That medal thief,” Ankh said, and the words came out a little more roughly than he’d intended.

“You’re not competing with him anymore,” Hina said, sounding almost resigned.

“What, like I couldn’t tell by looking?” Date folded his arms and nodded. “Give him my best, though, would you?”

“He’s asleep,” Ankh muttered, half-willingly.

“Well, when he’s awake.” Date looked him over, critically. “Anything I can help with?”
Caught off-guard, Ankh could only blink. “Help?” he said finally.

“You were healing the detective while you were possessing him,” Date said. “If you’re in Eiji, there’s something wrong. If you wanted, I might be able to lend a hand.”

No part of that had been something Ankh had seen coming. He blinked again. “You can look at his medical file, if you want,” he said finally. “The detective has it.”

Date nodded. “I will.” He clapped Ankh on the shoulder, and Ankh felt a vague need to explain further. He shoved it down, but it refused to stay there.

“You wouldn’t get much out of talking to him, anyway,” he said.

“Oh,” Date said. “Well, if you ever want to talk to someone about it, I’m here for a month, and I always answer my phone.”

Ankh narrowed his eyes. He knew that last part was blatantly untrue; he’d heard Goto complaining on the one or two occasions the other man had been around the detective’s apartment. “No, you don’t,” he said.

Date threw his head back and laughed. “No, but I’ll call you back,” he said, eyes sparkling. “How’s that?”

“Whatever.”

Having let himself get cornered by Date, the only way Ankh could really have avoided Goto would have been to leave, and he was reluctant to do so. He didn’t actually want to talk to anyone, but it was nice to have a group of familiar faces in one place.

“This isn’t really my job,” Goto said, which was never a good start to a conversation.

“So don’t do it,” Ankh returned. He was only a few steps from the door. He could probably make it there before Goto could catch him.

Goto sighed. “I don’t mind,” he said. “Besides, I’m kind of on call anyway.”

Ankh tried to convey that he couldn’t care less without saying a word. Goto took his expression as encouragement to explain instead.

“I have the Birth Driver,” he said. “Just in case.”

“Of course you do,” Ankh said, sidling toward the door as unobtrusively as possible.

“Mr. Kougami knows you and Eiji have a number of Core Medals,” Goto said.

“What of it?” Ankh was only carrying nine, so to speak; the rest were in a small pouch clipped unobtrusively to his belt. He’d seen what happened when too many Core Medals were absorbed; he had no desire to lose himself in chaos.

“No one is trying to take them away,” Goto said, hands clearly visible as he assumed a non-threatening posture. It was a nice effort, but there really wasn’t any way Goto could present himself as harmless. Especially not after dropping the information regarding his Driver.

“I didn’t say you were,” Ankh said. “But he can’t have them,” he added, just in case.

“I can’t say the CEO doesn’t want them,” Goto said, lightly. “But they’re yours. He has a different
proposition for you.”

“I already talked to him,” Ankh said.

“He’d like to speak with you again,” Goto said.

“Does this have anything to do with whatever Hina was talking about?” Ankh crossed his arms, shifting his weight to take him slightly farther away from Goto. Apparently without realizing it, Goto just edged closer to maintain the same distance of personal space. “Something about Cell Medals.”

“In a sense.” Goto paused for a moment. “The Foundation has identified what went wrong with the reconstituted Core Medals, and is fairly sure it can make new ones.”

Ankh froze in the act of subtly reaching for the door. “Kougami wants to create new Greeed?”

“Not exactly,” Goto hedged. “But he’d like to speak with you about the results of his experiments.”

“Fine.” Ankh narrowed his eyes. “You can tell him I’m willing to talk.”

“Great.” Goto reached out and clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s nice that you came,” he said, out of nowhere. “I’m glad to see Eiji, too.” He had an odd expression, eyes searching Ankh’s face.

“He can’t hear you,” Ankh said, but no heat was in the words despite his intentions.
There was, much to Ankh’s surprise, no cake on Kougami’s desk when he was shown into the office a few days later. The CEO was standing at the window, looking out over the city. There were some scars, still, from Uva’s mindless rampage.

“Good morning, Ankh,” Kougami said quietly.

The tone was so out of character that every hair on Ankh’s neck tried to stand upright, and he manifested his left arm without conscious thought. “Kougami,” he said cautiously, surreptitiously making sure nothing was between him and the door.

“Well done!” Kougami boomed, turning around with a mad smile. Ankh relaxed. “You don’t take things at face value. I like that about you.”

“What do you want?” Ankh asked, letting his hand fade back into obscurity. He kept his position, though, with a clear path to an exit.

“I regret,” Kougami said, “that I cannot recreate your lost Core Medals.”

The words stung, although Ankh had expected them. It had been a small hope, pushed down over the few days since the conversation he’d had with Goto, as Ankh told himself that it was in vain. It was still a disappointment to find out that he was right.

“I didn’t expect you to,” he said roughly. “I assume there’s something else you want, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“Ah. Yes.” Kougami pulled something out of his desk drawer and tossed it at Ankh.

Purely out of reflex, Ankh caught it in his left hand and felt the unmistakable sensation of a Cell Medal being absorbed. It felt – it felt like a memory he’d caught the edge of, a memory of drinking cool water after being parched with thirst. “What?” he said, unable to muster a more coherent thought for several seconds. Kougami waited until his vision cleared to speak.

“I thought that might be the case,” he said. “I have a proposition for you, Ankh.”

“Goto said as much.” Ankh knew he’d lost the high ground, knew he’d lost any leverage he might have had. The information he could have used before, information on how to repair a broken Core Medal, was suddenly much less valuable if Kougami could just make them from scratch.

“As you have been told, we are able to create Core Medals!” The manic excitement was back in Kougami’s voice, flushing his face ever so slightly. “To distill desire, the force that will change the world.”

“You can’t be serious.” Ankh didn’t care what happened to the world inasmuch as he cared what happened to him, and having more Greeed around was going to make his life difficult at some point. Greeed did not coexist well. That argument, however, was not about to sway Kougami. “Look what happened last time.”

“Yes,” Kougami said. “Last time did not proceed in an ideal manner.”

Understatement of the century, Ankh did not say. “Maki nearly pulled the city into a black hole,” he said instead.
“Maki’s not involved this time,” Kougami said, which was very much not the point.

“You didn’t think he was a problem last time,” Ankh said, and then shook his head. He wasn’t about to get sidetracked. “You didn’t bring me here to talk about Maki.”

“No,” Kougami said. “But I still believe that desire is the appropriate path.” He leaned against his desk, almost nonchalant. “Are you capable of making a Yummy?”

Whatever question Ankh had been expecting, that hadn’t been it. He was beginning to feel as though everyone he had thought he’d known was taking it upon themselves to blindside him at every opportunity, and an honest answer slipped out before he could push it back. “I don’t know.”

“Ah.” Kougami nodded. “Try,” he said, with an intensity far above anything Ankh had heard since walking in the door.

“No,” Ankh said reflexively. “I’m not a trained animal to dance for your amusement.”

Kougami laughed. “As you know,” he said, “I can’t have Yummies running unchecked through my city.” My city, Ankh mouthed, but said nothing. “If that were to happen, the environment might get messy.”

Ankh didn’t need Kougami to state outright that he’d send Goto after him; Ankh was fairly sure he could take Goto, but the resulting fight wouldn’t be pretty, and it would ruin what he already had. A Greeed might take what he wanted, but that didn’t mean he had to be a thoughtless idiot about it. Ankh nodded sharply.

“The power of desire is worthwhile if it can be controlled.” The glint in Kougami’s eye was unmistakable. “I could create new Greeed, but there’s some uncertainty there.”

At this stage, Kougami did not say, but Ankh heard it nonetheless.

“I would prefer to work with a known entity,” Kougami said. “You create the Yummy, which I will then use as I see fit in a controlled environment. In exchange, you keep half the Cell Medals it generates.”

“I should keep all of them,” Ankh snapped, which he realized too late effectively placed him in verbal agreement to participate in Kougami’s mad experiments. Kougami didn’t exactly have the best track record in keeping Greeed under control.

“Half,” Kougami said, tilting his chin up just slightly.

Ankh felt a distinct sense of déjà vu. “All,” he said. “What possible use could you have for Core Medals?”

“I can’t give away all my secrets,” Kougami said. “Half.”

“Ninety percent,” Ankh said. “If I can create a Yummy for you at all.” He was fairly sure he could; he was as complete as he was ever going to be.

“Half,” said Kougami, mildly and infuriatingly.

“Eighty percent,” Ankh said. He wanted to walk out the door, but absorbing the first Cell Medal since he’d woken in the hospital in Hokkaido had made him aware of how desperately he needed them. If he couldn’t bring Kougami to some sort of reasonable agreement, there would be chaos. But half wasn’t enough, couldn’t be enough, not to go beyond the bare minimum to keep Eiji
functioning.

“Half,” Kougami said. “And a numerical amount to be determined if you can’t create a Yummy.”

Ankh grimaced. “Seventy percent,” he said, hating that he was repeating the conversation he’d had with Kougami years before, when he’d bargained for Eiji’s right to use the Ride Vendors and keep the support of the Kougami Foundation.

“Half,” Kougami said again, but there was something on his face that made Ankh pause and seriously consider storming out the door. He could create a Yummy on his own, if he went far enough outside of the Tokyo city proper, and let it feed. It would give him enough Cell Medals, eventually, to heal and revive Eiji. Except, oh, except that it would cause chaos as it ran rampant, and Ankh hadn’t cared about that when he’d met Eiji, but somehow he cared about it now. It was frustrating.

Ankh closed his eyes briefly, knowing exactly what was going to happen the moment the next words tumbled out of his mouth. “Sixty percent,” he said.

“Happy Birthday!” Kougami roared, and there was the cake Ankh hadn’t seen when he’d come in. To a long and fruitful relationship was written in kanji on a decorative chocolate plaque, above a trio of somehow already lit candles reading 60%.

Ankh accepted the cake, tempted for a very long moment to fling it directly at Kougami. “Shall we try now?” he said instead, and delicately bit down on the chocolate plaque. It was better than ice cream.

“Not yet,” Kougami said. He scribbled something down on the back of a card and handed it to Ankh. “Take this to Satonaka,” he said, and it occurred to Ankh for the first time that he and Kougami were alone in the office. “She’ll get you set up.”

“Set up,” Ankh muttered, cake somehow in one hand and card in the other as he maneuvered his way out the office door. He didn’t have to go far to find Satonaka, who took the cake from him with one hand, sighed, and handed it off to someone passing by.

“Please follow me to fill out your paperwork,” she said, and Ankh glared.

“You have got to be kidding me,” he said, and she straightened and stared at him intently. Ankh was reminded of a very large feline staring down something it intended to eat.

“Business runs on doing things correctly,” she said, and Ankh somehow found himself scribbling on several sheets of paper.

Satonaka took them from him after a few moments, eying Ankh’s handwriting and then looking at him. Ankh crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair; the writing system in this part of the world was ridiculous.

“Right,” Satonaka said, visibly controlling her irritation, and started asking him questions instead. Her handwriting was as impeccably neat as the rest of her appearance, not that Ankh was paying attention to it. He did notice that she wrote Eiji’s name on the forms, around his as though Eiji had a second given name.

“Why?” he asked.

“You’re not technically a legal entity,” she said absently. “Can’t make a contract with someone who doesn’t exist on paper.”
“Tch.” Ankh curled his lip at her, but she wasn’t looking at him. “Are we done?”

“Almost.” She wanted his fingerprints, it turned out, for access to the laboratory, and his picture for an ID badge.

“You don’t expect me to wear this,” he said, holding it up between thumb and forefinger.

“You will if you want access to the lab,” she said. “Which is where you’re going to be doing your work.” *If you don’t work, you don’t get paid* went unspoken.

Ankh stuffed the badge into the wallet containing the unabsorbed Core Medals and forbore to comment further.

“As a sign-on bonus,” Satonaka said, snapping his attention back to her, and handed him a small gift bag. Ankh took it warily; it was heavier than it looked. He peered inside to see several short, neat stacks of Cell Medals.

“We’ll be in touch.” Satonaka stood. “Plan on being here Monday.”

“I plan nothing,” Ankh muttered, but Satonaka was already out the door. The Cell Medals were enough to make him feel as though he hadn’t made a mistake when he reached inside the bag, soothing a nagging want he hadn’t even realized he’d had. He felt Eiji murmur contentedly in the back of his head. “Oh, shut up,” he said, but there was a note of affection there.

Ankh was much less sanguine about the prospect of doing anything in Kougami’s lab when he showed up significantly later than instructed and waved his ID in the general direction of the reader next to the door. It demanded his thumbprint next, and Ankh was tempted to just knock it off the wall. He put his thumb down instead, and the door obligingly slid open. Three familiar faces looked back at him, although he couldn’t place them.

“Mr. Kougami didn’t say you’d be joining us, Mr. Hino,” said the tall blond, and it took Ankh a moment to realize that she was speaking Norwegian. Ankh didn’t speak it well, but he knew enough to get by. The sentiment was echoed in Portuguese and then in Mandarin before the two clearly Japanese members of Kougami’s little team welcomed him.

“I’m not Hino,” Ankh said in English, guessing as to the most widely understood common language. He didn’t speak either Portuguese or Mandarin, beyond being able to recognize them if he heard them, and he didn’t want to use Eiji’s memories. The odd reaction he’d had delving into them before hovered at the edge of his thoughts, making him even more reluctant to try and access even something as relatively neutral as language.

Ankh’s declaration prompted a conversation in four languages that Ankh refused to participate in after the first ninety seconds, stalking over to the only person in the room who wasn’t asking stupid questions. “Who am I supposed to use to make the Yummy?” he asked.

“Ah.” The man looked at him, and then looked at a tablet, flicking through several screens. “Before we do that, there’s some preliminary…”

“Then you can call me when it’s done,” Ankh said, and walked out.

Hina was in the apartment when Ankh walked in, intending to perch on the balcony railing and order his thoughts. He was remiss in not being able to understand what others in the lab might be saying, after all. Information was useful. That he was irritated and jittery at the prospect of reliving Eiji’s memories again had no bearing on anything, nor did the fact that he’d followed directions and had nothing to show for it. Hina looked up in surprise when Ankh made a beeline for the balcony door,
not stopping for so much as a greeting.

“Weren’t you at the Kougami Foundation?” she asked. “Did something happen?”

Real or imagined, Ankh heard a note of accusation and more than an inkling of insinuation that he wasn’t holding up his end of the bargain. “No,” he said shortly, and kept walking.

“Ankh,” Hina said, and Ankh’s temper snapped.

“I don’t have to put up with this,” he said, and pulled himself out of Eiji’s body. He felt rather than heard it crumple to the ground as he concentrated his own being into an arm and darted out the nearest open window.

“Eiji?” he heard from behind him, and picked up his pace.

Ankh hit the ground running, generating the basic form and functionality of a body. He wouldn’t have been able to hold it long without the Cell Medals he’d absorbed earlier, or without the Core Medals he’d left attached to Eiji’s belt. He hesitation for a moment, looking over his shoulder in indecision. He thought for half a second that he saw Hina in the window, and turned away before he could be accused of looking.

“I can take what I want,” he growled, manifesting a single Cell Medal. He could pick a passerby at random – everyone wanted, and no matter who he picked would bear a Yummy that could bring him what he needed to be truly strong. “I can take it.”

The thickest crowds were around the train station, which Ankh found himself approaching, flipping the Cell Medal back and forth through his fingers. No one looked particularly enticing, though. He wanted to make sure his first Yummy came from a strong enough desire to create a fruitful harvest, and everyone he saw seemed to have an overlying sense of apathy. Ankh toyed with the Cell Medal a little more, finally hoisting himself up to the top of a set of benches at the center of a busy corridor and listening.

“If I have to give something up to get what I want, there’s no point.” He didn’t know how long he’d been watching the crowds, trying to pick someone to create a Yummy. “That’s not how it works. I’m Greeed, not human. Humans bargain. I take.”

The words rang hollow.

The edges of the Cell Medal dug into Ankh’s palm, and he let it sink beneath his skin. He hadn’t felt this uncertainty, before being sealed. Before being betrayed. He hadn’t felt it when he’d slapped the OOO Driver around Eiji’s waist and sent him off to beat Cell Medals out of Yummies and Core Medals out of other Greeed. When Eiji hadn’t done as instructed, Ankh had been irritated but not uncertain; his maybe-lie that no one else could use the OOO Driver, since Eiji had been present when it was unsealed, had been one of the few statements he’d made early on that he actually regretted. In the end, it had been worth it. Of course, in the end, his goals had changed.

The Izumi balcony doors were wide open when Ankh floated back in, wearing the shape of an arm. The lights were on in the living room, but no one was there. Two pair of shoes were haphazardly lined up at the door, though, and Ankh could hear voices coming out of the space where he usually slept. The door was partially open; Ankh hovered for a moment.

“He needs a hospital, Hina,” the detective was saying.

“Ankh wouldn’t just leave,” Hina said. “He wouldn’t.”
“I know how much you care about him,” the detective said, and it wasn’t clear which ‘him’ he meant.

“Ankh will come back,” Hina said. “Eiji is…” she trailed off, and Ankh heard little choking noises. He pushed the door open and unobtrusively floated closer.

Hina had put Eiji on the pullout couch that had been meant for him to begin with, covering him to the waist with a light blanket. He looked odd, in Ankh’s clothing. Hina was holding his hand, and as Ankh watched, she gripped it more tightly. Eiji flinched, his eyes barely opening, and he moaned. Hina let go, hastily. Ankh slipped onto Eiji’s left hand, the pain of Hina’s grip slamming home, and prodded at Eiji’s mind. There was nothing more than there had been before, just the same sense of a lack of awareness. Ankh couldn’t help but feel disappointed.

“Ankh,” Hina said, and he opened his eyes.

“What.” He sat up, noticing that his pants had gone somewhere.

Hina glanced between him and the detective, and then all but pushed the detective out of the room. Ankh stretched and got dressed. Something felt off, but he couldn’t pinpoint it until he felt a breeze from the open window blow across his face. He’d felt everything, when he’d left Eiji behind, been able to see clearly and hear the world around him. Even as an arm, his senses had been almost as sharp as they were when he was in a human body.

The same thing had happened in the hospital, and he’d dismissed it as a fluke of perception. He wasn’t confused now, though, and he didn’t have the excuse of being newly woken. “Huh.” He flexed Eiji’s fingers, pulling a Cell Medal out and crushing it against his palm. It felt the same. He could hear Hina and the detective having a conversation through the closed door, voices low and intense, and it was less clear than what he’d heard through the open door. The door opened and then closed again while he wasn’t paying attention to it.

“Ankh,” Hina said again. He looked up to see her leaning against the closed door, and the sound he hadn’t specifically noticed registered.

“No,” he said.

“You can’t do that,” she said, as though he hadn’t said anything. “You can’t just leave like that.”

“Leave at all, or leave Eiji behind?” he said idly, but for all of it he actually cared about the answer.

“Either,” Hina said. “Both.” She took a deep breath and then another, not speaking or moving for long enough that he considered climbing out the window. “If you need to go, off by yourself,” she said finally, her voice tight, “that’s fine, but you can’t just abandon Eiji, and you can’t make me think you’re never coming back.” Moisture glittered in the corner of one eye, and Ankh reached for it slowly.

Hina looked up at him, and Ankh snatched his hand back before it touched anything. “Fine,” he found himself saying. He didn’t know if he would have said anything else, but his phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out, turning away from Hina.

There was a text with the following day’s date and a time from an unfamiliar number. Ankh frowned at it, but before he could delete it, a second message followed with the name of one of the laboratory staff members and the word “Yummy.” Ankh sent back a single letter’s worth of acknowledgement.

“Who was that?” Hina asked, and when he turned around, her eyes and face were dry.
“Foundation,” he said, and she nodded.

The detective drew him aside almost the moment Ankh walked through the door, with a serious expression on his face; it mixed wariness with empathy, and put Ankh more on edge than he had to begin with.

“What?” Ankh snapped, before the detective could speak.

“Is it all right with you if I hand Eiji’s medical file over to Date?” Izumi asked.

“I don’t care,” Ankh said. “You can do what you want with it.” It was just a piece of paper, after all; whatever information it had wasn’t something Ankh was worried about.

Izumi’s gaze went flat and hooded; it was the same look he got when he disapproved of something someone – often Ankh, but he’d seen it directed at others – was doing. “Would Eiji mind?” he asked.

“How should I know?” Ankh slipped around the detective, leaving his shoes in an untidy heap in front of the door. “It’s not like I can ask him.”

“I suppose not,” the detective said, and deflated, somehow, looking entirely too defeated for someone who had spent almost no actual conscious time with Eiji at all. “I’m going to see what he thinks about it.”

“I told you that’s fine,” Ankh made his escape before anything else awkward could happen, although he couldn’t help a faint sense of wanting to make amends.

His second experience at the Foundation laboratory was infinitely preferable to the first. The motley group inside paid very little attention to him as he sauntered through the door, except for the same person who hadn’t mobbed him the first time. “Mr. Hino,” he said.

“Ankh,” Ankh corrected.

“Uh, right.” The man looked at his tablet again, and then back at Ankh. “Please follow me.”

It seemed ridiculous to leave the laboratory right after walking into it, but Ankh shrugged and fell in beside the man. He introduced himself as Fujii Chikara, which Ankh promptly forgot, and led Ankh to another floor entirely. “Are we going somewhere in particular?” Ankh asked.

“Ah, yes.” Fujii – Ankh could read his name tag, now, and irked him to no end that he was going to waste memory on this human’s name – pushed his glasses farther up his face. “We’re going to – well, we’re here.”

The complex Ankh entered had oddly thick walls and a number of doors between the general access hallway and the room in which someone stood waiting. The person in question looked slightly nervous.

“This is one of our interns,” Fujii started.

“Don’t care,” Ankh said. “This is who you want for the Yummy’s parent?”

“Ah, yes.” Fujii backed toward the door slightly, and the intern shifted on his chair. Both of his fists were balled into his pants, knuckles white.

“This won’t hurt,” Ankh said, and flicked a Cell Medal toward him. A slot opened up on the intern’s forehead, the Cell Medal sliding neatly in. The intern stiffened before the outlines of a White Yummy
became visible beneath his skin. The Yummy slipped out, separating from the intern, and began prowling around the locked space. “Is that it?” Ankh asked.

“Um.” Fujii fumbled for the door behind him. “If we think of something, we’ll give you a call.”

It was odd, being able to feel the Yummy again; it almost gave Ankh a sense of nostalgia. There was something a little different about this one, its sense of desire a little dulled, a building sense of frustration. “If it doesn’t get what it wants, it won’t be pretty,” Ankh warned.

“Yes, we’ve read the reports,” Fujii said, and the door finally unlocked.

Ankh shrugged and left. What the Yummy did or didn’t do to the research team wasn’t his problem. The sense that the intern apparently wanted desperately to perform well on exams and aptitude tests came dimly through Ankh’s bond with the Yummy, and Ankh chuckled. Such a small desire for how much strength it had.

“Well, can you tell what it wants?” Fujii asked. He’d followed Ankh through the first door, placing a barrier between himself and the larval Yummy. Ankh told him. Fujii frowned and consulted his notes. “Interesting,” he said, and started tapping at the tablet. He looked like a completely different person, absorbed in his work. “Do you have a telepathic link with it?”

“No,” Ankh said shortly.

“How can you tell what it’s thinking?”

“Answering questions isn’t part of my contract,” Ankh said, and then paused. There had been a line specifically about providing information relevant to the research at hand, although what precisely constituted research hadn’t been entirely clear. “It’s mine,” he said finally, and left before Fujii could think of something else to ask.

Feeling the Yummy in the back of his mind made Ankh’s fingers itch for the medal case he no longer had. Even knowing the Yummy was his, even feeling that it was part of him, he still had the urge to find Eiji and toss him a trio of medals.

“Idiot,” he muttered at himself, tilting his face up to catch the sunlight outside. “Idiot, idiot, idiot.” He meant the words as much for Eiji as for himself.

The apartment was a welcome relief in that for once it wasn’t full of half-familiar ghosts; Hina’s project was spread out over the floor, nearly finished, and she pounced on him as soon as he walked in the door. “I need you to hold this,” she said.

Drowning out the persistent sensation of a frustrated Yummy in the back of his mind was worth standing in the living room being literally poked by pins as a distracted and harried Hina made some alterations. “Weren’t you done with this?” he asked.

“It’s due next week,” she said. “But there are a few changes.” She stopped talking, staring fiercely at part of the costume he couldn’t see. “Okay, now I need you to hold this,” she said for the second time in half an hour, but this time she actually handed him something.

“What is that,” Ankh said, as Hina manhandled a strap attached to a ridiculous something with strings over his head.

“That’s a guitar,” she said absenty. “Just hold still.”

“That’s not a guitar.” Ankh knew what a guitar was. He was fairly sure of it. The piece of vibrantly
colored plastic currently banging against his hip was no sort of musical instrument, no matter how many strings it pretended to have.

“It’s electric,” Hina said, moving it slightly to one side and reaching underneath it. She placed another pin.

“Stop poking me!” Ankh snapped, and Hina paused.

“I’m sorry,” she said, a sincere note of contrition in her voice. “I just only have this for a few hours and then for the actual presentation itself, and I need to get this part done now.”

Ankh rolled his eyes and ran his right hand across the strings. They felt odd, the new sensation pleasant under his fingertips, along with the sound almost too soft to hear.

“You play?” Hina asked, looking up at him with surprise.

“No,” Ankh said, but he kept his hand where it was.

Hina shook her head and went back to her work. At some point she removed the guitar, but that didn’t mean that Ankh was free; it was the longest he’d stood in one spot, modeling for Hina, since he’d first moved in. He was so caught up in glaring at her that he almost didn’t notice the sudden spike in satisfaction from the Yummy until the sensation ran through him in a wave. Hina smacked his thigh. “Hold still.”

The Yummy had matured, Ankh realized. He could feel it. Bare moments later, his link with it snapped and he shivered again.

“Are you okay?” Hina asked.

Ankh wasn’t sure whether to be annoyed that the Foundation was manipulating his Yummy without him or smug that he had an alleged source of Cell Medals for very little effort on his part. “Fine,” he said, when Hina started to stand and he realized he hadn’t given her an answer.

“Is Eiji okay?”

“He’s fine,” Ankh said shortly. “Are we done?”

“Almost.” Hina was pinning something near the floor while Ankh stood on top of a chair. She grazed his ankle with a pin at the sound of the door opening. “Welcome home,” she called over her shoulder without actually looking.

The detective didn’t greet Ankh, although he hadn’t spoken to him much since Ankh’s unannounced and precipitous temporary absence. “I’m back,” he said. “Whose guitar?”

Hina launched into an explanation of her last-minute alterations. Ankh started to carefully strip the current piece off, intent on using Hina’s distraction to make a quiet escape. She noticed anyway, telling him to hold still, she was almost done.

The detective, for his part, picked up the guitar and fiddled around with part of it, settling it on one knee and pulling sound out of the strings.

“You used to play,” Hina said, pausing again as she watched her brother.

“It’s been a long time.” The detective played a series of notes—chords, Ankh remembered—that sounded familiar in a way that should have warned him away. Words accompanied the music, a song
about loneliness and never quite fitting in.

The notes faded away, and Ankh opened his eyes. Hina and the detective were both watching him, almost warily, and Ankh realized that the voice singing had been his own. “What,” he snapped, and felt the wetness on his face. He reached up to scrub it away, the sight of Hina’s project pulling his hand up short. He stared at it, torn between not wanting to potentially ruin the project and not caring in the slightest what happened to it.

Hina slipped it off Ankh’s shoulders and handed him a tissue. “I didn’t know you could sing,” she said. “Although birds sing. I should have expected it.”

“That was Eiji,” Ankh whispered, the tissue balled in one fist. He recognized the memories for what they were, now; lessons Eiji had taken in childhood to learn what his parents had called international culture. He’d tried to play the guitar later, a way of distancing himself from unhappy memories while holding on to the comfort that the music had brought, and a way to communicate with people when he didn’t share a common language. He hadn’t been particularly good at it. Ankh pushed the memories back down.

“Oh,” Hina said, surprised. “I didn’t know.”

“Always full of surprises,” the detective said, but he was more relaxed than he had been in days. He looked straight at Ankh for a moment, even, before returning his attention to his sister, who nodded. “You want to try?” he asked, holding out the guitar to Ankh.

“No,” Ankh said, but he was already reaching for it. Eiji’s memories hurt less, this time, less emotionally fraught as they were full of concentration and sometimes frustration at not being able to move his fingers properly. “He didn’t play well,” he said, quietly, fumbling at the strings.

Hina giggled, her eyes suspiciously bright. “It’s just as well,” she said, but refused to explain what she meant by it. Ankh rolled his eyes, but he held on to the guitar while Hina finished with her work around him.

Ankh wouldn’t have given the guitar a second thought, afterwards, if Hina hadn’t produced one out of somewhere with a half-rushed story about inventory updates and school property donation and something else he paid precisely zero attention to. But she did, and the guitar somehow ended up on the pullout couch, and then it kept ending up in his hands.

Somewhere between Ankh stalking across an improvised stage to model Hina’s midterm project and his third Yummy for the Foundation’s mysterious research, Ankh found himself deliberately using the guitar as a way to handle Eiji’s memories. Every time he walked into the Foundation, someone was asking him to clarify a point of translation, or Hina brought up something the three of them had done together, and Ankh wasn’t about to continue demonstrating an adverse reaction.

“What’s wrong with the inside of your head, anyway?” he asked one afternoon, hands poised above the strings. Eiji, as usual, didn’t answer, even though Ankh had taken his practice outside to a park that Eiji would have loved, if he’d been awake enough to see it.

The difference between Ankh’s playing and Eiji’s was partly that once he’d started, Ankh was determined to actually be good at it. There was no reason to do anything badly, he felt, and this stupid instrument was no exception. That led to friction with the detective again, and a strict limit on when, precisely, Ankh was allowed to practice in the apartment, even though Ankh did the majority of his practicing at what he was coming to think of as Eiji’s park for absolutely no good reason.

Three in the morning was apparently not a reasonable time for practicing anything, according to the
Ankh made a face at the detective’s retreating back after that particular conversation, and then spent the rest of the night pacing the balcony out of a sense of restlessness he couldn’t quite explain. It finally faded near dawn, and Ankh was able to watch the sunrise with some semblance of calm. Or possibly just fatigue; he was running low on Cell Medals again, if he wanted to keep healing Eiji. Not, he thought, that he really had much of a conscious choice in the matter.

The lingering sense of discomfort almost led to him throwing his phone over the balcony rather than answer it when it buzzed insistently in his pocket. The fact that it was Goto’s name on the caller ID – and Goto never called, though he was reasonably polite in person – prompted him to answer the call. “This had better be good,” he said.

“We have a minor problem,” Goto said, and in the background Ankh could hear the distinctive sounds of someone firing the Birth Buster.

“Oh?” Ankh said.

“The Yummy escaped the Foundation,” Goto’s voice was tight with something it took several seconds for Ankh to recognize as pain, and the restlessness Ankh felt crystallized. The Yummy had matured, and then gone on to continue growing Cell Medals. It was ready for harvesting; it had been ready for harvesting, and Ankh hadn’t gone to deal with it. “We need OOO.”

“Of course you do.” Ankh said. “That doesn’t come without a price. OOO wasn’t part of the original agreement.” As he spoke, he was already stuffing his feet into Eiji’s boots – shoes were the one thing he hadn’t bought – and running for the street.

Goto started to say something, breaking off at the last second. Ankh wedged the phone between his ear and his shoulder and stuffed a coin into the Ride Vendor conveniently and deliberately located less than twenty meters from the Izumi apartment. It folded in on itself, and Ankh straddled the bike. Goto still hadn’t said a word.

“Well?” Ankh demanded.

“I’m authorized to offer you 80%,” Goto said.

“Not good enough.” Ankh didn’t start the bike, just rested on it. He placed the OOO Driver against his waist, letting it fasten itself snugly above his hips. He was going to harvest the Yummy either way, and he suspected that Kougami or whoever Goto was talking to knew it. He would, however, wait until he was good and ready.

“90%,” Goto said, and something in the background exploded.

“95%,” Ankh said. There was a brief silence, broken again by the sound of the Birth Buster.

“Agreed,” Goto said.

“Pleasure doing business with you.” Ankh hung up on whatever Goto was saying; he knew exactly where the Yummy was. Navigating Tokyo’s streets was a little harder, particularly when no one saw fit to get out of his way, and it took far too long for Ankh’s liking before he pulled up to a scene of utter chaos.

The Yummy had been baited into an empty parking lot in an attempt to contain the damage. It had ripped holes in the concrete, littering the formerly-flat surface with chunks of pavement. The early morning sun cast dark shadows across the pavement, both hiding and exaggerating cracks and
ripples. Ankh nearly tripped on one hole that simply looked like a shadow in the simple act of climbing off the Ride Vendor.

Goto was leaning against a pile of debris, one thigh stained dark and the Birth Driver around his waist. The Birth Buster was still in his hands, but his lax grip was doing him no good. Ankh wasn’t even sure he was conscious. Satonaka crouched near him, holding off the Yummy with the prototype Birth Buster. Or maybe it was a weapon made just for her; Ankh didn’t know or care. She looked as calm as ever, for all that she had clearly dressed rapidly and in the dark.

“About time you showed up,” she said. “I do not get paid enough for this shit.”

The Yummy hissed and charged toward her again, and this time the Buster clicked empty in Satonaka’s hands. Ankh moved forward gracefully, running an intercept path and swinging up onto the Yummy’s shoulders just as it angled past him. It hadn’t seen him coming, and he hauled it up short with his left arm. It might have been a seagull, he thought, long wicked beak echoed in its long and narrow arms.

Satonaka was reloading the Buster in the corner of Ankh’s vision, paying very little attention to him. He manifested his left arm and plunged it into the core of the Yummy. It slid around him like greasy smoke; he couldn’t grasp any of the medals, although he could tell they were there.

“What the hell did you do to this thing?” he demanded, struggling to maintain a grip with his knees around its ribcage and his right arm around its throat. It should have fallen apart the moment he willed it to; that was how a Yummy worked.

“Just kill it already,” Satonaka said. “Or get out of the way.”

Ankh flung himself off the Yummy, kicking it to the side and rolling across the ground. He fetched up on the wrong side of Satonaka’s cover and scrambled over it as she held off the Yummy again.

“Are you going to transform or what?” she asked. “I’m running out of Medals.”

Ankh glared at her. She had one knee against Goto’s thigh, above the dark stain that had turned out to be a makeshift pressure bandage, and she looked almost frightened. Satonaka didn’t ever look frightened; she was the epitome of cool and collected, even in the face of the Medal Vessel trying to absorb Tokyo. He filed it away for future reference. “Hold this.”

He left Eiji tucked up against Goto and climbed the pile of broken concrete in his full glory, wings spread against the morning sun. The Yummy fell back, but it didn’t run at first. Ankh stalked toward it, hands outstretched and talons prominent, and then the Yummy tried to flee. Ankh chased it, taking to the air before diving to catch his prey. He hit its spine, hearing it crack under his weight and knowing that the Yummy was far from incapacitated.

Ankh plunged both hands into the Yummy’s back, intending to tear it apart, but his talons were met with the same greasy smoke sensation and infuriating almost-void. He pulled himself free, balled up a fist, and punched it in the back of the head. That, at least, went satisfyingly well – he heard the crunch of what wasn’t really bone as a few Cell Medals bounced across the pavement. He hit it again, out of frustration.

“What the hell are you doing?” Satonaka called from halfway across the parking lot.

“What did you people do?” Ankh repeated, punctuating each word by slamming the Yummy’s head into the widening crater in the pavement. “This is all wrong. It’s all wrong!”

He had no desire to beat the Yummy to death, although he was fairly sure he could. Ankh stood and
slammed a heel into its spine. For a moment he contemplated dragging it back to the OOO Driver, but it was heavy. He took to the air again instead, landing lightly behind Satonaka and slipping back into Eiji.

“Something is wrong with that thing,” he said, pushing the medals into the OOO Driver. It felt familiar, muscle memory guiding his actions. The scanner sang as he slid it across the Driver, and Ankh had a bare moment to realize he’d used Eiji’s standard combination before the feeling of transformation rushed over him. It was nauseating, disorientation grabbing him and shaking him like a dog with a small toy, and Ankh staggered. Fire burned along his veins, and he swallowed hard.

“You okay?” Satonaka said, and he could barely hear her.

Letting muscle memory guide him again, Ankh vaulted over the stupid pile of concrete for what had to be the fourth time and just missed the Yummy trying to pull off his head. He ducked, sweeping his leg out against the Yummy’s knees, and it went part of the way down. Ankh drew back a fist and punched it again and again, until it stopped trying to attack and again started trying to flee.

For a long moment, Ankh let it think it was going to escape. He was furious at whatever the Foundation had done that wouldn’t let him harvest the Yummy, but he couldn’t take that out on Satonaka. No one responsible was here for him to confront. He watched it darting across the uneven surface, trying and failing to use the evidence of its own destructive nature as cover.

“I don’t think so,” he said, and then had to swallow the nausea down again before he could start running after it. The O Scanner was exactly where he expected it to be; he tilted the Driver and slid the scanner across it again. *Scanning Charge*, it said, the words familiar and unexpected, and he leapt up lightly before momentum and the OOO system pulled him rapidly through the three colored rings of TaToBa’s finishing kick.

The Yummy exploded, Cell Medals falling to the ground in a pool. Something in its center shimmered for a moment before dissolving into dark smoke that lingered briefly before dissipating. Ankh landed on his feet, tugging at the Driver to disengage the transformation. Beyond the nausea, it hurt, the suit burning like fire along his skin. Ankh shuddered at the humid breeze that swept over him, the roiling sensation in his stomach fading along with the pain to leave a leaden sense of exhaustion behind. Eiji whimpered in the back of his head, and it was so out of character and unexpected that Ankh froze.

“Eiji?” he whispered, but the sensation of weeping didn’t abate. “Hey!”

“What’s wrong?” Satonaka was doing something to Goto, who hadn’t stirred during the fight, as far as Ankh could tell, but she looked at him sharply when Ankh spoke.

“Nothing,” Ankh returned through gritted teeth. Eiji was quieting now, returning to the barely-there sleeping presence to which Ankh had almost grown accustomed. “Everything is fine.” He jerked his chin. “What about him?”

“Paramedics are on the way.” Satonaka looked back down. “The Foundation thanks you for your assistance,” she said, sounding detached.

“The Foundation can go fuck itself,” Ankh muttered too quietly for her to hear, and went to collect his Cell Medals.
Ankh, A Confrontation, and A Performance

The simple act of absorbing the Medals did almost nothing to abate the heaviness in Ankh’s limbs; he would have found it more alarming if he’d been less tired. He was not too worn out to meticulously measure out precisely 5% of the Cell Medals and place them on Goto's somehow still upright Ride Vendor bike. Flashing lights out of the corner of his eye turned out to be an ambulance attempting to navigate the former parking lot; Ankh waited until it had reached Satonaka and Goto before wearily climbing on his own bike and driving home. He didn’t remember actually getting there.

After waking disoriented to the hallway floor and Shingo’s slightly panicked voice, Ankh tried leaving Eiji’s body in the bed to sleep off whatever new damage it had incurred. It didn’t really help much, and Eiji didn’t react well to suddenly having Ankh’s support withdrawn. Ankh sulked into the living room and picked up the guitar he’d been practicing with.

The next thing he was aware of was somebody taking it out of his hands. He tightened his grip, because he could damn well practice when and where he pleased, and he said so. It didn’t quite sound like it had come out right. The same hands that had removed the guitar tugged him sideways, onto something soft, and he protested again. It still didn’t come out right, but he cared less when soft warmth settled over his shoulders.

“That’s not normal,” he heard distantly. He thought it was Hina. “I don’t remember that happening to you.”

“It didn’t,” Shingo said, coming through a little more clearly. “But this is a different situation.”

There was a rustling noise, and then Hina said something about Ankh’s most recent call being from Goto. Ankh had a momentary flash of anger that she was touching his things, but it couldn’t sustain itself.

“Goddammit,” Shingo said, sounding almost as tired as Ankh felt. “So it was Ankh in the OOO suit.” His voice faded into a badly-told explanation of the events of the early morning, and Ankh stopped listening. He was happy about precisely zero parts of that encounter, up to and including the gentle hand stroking his hair and sending him right back into sleep.

The terrible lethargy took three days to abate, during which Hina spent far too much time hovering over him like a mother hen. She brought Date along, even, though Date spent more time examining Eiji than focusing on the effects of the OOO Driver.

"It's hard to say," Date said finally, serious and sympathetic and professional in a way that made him look almost like a stranger. "The, ah, outlook isn't good, for most people with this type of injury."

"Injury?" Hina said from the door, and Date started an explanation that involved phrases Ankh didn't like. A high number of them involved the word **neural** in some capacity.

"In most cases, we just have to wait and see," Date said finally.

Ankh had known, somehow, that it would come down to him in the end, but Date's verdict made it that much more real. Hina's sympathy just added to the lingering exhaustion and made it that much worse.

“I’m not broken,” Ankh finally snarled at her. She pressed her lips together and glared at him before stalking away. Ankh made a face at her retreating back, but stopped trying to climb down from the
balcony. He could feel himself going slowly stir crazy at the same four walls and almost no sky, except for when nobody complained that outside in the sun was too hot and going to make things worse. Hina wasn’t exactly wrong on that particular score, but Ankh wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of giving in.

Hina also insisted on telling him how Goto was doing, which was as well as could be expected given that he’d nearly bled out despite proper use of the Birth Driver and not happy about it. He was stuck under observation for nearly as long as Ankh was trapped in the Izumi apartment, and then showed up on crutches when nobody else was home.

“I was going to lose my mind,” Goto said. Ankh wasn’t sure how he’d navigated the stairs, but Goto was nothing if not stubborn.

Ankh left him sitting in the living room and went back to the balcony. To his very great annoyance, Goto shuffled out to join him a few minutes later.

“Hot out here,” he said.

“What do you want?” Ankh asked that question far too often.

“I’m bored,” Goto said.

“You didn’t climb six flights of stairs on crutches because you’re bored,” Ankh returned. “Is this the Foundation’s method of spying on me?”

“I would tell you the Foundation doesn’t care what you do, but we both know I’d be lying,” Goto said, shifting in the chair so that he was entirely out of the sun. It was late enough in the day for most of the balcony to be covered in shade, south-facing or no.

“The OOO Driver works just fine,” Ankh said, aware that he sounded petulant.


Ankh blinked. “For what?”

“You saved my life,” Goto said. “If you hadn’t shown up, I would have died.”

“Whatever,” Ankh muttered, slouching farther down in the chair. “I didn’t do it for you.”

“Of course not,” Goto said, just a little too quickly, and Ankh bit down on further protest before the words could escape. Goto would only take it as more encouragement; he’d learned too much from Date not to. “Date’s leaving at the end of the week,” Goto said, as though he’d heard the man’s name crossing Ankh’s mind.

“Okay,” Ankh said, after it became clear that Goto was expecting some sort of response.

“We’re having a get-together at the café,” Goto said, and Ankh couldn’t stop the groan.

“Not again,” he said, although there was a part of him that enjoyed being around people that Eiji had known. People that Eiji knew, he corrected himself into the right tense. It prompted a smile out of Goto, which was not the result Ankh had been looking for.

When Ankh finally escaped the apartment, he didn’t go far; he took the guitar to the park and sat under a tree. He fully planned on climbing it to practice, but it could wait. While he sat in the shade, hand on the closed guitar case next to him he felt rather than heard someone approach from behind.
Tense, he waited until the individuals were nearly close enough to touch before jumping to his feet and turning to face the potential assailants. At least, that had been his intent, but the sudden movement was accompanied by a wave of dizziness and he had to catch himself on the tree.

“Ah, Mr. Guitar,” said one of the potential assailants, who appeared to be a perfectly ordinary human girl dressed identically to the other apparently perfectly ordinary human girl standing next to her. “Are you all right? We missed seeing you the past few days.”

“What did you call me?” Ankh said. The brief dizziness was subsiding, and with it the urge to manifest his talons.

“I’m sorry,” the second girl apologized. “We just kind of got used to seeing you playing up there.” She gestured to the tree. “And, well. The name just sort of happened.”

“We just wanted to say we’re glad you came back,” said the first girl. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

He hadn’t technically answered her the first time. “Fine,” he said shortly. He maybe wasn’t going to climb the tree today, although he wasn’t about to say that to either of these two interfering strangers.

Ankh ended up just sitting underneath the tree, without practicing, leaning back to feel the wind against his face. His attempt to enjoy the weather was interrupted by his phone, which contained a message from the Foundation requesting his presence for making another Yummy.

“That’s right,” Ankh said. He’d wanted to ask what they’d done to the last one, that he was neither able to absorb nor control it. “You bastards.”

Hina insisted on driving him to the Foundation at the requested time, although it had been two days since his episode of dizziness in the park, which she had not seen, and Ankh had been fine since then. He objected both on the basis of not needing the extra help, and also his lack of faith in Hina’s ability to drive any sort of vehicle. He was entirely sure she was going to break the detective’s car somehow.

“Get in the car, Ankh,” she said finally, hand on the half-wall surrounding the parking lot, and he thought he heard the concrete crack under her grip.

“I’m going to die,” he muttered, but he got in the car.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Hina reached over him and he flailed at her ineffectually before she grabbed some sort of strap and tugged it across his chest. “Don’t forget this.”

Ankh took it in one hand, dubiously, and it slid right back where it had come from. “What is it?”

“Have you never been in a car before?” She paused. “Didn’t you have access to all of my brother’s memories?”

“I didn’t pay attention to unimportant details,” he said, which earned him what Hina probably thought was a gentle slap on the shoulder. It stung.

“That’s a seat belt. It saves your life if there’s an accident.” She reached over him and took the belt again, this time clicking it into a receptacle on his right side. “See?”

“You’re planning on something happening to this vehicle,” he said, and if there was a slight note of hysteria in his voice, he would deny it to his dying day.

“You’re being ridiculous again,” Hina said. Ankh considered manifesting his entire body around
Eiji, which would probably give both of them more protection. He was fairly sure he could do it.

“Stop it,” Hina said, as though she could tell what he was thinking.

“I didn’t do anything,” he muttered, and she started the car.

Despite Ankh’s expectations, the detective’s car at no point approached another in a manner that was inconsistent with the vehicles around them, and they arrived outside the Kougami Foundation in one piece. He tugged at the belt, trying to get it off, but the more he pulled at it, the more stubbornly it stayed attached.

“Ankh,” Hina said, her tone implying that he was trying to be obnoxious on purpose. She reached over again and pressed a small button. The belt slithered back into its case, and Ankh all but flung himself out of the car. “I’ll be waiting,” Hina said.

“You really don’t have to,” Ankh told her. “You can give the car back to your brother,” he added, taking a stab in the dark.

Hina twitched, just slightly, and looked guilty. “Are you sure?” she said.

“Yes,” Ankh told her forcefully.

“Call me when you leave,” Hina said, and Ankh nodded. He had no intention of behaving like a small child checking in with its parents, but if he pretended to agree, she’d leave more quickly. He didn’t feel guilty about it, not in the slightest.

Instead of taking the by-now more familiar route to the complex where the Yummies were allegedly contained, Ankh went up to the laboratory. His thumbprint let him in the doors, but it took several moments before anyone noticed him. The room fell slowly silent as the four people present noticed that he was leaning on the wall against the door.

“Don’t stop on my account,” he said into the silence.

“The, ah,” Fujii started, and then faltered to a stop under Ankh’s flat stare.

“What did you do?” he asked, and none of them had the grace to look guilty. They wore almost identical expressions of confusion, although a small part of that could have been language barrier. “What did you do to the Yummy that escaped?” he said.

“Do?” said Pedersen. At least, Ankh was mostly sure the blonde’s name was Pedersen. “What do you mean, what did we do?”

“You altered it,” he said. “Did you think I couldn’t tell?”

An exchange of glances, everyone’s face carefully blank, told him that it wasn’t the first Yummy they’d altered. He hadn’t been able to tell, or he hadn’t paid enough attention once creating them to know that something had been off.

“I know you did something to all of them,” he said. “I want you to tell me what it is.”

“With all due respect,” said the Brazilian researcher. Da Costa, that was the man’s name. He spoke in Portuguese, which he invariably did when speaking to Ankh, although his Japanese was passable and his English excellent.

“Say it in Japanese,” Ankh interrupted harshly.
“With all due respect,” da Costa repeated, this time in English. Ankh folded his arms across his chest just a little more tightly, and da Costa finally relented. “We didn’t think you’d be interested,” he said.

“Didn’t think I’d be interested.” Ankh glared at each of them in turn. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to stop that thing?”

They exchanged glances again and shrugged. Da Costa took the lead again. “It isn’t easy to break them apart in here, either,” he said. It was something they hadn’t asked Ankh to do, something he wasn’t sure they knew he was supposed to be able to do.

“People almost died because it didn’t behave the way it should have,” Ankh snapped. Technically it had just been Goto, but they didn’t need to know the details. “Tell me what you did.”

“How,” said Zhao, and paused. She swallowed. “How could you tell?” she asked.

“What do you mean, how could I tell? I made it,” Ankh said. “Of course I could tell.”

“Yes, but how?” Zhao pressed, edging forward now. “You didn’t say anything with the first two.” She paused again. “Well, we didn’t really do anything to the first one, but you didn’t say anything with the second one, although we didn’t think that was a success.”

Ankh blinked at her, slightly disconcerted at the increasingly multilingual flood of information. She was switching back and forth between Mandarin and Japanese and he didn’t think she was doing it on purpose.

“The alterations were mainly to limit the expression of the progenitor’s desire,” Zhao was saying. “In order to direct it in a constructive manner.”

“Destructive is more like it,” Ankh muttered, the words sliding out in Mandarin. Zhao winced, and then looked around at the confused team members who weren’t following the conversation. “Whatever you’re doing, stop it,” Ankh said. “It’s not working.”

“Oh, sure,” da Costa muttered. “That’s a helpful directive.”

“If I can’t harvest the Yummy after it’s matured, we all have problems,” Ankh said.

“It was able to mature?” Pedersen breathed, and suddenly no one was paying attention to him at all. Ankh threw up his hands and stalked out, making his way to the reinforced complex with ill grace. He all but flung the Cell Medal at the waiting intern without waiting for the door to close. If they weren’t going to take advantage of what he knew, he certainly wasn’t going to volunteer information.

Contributing to Ankh’s general displeasure with the day, his presence at the gathering was assumed; he’s been under the impression he’d refused to attend. Ankh opened the freezer, pulling out one of the popsicles Hina had bought when he’d first moved in with them, before he’d figured out that they didn’t taste the same way he remembered. He bit down savagely on the tip of one anyway. It was cold and sweet, but he could taste the additives that gave it color and enhanced the sweetness; he hadn’t noticed that while possessing Izumi.

The detective, for his part, almost never ate ice cream or anything else frozen; Ankh sometimes saw Hina hesitate when her brother ignored the freezer entirely. He rolled his eyes and wandered into the living room, still eating the popsicle. Hina was there, reaching under the couch. She looked over her shoulder at him, opened her mouth, closed it, and then went back to reaching.

“There you are,” she said, but when Ankh looked back, she was addressing something in the palm of
Curious as to whether she was talking to something alive, Ankh made his way over to look. It was a hair clip, brightly colored and glittery and definitely not alive. He lost interest in it.

“I’d tell you not to spoil your appetite,” Hina said, glancing up at him and the half-empty stick in his hand.

“Whatever,” Ankh said automatically, and then, suspiciously, “Why?” That particular phrase was usually code for Hina experimenting in the kitchen. While her cooking had improved, the detective was still better at it. Ankh didn’t really care one way or the other, except when Hina tried something new and insisted he try it.

“Don’t tell me you forgot,” she said. “Cous Coussier. Date. He’s leaving tomorrow.”

“Oh, is that why your brother was asking me about Eiji’s file,” Ankh said. “You two have fun.”

“You’re coming with,” Hina said. “You said you would.”

Ankh was fairly sure he’d actually said no such thing, but it was also entirely possible that Hina had misinterpreted something he’d said. He narrowed his eyes at her, ready to stand his ground, when another thought occurred to him. “I’m taking the guitar,” he said.

“You what?” Hina, clearly prepared for an argument, found herself derailed, and just blinked at him.

“I’m taking the guitar,” Ankh said, pleased to have gotten the upper hand for once, and bit off another section of the ice pop. He could see the wheels in Hina’s head turning; she couldn’t accuse him of being unfriendly, even if he was using the guitar as an excuse to not actually talk to anyone. He pushed down the small pang that deliberately arguing with Hina brought.

“That’s wonderful,” Hina said finally, and smiled as though she meant it. After a moment, Ankh was fairly sure she did mean it. “I’m so glad you found something you like,” she said, and Ankh almost sputtered. That hadn’t been his intent at all, and yet he was almost glad that Hina wasn’t walking away upset.

Whether the conversation with Hina had been a victory or a loss was moot, Ankh decided later; taking the guitar had been a mistake. Chiyoko had been delighted when he’d shown up with it. She’d been a little more confused when he claimed a position in the general vicinity of the door and stayed there, but she had long ago proven herself willing to go along with almost anything. The rest of Date’s friends, when they’d shown up, had given him looks of the same manner of confusion.

Ankh, for his part, had found that he enjoyed the concentration of people far more when he wasn’t forced to interact with any of them on their terms, and had lost himself in playing what he’d spent the past weeks learning. It wasn’t much, and he was still new to the instrument, but it had soothed the irritation and aggravation of the past few days and let him look at things without the inconvenient emotional reactions. That hadn’t been the problem.

The difficulty had come when Chiyoko came up to him while he was stretching out his fingers; he wasn’t used to playing for quite such long stretches at a time, and his left hand had been a little sore.

“Ankh,” she’d said, a sparkle to her eye that he’d recognized and instantly wanted to run far away from.

“No,” he’d said.
Chiyoko had plowed ahead as though he hadn’t said anything at all. “Would you like to play here regularly?”

Ankh had blinked, nonplussed. “Are you going to pay me for it?” he’d asked, finally.

Chiyoko had looked almost offended. “Of course,” she had said. “That would be only fair.”

And just like that, things had settled into a routine. Ankh, somewhat to his own surprise, had found himself at the Cous Coussier a couple of times a week; Chiyoko kept presenting him with music she thought was appropriate for whatever theme she’d come up with that time, he would tell her if she wanted a trained monkey she could hire one, and then actually learn what she’d given him. It was challenging in a satisfying way, particularly when he figured out that using his talons instead of Eiji’s fingers made it easier to keep playing for longer, and increased his range of movement just enough to make playing a little easier. No one at the café batted an eye, either, when he showed up with a scaled red hand; Chiyoko declared it a brilliant piece of costuming and that was that.

Somehow requests from other patrons of the café led to Ankh playing and then singing while playing at other places in the general area; he was occasionally recognized by people he’d never seen, which was oddly disconcerting, but he was enjoying the act of performing too much to not do it.

The Kougami Foundation left Ankh alone for long enough following the escaped Yummy and his subsequent argument in the lab that he started to get tempted to make Yummies on his own again, but the requests started up again as though nothing had happened. Ankh had been wary, at first, of what they were doing with the Yummies, and whether he’d have to chase one down again, but the next few didn’t escape, and he began to relax a little.

Even the detective seemed less tense, showing up to listen to him play once in a while, and Hina was downright thrilled. Ankh couldn’t decide if it was annoying or not. The one thing that wore at him was that Eiji still refused to wake up, and Date had no insights on anything useful after all, and that in and of itself connected to a vague sense of building tension that Ankh couldn’t quite define.

The first break in that tension, or the first time things came to a head, depending on one’s point of view – and Ankh would always look back on it later with a distinct sense of ambivalence – came after Ankh accidentally acquired an agent. The agent worked for a small company trying to get off the ground; Ankh was approached after he’d played for the first time in a new place, and he’d been curious enough to hear the man out. When he’d learned that the agent wanted him to sign a contract, he’d just walked away.

Not long after, Ankh ran into the man again, this time at the Cous Coussier. He was talking to Chiyoko when Ankh walked in, and she smiled at him. It was that manic smile again. Justifiably wary, Ankh approached the two of them.

“I’m not signing a contract,” he said. “I do what I want, when I want.”

“Deal,” said the agent.

“What?”

“Sort of.” The agent produced a sheaf of paper that bore a startling resemblance to the papers he’d signed for the Kougami Foundation. Chiyoko wasn’t looking at them as though they were anything out of the ordinary, though, and Ankh took the papers to look them over. “We’ll find you places to perform, on a regular basis, as long as you agree to a certain number of performances in any given month. You have final say in whether or not you perform somewhere, as long as you meet those requirements.”
“It’s actually really good to you,” Chiyoko said, reading over his shoulder. “There’s a lot of kindness and consideration for the artist in this.”

Ankh glanced at her; she was farther into his personal space than he was used to. She smiled at him, rested her chin on his shoulder and reached around him to turn the page.

“See?” she said. “Most places wouldn’t give you this much freedom, if you wanted to make a living as a musician. There are horror stories.”

Ankh didn’t care about horror stories that applied to other people. He flipped through the pages again and then looked at the agent and back at Chiyoko. “This is what it’s like, being human?” he asked. The agent didn’t even blink, just kept watching him with a bland smile.

“For some people,” Chiyoko said, pulling away from him and turning him to face her directly. “Everyone has to make their own choices, find out what makes them happy.”

“Huh.” Ankh turned the papers over in his hands. It felt odd, having someone offer him something based on what he’d done, with the expectation that he’d continue to do it. “I want time.”

“I understand,” said the agent. Ankh thought for a very brief moment that there had been something like frustration on the man’s face, but it was gone before it really registered. He held out a small white card. Ankh cocked his head at it. Chiyoko stepped forward, taking it with both hands and thanking the agent. “I’ll need an answer by Wednesday,” the agent said.

“Right.” Ankh was looking at the contract again, and paid no attention to the man walking out the door. Chiyoko materialized at his side again, holding some sort of folder.

“Here.” She took the contract out of his hands and put it in the folder; there was a pocket perfectly sized to hold the white card, which Ankh could now see had a business logo, a name, and some contact information. “You might want to ask Shingo or Hina what they think,” she said.

“What do they know,” Ankh said, but he didn’t really mean it. Chiyoko smiled at him sympathetically.

“You going to get ready?” she said, and Ankh blinked. He was supposed to play for her that evening; he’d learned some of what she’d told him was British punk rock for whatever her theme was. As far as he was concerned, he’d learned how to play entire songs using no more than four chords, which was not necessarily particularly interesting. Keeping track of the lyrics had been a bit more of a challenge.

Whether or not Ankh had actually managed to keep track of the lyrics by the end of the evening was moot; he was fairly sure no one who might have been listening understood them anyway. Chiyoko looked thrilled, though, which he told himself he didn’t actually care about in the slightest.

“Have them look over the contract,” she reminded him, and he made a face at her. She just smiled in return, absolutely unfazed. There were moments Ankh was absolutely sure she couldn’t possibly be real.

The contract was passed around to multiple people, all without Ankh’s actual involvement. He’d decided that it was too much trouble for what it could be worth, and to ignore the entire thing, but Hina finally handed it back to him with a smile. “This could be really good for you,” she said.

“Whatever.” Ankh had a popsicle in one hand, still in its wrapper, and he tapped it against the countertop. “ Doesn’t matter. I’m not doing it.”
“Yeah, but,” Hina said, carefully. She was making the same face she did when she tried to convince him to do things that were allegedly good for either him or for Eiji. “It actually gives you a lot of freedom.”

Ankh squished the popsicle between the fingers of his right hand, relishing the sensation of cold.

“Are you going to eat that?” Hina asked.

“It doesn’t taste right,” he said. “Eiji tastes things differently than the detective.”

“Really,” Hina said, sidling closer to him. “Different how?”

“Just different.” He inched away, still reducing the popsicle to goo inside its wrapper. The wrapper split under the strain, and Ankh glared at the purple mush now dripping off of his hand.

“Oh, come on,” Hina said.

Ankh dumped the remains of the popsicle in the sink. He found, much to his dismay, that the remains of the frozen treat were obnoxiously sticky. That really seemed like something that should have come up before, he felt.

“It’s good, though,” Hina said, and for a moment he thought she was talking about the popsicle.

“Whatever.” He took the papers out of her hands. It did not occur to him to wonder what Eiji might have thought about this particular use of his body as he signed the papers where indicated and texted the number on the business card he’d been given.
Ankh, TaJaDor, and Hina

“You don’t need to be nervous.” The person who’d come out with Ankh to the first show his agent had booked had been introduced to him as his manager, to which he’d said he could manage himself just fine and didn’t take instructions from anyone.

The manager had started to frown at that before carefully smoothing out his – or was it her? Ankh hadn’t been able to tell whether the individual was male or female – lips into something resembling a smile. “This is a slightly different environment than what you might be used to.”

Ankh rolled his eyes at the statement that he might be nervous, but truth be told, there was a fluttering sensation just below his ribs. It felt familiar in a way that he couldn’t quite place, and if he hadn’t known better he would almost have said he was reacting to the presence of another Greeed. His manager looked at him sympathetically.

“What’s perfectly normal,” his manager said, pulling the tie around his? – neck straight. “Go on, you’ll be fine.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Ankh said.

Hina was hovering in the hallway outside; Ankh slipped out before he was actually supposed to walk into what passed for a stage in that particular location. He was somewhat surprised to see not only the detective with her, but also Goto and Satonaka.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. He’d known Hina was showing up; he hadn’t been able to talk her out of it.

“Break a leg,” Goto said, which was no answer at all.

“Are you nervous?” Hina asked, and he growled. She laughed softly.

“Ankh, I’m proud of you,” the detective said, and that almost made Ankh walk out of the building right then and there. The detective had no right to stake that sort of claim on him, had no business taking any sort of ownership for what Ankh did.

“Sure,” he said, because if he didn’t say anything at all, they’d all start making faces at him.

“Look for us, okay?” Hina said, and Ankh nodded. Whatever else Hina might have tried to say was forestalled by his manager rushing out into the hallway and all but bodily moving him toward the stage.

The butterflies did not abate throughout his set. Ankh refused to acknowledge that they were there, that simply the presence of a group of humans watching him – or at least aware of him – was going to make him feel anything resembling nerves. The fact that the people he might have considered his family were among them had nothing to do with anything, he repeated to himself more than once. It wasn’t until close to the end of his set that the sensation bloomed into certainty that something was
Ankh was less than thirty seconds away from the end of his final piece when he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that what he felt was not nerves, or butterflies, or any other emotional reaction. He could feel the unmistakable presence of a Yummy, and he couldn’t identify its type. Whether or not he could tell before seeing the Yummy, to be fair, had always been chancy at best, but this had an unfamiliar flavor to it.

Without finishing the song, Ankh darted off the stage. The guitar went into its case; someone would pick it up, or they wouldn’t. It was precisely as unimportant as his manager staring at him with wide worried eyes and asking him pointless questions. He dodged any attempts at questions and made for the door. He’d seen a Ride Vendor a block away, the quickest way to get to where he could feel the Yummy.

“What are you up to,” he muttered. It had to the Foundation; there was no other possible source for Greeed to revive, or worse, to be made anew. Whether the Yummy had escaped or deliberately been set free, Ankh was furious that the Foundation had been stepping on his territory.

The Ride Vendor was exactly where Ankh had remembered seeing it, and even its rapid transformation from machine to motorcycle was too slow. Ankh threw his leg over it, hearing it roar to life. He hadn’t heard anyone behind him, and startled badly when he felt an arm slide around his waist.

“What?” He jerked his arm back, reflexively, only to find his elbow caught in an iron grip.

“I’m going with you,” Hina said, settling behind him on the bike.

“I’m not going to protect you,” he said. “You’re going to have to take care of yourself.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said. “Besides, I’m the one that has the Driver and Scanner.”


Ankh couldn’t find the Yummy, when he reached the underpass where he knew it was. He pulled up on the bike, turning it off and slowly climbing onto the ground. He could feel the Yummy, but he couldn’t see it. He turned in a slow circle, searching the shadows and the pools of light under the streetlamps. Hina handed him the Driver, and he put it on, still trying to find the Yummy.

Whatever the Yummy was, it was moving. Ankh shook his head when Hina handed him the TaToBa combination, and put his own cores in the Driver instead. He had the scanner in his right hand when he felt a pebble hit his shoulder and finally thought to look up. Gray-white fur filled his vision as he pushed Hina to one side and flung himself to the other, and a massive spider hit the ground right where he’d been standing. The Scanner fell out of his hand and bounced away, and Ankh barely managed to roll and come up on his feet.

The spider, now that he could see it clearly, wasn’t entirely a spider. It clearly had an arachnid base, but its joints were all wrong, and the patchy armor plating spotting its long pale fur looked unhealthy. Its eight eyes were deep crimson, glinting with a glow that Ankh didn’t think came from the streetlight behind him, and each of its legs was sharp. The pointed tips glistened as it moved warily back and forth, unable to decide whether he or Hina was a more appropriate target.

“Hina,” Ankh said as quietly as he could, moving his mouth as little as possible. “Get to the Ride Vendor.”

Whatever had made this Yummy, it had matured incredibly quickly, if he’d started feeling it when
he’d felt what clearly hadn’t been butterflies. It was going to give him a fantastic amount of Cell Medals. Ankh tried to look for the scanner out of the corners of his eyes, not paying any attention to whatever Hina’s reply had been. If she knew what was good for her, she’d get on the bike and flee.

The scanner hadn’t gone far; it was only a few meters to his right. Ankh moved slowly toward it, keeping his eyes locked on the spider. It shifted its weight toward him, talons clicking on what was left of the pavement. Ankh risked a glance at the Scanner, seeing the spider start to charge just as he started to look back. He dove for it, scrabbling for an agonizing half a second before his hands closed around the handle. The spider shot past him and skittered halfway up the embankment before checking its own momentum and starting back.

Ankh rose to his feet, Scanner in hand, and pulled it across the medals. The Driver sang, the glorious melody of TaJaDor ringing through the shadows, and Ankh felt the armor form itself around him. It burned the way fire never had, pain along every nerve ending. He barely felt it when the spider charged into him, knocking him into one of the concrete supports, but hitting the ground jolted him out of the sense of shock.

The spider was almost on top of him. Ankh flung fire at it, driving it back, the flames catching and burning the concrete. Hina screamed, and he realized he’d pushed it almost right towards her. He pushed himself to his feet and stumbled almost immediately. “Over here!” he shouted, voice hoarse, and he could see where Hina was, now. She ran to meet him halfway, the spider angling to intercept. Ankh spit flames at it again, catching it directly this time. Its fur caught fire and its armor glowed with heat, and it shrieked.

The sound pierced Ankh’s ears, pushing into his brain, and he felt concrete digging into his cheek. That wasn’t right, he was wearing Eiji’s armor. It was gone, he realized distantly, and most of the pain had gone with it. He reached for the scanner again, but his hands wouldn’t move. He could feel his fingers twitch as everything went dark, and then he felt hands that could only belong to Hina pulling him over onto his back before sensation faded into nothing.

Ankh woke up on something soft, too-warm air blowing past his face and sunlight directly in his eyes. It was almost silent, except for the vague noises of life in other parts of the building. Ankh maneuvered himself out of the too-bright light, shaking with the effort it took. That wasn’t supposed to happen, not when he had enough Cell Medals. He could feel the Medals he’d absorbed, but they were inexplicably not enough to even let him move easily.

Ankh put that problem aside in favor of figuring out exactly where he was; the room was unfamiliar, with narrow windows lining the top of one wall and almost no furniture or other distinguishing features. All he could see out of the high windows was open sky. There were no blinds or shutters over the windows, all of which were wide open and presumably the source of the warm breeze drifting through the room. Ankh looked for a door and found one opposite the windows. The soft surface he’d woken on turned out to be some sort of thick mat laid out on the floor.

Leaning against the wall, Ankh looked at the door. It seemed both impossibly far away and claustrophobically near, and the edges of the odd slabs of plant material making up the floor wavered around him. He squeezed his eyes shut, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyelids until his vision steadied and his breathing slowed. Greeed did not panic, he told himself. Unfamiliar surroundings were no reason for discomfort.

Ankh used the wall to lever himself upright, leaning on it again. Something glistened along his arm, and he glanced down at himself. The glitter he’d worn for his performance, whenever that had been, was still smeared over his skin, but his clothing had been replaced with soft, loose pants and a matching shirt. His feet were bare, and that was oddly disorienting. Still using the wall as a prop,
Ankh made his way across the room to the door, nearly tripping over the edge of the wooden flooring around the door itself, and pushed it open.

The hallway outside was a distinct contrast to the quiet of the room; it was brightly and fluorescently lit, and there was a steady if sparse stream of unfamiliar people walking up and down. After a moment, Ankh could see identification badges marking them as Kougami Foundation employees, which at least told him where he was. None of them paid attention to him, beyond a startled glance or two.

“Ankh!” came a voice from the direction he wasn’t looking.

Startled, Ankh let go of the doorframe and backed up. He was feeling better, the longer he stood, his thoughts clearing enough to recognize the voice. Kougami had sent Satonaka down for him. She strode through the door, paused at the edge of the wooden floor to take off her shoes, and then circled around him.

“You’re alive,” she said, and then produced a stack of clothing from an alcove he’d somehow managed to miss while inspecting the room. “Get dressed.”

It did not escape Ankh’s attention that Satonaka’s eyes narrowed when he put on his shoes, but by the time he finished dressing, he’d recovered enough that he didn’t particularly care. There was still a leftover unsteady sensation in his joints, as if they’d give out if he moved too quickly, but he was at least confident of his ability to walk down a hallway. The Cell Medals he’d absorbed felt right again, energy flowing from them to his Cores.

Satonaka led him out into the hallway, pausing just long enough to put her shoes back on in a display of ridiculous affectation, and then walked off impatiently as though he were expected to follow. Not being entirely sure of where in the Foundation he was, Ankh did; with all the attention she was paying him, he could leave as soon as he saw something familiar.

The first part of the building he recognized turned out to be their destination. Ankh stared at the thumbprint scanner in front of the laboratory he visited semi-regularly with a sense of betrayal, but Satonaka had already opened the door and ushered him through it before he thought to simply walk away. It was possible that he wasn’t quite as recovered as he thought he was, from whatever had happened.

It occurred to Ankh that he wasn’t entirely sure how he’d gotten to the Foundation; the last thing he remembered, now that he thought about it, was standing on a stage.

Fujii was the only other person in the room when Ankh entered. He could see Satonaka nodding out of the corner of his eye as she said, “He’s all yours” and vanished out the door without so much as a word to him.

“What is going on?” Ankh said, or tried to say. His voice caught in his throat, and he had to cough to clear it and try again.

“Um.” Fujii looked between Ankh and something on the ceiling. Ankh stalked forward, intending to grab the man by the throat, but Fujii slipped out of his reach easily and came back with a stethoscope. “Let me see how you’re doing first, okay?”

Ankh glared at him, but for once, Fujii didn’t respond to the implicit threat, and insisted on poking and prodding at him with a variety of things that Ankh did not recognize. It didn’t help that halfway through Fujii’s ridiculous semi-torture routine, Ankh found himself needing to sit down and stay down.
“What’s the last thing you remember?” Fujii asked eventually.

“I don’t have to answer you,” Ankh said, although not remembering how he’d gotten to the Foundation was really starting to bother him.

“Ankh,” Fujii said, and it was the first time he’d ever actually addressed Ankh by name. “You had an, um, experience and did not react well. The Foundation would like to find out as much as possible about what happened.”

“You tell me what’s going on, then,” Ankh said.

“I will,” Fujii said patiently. “But first I need to know what you remember.”

Ankh grimaced. If he was going to admit to anyone what he couldn’t remember, at least he could tell a familiar face; even knowing that it was a manipulative ploy to get information out of him, he actually felt better with Fujii in the room than he would have with someone he didn’t know. “Fine,” he said, and told Fujii.

“You don’t remember leaving the venue,” Fujii said.

Ankh shook his head, drawing his knees up against his chest and resting his forehead on them.

“You were chasing an escaped Yummy,” Fujii said carefully. “You don’t remember that?”

Ankh thought about it, but he didn’t even remember leaving the stage. “No,” he said.

“You transformed into OOO.” Fujii paused, and Ankh looked up. “The suit was red,” Fujii added. “All three sections.”

“TaJaDor,” Ankh said. “I used TaJaDor.” That made some sort of sense; the first time he’d used the driver, TaToBa had been painful. Using his own medals should have been easier. He suddenly felt a moment of panic; if he’d used his own medals in the OOO Driver, had he reabsorbed them? He pressed a hand to his chest, concentrating on the feeling of his own Cores. They were all there, all six of them that were still intact. Ankh relaxed, and then heard Fujii speaking.

“Are you all right? Ankh. Ankh!”

“Stop panicking,” Ankh said, shooting the other man an annoyed glare.

“Don’t do that.” Fujii shone a light in his eyes, again, and Ankh batted it away. “You collapsed not long after transforming into TaJaDor,” he said. “Mr. Goto arrived on the scene with the Birth Driver and dispatched the Yummy. He was then instructed to bring you here.”

“You know,” Ankh said, out of a perverse desire to be obnoxious and unhelpful, “I thought Goto didn’t work for you anymore. I thought he’d gone back to the police department.”

“He’s a consultant,” Fujii said. “The department loans him to us.”

“Of course they do,” Ankh said, but he wasn’t paying attention to what he was saying. It was absurd; no matter how Eiji had reacted to the physical stresses of transforming into OOO, Ankh should have been able to compensate for it. Eiji had gotten better at withstanding the physical stresses besides – by the end, it was only the purple Cores that had drained him so thoroughly. “Can I leave now?”

“The Foundation has called you a car,” Fujii said. “It’s waiting by the front door.”
Ankh stood, only wobbling slightly, and then paused. “How long?” he asked.

“How long?” Fujii repeated.

“How long ago was the fight?” Ankh said.

Fujii hesitated, and Ankh glared. It was a little more effective the second time around, because Fujii got noticeably paler. “Four days,” he said. “It’s Tuesday.”

“Tuesday.” Ankh stalked out the door, hearing Fujii sigh in relief behind him.

The memories wouldn’t come back; all Ankh got was the phantom sensation of fire ghosting painfully over his skin and an equally painful grip across his shoulders. He climbed out of the Foundation car more unsettled than when he’d gotten in.

The Izumi apartment was empty when Ankh entered, still and quiet in a way he hadn’t realized he sorely needed. He leaned against the door for a full minute, just breathing, before going out to the balcony and staring down at the city. The oppressive heat drove him back indoors after only a few minutes, but at least the view had gone a long way toward restoring his equilibrium. The sight of the guitar propped up in the corner of the living room brought another trickle of relief; he hadn’t known what had happened to it, either, although it seemed less important in the wider scheme of things.

Ankh didn’t mean to fall asleep again, but he woke to Hina settling a completely unnecessary blanket over his shoulders and caught her by the wrist.

“Welcome home,” Hina said.

“Whatever.” Ankh shrugged the blanket off, sitting up from where he’d inadvertently slid down. “I’m back,” he said, not looking at her. Hina grinned widely at that.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” she said, eyes searching his face for something.

Ankh stared at her for a moment, long enough that Hina started to fidget and then blush. “I need to ask you something,” he said, the words not coming easily. If he could trust anyone, he could trust Hina.

Startled, Hina nodded and sat next to him. She took his hand, carefully, and squeezed it with more gentleness than he’d ever seen her use. “Anything,” she said.

“What.” His voice failed, and he cleared his throat. “What happened on Friday?” he asked.

“Oh,” Hina said. “You don’t remember.”

Hina verified Fujii’s depiction of events, but added something Fujii had left out. The Yummy hadn’t been avian, which meant it hadn’t been his. It had been an arachnid, and Kougami had grown himself another Greeed.

“You’re sure,” he couldn’t help saying.

“I know a spider when I see one,” Hina said, sharply for her. She hesitated, biting her bottom lip. “I was worried,” she said after a moment. “You wouldn’t wake up.”
“What happened to the Medals after Goto destroyed it?” Ankh asked.

Hina stared at him for several seconds, face warring between indignation and annoyance. “He collected them,” she said.

“Of course.” Ankh rolled his eyes. Since he hadn’t been the one to dispatch the Yummy, and it hadn’t technically been his Yummy to begin with, the Foundation wasn’t going to let him have the Medals.

“There’s something else,” Hina said, and then she paused yet again.

“Out with it,” Ankh said impatiently when she showed no signs of speaking.

“Are you sure,” she said, and lapsed into silence again.

“Hina.” Ankh resisted the urge to either shake the words out of her or just walk off.

“Are you sure Eiji is the only one who can use the OOO Driver?” Hina asked.

“Why?” Ankh demanded.

“It’s just.” Hina twisted her hands together. “When the spider – you threw fire at it, and I tried to catch you when you fell over, after that, and the armor disappeared. But I felt something, when it vanished, and that’s why I dropped you. I’m sorry I dropped you,” she added, the words falling over each other.

Ankh waved it off, eyes narrowed. “You think you can transform into OOO?”

Hina spread her hands. “I don’t know. But I took the Driver, and it felt tingly.”

“You have the Driver.” Ankh identified the feeling spreading through his chest as relief; the Foundation didn’t have it. He felt that he should have thought of it earlier, but he’d been too concerned about whether or not he still had his Cores, and then about his missing memories.

Hina dug it out of her purse. “I haven’t let it go,” she said.

Ankh considered for a moment. “Try,” he said.

“Try what?”

“Transforming,” he said impatiently. “Try it now.”

“In here?” Hina looked around doubtfully.

“On the balcony, then.” She had his little case of medals, too, and he pulled two out of it. After a moment’s thought, he handed her one of his own Cores, giving her the makings of TaToBa. She looked at it, and then at him, with wide eyes.

“What are you waiting for?” He heaved himself to his feet, pleased to discover that it was easier than he’d thought it would be, and pulled her with. “Go on.”

Hina looked doubtfully between the Driver and the Medals in her hand, and Ankh pushed her out onto the balcony. He suspected that if she’d resisted even a little, he would have failed, but she went along with the attempt willingly enough.

“It doesn’t seem right,” she said. “Eiji.” She stopped abruptly.
“It’s not like he would care if someone else used the Driver,” Ankh said, which was true. Eiji would probably be furious if Ankh pointed Hina toward a Yummy, OOO armor or no, but he didn’t have to say that part of it. Eiji could say it all on his own, if he ever decided to stop sleeping.

“If you’re sure,” Hina said.

Ankh considered for less than half a second before taking her by the shoulders. “Hina,” he said, trying to come across as earnest and empathetic. It was hard. “I can’t use the Driver. Something’s wrong with me, or with Eiji. If there’s a new Greeed running around, we need OOO to be able to do something about it.” He was forgetting something. Oh, right. “Goto can’t be expected to handle things all on his own, particularly not if the Foundation made the Greeed. Goto needs the backup.”

Hina was looking at him oddly, and Ankh wondered if he’d overplayed his hand. He wanted the new Greeed dead, before it ruined his territory, and it was looking like he was going to need help doing that. Eiji was taking more of his energy than he’d anticipated. It didn’t occur to him to simply leave Eiji behind.

“Ankh,” Hina said, her eyes growing suspiciously bright, and Ankh failed to fend off what he was sure was a literally bone-cracking hug.

“Air,” he gasped. Eiji still needed to breathe.

Hina let go, jumping back. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Ankh was too busy not suffocating to answer with more than a handwave in her general direction. “Just,” he said finally, managing to take a full breath and feeling his ribs twinge. “Try to transform, would you.”

“Right.” Hina held the Driver up to her waist. “How do I – oh!” The belt shot out of the Driver, securing itself around Hina and pulling in tight. Ankh felt that was a good sign.

“Put the medals in,” he reminded her, and she slid them in one at a time. The Driver reacted, the standby tones sounding. “And the Scanner.” It was hooked on to the side of the belt, and she fumbled it slightly before detaching it and sliding it across the Driver. The sound of the Medals registering with the Scanner rang in Ankh’s ears.

“Transform?” Hina said, almost drowned out by the Driver singing the transformation melody. The whirling pattern of Medals Ankh had seen around Eiji so many times spun around Hina as the melody played itself out, and finally cleared to show OOO standing incongruously on the Izumi balcony.

“Well, it worked,” Ankh said.

Hina looked a little different than Eiji had, in the armor; she had less mass than he did and a little more of a sense of grace and fragility. No one who had ever seen Eiji in the armor would mistake her for him, or at least no one who’d seen him up close. But she looked similar enough that Ankh was reasonably sure no one would be able to tell at even a moderate distance.

“Wow,” Hina said, looking down at herself. “This is… this is…” She turned her hands over, looking at the claws folded across her forearms, and then running her hands over the shield covering her chest. “It’s so strange,” she said.

“The next time a Yummy escapes, you get to come with me to kill it,” Ankh said, and Hina’s head snapped up.
It was a little odd, having OOO’s green eyes fixed on him in a way they hadn’t been for so long, but Ankh found it almost calming. “You want me to fight?” Hina said, but she didn’t sound dismayed by the prospect. She sounded skeptical, and almost excited.

“I don’t know why else you’d want to use the Driver,” Ankh snapped. Briefly, he wondered how Hina’s ridiculously inhuman strength would affect the armor. Then, somewhat more worryingly, he wondered how Hina’s total ineffectiveness in anything resembling a fight would affect her performance, armor or no armor. “Maybe we should practice,” he added.

Ankh had nightmares that night, images that stayed with him clearly after he woke although he almost never remembered his dreams. If he even dreamed in the first place; he wasn’t entirely sure on that score. This time, though, the visions were painfully sharp to his mind’s eye, even after he woke and the pale ceiling came into focus above him.

Of course the images were easy to remember, he told himself. Most of them had actually happened. He’d dreamed of the first OOO, the king, the genius or lunatic or visionary or whatever one might have called him, the one who’d created the belt and the driver and the Greeed in the first place. The one who’d betrayed Ankh, who’d tried to absorb all the medals and become a god and ended up sending himself into oblivion and Ankh, in pieces, eight centuries into the future.

It had been a long time since the memories of the king had been so vivid. Ankh scrubbed his hands across his face, if only because there was no one to see how slightly they were shaking. Once in a while, he thought he should have seen it coming, known that if the king was willing to betray the rest of his creations, he’d be willing to betray Ankh as well. But he’d thought he was special, that he was the one who knew more than everyone else, the one who deserved everything.

Eiji had been different, because deep down, he hadn’t wanted anything. He acted on behalf of others, but never for his own good or gain. Ankh had thought, once in a while, how lucky he was that the person who’d been present when the Driver was unsealed was perhaps the only person who wouldn’t have been driven insane by it; if controlling use of the Medals depended on the user not having any desires, anyone else would have gone down the same path the king had.

Ankh knew, suddenly, why he’d been having nightmares.

After all that work I went through, trying to talk myself into trusting Hina in the first place. The thought came unbidden and he pushed it away. It didn’t matter if he couldn’t trust Hina, as long as she could properly wear the belt. There might be some way to mitigate the effects of the medals, after all.

The detective was a hard man to pin down alone; if Ankh didn’t know better, he’d think Izumi was actively avoiding him. He couldn’t manage to get more than a few seconds alone with the man before Hina would show up, or the detective would have a perfectly good reason to leave, or Ankh himself would have a perfectly good reason to leave.

It wasn’t that Ankh had that much free time to spare; the Foundation had made its own Greeed, and Ankh was going to kill it, but he couldn’t kill it unless he could find it. It wasn’t in the Foundation complex, of that much he was sure. He made a point of showing up at the lab at odd hours, to see if he could catch it, until he knew that it was somewhere else.

It took a while for someone to broach the topic of the new Greeed with him. Kougami had remained entirely silent on the matter, and Ankh refused to talk to the clearly crazy man about it. He’d expected it to come from Fujii, but Pedersen approached him just a little too casually. He looked up at her, for once annoyed that she was taller than he was. She was taller than almost everyone at the Foundation, to be fair, but at the moment, Ankh resented that he had to look up to meet her eyes.
“So,” she said, and twisted her hands in an uncharacteristic display of nerves. If she’d been da Costa, Ankh was fairly sure she would have been actively shaking and wringing her hands. “About –“

“I don’t care,” Ankh interrupted her. “The existence of a new Greeed hasn’t changed my contract.”

“Oh,” Pedersen said, her hands stilling in surprise. “I, uh, that’s good.”

“Then, unless there are plans to not give me what I want, which, by the way, I have been getting, why don’t you not worry about what I’m going to do about something that I don’t care about.” He smirked at her, a shark’s grin that felt wrong on Eiji’s face.

He waited a moment for her to parse that sentence, spoken in English rather than Norwegian, because he still had at least part of a small, petty desire to make someone squirm. She all but fled once she’d figured it out, and Ankh watched her go with his predatory smile fading to something bland and inoffensive. For some reason, that made the rest of the research team – who’d been watching the entire exchange while pretending not to – more nervous. Ankh rolled his eyes and left.

The other drain on Ankh’s time was his manager; Ankh spent enough time preparing for and playing in locations scattered throughout the general area to keep anyone distracted. It had taken him a while, but he’d finally pinned down said manager as exactly that – a distraction. The agency the manager allegedly worked for existed, and was more or less as advertised; it was trying to get off the ground by representing a wide variety of artists who might or might not become popular enough to attract other high-quality talent.

The problem was that the agency turned out to be owned by a shell corporation, which was owned by another shell corporation, which was in and of itself owned and managed by a subsidiary of the Kougami Foundation. Ankh hadn’t had the resources to figure that out on his own, nor did he trust anyone in his immediate vicinity when it finally occurred to him that it had been far too easy to fall into what amounted to steady work as a musician. He’d gone to Philip.

“No, you can’t tell Shotaro,” he’d said, using the disposable phone he’d bought out of a sense of paranoia. If the Kougami Foundation was in fact attempting to manipulate his life as a distraction, who knew what else they were doing. “I just need you to find out something for me.”

“It wouldn’t happen to be about heat shields, would it?” Philip had said.

“What? No.”

“Oh.” Philip had actually sounded disappointed at that. “Because the issue of functionality and weight, when you consider the effort it takes to get something into orbit to begin with –“

“Philip,” Ankh had interrupted, and had then pushed down a sense of being ridiculous and explained that he thought something wasn’t right about his manager. And then he’d had to explain that he had a manager, and then Philip had thought Shotaro would enjoy a concert, and then Ankh had nearly screamed in frustration. “You can’t tell him about this,” he’d said.

“Oh, there are posters, I just didn’t think that was actually you,” Philip had replied.

“Can you do it or not?”

Philip had confirmed it, Ankh had promised to send payment, and Philip had insisted on said payment being information about the seedy underbelly of the entertainment industry. Ankh had told him he didn’t know a damn thing about any such thing, and Philip had sounded so disappointed that Ankh had ended up somehow inviting both of them over to the Izumi apartment following one of his performances.
None of that got him any closer to actually finding the Greeed, but Ankh was nothing if not patient. He’d learned to be patient. The Greeed would give itself away sooner or later, and then he’d be ready for it. His more immediate problem was keeping Hina from drowning in the power of OOO.

Ankh finally got his chance to talk to the detective when Hina dragged them to another summer festival. He’d avoided the previous one, which had had something to do with dancing and lanterns in boats and the souls of the dead; there was no one who was gone that he cared to remember – *Eiji isn’t dead*, whispered his mind – and Hina and her brother could honor their parents all on their own.

The second time he couldn’t get out of it; Hina stood in front of him on a night she knew he wasn’t playing, wearing a yukata, with the detective behind her, wearing the stubborn expression that told him that she was not above physically manhandling him out the door if necessary. Ankh sighed and followed her.

Ankh forgave Hina for dragging the both of them all the way over to Ueno for the tail end of what was still an overcrowded street fair, complete with stalls, lights, and the occasional fireworks, when she put what turned out to be a chocolate-covered banana on a stick in his hands. It was the best thing he’d tasted since possessing Eiji. “More,” he said, when he finished the first one, and Hina laughed delightedly.

Two bananas-on-a-stick later, Ankh was much less cranky about the summer festival and Hina had been dragged off by a group of classmates with a promise to catch up with them in a little while. Ankh licked chocolate off one finger and caught the detective looking at him almost fondly. Ankh glared, and the expression vanished, the detective returning Ankh’s stare in equal measure.

“If,” Ankh said, and paused. “How do you keep humans from giving in to their desires?”

He was hit by a sudden flash of memory; telling Eiji, when they’d just barely met, that humans would always give in. Eiji had insisted that people could win out over their own baser wants, but Ankh had yet to find the human that would prove Eiji wrong. Even Eiji, when he’d finally found something he wanted, had devoted himself to it.

The detective’s cold calm gave way to surprise, and then a wary suspicion. “Why?” he asked.

Ankh gestured around them, at the laughing mass of people. “They do things that – that won’t help them in the long run,” he said. “They get lost in what they desire. Eiji…” Something caught in his throat, and he had to look away and swallow it back down. “Eiji thought – told me that humans don’t always lose to what they want.” He glanced back to see Izumi wearing an unreadable expression.

“Ankh,” the detective said, and half-reached out toward him before letting his hand fall back. “It’s not really that simple,” he said instead.

“What do you mean?” Ankh turned to face him, stopping in the middle of the walkway.

“Here.” The detective gestured him toward a quieter corner. “In order to not do or have something you want, there has to be something you want more.”

Ankh tilted his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

The detective sighed, scrubbing his hand through his hair. It stood up in a shock, and it was odd for a moment to be standing across from a face that he’d once been used to seeing in the mirror. “Let me use a simple example,” he said. “I might want to stay home and spend time with my sister, right?”

Ankh nodded; that was a fairly common thing to want, as far as he could tell.
“But I also want to provide her with a safe home, and make sure that she’s being taken care of while she’s in school. It’s more important to me that she have somewhere to come home to than that I get to spend a lot of time with her. So I go to work.” The detective spread his hands out. “Does that make sense?”

“Physical needs are more important?” Ankh hazarded.

“Not exactly.” The detective glanced around. “A person has to figure out what’s most important. Sometimes we want things that conflict with each other.”

That was fascinating; Ankh hadn’t thought that might be the case. As far as he had always been able to tell, humans wanted things and then went for them.

“If that happens, sometimes the person will go for what’s easiest, and sometimes they’ll decide that the harder choice is the one they want more.” The detective shoved his hands in his pockets. “It’s tricky and complicated.”

“But it comes down to what you want the most,” Ankh said slowly. “Even when that means doing something difficult.” It might have been understandable after all; he’d wanted to be alive, and he’d gotten it, but more than that, he’d wanted Eiji to survive at the end. He’d wanted Eiji to survive with his heart and soul intact, and not let the purple Cores burn him up from the inside out.

“Why do you ask?” Izumi said, deceptively mildly.

“Because humans are strange,” Ankh shot back. “And nothing any of you do makes any sense.”

“Right,” said the detective, and gestured for Ankh to follow him. “Let’s go see if we can’t keep my sister out of trouble.”

“Trouble finds her like a magnet,” Ankh muttered. “You can’t keep her out of it. The best you can do is minimize it.”

Izumi surprised him by laughing out loud.
Ankh, OOO, and The Restraining Order

Having been fending off Hina’s attempts to practice with the OOO Driver, Ankh thought it would be a simple matter to set up a practice session. It seemed, however, that nothing could ever just go smoothly, and he barely got a chance to talk to Hina, much less drag her out somewhere deserted enough that practicing with the Driver would go unnoticed. Before he could do so much as mention to her that the Driver would amplify any desires she had, he felt the unmistakable ripples of a Yummy he hadn’t spawned.

Hina was in class; Ankh knew that much from living with her for months and half-heartedly noticing when she came and went. He knew more or less where the school was, and used the closest Ride Vendor to start towards it, calling Hina on the way. She didn’t answer, predictably, and he wasn’t about to search classroom by classroom. Luck was with him in that he saw her walking from building to building shortly after he pulled up.

“Ankh!” she said, clearly surprised. The two girls with her gave him surprised and appreciative looks, or maybe they were admiring the bike.

“We have to go,” he told her. “Now.”

Hina’s eyes widened. “Another one?” she said.

“No,” Ankh repeated, and all but threw the spare helmet at her. Hina jammed it on her head and clambered onto the back of the bike, ignoring the startled questions from her classmates. Ankh accelerated as soon as she had half a grip on him; she startled and grabbed him so tightly he could hear his ribs creak before shifting so as to not break his spine.

The Yummy was more human-shaped than the last one had been, which was to say it walked on two legs rather than eight, but it still skittered on all four limbs at an unsettling pace as soon as they got close to it. It was covered in chitin, shading from charcoal black to pale dusty white, eyes covering its face and then running down its armor-covered back. It ran down the sidewalk, pausing to lay its hands and feet against everything that could even be vaguely categorized as a plant, and every time it did, the plant in question rippled and grew. The few trees in their sidewalk square plots grew massive, ripping up the concrete, while the flowers in a flower shop grew roots through the store floor and the pavement.

“Aim for the eyes,” Ankh said, skidding to a halt and shoving the Driver at Hina.

She nodded, pushing the medals into the driver and scanning them with the awkward motions of someone learning the steps of a new action. The Driver didn’t care how awkward she was; it sang the transformation song, and when the images and music faded away, OOO stood facing the Yummy. Hina stepped forward and the Yummy slipped back, the two of them circling around each other. The Yummy didn’t turn tail and run, though, inching toward Hina and then back again as if it couldn’t quite tell whether or not she was a plant, Ankh realized. He bit down on a laugh at that.

Any sense of humor Ankh found in the situation drained away as he felt the presence of another Greeed. It wasn’t far away, but he couldn’t see it from where he was. “I’ll be right back,” he said to Hina, who twitched but gave him a resolute thumbs up. Ankh took off at a run, towards where he knew the Greeed was hiding. It was in a narrow gap between two buildings, not more than half a block distant.

“Wait, you asshole,” he muttered as its presence started to fade. “You’re not getting away that easily.
Not this time.”

He nearly overbalanced rounding the corner, flailing wildly for just a second before coming to a halt to see nothing. The Greeed was gone. He could still feel it; he was right on top of it for half a second before it vanished entirely. Ankh shouted wordlessly and did not set the ground on fire. Suddenly remembering how the previous Yummy had hidden above them, he looked up, but there was nothing except for sky.

“Are you on the roof?” Something on the ground caught his eye; a manhole cover, directly in the center of the space, ever so slightly displaced. A patch of pale fur was caught on the edge, as if something had squeezed through the hole. “You miserable little bastard.” The Greeed was hiding underground; either Kougami had lost it entirely or he’d purposely set it free.

The crashing noise of the fight behind him had subsided into the sound of falling Medals, and he turned back to see Hina pummeling the Yummy, pinning it to a wall with one foot and simply punching it until it exploded into a pile of Medals. Hina stood, panting slightly, before disengaging the transformation and sagging to her knees.

Ankh strolled up to her, taking the Driver out of her limp hands and looking carefully for any signs of incipient madness. Not that he knew what incipient madness on Hina would look like, but she looked more tired than anything else. “You okay?” he asked.

“No wonder Eiji had so much trouble with this,” she said, giving him half a smile. “This is exhausting.”

“You get used to it.” Ankh made as if to help her to his feet, but the look she gave him – part frank disbelief, part deep suspicion – made him back off. He put the Driver back in its case and went to collect Medals.

Ankh’s phone rang, just as he’d picked up the last of what he could find; it was pure dumb luck that he was facing Hina when he answered what should have been a perfectly standard call to find Kougami’s face filling his screen. Hina looked at him questioningly, and he ignored her, willing her to understand that he wanted no part of her involvement to get back to the Kougami Foundation for as long as possible. “Boss,” he said, just to see how Kougami would react.

“You found it!” Kougami roared. “Happy Birthday!”

Ankh did not feel the second sentiment was precisely correct, in this situation. “I found the Yummy. It has been dispatched. Any problems with that?”

“Should there be?” Kougami countered swiftly. “Your contract is still valid.”

“My contract does not cover the use of the OOO Driver,” Ankh replied, just as quickly. “Which was necessary in this instance, as the Yummy had matured before I got to it.” He paused, too briefly for Kougami to start to reply, before saying, “I was under the impression that the Yummies were only to be released in a controlled environment.”

“Nyah,” Kougami said, making a disgusted face. “Things happen. They’re rather clever, you know.”

Ankh couldn’t tell if the man was trying to cover up for deliberately releasing the Greeed or not. “They are,” he agreed. “About the use of OOO.” He let his voice trail off delicately, giving Kougami an opening. As he expected, Kougami focused on him.

“I’m glad you seem to be weathering its effects with greater ease,” Kougami said. “Perhaps the same terms should apply.”
“OOO causes substantial physical distress,” Ankh returned. “A higher percentage of Medals is necessary to counter its destructive tendencies.”

Kougami regarded him for a long moment, and then seemed to decide not to push the issue of Ankh potentially not being the one to wear the OOO armor. From there, it was all negotiation, which was done while Hina remained quiet and patient in the background. Ankh ended up with a final value of 80% for any fight involving OOO, carefully implying that he was the one wearing the suit without outright lying about it once. He felt it was a stunning accomplishment. Hina, when he finally ended the call, was not impressed.

“Seriously?” she said, and he didn’t think he’d ever heard her sound quite this irritated. “What was that?”

“What was what?” Ankh tossed her the spare helmet, once she got to her feet.

“That,” she said again, gesturing at him. “With… with the boss.”

“I want to keep you out of this,” Ankh said. “As much as possible. I don’t know what kind of effect the Driver is going to have on you.”

“So you just want to use me?” Hina stepped toward him, eyes flashing dangerously.

“What? No!” Ankh glared right back. He paused for a moment. “Okay, partly. I can’t equip the OOO Driver without hurting Eiji, and I can’t equip it on my own at all. If OOO is needed to dispatch a Yummy, then I need help to do it.”

“This is to help Eiji,” Hina said, and now she seemed less intent, less focused, more like herself.

“I want Medals, too,” Ankh said, cautiously. “It’s not just for Eiji.”

“It’s a good thing you said that,” Hina said. “Or I’d think you were trying to manipulate me.”

“I learned my lesson with Eiji,” Ankh said, letting resignation creep into his voice. “It doesn’t work on you people, crazy idealists that you are.”

Hina laughed, seemingly back to her old self, but Ankh couldn’t shake the image of her face, set in a cold and quiet fury that was entirely unlike the Hina he had grown to know. He was going to have to be more careful than he’d originally thought, if he wanted to make sure Hina stayed herself. He told himself it was because she was of no use to him if she grew paranoid, destructive, ambitious, and not because he wanted Hina to remain Hina for her own sake, but he knew he didn’t quite believe that.

Ankh should have known things wouldn’t be that easy; the detective was waiting when he pulled up in front of the Izumi apartment building with Hina on the back of the Ride Vendor. The detective’s eyes narrowed in unmistakable fury when he saw the two of them, Hina clearly bruised down one arm and covered in dust that hadn’t blown away during the drive.

“Upstairs. Now.” The detective turned on one heel and stalked toward the door.

“Whoops,” Hina muttered, sounding less tired than she had before. Ankh was inclined to agree, but if he wanted to keep Hina’s cooperation, he was going to need the detective to not interfere. He sighed and followed both of them.

“How did that happen?” Izumi asked, carefully examining the bruise and then looking Hina over for any other sign of injury. There wasn’t any; she’d done fairly well for her first time out.
“There was a tree,” Hina said. “It’s gone now.”

The detective sighed, looking at his sister patiently. Ankh inched toward either the balcony or his room; they were both on the same trajectory from the front door. “Don’t move,” the detective said, flinging out one arm to point straight at Ankh. It would have been slightly less unnerving if he’d looked at Ankh at any point, but his gaze remained focused on Hina. “Do you want to come out and say it?” he asked. “Or am I going to have to tell you that I know?”

“I transformed into OOO,” Hina said, the words tumbling over each other. “I fought a Yummy. It’s gone.”

“Why would you let her do that?” Now Izumi looked over at Ankh, and Ankh would have been happier if he hadn’t.

“You say let,” he muttered. “It’s not like I could have stopped her.”

“Not like.” The detective paused. “You’re telling me that this wasn’t your idea?”

“I won’t say the thought never crossed my mind,” Ankh said.

“I asked,” Hina said. “I asked, Shingo. Ankh can’t fight the Yummies and take care of Eiji at the same time, and I couldn’t stand being useless.”

Not that Hina was wrong; in fact, precisely because she was right, Ankh felt a sense of inadequacy. She’d put into words what he hadn’t wanted to say out loud. Whatever Eiji had done to bring him back, he was still damaged, and he could heal Eiji while healing himself, but he couldn’t fight at the same time. He certainly couldn’t fight as OOO.

“Why are there even Yummies to begin with? I thought they were under control,” Izumi said. “Or that you at least had some measure of control over the ones you created.”

Ankh grimaced, looking off to the side. It was one thing to admit that he was trying to help Eiji. He wasn’t going to explain how the Foundation had altered his Yummies so that he couldn’t harvest them.

“I don’t think this one was Ankh’s,” Hina said. “Or the last one. They were both, um.” She wiggled her fingers. “This one was kind of buggy, and the last one was a spider.”

“Buggy,” Izumi said, flatly.

“Like an insect,” Hina said, a rare sharpness in her voice. “Or a spider,” she added, sounding milder. “There wasn’t anything bird-like about it at all.”

“There was another Greeed?” Shingo said, clearly at a loss. He knew almost as much about what had happened while the Greeed had rampaged around the first time as Ankh did; he might even have had access to Ankh’s memories the way Ankh had had access to his, in which case it should be very clear to him that this was not a Greeed that had been sealed.

“No,” Ankh said anyway. “This is something new.”

They’d seen new Greeed before, or at least Cores that didn’t correspond with the five who’d been sealed away, even discounting the purple Cores. It wasn’t entirely new. The fact that it had gone beyond a whole new set of Medals was what was apparently of concern to the detective.

“Is this like before?” he asked, and Ankh knew what he was referring to.
“I don’t think so,” Ankh said. “Spiders are living creatures.” Not like the bases for the purple Cores, he didn’t have to say.

“Ah.”

The answer seemed to satisfy the detective, although truth be told, Ankh wasn’t sure what had been the base for the new Greed; they weren’t just formed of Core Medals, Cell Medals, and the wish for consciousness. They’d all been something else, once upon a time, even if he barely remembered it. He didn’t think it had been something sapient, though, not something conscious like a human.

“Hina,” the detective said, and Hina got a sudden cagey expression. “I don’t want you to transform again,” Izumi said, as if he hadn’t noticed.

“Why?” Hina said.

“It’s dangerous,” Izumi said. “It’s dangerous, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I won’t get hurt,” Hina said.

“You don’t know that,” the detective said. “I don’t know that. Ankh can’t promise that.”

“He’s not wrong,” Ankh admitted.

“You think I can’t take care of myself?” Hina drew herself upwards, eyes flashing. Ankh would have hesitated before crossing her when she looked like that, were he human. “I’m stronger than both of you put together.”

“I’m worried about what the effects of the Driver might be,” Ankh said, before the detective could say something monumentally stupid.

“You what?” From his tone, the detective hadn’t considered that aspect of it at all, for all of his knowledge about how the Driver had been created and how the Greeed had been sealed in the first place. “It didn’t affect Eiji, though,” he said, after a tense pause.

“So why would it affect me?” Hina asked. She’d relaxed a little, and moved to sit on one of the kitchen chairs.

“Because you want things,” Ankh said. “Eiji didn’t want anything.” He could almost watch her train of thought as she processed both statements, and came up with a suitably chastened and wary conclusion.

“So she shouldn’t touch it at all,” the detective said.

“It’s like you said,” Ankh told him. “She just has to find something she wants more.”

“You’re a manipulative little asshole,” the detective said, but there was no heat to his words. “I would have told you to go take a flying leap if I’d known that was why you were asking me.”

“So if I remember what I really want, then the Driver won’t give me trouble?” Hina asked.

“I’m not sure.” The only way he was going to win this one was by laying out all his cards on the table, by being as open and honest and direct as possible. Eiji’s face made it a little easier to be believed, but Ankh had to follow through with intent. “Maybe.”

“Maybe isn’t good enough,” the detective said.
“It’s my decision,” Hina said. “Shingo, it’s not like it happens that often. Ankh may not need my help at all. Or not much. And there’s Goto.” Ankh had forgotten about Goto, who’d somehow managed to miss both the initial fight with the Yummy and the phone call afterwards.

In the end, the detective came around to Ankh and Hina’s way of thinking, or at least to something resembling a grumbling acquiescence. He didn’t have a great deal of choice in the matter, as Ankh saw it, but his sole stipulation on not passing on the information to Goto and therefore the Kougami Foundation for as long as possible was that Hina use the Driver as little as possible.

“Wonderful,” Ankh said from his position on the back of the couch when the detective finally stopped complaining. “By the way,” he added. “Did I tell you we were having dinner guests?”

The ensuing mix of excitement from Hina that Ankh had actually met and gotten along with other people and frustrated resignation from Shingo regarding Ankh’s lack of concern for the appropriate social niceties was a highly effective distraction, particularly given the timing of Ankh’s next performance.

“Tomorrow?” The detective looked pained. “Really, Ankh?”

Ankh shrugged. “They helped you find Eiji, right?” He was fairly sure he heard the detective muttering something about possession and insolent spirit creatures, and ignored it in favor of his ringing phone. “Hello?”

The conversation with his manager turned out to be the most surreal experience Ankh had had since possessing Eiji. The absurdity of the situation was either reflected in his face or Hina was paying far too much attention to someone else’s phone calls, because she was giving him an impatient and inquisitive look when he shoved the phone back in his pocket with annoyance.

“What?” he asked.

“Don’t want to talk to who?” she asked.

“Eiji has a family,” Ankh said, sitting down slowly. He didn’t particularly care, one way or another, but he’d gotten an emotional reaction from Eiji when his manager had explained that he’d been contacted by a couple claiming to be Eiji’s parents. The manager had done his due diligence and confirmed their identity, more or less, but the couple had insisted on being given contact information for their son. “He doesn’t – he didn’t want anything to do with them.”

Hina curled up on the couch next to him, almost touching but not quite, near enough that Ankh could feel her warmth. “He didn’t get along with his father, after the… the situation abroad,” she said. “They brought him home and leveraged the publicity towards his father’s career, Date said.”

Ankh dimly remembered something along those lines; Eiji had gotten involved in a civil war, one that had been started with money donated from his family because of his naïve failure to properly read the sociopolitical climate of the region he’d wanted to help, and it had gone badly. Eiji had responded by withdrawing into himself, and then by cutting ties with his family to wander aimlessly in and out of the country from one part-time job to the next.

“What did they want?” Hina asked.

“What?”

“His family,” Hina said. “They must have wanted something, or they wouldn’t have called.”

“That was my manager,” Ankh told her. “They called the company and wanted to know where Eiji
“And?”

“And they’re not getting anything,” Ankh said, annoyed. “I’m not talking to them. They’re not my problem.”

“Wait, how did they even know to call a talent agency?” Hina shifted just enough that she was lightly pressed against Ankh’s side. The contact was comforting, dispersing some of a sense of anxiety that Ankh hadn’t realized he was feeling until it lessened.

“There are posters,” he said. “Eiji’s face is on them.”

Hina twisted around to look at him, and her eyes widened. “I’ve seen those,” she said.

“Everybody has seen those,” Ankh muttered. “Eiji’s family wants him to stop tarnishing the family reputation with low-rent performances,” he added after a moment.

Hina’s face went from surprised recognition to righteous indignation so quickly that Ankh almost looked behind him to see if a threat had materialized in the middle of the Izumi living room, but Hina started talking before he could do so much as twitch. “That’s ridiculous,” she said. “They didn’t care what he was doing before, when he wasn’t bringing any attention to himself. It’s ridiculous that they suddenly have an opinion now.”

It’s human nature, Ankh wanted to say, but Hina was working herself up into a highly entertaining fit of temper, so he kept his mouth shut.

“It makes perfect sense,” the detective said. Ankh hadn’t thought he was paying attention. “Eiji’s father was very image-conscious, as I recall. Having his son in a relatively highly visible position without the legitimacy of an established agency guaranteeing a successful career path doesn’t sound like something he’d approve.”

“How would you know,” Hina said, but quietly.

“It’s my job to know things,” the detective said with the air of someone holding out an advantage over a younger sibling.

“I’m not talking to them,” Ankh said, just in case anyone was getting any ideas.

“Did I hear you agree to play at that place in Roppongi?” Hina said, which was enough of a subject change to mollify Ankh. “I thought you refused the last time, because there was too much space.”

Ankh smirked. “It seemed like the right time for a bigger audience.”

The detective snorted, but when Ankh looked over at him, he was wearing a mix of resignation and amusement. “You’re such an asshole,” he said, but Ankh was fairly sure it wasn’t a pejorative statement. The detective had almost sounded affectionate.

“I’m a Greeed,” Ankh corrected him, and was rewarded with the detective rolling his eyes.

Having assumed that Hina had both met Philip and Shotaro and was capable of finding them in the audience, Ankh was somewhat put out at having to hunt down two separate sets of people following his set. He was annoyed enough that he didn’t register someone repeating Eiji’s name until he felt his shoulder being rudely grabbed in an attempt to yank him backwards.
Ankh turned, scowling at whoever thought they could touch him without his permission. He didn’t know what he’d expected to see, but it wasn’t a middle-aged woman dressed in clothing that was more expensive than the people who usually haunted his venues staring at him with resignation and sadness. “What?” he said. “I’m busy.”

“Eiji,” said the woman again.

“I don’t have time for this,” he said, and went back to his search for his roommate and the idiot private detectives, who should have had the sense to all be in one place where he could find them easily.

Hina wasn’t that far away, but she was short enough to get buried in the crowd, and he almost missed her. “Who was that?” she asked.

“How should I know?” Ankh scanned the crowd for Hidari’s ridiculous hat; he was convinced the man only wore it to add centimeters to his height. He saw it, or what he hoped was it, because if more than one person was wearing such a hideous monstrosity, Ankh was going to have to set it on fire, and started off toward it. As an afterthought, he grabbed Hina by the wrist so as not to lose her again.

“Hey,” Hina protested, pulling out of his grasp while effortlessly keeping up with him. Ankh, not about to lose her in the crush of people that seemed far denser on the ground than it had from up on the stage, wasn’t about to let go, and ended up holding her hand rather than her wrist.

The hat, dark red with some sort of fluffy trim, did indeed belong to Hidari. Philip was still affecting colorful clips to keep his hair pinned back, in an awful lime green that managed to clash with Hidari’s hat even when they weren’t standing right next to each other.

“That wasn’t a prosthetic, right?” Philip said, by way of greeting, making a grab for Ankh’s left hand and looking disappointed when Ankh moved it out of the way. Or perhaps his disappointment was for the hand appearing human. “That was what your arm actually looks like.”

“Philip,” Hidari said, in a long-suffering tone. “Good evening, Ankh, Miss Izumi. This is my companion, Philip.”

Inexplicably, Hina nudged Ankh in the ribs after several seconds of extended awkward silence. He glared at her. “What was that for?”

Hina sighed. “Izumi Hina,” she said to Philip. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Hidari.”

In the space of no time at all, Hina and Hidari had somehow gone from awkward near-strangers to giving each other sympathetic looks, and Ankh wasn’t sure why. He also wasn’t sure he liked this instant newfound camaraderie, and stepped protectively between the two of them. Hidari gave Hina a rueful half-smile, and Philip actually managed to grab and pull Ankh’s left hand toward him for closer examination.

“Gentlemen,” Hina said, sounding very much like she wanted to laugh and was trying not to, “this way.”

Ankh shook Philip loose, a harder task than he initially assumed, and followed Hina toward the exit.

The entire trip home was spent in attempting to deflect Philip’s increasingly technical and detail-oriented questions about the Greeed; not in the process of constructing the Medals, but in how the Greeed worked in a physiological sense. More than once, Ankh looked over at Hina for what he wouldn’t quite call assistance, only to find her deep in conversation with Hidari. Every single time,
one or both of them was nodding sympathetically, and at least twice Ankh distinctly heard exclamations along the line of “That happens all the time! Yours does it, too?”

“Don’t worry about Shotaro,” Philip said, the third time Ankh twitched visibly.

“I’m not worried about Hidari,” Ankh snapped, but Philip was staring past him with a fond smile that transformed his entire face, and Ankh didn’t think he was listening at all. At least, if Philip was mooning over his partner, he wasn’t asking Ankh questions. Unfortunately, the distraction only lasted a few seconds before Philip asked about the process creating Cell Medals and how they were stored.

The detective turned out to be just as inexplicably amused by whatever it was that had Hina determinedly not laughing. Ankh was sure that he’d said something about having to work late that night, but when they opened the door, there he was. He was not only not still at the office, he’d prepared food, which kicked off a whole new round of questioning from Philip – this time he wanted to know how possession altered the five main senses, and whether they were different from host to host, since humans had clear preferences.

“Oh,” Hina said, after Ankh failed to dodge the questions with anything resembling grace. “Is that why you don’t eat ice cream much anymore?”

“Ice cream?” Philip asked, and Ankh fled to the balcony.

Hidari emerged a few minutes later, and Ankh stiffened. Hidari was quiet, though, and held out a banana dipped in chocolate on a stick. Ankh snatched it out of his hand and ate it sulkily, perched on the balcony rail. Hidari was still there when he finished, quiet and unassuming in a welcome change from his usual demeanor.

“Philip can come on a little strongly,” he said. “But he’s a good man at heart.”

“Tch,” Ankh said, licking the last remnants of chocolate off the stick. “He’s not a man. Not human,” he clarified, at Hidari’s affronted expression.

Hidari smiled. “Not entirely, no.”

“Does he always ask so many questions?”

Hidari laughed out loud, the act transforming him just as thoroughly as Philip’s affectionate smile. Ankh felt a pang of something he couldn’t identify at Hidari’s unrestrained joy, and pushed it back where it had come from. “You can tell him to stop.”

“Didn’t work,” Ankh said.

“Sorry,” Hidari said, but he didn’t seem sorry at all. “It’s rare for him to come across completely new information. The Gaia Library – the one in his head – has pretty much everything known to mankind, indexed and searchable, and usually when he wants to know something all he has to do is look it up.”

“If you’re trying to compliment me, you’re terrible at it.” Ankh dropped the stick over the side of the balcony.

“I’m still half-boiled,” Hidari said, which made zero sense, but he followed the statement by returning inside. Ankh waited a few more minutes before following, slipping inside silently and joining the dinner conversation by not saying a word while he ate. Philip, much to Ankh’s relief, stopped asking quite so many questions; Ankh noticed that he asked one every 300 seconds, like
clockwork, including the follow-up questions.

“Have you tried collaborating with the Kougami Foundation?” he asked, after Philip wanted to know what a Cell Medal felt like.

“I’m interested in personal experience,” Philip said earnestly.

“He’s already gone through their servers,” Hidari translated, and then glanced somewhat guiltily at the detective.

Izumi had his face buried in his hands. “I have heard nothing of possible legal transgressions in the course of this meal,” he said. “Nothing.” Hina patted her brother’s shoulder.

Overall, Ankh considered the evening to be remuneration worth the information that the Kougami Foundation had been attempting to distract him from their creation of a new Greeed with the talent agency. He didn’t know how – or if – he wanted to use the information, but he liked knowing he had it; better to be informed than to be in the dark.

In the meantime, he enjoyed performing enough to continue, even under dishonest pretenses, and he was still getting an appropriate amount of Cell Medals from providing the lab with regular Yummy subjects for study. In the weeks following Hidari’s visit, Ankh found an odd sense of routine beginning to settle around him; performances at slightly larger and more unfamiliar venues, scheduled visits to the lab, and Hina’s next few outings as OOO.

Ankh tried to keep Hina’s time transformed as short as possible, allowing her to defeat each Yummy before it matured despite the lower Medal harvest. She didn’t seem to be reacting poorly to use of the Driver, surrendering it to Ankh for safekeeping without protest or apparent reluctance, but he kept a close eye on her all the same. The one time he felt uneasy about the arrangement was when Hina failed to arrive quickly enough to prevent the Yummy’s maturation and it molted its humanoid skin to reveal an eight-legged perversion of a hard-shelled crab.

“I don’t know what you want me to do with that!” Hina said, sounding half-way hysterical as the crab unfolded itself into a two-and-a-half-meter tall monstrosity.

“Switch medals,” Ankh snapped, and tossed Kujaku and Condor at her. She fumbled the catch, and the crab started to scuttle after her as she groped for the Medals. “Here!” Ankh shouted, flinging one of his Cell Medals hard enough to ping off the crab’s shell. Its eyes swiveled over to him on the ends of long, long stalks, and it moved with devastating speed.

Ankh dodged, hearing cloth rip as the crab made a grab for him with its wickedly sharp claws and feeling his foot go numb as the crab just barely grazed his ankle. He heard the welcome sound of the OOO Driver singing the TaJaDor melody and scrambled to his feet.

“Fire!” he shouted, and Hina unleashed an inferno. He barely got clear in time, one trailing forearm singed pink by the heat as the crab burned with enough ferocity to melt the sidewalk. It exploded into a shower of Cell Medals, glowing slightly as they cooled, and Hina stood triumphantly over it. “You can take that off,” he said, limping slightly as he walked toward the still-warm Cell Medals.

Hina turned to look at him. Ankh hadn’t realized how eerie the expressionless face of the OOO armor could be until it was staring at him without moving.

“Take it off,” he said, letting warning sharpen his voice.

The suit crackled and vanished, Hina pulling in a deep breath. She dropped the Driver and the Scanner, panting as though she’d run a marathon, and stumbled backwards. Ankh frowned.
“What?” he asked.

“I…” She shook her head. “I almost – I didn’t – you were nearly caught in the – I nearly killed you!”

“No, you didn’t.” He might have argued the point on another occasion, but he knew he was quick enough that she’d actually have to try to damage him, no matter whose body he was wearing. Besides, the idea was to keep her from going off the deep end, not push her into it. “Though your aim could be better.”

“What?” She glared at him indignantly, the tears that had been welling up vanishing.

“Your aim,” he said. “You should have gone for the vulnerable points at the edges of its shell, or its eyes, rather than the armored back.”

“Like you could do a better job,” she said, which was still not quite Hina-like. It was close enough. Ankh raised an eyebrow at her.

“Eiji never had trouble catching the Medals, either,” he said.

“Now that is absolutely not true,” Hina said. “I caught you both practicing. More than once.” Ankh smirked at her. “Fine, we’ll practice.” She sighed and picked up the Driver and Scanner, handing them both to him.

The last part of the short-lived routine was the most unexpected; Ankh found himself refusing to see people with unfamiliar names who refused to tell him or the people running interference what their business was. It started with phone calls from unfamiliar numbers, and progressed to people showing up at the agency office or at his performances. There were two men and one woman, all of whom were persistent and none of whom were the woman who’d accosted him the night he’d seen Hidari, and eventually he asked the detective if he could find out who they were.

The detective insisted that Ankh register a complaint before he would use public resources, but when he came back with identities, he was clearly uncomfortable.

“Ankh, these are Eiji’s siblings.” He put three sheets of paper down on the desk, having also insisted that Ankh come to the station to fill out paperwork in order to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. “Takaichi Kazuya. Takaichi Yasuo. Maehara Naoko.”

“Eiji has siblings?” Ankh reached toward the nearest sheet of paper, but before he could reach it, he felt a sudden stab of pain in his chest. He drew in a sharp breath and rubbed at the spot, feeling it subside reluctantly.

“Are you all right?” The detective eyed him.

“Fine,” he answered shortly. It seemed to be over, whatever it had been. “Can I make them stay away?” He could recognize some of the discomfort for what it was, now; Eiji had had a number of conflicting emotional reactions to his siblings, it seemed, and they were leaking through. It was the first sense of Eiji that Ankh had had since transforming to TaJaDor; he hadn’t noticed when his impressions of Eiji had stopped, and it was uncomfortably reminiscent of Hina not noticing that she hadn’t heard from Eiji in a month. Just to reassure himself, Ankh reached inwards, but Eiji still felt the same, still vague and barely present.

“Well,” the detective was saying slowly, “you could file a restraining order, although that seems like –“

“Do it,” Ankh said. “If it will keep them away from me, do it.” The detective wasn’t happy about it,
but Ankh signed whatever paperwork the detective put in front of him, and considered the matter
settled. The feeling of being in something of a holding pattern didn’t abate, and he wasn’t sure how
effective his efforts to heal Eiji were, but he thought he could be patient for a while longer.
Ankh, Family, and Memories

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ankh didn’t get much longer before the situation he’d dismissed came to a head. It had even been a good day, for the most part; Hina had fought with a Yummy, dispatched it before it had matured, and made it to her first class on time. Ankh had gotten a sizable haul of Cell Medals out of the Yummy despite it not maturing, and then he’d spent a significant chunk of time in Kougami’s lab so that various measurements of the process of creating a Yummy could be measured. The lab time was more boring than unpleasant, but it had been beautiful enough outside that he’d elected to walk most of the way back to the Izumi residence.

The few leaves that were left were brightly colored and the sky was an unusually clear and deep blue. Ankh breathed deeply, irrationally disappointed that the air still smelled like the city. A few white fluffy clouds scudded overhead in the brisk wind, leaving the warmth of the late afternoon sun a pleasant counterpoint to the cool briskness of the breeze. The people on the street, Ankh noticed, were bundled up as though they were freezing, but he was enjoying the air.

When he got to the apartment building, he didn’t want to go inside; it had gotten dark enough that his climbing the outside of the building would go unnoticed, with the only remnants of what had been a spectacular sunset being a paler strip along the western edge of the sky. It wasn’t really even visible from the ground. Ankh went up his usual route and sat back in one of the balcony chairs, stretching all four of Eiji’s limbs. It felt good, and he could just barely make out a rare sense of contentment coming from Eiji’s unconscious mind.

The strange voices coming from inside the living room, clearly audible through the partly open balcony door, were not a welcome addition to Ankh’s environment.

“He’s my son,” said the first voice Ankh heard. It was male, with an air that suggested that the owner was used to being obeyed.

“Our son,” came another voice, much quieter than the first but clear for all of that; Ankh thought the owner might be standing closer to the open door. The second voice was female, and vaguely familiar. The image of a well-dressed middle-aged woman in a crowd flashed behind Ankh’s eyes, but he couldn’t place it.

“Your son isn’t here,” said the detective. He was remarkably calm, for someone who seemed to have had his home invaded. “Even if he was, he’s an adult who can make his own decisions on whether or not he wants to talk to you.”

“I’m not leaving him in this… this den of iniquity,” said the man, and Ankh suppressed a laugh. Den of iniquity, indeed, he thought; what did this man think his son was doing? “It’s out of the question for him to be living with a young woman without supervision.”

“Excuse me,” the detective said, and Ankh could hear that he’d reached the end of his patience, although he wasn’t sure the man speaking could tell, given that he kept right on going.

“If you and your harlot wish to continue an unseemly lifestyle, you can go right ahead, but leave my son out of it. I won’t stand for you putting your hands on him.”

“Get out,” Shingo said, having lost any semblance of calm. “That’s my sister you’re – get out.”
“I will not,” the man said. “I refuse to leave until I see my son. Where is Eiji?”

Ankh felt he should have put the pieces together more quickly; he remembered now that he’d seen the woman at one of his performances, and that she’d called him with Eiji’s name.

“Filing a restraining order against his brothers, refusing to talk to his mother – produce my son, immediately, or I will have you arrested.”

“You’re trespassing,” the detective returned. “Get out, before I throw you both out.”

Ankh had had enough of the conversation, and he’d had enough of the interference from someone who had done nothing but make his life difficult in an attempt to get Eiji to stop doing something that Ankh enjoyed, something that wasn’t causing anyone any harm. “If you want him, you can have him,” he muttered, and slipped out of Eiji’s body.

If Ankh had given it a second’s thought, he wouldn’t have disengaged from Eiji until he’d at least put the body into a sitting position. As it was, Eiji crashed to the ground, knocking over one of the detective’s chairs and the glass side table. Ankh had a spare moment of guilt before he slipped out of sight over the balcony rail, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

“Ankh?” he heard from the detective, and the balcony door was flung wide open. “Eiji,” the detective said, surprised, and knelt down. “Ankh,” he hissed. “Get back here.”

Before Ankh could make any sort of answer, the owner of the voice shouldered his way through the door. He was tall and broad, wearing both his years and his weight well. “Eiji!” he said, and then shouted over his shoulder for his wife to call an ambulance.

“No,” the detective started to say, but then he caught sight of Ankh lurking just below the balcony rail. He pointed at Eiji, mouth set in a straight line. Ankh gave him the middle finger, and the detective stepped toward him with a clearly predatory intent. Ankh backed away a bare millimeter, ready to dodge if the detective actually tried to grab him, but temporary salvation came from an unlikely source.

“Mr. Izumi,” said Eiji’s mother. “Has anything like this happened to my son before?”

“I think that is something you should discuss with your son,” the detective said tactfully, throwing one last glance over his shoulder at Ankh.

By that point, it was too late to stop the paramedics from showing up and carting Eiji’s unconscious body off; Ankh waited until everyone had left and the apartment was dark and quiet to emerge from the balcony. He stretched, using Cell Medals to create the same body he’d used the last time he’d left Eiji for more than a few minutes; the face settled somewhere between the detective’s and Eiji’s, although he’d thought he had more Cell Medals than the pile that he apparently did.

Hina, with spectacular timing, showed up not five minute after everyone else had left. “Shingo?” she called, kicking off her shoes. “I saw an ambulance outside. Do you know who it was for? Shingo?”

“No here,” Ankh said, walking through his door.

“Ankh!” Hina flinched back, and then fumbled on the wall for a light switch. She blinked when she saw Ankh clearly, and looked around the room at the scattered detritus left behind. “What happened?”

“Eiji’s parents,” Ankh said, which should have been enough explanation. It wasn’t.
“Where’s Eiji?” Hina asked carefully.

“Probably in some hospital,” Ankh said. “They want to talk to him, they’re welcome to try. Persistent assholes that they are.”

“Ankh,” Hina started, and he rounded on her.

“I am done,” he said. “I didn’t sign up to referee Eiji’s family drama. Either he’ll get better on his own, or he won’t, but I am not putting up with any of this.” Without Eiji’s presence influencing and undermining his thoughts, Ankh could finally clearly understand how he felt. He wasn’t doing anything he wanted to be doing – what did he care if the Kougami Foundation managed to work out whatever it was doing with his Yummies, or with its newborn Greeed, and he liked performing well enough but not enough to suffer through the associated drama.

“You can’t just leave him,” Hina said, and her insistence that she could tell him what to do just made Ankh angrier.

“Watch me,” he said.

His sense of righteous fury carried him all the way to the airport and onto the last plane of the day bound for Sapporo, but by the time he’d been in the air for an hour, it had started to fade. He thumped his head on the back of his seat with more force than was necessary. What am I doing?, he asked silently.

“You okay?”

The voice speaking English came from his left, a small non-Japanese child looking up at him with huge gray eyes. He blinked down at it.

“I’m so sorry,” said someone who Ankh presumed was related to the child somehow. “Don’t just ask strangers questions, sweetie.”

“It’s okay,” Ankh said. He looked down at the child. “My friend is very sick,” he said. “I don’t know if he’ll get better.”

The child tilted its head to the side. “Did you give him chicken soup?” it asked. “Mommy gives me chicken soup when I’m sick.”

“No,” Ankh said, struggling to get the words out past a lump in his throat that had put itself there without his permission. He wasn’t supposed to have these problems in a body made exclusively of Medals. “No, I haven’t tried feeding him chicken soup.”

“I’m sorry,” said the child’s companion. “Are you on your way to see your friend?”

“He’s in Tokyo,” Ankh said. “I can’t – I can’t help him. I’m not going to stand there and talk to his parents, who keep accusing him of – why am I saying this to you.” It was easier to talk to someone he knew he was never going to see again, but he shouldn’t have felt better after talking about something so ridiculous and so personal in the first place. The child’s companion was giving him an odd look now, and pulled the child closer to her. She ignored him for the rest of the flight, making some sort of ritualized gesture and removing herself and the child from Ankh’s immediate vicinity the second the plane touched down.

The whole episode made Ankh feel even worse.

“Stupid Eiji,” he muttered and swiped at his burning eyes. His hand came away wet, and he stared at
it in near shock. He hadn’t thought this body could cry. “Stupid, stupid Eiji,” he said again, and walked out of the airport into the cold Hokkaido night without bothering to turn his phone back on.

Ankh didn’t know what he’d wanted to accomplish by returning to Hokkaido, only that it was the farthest destination from Tokyo that he could think of that didn’t require a passport. Sapporo as a city brought back a flood of memories that he tried to shove back down, but they kept coming, and the image that was the most vivid was the cemetery pretending to be a park where Eiji had been found unconscious months before.

“Fine,” Ankh growled, and tried to work out how to get there.

He was too late for the majority of the buses and trains, but he eventually made his way to the park in question. It was closed, but that didn’t stop him from simply walking inside. The spot where Eiji had been found was outside the park proper, far enough away from populated or visited areas that Ankh was surprised that Eiji had been found at all. He stared down at the patch of ground that he knew was where Eiji had done whatever it was he’d done, now covered in untouched snow. Memory threatened again, and he pushed back at it. “I don’t know what Eiji did,” he said out loud. “I don’t want to know.”

Standing in the same spot, he couldn’t deny that he knew exactly what had happened; whether he’d accessed the information and then pushed it away or whether it had seeped into his mind in an unintended transfer, Ankh could see and hear what Eiji had done as clearly as if it was happening right before his no-longer-borrowed eyes. With a shudder, Ankh closed his eyes and let the memory play out.

Eiji’s clothes were still wet; his feet squished in his shoes and the bag holding the medals he’d found was still clinging to itself, although it was no longer dripping. He was distantly grateful that the weather was warm enough for him not to freeze to death, although the ocean certainly hadn’t approximated any definition of warm, and he was shivering. He put the Medals down, carefully, and belted the Driver around his waist.

The first Medals were, as always, Taka, Tora, and Batta, the Driver singing the TaToBa melody with its unrestrained cheerfulness. Eiji felt the tears prickle the backs of his eyelids and blinked to keep his vision clear. Tora and Batta were replaced by Kujaku and Condor, the copies of those Medals Ankh had held onto the longest, and the Driver sang for TaJaDor. Eiji took a deep breath and pulled the Taka Medal out, placing it with the others, and removing the two halves of Ankh’s broken Core from the medal case.

Energy from the transformation process might fuse the two halves of the Medal together again, Eiji had thought in the middle of some night. The transformation process was what had exposed the weaknesses of the reconstituted Cores, and he’d had the fleeting thought as the one successful transformation failed that it might kill him, too. He’d almost been disappointed to wake up, but if he didn’t put Ankh’s Core back together, no one would. It had been some time after that that he’d had the idea that the Driver might be the key.

Tonight was his last-ditch effort; he’d exhausted every other avenue, he’d run out of options. If something went wrong, at least there was no one around to get hurt; he’d been told there had been some injuries during the energetic final failure of the reconstituted Cores, and that was a part of history he had no interest in repeating. Eiji was going to put Ankh’s Core back together or he was going to die trying.

You’re an idiot, he could imagine Ankh saying, and he smiled at the illusion. “At least if I fail, I’m already in a cemetery,” he pointed out to the spirit that wasn’t there. The illusion-Ankh didn’t think it was funny in the slightest, but that was all right. TaJaDor was hot against his skin. With another
deep breath, Eiji carefully inserted the broken halves of the Medal into the slot. It took a little bit of maneuvering to make sure it was positioned correctly, but Eiji could feel it lock into place as if it was coming home. He pulled the Scanner off his belt and ran it across the Driver.

The Driver stuttered, repeating Taka over and over and over again, heat building in it each time until heat became pain, pain became agony, and Eiji screamed. The suit crackled against his skin, red energy washing over him in a wave. It picked apart his brain, overwhelming his mind with fiery red and driving him straight into featureless darkness.

Ankh surfaced from the memory to find himself on his knees in the snow, chill moisture seeping through to his skin. “You are an idiot,” he said. “You were right about that.”

He’d told Eiji that he’d gotten what he’d wanted, when Eiji had been falling to Earth after destroying Maki’s mad creation. He’d spent the last of his energy making sure Eiji had half of his Medal and Hina had the other half, so they’d know he appreciated what they’d done. They’d helped him – a pile of Medals with a thought process – have enough of a life to be able to die, and being alive was all he’d ever wanted. His energy had gone toward making sure Eiji would keep the life he had, and Eiji had damaged himself almost certainly beyond repair. But he had succeeded in putting Ankh’s Core back together.

“Idiot,” he said again. “I won’t cry over you. I’m not fixing the mess you put yourself in.”

Tears were already streaking his cheeks; he brushed them away and stood. He could go any number of places, but he didn’t want to visit any of them. Right at that moment, he wanted nothing to do with Eiji or with his former life. Ankh walked deeper into the mountains.

Chapter End Notes

Mostly unrelated to the fic, I’ve broken my wrist in three places, which has been slowing down the editing process considerably. (It’s out of the cast and into a splint, which is good, but the downside is that I’ve been told to stop using both hands to type. Frustrating.) The fic has been written through to its conclusion, but there will be some delays getting the last three parts up while I edit with one hand and/or try not to murder my speech recognition software.
“Anything?” Shingo asked.

Hina shook her head. “It’s still going straight to voicemail. Either the battery’s run out or he’s turned it off.” She didn’t want to ask her brother to track Ankh’s cell phone via his work; Shingo felt strongly about the misuse of public resources for private matters, even if it probably wouldn’t have come with a reprimand.

“If you file a missing person report,” Shingo said, but his eyes flicked over to the closed door. If Hina tried to file a missing person report for Hino Eiji, he would turn up in the hospital where he was currently being treated for an unknown condition, and Ankh didn’t technically legally exist.

Hina shook her head. “It was a good thought,” she said. She squeezed Shingo’s hand tighter, and he squeezed back in sympathy.

He had a great deal less sympathy for hospital security a few minutes later, when two guards came up to them radiating a wordless apology and told them that they would have to leave the hospital grounds.

“What?” Hina said.

“The patient in room 4077,” said the guard. “His parents have requested that you be removed in order to prevent a disturbance.”

“You can’t be serious,” Hina gasped.

“Hina, it’s not worth it. We’ll go,” Shingo said, tugging her toward the door.

“Not worth it? We’re Eiji’s friends!” Hina pulled away and stalked toward the room they’d been unceremoniously thrown out of when they’d tried to see Eiji earlier. They’d retreated to the nearest waiting room in the hope of reaching some sort of agreement with the Takaichis, but the effort had been in vain. “We’re the one who were there for him, not them!”

Hina was simultaneously acutely aware that she’d been the one urging Eiji to speak to his family while he’d been OOO for a year, and absolutely furious at being shut out. The door to Eiji’s room stayed stubbornly closed, but now the security guards were moving to intercept her and one of them was calling for backup.

“Hina, stop.” Shingo stepped in front of her.

Hina stopped, breathing heavily. “Shingo,” she said. “You know it’s wrong.”

“We can’t do anything from here,” Shingo said. “Come on.”

Reluctantly, Hina followed her brother to the elevator and out the door. She tried Ankh’s phone again; he was the only shot they had at getting Eiji’s body out of the hospital without literally kidnapping him, and even if they did, they couldn’t take care of him unless he woke up on his own. She fumed all the way home, directing her energy into cleaning up everything the paramedics had left behind and then cleaning the apartment. She carefully threw out the broken glass on the balcony and righted the fallen chair.

Eiji had bled all over the balcony. Her stomach twisted, and she pressed a hand to her mouth before
going after bleach and a pair of rubber gloves. By the time she’d finished, Shingo was deeply asleep on the couch and she’d curled up on the now-wobbly chair with a cup of strong coffee to watch the rising sun. Hina was still sitting in the cool morning air, wearing a heavy jacket, her coffee long gone cold, when Shingo stepped out onto the balcony a few hours later. “Have you slept?” he asked, pulling his inadequate shirt more tightly around his torso.

“I can't believe he would do this,” Hina said. She wasn't crying; the moisture in her eyes was from the fitful breeze that curled through the balcony, refusing to either die or turn into something resembling wind.

Shingo sighed heavily, and Hina could hear everything he wasn't saying. She let him herd her inside, where it was warmer; she hadn’t realized quite how cold she was until she was no longer freezing. "This was always a possibility," he said, handing her a cup of hot tea. That he was almost apologetic as he said it lessened her initial instinct to smack the cup to the floor to a simple convulsive tightening of her grip.

She took a sip before she could say something she regretted to her brother, who wasn't the target of her anger. He was simply there. The tea burned her tongue, but it was worth it for the warmth spreading through her stomach, and the physical sensation helped her bring her emotions under control. Dimly she thought of Ankh warning her of what the OOO suit might do, and took a deep breath until the automatic swell of rage subsided. "It shouldn't have been," she said finally. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

"I know." Shingo fiddled with the edge of his shirt in an uncharacteristic display of restlessness. "I'm a little surprised he stayed this long," he said finally, his voice low, and Hina remembered how Ankh had borrowed her brother for most of a year. How Shingo had been awake through the majority of it. How well Shingo knew Ankh; better than any of them, in a lot of ways, and she wanted to tell him anyway that her friend was better than that.

"He was supposed to -" she started to say, and her throat closed off. She wasn't sure what she would have said. Hina took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're late for work," she said, trying to keep her voice even. She almost succeeded.

““You going to be okay alone?” Shingo asked.

“Go ahead.” Hina gave him as bright of a smile as she could manage. “I’ll… think of something to do.” She’d had her final exam for her last class on the last day she’d fought a Yummy as OOO; she was just waiting on results, now, and then winter break was hers to do with as she chose. She’d initially thought the longer-than-usual winter break was a positive part of the program in which she’d enrolled, but now she had no distractions.

An attempt to get into the hospital only got her recognized and thrown back out again; as if that wasn’t enough, the alert she’d set started going off, and Hina found on-the-spot reports of a Yummy rampaging around another district. She tried Ankh again, to tell him that she needed the Driver and the Scanner, but the number continued to go straight to voicemail.

A RideVendor was close enough for her to activate it and drive to the area in question – she had a ready supply of Cell Medals, specifically for that purpose. She didn’t know what she was going to do to the Yummy without the OOO suit, except maybe punch it or drop something heavy on it. Maybe she could throw the RideVendor at it. She glanced down at the bike. It didn’t deserve that.

Birth was already fighting with the Yummy when she arrived, but as it had chosen a construction site for its tantrum, there were plenty of handy chunks of concrete around. Hina picked one up and threw it at the Yummy just as its skin began to ripple in maturation. It crashed to the ground, spitting out a
shower of Cell Medals. Birth hopped to his feet with a jaunty little salute and Hina threw another rock at the Yummy. More Cell Medals scattered across the street, and Birth finished it off with no further trouble.

“What are you doing here?” Goto asked, disengaging the transformation and removing the belt.

“I’m having a very weird day,” Hina said, and went to pick up some of the Cell Medals.

“Uh, I’m not sure I’m supposed to let you do that,” Goto said apologetically.

“I did help,” she said. “And I need them for the RideVendor.”

“Since when do you use the RideVendor?” Goto frowned at her, and she belatedly realized that he was going to start putting the pieces together.

“I asked for lessons,” she said. “Sometimes it’s quicker than taking the train to class.” She didn’t think Goto was falling for it, but at least he stopped asking.

“How did you know there was a Yummy?” he said instead, which wasn’t much better, and she wordlessly held up her phone to show him the alerts. “Then why are you here?”

She didn’t have to lie to answer that question. “I was hoping Ankh would show up,” she said. The adrenaline and exhaustion caught up to her, and she was sobbing into Goto’s shoulder, and telling him about Eiji’s parents and Ankh leaving and that she hadn’t been able to get in touch with him. Goto patted her on the back, awkwardly, until Hina stepped away. “I’m sorry,” she said finally.

Goto gave her a look halfway between scandalized and reassuring. “You have no idea where he went?” he asked, clearly choosing the safest topic.

“No, it’s a nightmare.” Hina tried to dry off her cheeks without removing what remained of her mascara, but she didn’t think she was succeeding too well. “Eiji's parents won’t let us see him, and Ankh won’t answer his phone.”

“The Foundation might be able to track it,” Goto said.

Hina considered the offer for less than half a second. “Please,” she said.

“I’ll let you know what I find.” Goto nodded to her. Hina drove the RideVendor back toward home, leaving Goto to collect the Cell Medals.

Results weren’t expected immediately, and Hina was both unsurprised and somewhat disappointed to hear that Ankh’s phone had gone in the general direction of Narita before being shut off. Goto could try something else to track it, he said, but it would take some time. Goto also mentioned that he would appreciate if word of his doing this particular favor didn’t get spread around, which Hina assumed meant that he was doing it without his boss’s knowledge.

“Thank you,” she said, trying to convey how much the gesture meant to her.

“It’s nothing,” Goto said. “Hino’s my friend, too, and Ankh, well. Ankh is Ankh.”

Hina was tired enough to laugh at that, grateful that Goto had hung up before the slightly hysterical giggle found its way out, but then she found herself playing a waiting game. Waiting to see if Ankh answered the phone, waiting to see if Eiji had healed enough to wake up, waiting to see if Goto could find Ankh, waiting for her grades, although the latter seemed less important with each passing day. The day that Hina found out through what she refused to classify as eavesdropping that Eiji’s
parents were moving him out of the hospital into longer-term care was a difficult day, for all that she memorized every piece of information she overheard.

One week to the day after Ankh had left, Goto sent the location of his phone. Ankh had apparently finally turned it back on, she saw, and he was in Sendai. “What’s in Sendai?” Goto asked, innocently enough.

“I have no idea,” Hina said, with perfect honesty. She had no idea what Ankh was doing, but Goto had sent her a small executable file that would allow her to use her phone to continue to track Ankh’s. She was on a train heading northward within the hour.

Whatever Hina had expected to find, Ankh toying with a Yummy wasn’t it; it was in its larval form and hadn’t matured, and he was dancing backwards to avoid its increasingly frustrated attacks. He was playing his game in the middle of a busy city street, while passersby filmed the confrontation on their phones, until a stray burst of flame set a nearby tree on fire. Hina reached them just as the crowd scattered.

“Ankh!” she shouted.

“Don’t worry,” he said easily, and the Yummy dissolved into a pile of Cell Medals. Ankh absorbed them and sauntered down the street right past her. He was close enough that Hina could see he wasn’t wearing a human face until he was out of sight of the few people still in the area, and then he abruptly shifted into the face she’d seen him wear the first time she’d thought he’d abandoned Eiji; it was somewhere between Eiji and her brother, and it was oddly unsettling. The hair was the same, between the both of them, and the smirk, and that made it a little easier to look at a face that was both too familiar and not familiar enough.

“What did you think you were doing?” It was clear that the Yummy had been his, but she knew he’d agreed not to cause chaos for the sake of generating Cell Medals.

“I was running low,” he said with a careless shrug. “I had less than I thought I did when I started out.”

“Still – that’s not why I’m here.”

“You’re here because I let you know where I was,” Ankh said loftily. He turned down a side street without warning and Hina had to jog to catch up. “I noticed you called,” he added, looking a little less sure of himself, and then closed his mouth as if he’d wanted to say something else but changed his mind at the last moment.

“Eiji’s parents still have him,” Hina said. “They moved him out of the hospital, though.”

“Tch.” Ankh grimaced, an expression that she’d gotten used to first on her brother and then on Eiji, and one that finally cemented this new face as neither one nor the other. He didn't stop walking or look at her directly.

“Come home,” Hina said, which wasn’t what she’d planned on saying. She planted herself in the middle of the street and refused to budge. "You made a commitment.”

“You just want me to try to heal Eiji,” Ankh said, turning back and physically pushing her through a nondescript door with a sign she didn’t have a chance to read. The building turned out to be a small café; the proprietor behind the counter handed Ankh a chocolate-covered banana on a stick and a mug without asking, and turned to Hina. Flustered, she ordered tea and tried to pay for it, but Ankh nudged her toward a table. “There’s an agreement,” he said.
Hina swallowed whatever argument she might have made about Ankh’s arrangement regarding candied bananas and milk tea. “I do want you to heal Eiji,” she said. “But you’re my friend, too, Ankh. And you made me a promise.” She was less angry, now, than she had been a week previously; seven days to think had simply left her tired and disappointed over what she felt she was justified in describing as Ankh’s betrayal of them both. She couldn't fix any of it if Ankh kept hiding, though.

Ankh dropped his eyes to the table in an uncharacteristic display of reticence, moodily biting the tip off the banana and chewing it thoroughly before swallowing. “I don’t know if he’ll ever get better,” he said bluntly. “Even with me helping.”

The bottom dropped out of Hina’s stomach; of all the things Ankh could have said, that was what she would have least expected. Even if it did seem to be taking longer to heal Eiji than it had taken to heal Shingo, the word never hadn’t occurred to her. “Why didn’t you say anything?” she asked, when she finally found her voice.

“I didn’t know how,” Ankh said. He shifted on his chair and ate more banana. Hina waited, but he didn’t say anything else.

“Don’t you want to try anyway?” she prompted.

“I don’t think Eiji wants me to,” Ankh said, so quietly that she wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly.

“Excuse me?” Ankh straightened and glared at her for the tone in her voice, but Hina held her ground. ”That’s ridiculous,” she said, but her voice was trailing off in hesitation by the end of it, at the expression on Ankh's face.

“I remember what he did to repair me,” he hissed, and he told her in gut-wrenching detail exactly what he remembered.

“You –“ Words failed her. She cleared her throat. “You think he was trying – he wouldn’t.”

“I know what I remember,” Ankh snapped. “He has what he wants, right now.”

“Do you want to try anyway?” Her voice came out small and almost scared, but she was sure that if Eiji knew that he’d brought Ankh back, that he’d be happy about it.

“I don’t know if –” Ankh broke off abruptly, mouth twisting downwards, and stared right through her. “Screw that,” he said, heat creeping into his voice. He bit down savagely on the banana, crunching right through the end of the stick. He didn’t seem to notice the splinters, even though Hina could hear them grinding in his teeth.

“What?” she asked, partly for clarification but partly as a distraction from the unsettling sound.

“Screw that,” Ankh said. “If he thinks he can get away with pulling idiotic stunts, he’s got another think coming.”

Hina cheered internally and did her best to keep her face straight, or at least limit herself to a kind smile. Ankh agreeing to come back wasn’t enough to entirely mitigate his running off in the first place, but it went a long way.

“Stop smirking,” Ankh said, and she smacked his arm. “How does that still hurt?” he demanded, rubbing the spot she’d hit. “This body is made of Cell Medals. How can it possibly hurt?”

“You deserved that,” she said. “I’m not going to apologize.”
Ankh grumbled, but he was on a train with her the following morning bound for Tokyo, as Hina fielded calls and texts from her brother demanding to know where she’d gone without leaving him so much as a note. He was not pleased with her explanation, either, even if he was relieved that Ankh was coming home.

“But don’t tell him I said that,” Shingo said.

As the train outpaced the northern promise of snow for the relatively warmer weather farther south, Hina watched Ankh’s blurry reflection in the window. He kept glancing over at her, and then looking away. "I'm still upset with you," she said after he had opened his mouth for the third time. She saw him flinch before she turned around to look at him head on.

Ankh bristled, mouth flattening out to a thin straight line before he sighed and deflated. "That's... fair," he said grudgingly, the words sounding as if they had to fight to get out. "I - I acted quickly."

Hina blinked at him, utterly nonplussed. "Are you trying to play head games with me?" she demanded, when she finally found her voice. Ankh didn't apologize for anything, and the only way he could have gotten closer to an apology would have been to include the word sorry.

"I'm not saying it again," Ankh said, and Hina bit down on telling him that he hadn't said it the first time. "I won't do it again," he added quietly, and Hina found herself going along with it just to put a stop to the uncharacteristic moodiness.

"Why?" she asked instead. "And don't tell me it's because you didn't think you could heal Eiji. That's why you didn't come back. I want to know why you left."

"It doesn't matter why," Ankh snapped. "I made a mistake. I'm trying to fix it."

"It matters," Hina said, "because I don't think you were trying to deliberately hurt anyone. Even if we ended up hurt."

"This is stupid," Ankh muttered. Hina just kept looking at him, until he started avoiding her gaze. "I was angry, okay?" he said. "I'm not here to fix the mess Eiji made of his personal life, but they wouldn't just leave me alone."

Hina sighed. For all that Ankh was both centuries old and not human to begin with, he was capable of acting eerily like a teenager with too few restrictions on his behavior when there was something that inconvenienced him. She didn't know if she was relieved or disappointed that the precipitating incident had ultimately amounted to a temper tantrum.

"I said I wasn't going to do it again," Ankh muttered, and Hina chose to believe that he was sincere.
Ankh, Pursuit, and The Greeed

Ankh flopped onto the Izumi couch with a feeling of bone weariness. He’d forgotten how exhausting it was, wearing Eiji, but it was worth it to have seen Eiji’s father in the rear window of the taxi as he commandeered it to drive away using Eiji’s father’s money. By the door was a stupid place to leave a wallet; the man was lucky Ankh hadn’t just swiped the whole thing.

He would have to replace the clothes, though; there had been a great deal of clothing in Eiji’s size, but none of it was anything he actually would have worn. None of it was what Ankh preferred to wear, either, which was more relevant, and he’d taken a great deal of satisfaction in shredding the carefully tailored slacks and button-down shirt that had been representative of what had been in the closet. It had been even more satisfying to climb the outside of the sixty-four story building in broad daylight before punching his way through a window, and then laugh because no one except the people who already knew would figure out who the intruder was.

Ankh had seen police cars racing toward the building as the taxi had driven away, and it had been funny then, too, but he’d looked respectable enough dressed in Eiji’s family’s idea of appropriate clothing despite his hair and eyes that no one had questioned him when he’d gone right out the front door.

When the dream started wasn’t entirely clear; Ankh felt something in the back of his mind shifting, and sent a tentative thought towards it. “Eiji?”

There was no answer, not that he expected one. Ankh wrapped Eiji’s unconscious mind up again, trying to prevent the sort of bleed-through that he’d experienced before, but the barrier seemed insubstantial. He heard footsteps by the door, and then he was falling through a thunderstorm.

The ground was wet and cold when he hit it, feeling the unmistakable sensation of the Medals being ripped out of his chest. Uva stood over him, shaking his head mournfully before rippling into Kazari with his claws full of Ankh’s medals. They were neatly lined up, red and blue and purple and orange, and Ankh clapped a hand to his chest. It was warm and sticky, and he felt blood pumping out between his fingers.

“These are not for you,” Doctor Maki said, and the doll on his shoulder was a mass of Core Medals twisted obscenely into the approximate shape of a human being. Ankh stumbled backwards, falling even though he was sure he’d been lying down only a moment ago, and the flow beneath his fingers trickled away to nothing. He looked down to see silver coating his hands, Cell Medals melted into nothing.

“What did you do to me?” he asked, but the words came out garbled.

“Do? Nothing,” Gamel said, and stretched into a mockery of a spider, eight white eyes staring blindly while it wrapped him tightly in silken sticky strands until he couldn’t so much as twitch. Silver stained the threads at his heart, and he could feel the Medals draining away. The spider hissed at him, inhuman jaws clacking, and it melted into the most stunningly beautiful man Ankh had ever seen. The man held up a Cell Medal, and Ankh felt a slot open in his forehead.

“You can’t do this to me,” he said. “I’m a Greeed, not a human.”

The man smiled, cocking his head to the side. “Wake up,” he said, and flicked the medal at Ankh. It slid home, the sensation of wrongness exploding inside Ankh’s skin. “You’re having a nightmare.” Ankh opened his eyes to Hina’s worried face.
“Are you okay?” she asked.

The sense of wrongness from the dream took several moments to fade away, and Ankh had to swallow before he could speak. “I’m fine,” he said, but he couldn’t speak at a higher volume than a whisper. Hina frowned and left, returning a few moments later with her hands full of something glinting in the half light.

“Cell Medals,” she said, and dropped them one by one onto his left palm. Ankh felt better almost immediately, and had a horrifying thought. Remembering the dream, he felt frantically for his Core Medals. They were all present, the six red Cores and the variously colored others he’d chosen to keep absorbed, and he sighed in relief, even if his Cell Medal count had depleted again.

“How do I make them stay away?” he asked once the final medal had been absorbed.

“The Takaichi family?” Hina asked, and shrugged when he nodded. “I don’t know.” She looked troubled.

Ankh stretched out, his feet stretching past the edge of the couch, and rolled off it. “It’s late,” he said, and closed the door to his room to stave off any further questions. The lingering sense of wrongness from the dream was still barely tangible against his skin, and he rubbed at his chest where the dream Uva had reached inside his body.

His temporary solution to not dealing with Eiji’s parents ended up being another trip out of Tokyo; they couldn’t harass Eiji if they didn’t know where he was. He traveled south to Japan’s smaller islands instead of north, this time, leaving Kougami’s lab with a complement of Yummies to occupy their time and simply exploring areas outside of Tokyo. Hina caught up with him after the first day, citing boredom at home and the fact that her spring classes wouldn’t start for another two weeks. Ankh was privately certain that she was making sure he wasn’t going to run off again, but having her around wasn’t unpleasant.

“Shouldn’t you be spending New Year with your brother?” he asked, after a few days had passed and she showed no signs of going home. He remembered a conversation about the holiday the previous year, a whispered argument between Eiji and Hina that they hadn’t intended for him to hear, and Hina’s unusually bleak mood for the few days at the end of one calendar year and the beginning of the next. At the time, he’d dismissed it as ridiculous; now, he still found it ridiculous, but it meant something to Hina.

“He’s working,” she said. “It’s his turn, this year. We’ll spend some time together afterwards.”

“Oh.” Ankh was learning more about the people living in this time, the humans living and breathing and wanting, the force driving the world. He drained his can of heated coffee, deciding that the novel experience had been worthwhile but would not bear repeating, even if the warmth was welcome in the chill of the early morning.

“You should wear a jacket,” Hina said, and Ankh rolled his eyes.

It didn’t make a difference whether or not he wore a jacket; keeping Eiji warm took so little energy as to be insignificant, and he preferred not to have his movements limited. His clever nonverbal rejoinder was interrupted by the unmistakable feel of a Yummy nearby, and Ankh cursed instead.

“You don’t have to be rude about it,” Hina said.

“What? No.” He pushed the Driver and Scanner toward her; even here, he still kept it on hand. “There’s a Yummy.”
“All the way down here?” Hina frowned doubtfully at him, but she strapped the belt on. She struggled somewhat to fasten it over her thick coat, and he gave her a significant look. It wasn’t even like it was that cold, but she wasn’t wearing warm clothing underneath it.

The Yummy burst into the open just as Hina scanned the Driver, and Ankh pelted it with his empty coffee can. It was oddly shaped, looking almost like an immature larval Yummy, but covered in a shiny white carapace instead of the blotchy white and black strips that his own immature Yummies possessed, or those of Uva or Kazari. Its face was completely blank, and he felt an atavistic repulsion. It dodged his flung can with surprising agility, but Hina’s transformation had taken hold.

OOO swiped at the Yummy with the tiger’s claws, scoring long gray lines along its chest. The lines slowly faded, and Hina spun around to kick it in the jaw. It tumbled backwards, coming up in a crouch, and launched itself at Hina. She used its momentum against it to fling it against the nearby concrete blockade, leaving the wall cracked and dented. The Yummy hit the ground, apparently stunned, and Hina viciously drove her heel into its skull.

The Yummy caught her foot on the second downward kick, flipping Hina backwards. She landed awkwardly, giving the Yummy enough time to scramble to its feet, and Ankh pulled a set of three Medals out to let Hina switch forms. She caught them more easily than she had during their last outing, the OOO armor shifting to SaGohZo. Hina hadn’t used this combo before, and it took her a few seconds to catch on.

The Yummy grabbed her by the shoulders as she was figuring out how the combo worked, although Ankh couldn’t see what it was attempting to do, and Hina bashed it in the forehead with her own helmet. The Yummy staggered backwards, giving Hina enough time to slam it into the ground with SaGohZo Impact and grind it into so much dust. It melted into a pile of Cell Medals, and Hina disengaged the transformation.

“That was different,” she said, breathing hard and slowly sitting down. Ankh collected the Medals before checking on her; she was half-asleep, sitting in the middle of the street, and he pulled her upright. He left her in the hotel room they hadn’t yet checked out of, paying for another night’s stay, and decided to be smug that she could handle TaJaDor better than the other combos rather than annoyed that she didn’t have enough stamina for the other monochrome combos yet.

More important was the question of why, precisely, a Yummy had shown up so far from Tokyo; Ankh knew he hadn’t created it, unless there had been far more extensive experimentation done in the Foundation lab than he’d been led to believe. The most reasonable explanation was that Kougami’s Spider Greeed had been wandering. Ankh dropped his head to the table, hitting it a couple of times for good measure, and concluded that everything involved with the Kougami foundation went wrong somehow.

“Maybe it will just go home,” he said to no one in particular. He was currently in no mood to chase the baby Greeed around, for all that he was going to kill it eventually.

Ankh didn’t have to chase the Greeed; the Yummies kept coming to him. Every two or three days, a new larval Yummy would show up, with its odd featureless carapace and provoking the same frisson of disgust as the first. Hina figured out the second time out that she enjoyed equipping GataKiriBa to trap the Yummy and pound it into submission, and she adapted to its particular physiological stressors with remarkable speed.

Ankh, on the other hand, disliked the Yummies more every time they showed up, and abruptly decided that the trip was over. At least Tokyo had RideVendors and potential backup so that he didn’t have to feel his skin try to crawl away every time one of the Yummies showed up. Hina, to his surprise, objected to leaving an area so obviously needing Rider involvement.
“I don’t think it’s Shikoku,” Ankh said.

“Kyushu,” Hina corrected him. “We were on Shikoku last week.”

“Whatever.” Ankh flipped a Cell Medal back and forth across the fingers of his right hand and sprawled across one of the seats on the train platform. Hina pulled her small suitcase close enough to touch and sat with significantly more decorum in the seat next to him, still dubious as to Ankh’s motivations. “It’s going where we are. We’re being followed.”

Hina did not look convinced, particularly when the third day post-Yummy-incident came and went in Tokyo without one of the maybe-larval Yummies showing its lack of a face. Since there were no news reports of Yummies in either of Japan’s smaller southern islands, Ankh still regarded his statements to have been vindicated.

The trip Hina had planned to visit a shrine during the first week of January - just because she couldn’t spend the holiday with her brother was no reason not to celebrate at all, she’d said, and Ankh had rolled his eyes - was spoiled by a clearly larval Yummy, black and white skin and all, attempting to set a completely different shrine on fire. Hina was annoyed enough that Ankh found her pouting hilarious, but she dispatched the Yummy in record time before deciding that Ankh was going to experience a proper New Year celebration and it was suddenly much less funny.

The detective, who had barely twitched when Ankh had thrown the Driver and Scanner toward Hina, hid a smile. Ankh had seen him watching his sister carefully, though, and it occurred to him that this was the first time the detective had seen Hina transform. The detective pulled Hina aside for a whispered conversation after she handed the Driver and Scanner back to Ankh, coming back with an easier expression.

Ankh, perched on the parked RideVendor, rubbed his bare arms pointedly.

“If you wore more layers, you’d be less cold,” she said.

“I’m not cold, I’m bored,” he retorted, which only served to get him shushed.

As if the first Yummy had been bait for the second, one of the pure white Yummies showed up as Hina rode behind him on the RideVendor for the trip home, and Ankh skidded to a halt before running it over. Not that he didn’t want to hit it, but he didn’t want to damage the bike. The Foundation tended to bill for repairs.

“Another one?” Hina grabbed the Driver out of his hand. “This is ridiculous.”

“I told you they were following us,” he said, and she pushed the Cell Medals into the Driver with more force than she really needed.

“Coincidence.”

Ankh sat back on the RideVendor and watched her beat the Yummy into the ground. She stuck with TaToBa, working out her apparently considerable frustration before dispatching it with TaToBa’s signature kick. The detective hung back, eyes narrow as he watched his sister.

“It’s coincidence,” Hina said again after the fight, not quite throwing the Driver and Scanner at Ankh.

“Uh huh,” Ankh said.

The detective apparently had the same reservations about the monochromatic Yummies that Ankh
did; Ankh suddenly found his presence expected and assumed on Hina’s planned trip to the nearby Hakone shrine and surrounding district that he was fairly sure had been intended for Izumi siblings only no matter what Hina had said about Ankh participating in holiday traditions. The detective didn’t say as much to Ankh, just that the trip would be fun. Ankh could recognize a fight he wasn’t going to win when he saw it.

The train station had yet another surprise; Date had arrived back in Japan at some point, although no one had told Ankh, and he was on the train platform with both Goto and Satonaka. “Izumi!” he called. “Ankh! Little Hina!”

“Don’t call me little,” Hina muttered, and Date ruffled her hair as though she were his little sister.

The detective seemed to find it amusing. Ankh eyed the three current and former Foundation employees with a high level of skepticism; either one of them knew something he didn’t, or the detective was more paranoid than he should have been about a string of Yummies. None of them had come close to defeating Hina as OOO.

“I’m worried about her,” the detective said in an undertone while Date distracted Hina with a slew of questions about her classes and enthusiastically looked at her photos of the work she’d done over the last semester. “I can’t tell if she’s upset because of the holiday, or if OOO is affecting her.”

“She’s fine,” Ankh said, fairly sure he was correct. Hina wasn’t poised on the slippery slope to madness and attempted world conquest, she was just cranky.

“Please keep an eye on her,” the detective said instead of arguing, which was a fairly effective method of getting Ankh’s agreement.

The shrine turned out to be Ankh’s least favorite part of the area; Hina and the detective, while not engaging in the full New Year’s ceremonies, still spent an inordinate amount of time doing nothing at all that he could see, leaving Ankh with Satonaka for company. He concluded that she was awful company; she spent the majority of the time on her phone, except for the brief interval in which she found a soft-serve ice cream vendor inexplicably open despite the weather. She did present him with the only flavor of ice cream that tasted as good as he remembered the ice pops tasting, but given that it was wasabi he wasn’t sure if he forgave her for it.

“Eiji likes spicy food,” she said by way of explanation when he took the first bite.

“Of course he does,” Ankh said. He ate the ice cream anyway.

The shrine was followed by an experience that justified the entirety of the trip, including being bored out of his mind at the shrine itself and Satonaka’s abomination of dessert – Ankh was treated to his first hot spring. The ritual of bathing first mimicked the process before soaking in a bath, although Ankh generally eschewed the latter part for the efficiency of getting clean and then getting dressed again.

Hot springs were so many steps above and beyond the cramped bath in the Izumi apartment that Ankh wasn’t sure he wanted to leave. He didn’t even care how many other people were around, not even when Date lazily reached over to pluck the small towel out of Ankh’s hands and place it on his head.

“Can’t get it wet,” Date said.

Ankh opened one eye enough to glare at him half-heartedly before going back to reveling in the heat. It went clear through to his bones, leaving him with a sense of wellbeing he hadn’t felt since
possessing Eiji for the first time, and he protested when the detective poked at his shoulder to tell him it was time to climb back out.

“It’s not good for you to spend too long in here,” Izumi said mercilessly over Ankh’s statement that he wasn’t bound by the normal rules of human physiology and could do what he wanted. The cold air felt good on his heated skin when he reluctantly followed the others, though, and he only grumbled a little during the process of wrapping his still-damp body in a yukata.

Hina and Satonaka had apparently also taken advantage of the hot springs; they had both pinned up their hair and were flushed pink and smiling when Ankh saw them outside the facility.

“Did you like it?” Hina asked, eyes sparkling.

“He loved it and don’t let him tell you otherwise,” Date said, his wide grin having more than a hint of smugness to it.

“It was fine,” Ankh said shortly, and Hina giggled. The mood was spoiled by the unmistakable stomach-turning sensation of one of the monochromatic Yummies approaching the hot spring, and Ankh ran for the bag containing the Driver and Scanner.

“What’s going on?” Date asked, but Goto was barely half a step behind Ankh and Hina was keeping up with him without effort.

"Give me the Driver,” Hina said when Ankh hesitated; they’d worked hard to maintain the illusion that Ankh was the one wearing the OOO armor.

"Wait, what?” Date said again, looking back and forth between them. "Since when is Hina OOO?"

Goto fastened the Birth Driver around his yukata half a second before Hina clicked the OOO Driver into place and scanned the Core Medals Ankh flung her way without looking. The Yummy was nearly invisible against the snow, but Hina pounced on it as soon as it moved.

"It's been a couple of months, right?” Goto said, keeping out of the fight and offering remote support via the Birth Buster. "Right, Erika?"

Satonaka nodded once, sharply, which Date apparently took as an invitation to start asking for details. She deflected him with what looked like practiced ease.

Ankh sighed.

The Yummy went down quickly enough, Cell Medals showering the snowy landscape. “It’s clearly following us,” Hina said, disengaging the transformation and handing the equipment back to Ankh.

“Keep it,” he said, busy collecting Cell Medals, and she gave him a surprised look. He ignored it in favor of replenishing his energy levels; he was using less in healing Eiji than he had before leaving him to his own devices for a week, but he was still burning through them more quickly with Eiji than he had with the detective.

The Spider Greeed was another matter, one that Ankh wanted resolved. He didn’t care what it was that Kougami had thought he was doing when he’d set the thing loose, but he was done with its creepy monochromatic Yummies making his skin crawl and his stomach turn. It had to die.

“Satonaka,” he said, shaking the snow off his bare feet as he got back to the building.

“I’m not getting paid for this,” she told him.
Ankh simply looked at her, unimpressed, until she produced the tablet she used to videoconference with Kougami.

Despite the late hour and the holiday season, Kougami was in the office, still impeccably dressed and meticulously decorating an oddly-shaped cake with pale blue icing. “Ankh!” he roared. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“You and I both know that’s a lie,” Ankh said. He had no desire to play Kougami’s word games. “Your new Greeed. It’s stalking me, and I want you to know that I’m going to kill it.”

“You’re in Hakone,” Kougami said, putting the icing down and stepping closer to the camera.

“And before that Kyushu, and before that, Shikoku.” Ankh folded his arms. “What’s your point?”

“The Spider Greeed hasn’t left Tokyo,” Kougami said mildly. Ankh didn’t know if he was more surprised to hear Kougami casually acknowledge the existence of the monster he’d deliberately created and released, or to hear a flat-out denial of what he knew to be true. There was no other Greeed to create Yummies, unless Kougami had been busier than he seemed. “It’s the only one we’ve successfully engendered,” Kougami added, as if it was an afterthought.

“You’re lying,” Ankh said.

“It was fitted with a GPS tracker before it left the Foundation’s active custody,” Kougami said. “It hasn’t left the city.”

“It removed the chip, then,” Ankh said, a hint of desperation in his voice. He wasn’t accidentally creating Yummies that turned around and assaulted him, he was sure of it. He wanted to be sure of it. He wanted to know that he wasn’t creating the creatures that exuded such a sense of wrongness.

“It has not!” Kougami shouted. “It’s defined a territory, and it has been moving through that territory.” He grinned sharply, showing too many teeth. “It’s fascinating,” he said, his voice dropping. “But it has not left Tokyo.”

Ankh grabbed the tablet with the express intent of flinging it against the nearest wall. Satonaka rescued it, turning it off. “Then what’s been creating those… those things?”

Satonaka wasn’t listening; she packed away the tablet and looked at Goto. “I expect overtime for this,” she said.

Goto sighed melodramatically. “I’ll fill out the paperwork when I get back,” he said.

Ankh left them to their discussion. He pulled his clothes on with the jerky motions of aggravation, and in the process of picking up his bag to move it, realized it felt oddly light. He pulled out the Medal case and looked inside before remembering that he’d told Hina to hang on to the Driver and Scanner. She could hold them without a problem, he thought, as long as she didn’t have the Medals. He could feel his six Cores, along with the single yellow Core and the sets of green and gray Cores he’d chosen to absorb, and the rest should have been in the case.

Ankh idly flipped the case open, expecting to see the full set of blue Cores, along with the remaining two yellow Cores, and the orange and purple sets that he preferred to pretend didn’t exist. Apparently his pretending had had an effect on reality, because the purple Cores were gone. Ankh felt around inside his bag, knowing that they hadn’t fallen out but needing to check anyway. They weren’t there.

“Hina,” he breathed, snapped the case shut, and stalked down to the room she was sharing with
Satonaka. Ankh flung the door open without knocking, getting an eyeful of Satonaka pulling on her shirt and Hina fastening a skirt over her tights.

“Hey,” Satonaka said sharply once her eyes had cleared the neckline of her shirt, and she flung the nearest object at hand toward his head. Ankh dodged, focused on Hina.

“Where are they?” he asked.

“Where are what?” Hina looked bewildered; it was a good act, better than he’d thought she could pull off. The Driver was affecting her more than he’d thought it was, if she’d gained this level of duplicity.

“Don’t play games,” he snapped. “The Purple Cores. Where are they?”

“How should I know?” She was past confused and well into indignant now, folding her arms across her chest. “You’ve never let me use them.”

“There’s a reason for that!” He wasn’t quite shouting. “Those Cores are dangerous!”

“Well, I don’t have them!” Hina was shouting, loudly enough that Ankh could hear an audience gathering outside the door. Satonaka crossed the room and closed the door in Goto’s face.

Ankh held up the Medal case. “They’re not in here. What did you do with them?”

“I can’t believe you don’t trust me,” Hina hissed, and pushed past him. She shoved her way through the small crowd in front of the door, but not before Ankh saw the start of angry tears spilling out of her eyes. There was a brief scuffle outside the door, and then Goto followed Hina.

“What’s going on?” the detective asked, nearly as angry as his sister but voice much more level.

“She did something with the purple Cores,” Ankh said, knowing that the detective understood how much of a risk those specific Cores posed.

“Let me see that.” The detective reached for the medal case, and after a brief moment’s hesitation, Ankh surrendered it. The detective flipped it open, visually confirming the lack of purple Cores.

“Are you sure she has them?” he asked.

“Who else could?” Ankh demanded, snatching the case back out of the detective’s hands. “Who else even knows what this is?”


“Can’t you feel the Cores?” Satonaka asked, sounding both bored and curious. Ankh wasn’t sure how she pulled that particular vocal trick off, but she was more or less right.

“I can’t feel them if they’re not active,” he said.

“Are they?” Satonaka asked.

“Are they what?”

“Active,” Satonaka said, as if it were incredibly obvious.

Ankh heaved a huge, put-upon sigh and shouldered his way past Date and the detective toward the
door leading to the balcony stretching across the southern wall of the hotel. It was harder to catch the trace of Core Medals in action in Eiji’s body than it had been in Izumi’s, if he were to be completely honest with himself, and even the Yummies took longer to register. He wasn’t sure he’d actually feel active Cores without trying unless they were right in front of him, and being outside the building would reduce the sense of interference.

An entourage of three fell in behind him, and Ankh almost snapped at them to keep back, but it wasn’t like they were going to interfere. Probably.

The temperature had dropped while he’d been inside the building, and a light snow had begun to fall. It glittered in the artificial lights surrounding the building, stinging Ankh’s skin where it landed on it. He closed his eyes and extended his senses, searching for the flavor of the purple Cores. To his very great surprise, he registered a reaction not far away, lurking in the wooded hills outside the hotel. Distantly, he thought he’d have to apologize to Hina, and then was surprised at himself for the urge. I’ve changed, he thought, but the sense of the purple Cores was more important than potential future apologies.

“There’s something there,” he said reluctantly, and pointed. Hina emerged from the door behind him, and the vague thought that she’d fled with the Medals died. She clearly didn’t have them, not if she was standing right next to him and the reaction was coming from almost exactly the opposite direction.

Ankh vaulted over the balcony railing, landing lightly in the snow below, and took off running. He wanted answers. Goto was right behind him, Birth Driver already belted around his waist. He’d landed a little harder than Ankh had, from the sound of it, but he was running easily. Ankh sped up, pushing Eiji’s body to its limits, and felt the purple Cores move. Whoever or whatever had them was trying not to get caught, trying to maintain a consistent distance between Ankh and the Cores. He wasn’t having it.

The Cores switched directions twice, Ankh altering his trajectory smoothly both times. Goto kept up, running with frankly impressive speed and lack of effort. If Ankh hadn’t been burning through Cell Medals, he didn’t think he would have been able to maintain velocity, but Goto just kept right on going. “You’ve trained for this,” he said. Goto shot him a look that very clearly read, Of course I did without wasting breath on actual words.

Ankh rolled his eyes and ducked to the left. He thought he recognized the area from one of their earlier activities, after Hina and Izumi had finished at the shrine, but before they’d returned to the hotel, and he thought he could head off the Medal thief. He was right, although when he caught sight of the fleeing figure, he almost wished he hadn’t been.

As though it felt his eyes on it, the figure stopped running and turned to face him. Ankh stumbled to a halt, Goto clipping his shoulder from behind in an attempt to not run him over entirely, and stared.

The Medal thief wasn’t human, or if it had started out that way it wasn’t human now. He could feel it clearly now, though, and all he felt was a writhing mass of Cell Medals around the three purple Cores, bearing the unmistakable face and form of the Dinosaur Greeed Eiji had turned into all those months ago.

“That’s…” Goto’s eyes darted back and forth between Ankh and the impossible Greeed. “Forgive me, Ankh, but you are possessing Hino, right?”


The Greeed charged at them, and Ankh ducked out of the way. Goto rolled and came up with a Cell Medal in hand, dropping it into the Birth Driver with a practiced motion. The transformation
unfolded over him, and the Greeed stopped eyeing Ankh and looked at Goto with confusion. He fired on it with the Birth Buster, but not having brought the canister of Cell Medals with him was putting him at a disadvantage.

Ankh hung back, not wanting to damage either Eiji or himself if Goto didn’t need the help, but the Greeed was tough enough to survive a barrage from the Birth Buster and threw Goto into the nearest tree before turning and darting towards Ankh. Timing was of paramount importance; Ankh gritted his teeth and stood his ground, ducking at the last possible second and sliding sideways. He let a burst of flame pour over the Greeed as it went by, and it responded with an outpouring of ice. Ankh barely avoided being trapped.

The sound of the Buster was welcome, even if it wasn’t doing any good, but it gave Ankh enough of a respite to fall back and regroup. He didn’t have to go far before Hina crashed through the undergrowth, cheeks flushed and boots caked in snow. She had the Scanner in one hand and the Driver fastened around her waist. Ankh tossed Taka, Kujaku, and Condor at her; TaToBa wasn’t going to be useful, not when what they needed was fire. She nodded once, and the transformation washed over her.

The Greeed took to the air at the first gout of fire Hina spat towards it, and she launched herself after it. Date had been right behind Hina, and he’d had the foresight to bring the arsenal of Cell Medals. Goto hurriedly loaded them into the Driver before following Hina upwards.

Ash and ice rained downwards as Ankh watched helplessly from below. He couldn’t even shout advice to Hina from this distance, but she was holding her own. With Goto providing backup, they were doing more than holding their own – they were forcing the Greeed downwards, until Hina drove it into the ground. TaJaDor’s finishing move wasn’t enough to kill it, though, and it charged toward Ankh.

He ducked, but Date wasn’t quite so lucky. He took a blow to the ribs, folding over the Greeed’s fist and falling bonelessly to the ground. The detective swung at the Greeed with an insubstantial stick, and the Greeed swatted it out of his hands. Ice crawled along the ground toward the detective, and Ankh tackled the Greeed from behind. The Greeed stopped trying to freeze the detective, fixing one baleful eye on Ankh.

“Up here!” Hina shouted, catching the Greeed with a perfectly aimed spout of flame. Ankh could feel its heat as he and the detective pulled a protesting Date away from the Greeed. It flung itself upward, but not toward Hina; it caught Goto by surprise and sent him crashing through multiple treetops. The Birth transformation melted away as Goto fell, and he fell the last few feet with no protection.

“Take Date,” the detective said, and Ankh narrowed his eyes. Date was on his feet again, grimacing with one hand pressed against his side.

“I’m good,” he said. “Go help Goto.”

“Tch.” It was Hina that needed the help, Ankh thought, but she was making a good show even without it. The Greeed was slower than it had been, and this time when she smashed it into the ground, it didn’t get up. It twitched, moving weakly, and Ankh ran forward.

The Greeed wasn’t strong enough to fend off Ankh’s reaching hand, and he pulled all three purple Cores out of its chest. It held its shape for a long moment, staring at him with haunting familiar eyes, before dissolving into a flood of silver. Ankh absorbed the pile of Cell Medals and then stood, dusting the snow off his knees with one hand and holding the purple Cores in the other.
Hina landed behind him, heat rolling off her in waves as TaJaDor’s translucent wings folded and then faded away. She tilted the Driver, releasing the transformation, and walked through the slush. “It looked like Eiji,” she said.

“That wasn’t Hino.” Ankh closed his hand around the purple Cores, feeling them creak under his grip but knowing they wouldn’t break. “He’s here.” He tapped his chest with his other hand.

“I didn’t mean that it was,” Hina said, and then appeared to remember that there were other people present. “Shingo!”

Goto was bleeding badly, and Date was unable to stand entirely upright. The detective had a bruise along one temple that Ankh hadn’t noticed previously, making it a battered group that emerged onto a public road in the dark. Ankh was the only one with a working cell phone, and was therefore tapped to call emergency services; an ambulance failed to arrive before Goto folded entirely, looking paler than the snow.

Hina, who had been trying to hide a limp, was harangued by her brother to get her ankle treated even as he was strongly convinced to have his brain scanned for possible trauma, and Ankh was left alone in a waiting room. He didn’t like it. There was no volume to the television in the corner, and none of the scattered and out of date magazines were an appropriate distraction. Ankh could feel the purple Cores in his pocket, and he wanted them away from his skin.

“How did you get out?” he murmured, rubbing the lump with his palm. Medals required intent and consciousness to form a body, but what he had been able to feel when he plunged his hand into its chest was that the Greeed had had neither; it had been more of a pseudo-Greeed than something even nominally alive. “Something must have made you.”

Shivers of energy flickered outward from the Cores, and Ankh pulled them out of his pocket. “Stop that.” He clenched his left hand around them, cutting off any attempt to radiate power with his own aura. It flickered again and subsided, and Ankh felt a response from Eiji before the Cores became quiescent again. “Eiji?”

There was no answer from inside his mind, but Ankh closed his eyes and carefully extended his awareness downwards. He could feel the vague shape of thoughts, half-formed and incoherent, coupled with muted emotions rising and falling in a regular rhythm. He resurfaced, blinking. Eiji was no longer comatose; he was simply asleep, and had been for a while.

Looking around to confirm that he was still alone in the waiting room, Ankh dove back under the surface of his mind, carefully exploring the traces of energy left by his attempts to heal Eiji. He could feel where his transformation into TaJaDor had jolted something, changing the overlay of his presence enough to actually drive the energy from the Cell Medals where it needed to go, but the abrupt changes when he’d left Eiji’s body on its own and then repossessed it were what had brought Eiji out of his vegetative state.

Ankh opened his eyes again, not trying to wake Eiji, and blinked to clear his vision. Hina was sitting next to him, boots on and apparently fine. “You’re awake,” she said.

“Of course I’m awake.” His hand was still clenched around the purple Cores, and he put them back in his pocket. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Staying overnight,” Hina said. “Mostly for observation, but they’re all okay. I think the staff is bored. There aren’t many people here.”

“Oh, good, we can leave.”
Hina vanished into the room she was sharing with Satonaka as soon as they got back; Ankh hadn’t seen her since vaulting off the balcony, and wondered if she was in the room before dismissing the thought as irrelevant. Satonaka could do what she wanted. He let himself into the shared room that was currently empty, and lay down before exiting Eiji’s body.

Ankh had more than enough Cell Medals to create a physical body, with a significant surplus; the sensation of Medals leaving a physical form reminded him strongly of the nightmare he’d had the day he’d possessed Eiji again, and he wondered if the reason he’d been so depleted that day was because the purple Cores had drawn the Medals out of him. It was certainly possible; it had been afterwards that he’d seen the monochromatic Yummies for the first time.

Eiji sighed as Ankh’s features settled into a by-now familiar face, and he shifted in his sleep. Ankh reached out, touching his shoulder lightly. “Eiji, wake up.”

“I’m awake,” Eiji said, voice thick with sleep, and slowly opened his eyes. Ankh leaned back, waiting. Eiji looked at him with an absolute lack of curiosity and sat up slowly, blinking. “You look like someone I know,” he said slowly.

“Idiot,” Ankh said. “I am someone you know.”

Eiji drew his knees up to his chest and rested his chin on them, arms wrapped loosely around his legs. “I failed him,” he said, still speaking slowly. “I failed him, and I wanted to be done, but I’m still here.”

Ankh was beginning to lose patience. “I’m right here,” he said, and Eiji’s eyes flicked to him once before he went right back to staring at nothing.

“Am I dreaming?” He raised a hand, looking at his palm with not quite focused eyes. “I tried to reach out, but no one was there.”

“You’re not dreaming,” Ankh said. Maybe pinching him would work, or maybe a punch. Possibly just a slap, if it would make Eiji stop talking in an awful vague tone about things that were no longer true.

“I thought… I thought I’d turned into a monster again, but it’s all in here,” Eiji said, and pulled himself into a tighter huddle. “None of it was real.” He laughed, a sad and bitter sound. “I failed her, too, if she had to wear the belt and transform.”

“Eiji,” Ankh said, flexing his fingers and telling himself that he was not going to hit his clearly traumatized friend upside the head.

“It was wearing my face,” Eiji said. “I dreamed that it was wearing my face.” He looked at Ankh and frowned. “Almost like you are now.”

Ankh took a deep breath. “You weren’t dreaming. You created a baby Greeed, which kept trying to kill me, and I am not happy about that.”

Eiji blinked again, his eyes clearing a little. “Ankh?” he asked, as if they hadn’t been having an entire conversation for the past several minutes.

“Yes, you idiot.” Ankh shook him, just slightly, reasoning that it was an acceptable level of physical force to try and get Eiji to finish waking up already.

“Am I dreaming?” Eiji asked again, sounding much less sure of himself this time.
“No, but I will punch you into unconsciousness if you don’t stop asking me stupid questions.” Ankh let go and backed away just enough to give Eiji some space.

“You… you’re back?” Eiji breathed. “It worked?” Sudden hope lit his face. He uncurled and surged forward, tripping over his own feet and knocking Ankh backwards. Eiji landed on top of him, touching Ankh’s chest and shoulders and feeling down his face with shaking hands. “You’re really here?”

It had finally gone too far; he wasn’t going to lie here and let Eiji crawl all over him. Ankh pitched him across the floor and stood. “Stop asking me that!”

Eiji sat up, slowly, eyes wide and finally alert, and then he started sobbing. Ankh threw a pillow at him; he didn’t have the patience for this, not now. Not after Eiji had apparently unconsciously recreated the Greeed he’d turned into out of some twisted desire for oblivion, because he’d failed to save Ankh, while Ankh was possessing and healing him from the damage he’d done to himself. It was ridiculous. It was Eiji-esque. Ankh had missed him.

Eiji caught the pillow and curled around it, still crying. Ankh paced over to the door, making sure it was closed and locked, and then strolled over to the window. He couldn’t see much, with the lights in the room still on, but he could tell that it had stopped snowing. Behind him, Eiji slowly quieted down. After a moment, Ankh glanced over his shoulder to see Eiji asleep on the floor. He rolled his eyes and climbed out the window to spend the rest of the night looking at the stars from the roof.

He thought he’d worked out when Eiji had woken up, and knowing that it had been the Dinosaur Greeed that had created the monochromatic Yummies went a long way toward explaining why they made his skin crawl; they were born out of a desire for nothingness, rather than a pure desire for something. The idea of nothing was antithetical to everything Ankh was. Harder to figure out was how he’d missed the creation of the Dinosaur Greeed to begin with, but he eventually came to the conclusion that it had to have happened while he was dreaming, after repossessing Eiji. There was simply no other option.

The window was still open when the sun rose the next morning, and Ankh heard the door to the room open. He started to climb down, but didn’t get more than halfway before he recognized Hina’s voice.

“Eiji,” she said, sounding extremely pissed off, and then, slightly louder, “Ankh! Get back here!”

“Hina?” he heard Eiji say, sounding groggy, and Hina shrieked. Ankh laughed hard enough to nearly lose his grip on the window and missed the majority of the subsequent conversation, only starting to listen again when he heard his name.

“…Ankh?” Eiji asked. “He possessed me? Where is he?”

“Not far away, if he knows what’s good for him,” Hina said fiercely, and Ankh ducked inside the window.

“I was up there,” he said, and pointed toward the roof.

Whatever Hina might have said was drowned out by Eiji’s full-body hug. Even not having to breathe, Ankh was starting to get light-headed by the time Eiji finally let go. “You’re really back,” he said happily. “I’ve missed you.”

“We covered that last night,” Ankh said, letting annoyance sharpen his voice. “I’ve been back for seven months. You’re the one who slept through all of it.”
“I thought I was dreaming.” Eiji dropped his gaze and fiddled with the hem of what had been Ankh’s shirt. He frowned at it, seeming to notice the one red sleeve for the first time. “I thought I failed.”

“It was a stupid thing you did,” Hina said, not looking pleased at the reminder of how, exactly, Eiji had restored Ankh’s medal. “You could have died.” Eiji looked down, not answering. Hina made an abortive movement with one hand and then gathered him into a carefully gentle hug. “Don’t do something like that again,” she said.

“It worked, though,” Eiji said.

“It worked so well that when I healed you, you dreamed that I was still dead, put the Dinosaur Greeed back together, and kept sending Yummies after me.” Ankh pulled Eiji’s hands away from the bottom of the shirt. “It was less than pleasant.”

“That was Eiji?” Hina looked back and forth between them.

“I was dreaming that someone was pretending to be Ankh with my face,” Eiji said, somewhat sheepishly. “Ankh was still – still gone, and it hurt.”

Hina gave him another long, hard look before letting the comment go and changing tacks. “Shingo is going to be so happy you’re awake,” she said, and hugged both of them. Eiji was gasping for breath when she finally let go.

“So what did I miss?” he asked.
Eiji couldn’t sleep.

Seven months spent sleeping might give someone insomnia, he supposed, but his eyes wouldn’t stay closed. Every time he tried, he kept seeing the dreams. He remembered feeling pain, fire running through his veins along with the rush of power that brought TaJaDor, and then nothing again for a while. But after that, the dreams had started. Eiji knew now that they hadn’t been dreams so much as tangled and distorted impressions of Ankh wearing his body, trying his best to heal Eiji the way he’d healed Shingo. The difference was that Shingo had been awake for most of it.

He had nightmares now, when he did manage to fall asleep, though he could never remember them when he woke trembling and paralyzed. All he could remember was bitter cold, seeping into his bones and freezing him into utter immobility, and it would take him what felt like forever to get warm again. He’d tried running, to tire himself out, but all that had done was make it harder to wake up when the nightmares really got going, and he’d given up. At least when he started dreaming now, he could open his eyes and escape.

Eiji didn’t want to keep presuming on the Izumis’ hospitality, either, but he didn’t have anywhere else to go. His passport had been left behind and while he’d gone to get it replaced, he was still waiting for the new one to arrive. He couldn’t sleep outside in winter, and he didn’t have the mental energy to deal with the mess Ankh had created with his family. Eiji groaned at the thought and rubbed his face with both hands. He couldn’t presume on Chiyoko, either, no matter that she probably wouldn’t bat a perfectly manicured eyelid if he showed up in her attic again.

Whatever he did, Eiji didn’t want to be alone, and that more than anything kept him tethered to Tokyo, but he couldn’t help feeling trapped at the same time. Sleeping in the bottom half of a daybed clearly designed with Ankh in mind wasn’t doing him any favors, either. He thought he could hear Shingo and Hina breathing on either side of the wall, and he finally rolled off the bed and crept as quietly as he could out onto the balcony.

“What are you doing?” Ankh asked, and Eiji flinched.

In retrospect, the lack of noise from above his head should have clued him in to the fact that Ankh wasn’t there, but then again, Ankh didn’t technically need to breathe. Eiji sometimes thought he did it out of habit. Ankh certainly didn’t sleep, although he would sometimes lie still and listen to music on a set of headphones. Eiji slept easier on those nights, when he could hear Ankh’s imitation of human breath.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said, aware that he sounded like a child. It was cold on the balcony, and he wished he’d thought to bring a jacket. He’d felt scatterbrained, since waking in the hotel in Hakone, although he thought it was slowly getting better.

Ankh sighed. “If you don’t sleep, you don’t finish healing, and then Hina’s going to have to wear the OOO suit forever. Is that what you want?” He sounded bored, repeating the same words he said every time Eiji wandered around in the middle of the night and then ended up tired and irritable during the day.

“I know,” Eiji said. “I just.” He curled up on one of the chairs, seeing his breath hang in the air under
the artificial lights illuminating the street below. “I can’t,” he said finally.

“I know where the Spider Greeed is,” Ankh said in an apparent non sequitur. Eiji went with it.

“What are you going to do with it?” he asked.

“Hina’s going to equip the OOO suit, and we’re going to kill it,” Ankh said easily. “It’s too dangerous to leave running around.”

Setting the issue of Hina wearing the OOO armor aside for the moment, Eiji asked, “What’s going to stop the Foundation from making another one?”

Ankh sighed. “I don’t think they know how they made this one,” he said. “Or they would have replicated it by now. Kougami never holds back with anything.”

“I suppose,” Eiji said. He could feel Ankh frowning, even if he couldn’t see his face clearly.

“What?”

“You,” Ankh said, unexpectedly. “There’s something off about you.” He was blunt, more open and honest than he had been since Eiji had gotten control of his body back to find out what Ankh had been doing with it while he had been keeping himself locked in a void.

“I haven’t changed,” Eiji said.

“Bullshit.” Ankh bared his teeth, gleaming white in the darkness. “Someone showed up looking for you,” he said after a moment of waiting for a reply Eiji didn’t know how to give. “I told him to show up at the Cous Coussier tomorrow.”

“Who?” That word was easier to get out, at least.

“How should I know who you met while you were wandering around doing stupid shit?” Ankh looked away again, apparently having exhausted his supply of interest.

“I wasn’t – I was trying to figure out how to bring you back!” Eiji hissed, keeping his voice down. “I wasn’t doing something stupid and pointless.”

“Well, here I am,” Ankh said. “Now what?” He seemed to be enjoying the question in some way that Eiji didn’t quite grasp, like he knew what answer Eiji was going to give and was waiting for it to flop.

“I don’t know,” Eiji said. “I don’t know what I want.”

“Ah,” Ankh said, and fell silent again.

Eiji mulled over the sentence; it didn’t quite ring true. “I want Hina to be safe,” he said. “And you. And Shingo.” All of those were part of it, but they didn’t encompass everything. “I want Hina to not have to transform into OOO,” he said. “I want her to be able to finish school without worrying about fighting.”

“Those are all things for other people,” Ankh said. “What do you want?”

Eiji didn’t have an answer for that.

The grayish morning light shone in his eyes, and he blinked, wondering if he’d dreamed the entire conversation with Ankh. He didn’t remember going back inside, but he was curled under the heavy blankets on his part of the bed, warm enough for once. Hina was in the kitchen when he wandered
out, still dressed in the loose clothing he’d worn for sleep, and she handed him a cup of tea.

“This was yours,” he said, trying to hand it back. He hadn’t intended to take her tea.

“There’s more,” she said, pouring a second cup and taking it into the living room. After a moment, Eiji followed. “My classes start tomorrow,” Hina said, taking a small sip of the tea.

“Can you be OOO and still do your schoolwork?” Eiji’s tea wasn’t too hot; he liked the way it nearly burned his tongue, and that he could feel it all the way down.


“You know how to ride a motorcycle.” Eiji grinned at her. That one small thing slightly eased the knot that had taken up all but permanent residence in his stomach since Ankh had stopped possessing him, knowing that Hina had learned a new and maybe valuable skill because she’d met him.

“Ankh does like to do the driving,” Hina said, and grinned back. “But it’s a lot of fun.”

“It is.” The tea was gone. He set the cup down and stretched. “Did Ankh find the Greeed?” he asked.

Hina shook her head. “I think he’s still looking,” she said. “I don’t know what he wants to do after he gets rid of it.” She pushed her hair back over her shoulder. “What do you want to do?” she asked.

Eiji shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. It echoed his dream, the same question Ankh had asked. What had he said then? “I want you to be safe. You and your brother, and Ankh.” Ha paused. “I want you to be able to finish school and do things you love, without having to worry about OOO or fighting.”

“Eiji,” Hina said, and she had exactly the same expression Ankh had had. “I’m flattered, but those are things for other people. What is it that you want for yourself?”

He was no more able to answer in daylight than he had been able to answer in his dream. “I don’t know,” he said. “I got the last thing I wanted.”

Hina leaned forward, face full of compassion. “That was something you wanted for someone else, too,” she said. “You wanted it for Ankh, not for yourself. What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” he said again, and the second layer of the dream fell apart around him. He opened his eyes to find himself on the floor, half-tangled in the blanket and one foot still up on the bed where he’d started. Bright sunlight streamed in the room, the sliver of sky he could see through the window a dazzling blue. Eiji groaned and levered himself off the floor, pinching himself to see if he was really awake that time.

“I don’t know what I want,” he said, irritated that the inside of his own head was grilling him for answers that he didn’t have. He didn’t remember what it felt like to want something.

No one was in the apartment when Eiji finally emerged from the bedroom to bathe and dress; once dressed, he couldn’t stay in the empty space with nothing but silence to keep him company. He didn’t plan on visiting Fuuto City, but the familiar and almost desperate urge to go anywhere—but here coupled with the warring desire to stay close to the people he loved kept him close to Tokyo while still going outside the city limits.

The rooftop where he ended up was a vaguely familiar one; Eiji remembered, back when he’d first
met Ankh and started fighting as OOO, that he’d missed a Medal and had to chase it down. It had led him into someone else’s fight. He leaned on the railing and looked out at the giant wind tower dominating the skyline; even Fuuto City knew what it wanted, he thought with a tinge of bitterness. Fuuto City’s Rider wasn’t holding onto his transformation equipment and title out of pity, because the person who’d inherited said equipment and title actually had a life and goals and was working toward achieving them and had given them back when he’d unceremoniously been dropped back into her life. Eiji dropped his forehead onto his folded arms and tried to ignore his runaway train of thought; he had the Driver because it had been his to begin with, not because Ankh and Hina somehow felt sorry for him. OOO was his responsibility, for all that he was grateful that Hina had taken up the weight of it for a while.

“Why,” said someone behind him, “do you kids keep insisting on lurking on rooftops?”

Eiji blinked and turned around. Hidari Shotaro – Kamen Rider Double, or at least the left half – stood behind him, one hand on his omnipresent hat. “You can’t be more than thirty,” Eiji said, but Shotaro had reminded him that he’d missed his birthday while Ankh had been possessing him. He’d turned twenty-four, but he felt so much older.

Shotaro took the hand off his hat and clapped it to his heart in a melodramatic gesture. “I’m not even twenty-nine, Eiji,” he said. “You wound me to the core.”

Despite himself, the Eiji felt the corners of his mouth twist upwards. “You’re the one who called someone four years younger than you a kid,” he said.

“Touché.” Despite his words, Shotaro put his hands on his hips, looking Eiji up and down in a distinctly parental fashion. Not wanting to have anything to do with whatever wisdom Shotaro was about to attempt to impart, Eiji opened his mouth to excuse himself. Shotaro beat him to the punch. “Want some coffee?” he asked brightly, the penetrating look fading into something innocuously pleasant.

Eiji closed his mouth with a snap after letting it hang open just a little too long. “Sure,” he said finally, when Shotaro just kept smiling at him in invitation.

“Philip will be glad to see you.” Shotaro ambled toward the rooftop door.

Eiji, who hadn’t taken the building’s internal staircase, had also not been aware there was a door. He jogged to catch up, the cold of mid-January finally penetrating his senses. He hadn’t thought to bring a jacket. “Philip,” he said. “How is he?”

“Come to think of it, I probably shouldn’t have offered you coffee,” Shotaro said, holding the door open. “He’s been – you know the civet cat coffee? He’s been experimenting with a chemical replication process. The results are, um. Interesting.”

The mental image of Philip’s experiments made Eiji laugh a little, and he realized that the last time he’d laughed was when he’d seen Kenzaki in Russia. The memory spurred another pang of guilt; Kenzaki had been a friend, a good one, and Eiji hadn’t let him know that he was even still alive. Without his phone, though, he had no way of contacting the former Rider, and he’d left it behind along with his passport. In the days since waking up in a hotel room in Hakone, he’d refused to get a new one without knowing why he felt so strongly about it.

The experiments in question were both exactly what Eiji had pictured and far more extensive than he’d thought; nearly every flat surface in the Narumi Detective Agency’s front room held at least one of some type of container, with the sole exception of Shotaro’s desk. There was a sweet-sour smell to the air halfway between tantalizing and nauseating, and Shotaro sighed as they walked in the door. “I
keep telling him to open a window,” he said, hanging his hat on a peg and pushing said window open. “Not that it helps.”

“I don’t understand,” Philip said, coming out from behind the basement door without actually looking up. “It doesn’t taste right, but the chemical compounds are exactly the same. The temperature is the same.”

“Philip,” Shotaro said, and Philip waved distractedly at Eiji.

“Good to see you, Hino,” he said, and went right back to complaining about the taste of his latest test batch. “It’s supposed to be smooth,” he finished, and then pinned Eiji with a calculating stare. “You want to test it, right.”

“Uh.” Eiji blinked. Philip was treating him normally, he thought suddenly, instead of walking on eggshells or trying too hard for a facsimile of casual. “Sure,” he said, over Shotaro’s protests that it was socially inappropriate to hijack guests for culinary experiments. “I don’t mind.”

Philip smiled at him and vanished down the stairs. Shotaro watched him go with a speculative look. “He may or may not actually come back with the coffee,” he said, and then snapped his fingers. “Which reminds me.” He held out a package with Eiji’s name on it in neat handwriting, the only visible part of the original address buried beneath a veritable stack of forwarding-address stickers. “This is yours.”

Eiji wasn’t sure he wanted to know what particular train of thought had driven that association, but he took the package. “What is it?”

Shotaro shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not entirely sure how it got here, instead of to Detective Izumi, or that café where you used to live, or, you know.” He leaned against the desk with one hip, barely settling his weight before jumping upright and heading for the kitchen. “Tea,” he said, over his shoulder. “I can promise that it will at least be drinkable.”

“Thanks,” Eiji said absently, turning the package over in his hands. It was an unassuming brown paper envelope, neatly taped together, with enough give beneath the surface to indicate some sort of padding, and enough weight to imply an object rather than simply a letter. The return address was in Cyrillic letters, which he’d never learned to read.

The tape stuck to Eiji’s fingers in long, thin strips as he pulled it free, and eventually he just tore open the side of the package instead. A piece of paper fluttered out, landing on the sealed top of one of Philip’s experimental tanks. Eiji ignored it for the moment, reaching inside the package for whatever heavy object was inside it. His questing fingers met with a slim book and a smooth slender brick; his passport and his cell phone. The phone was dead, no charge at all, and the passport was creased where he’d stuffed it into the bicycle basket in the hopes that Kenzaki would miss it entirely.

“Do you have a phone charger?” Eiji called into the kitchen.

Shotaro called back a half-audible reply that seemed positive enough and included the word desk; Eiji found the cable in question, attached to another dead phone and not actually plugged into the wall. He shook his head and attached the cord to both the outlet and his phone, surprised that the phone flickered to life after only a few seconds. He left it to charge, returning to the piece of mystery paper.

The paper turned out to be a note, written in the same neat script that was on the outside of the package.
The guilt Eiji had felt earlier returned in full force, yet one more thing that he hadn’t done properly to add to his list of inadequacies. His phone hadn’t charged enough to power up, even connected to the wall; he still couldn’t rectify even this one little thing. A noise behind him turned out to be Shotaro, holding two mismatched mugs, one chipped at the base. Neither of them was an appropriate vessel for tea, as far as Eiji remembered.

“Lot of coffee around here,” Shotaro said, holding out the intact mug. It was bright red, and bespoke a cheerfulness that Shotaro wasn’t displaying and that Eiji certainly didn’t feel. “Sit down,” Shotaro added, gesturing to the only open seat in the room. Eiji sat in what was clearly Shotaro’s chair, watching mutely as Shotaro made himself comfortable on the other side of the desk.

“I,” Eiji said, and then found he didn’t know what he wanted to say. He took a sip of the tea, hot and bitter. Shotaro clearly had no idea how to make tea, but the gesture was almost overwhelmingly kind.

“Thank you,” Eiji said suddenly.

“That is the first time anyone has tasted my tea and thanked me for it,” Shotaro said, deliberately misinterpreting Eiji’s words.

“No, I mean.” Eiji’s hands were full of the coffee mug masquerading as a teacup, and he clutched it tightly. “For. For everything. The – the detective told me you were the one who went looking for me.”

Shotaro took a deep breath, holding it before releasing it in what wasn’t quite a sigh. “Eiji, I’m sorry.”

Eiji blinked. “What?”

“Gentaro says to tell you thank you, for whatever you did for him,” Shotaro said in an apparent non sequitur, and Eiji had to think about that for a moment before the memory of a brief trip surfaced, a few well-timed minutes fighting something that wasn’t a Greeed and hadn’t resonated with any of his past regrets.

“We help each other out,” he said. “If you stretch out your hand…”

“I’ll be there to grab it,” Shotaro finished, and took a sip of tea, his eyes staying on Eiji over the rim of his chipped mug. He grimaced and set the mug down without looking where he put it. “I think you’re reaching out now,” he said.

“I,” Eiji said again, and his voice caught in his throat. “I don’t – I don’t know why,” he said in a rush, the words hard at first but easier the more he spoke. “I got – Ankh is – I did it, but I don’t know why it isn’t enough. It should be enough. I don’t know why I can’t just accept it and be happy.” He couldn’t meet Shotaro’s eyes any longer; it was easier just to look at the murky surface of the mostly-untouched tea. “I should be.”

“Eiji,” Shotaro said, and paused. After a moment, Eiji glanced upwards, but Shotaro wasn’t looking at him. He was staring out the window, one finger tapping against his thigh in an irregular rhythm.

“You, um.” Shotaro tousled the hair at the back of his head, making it stand up more wildly than it had before. “You didn’t have an easy time of it,” he said finally.

“No one does,” Eiji said. “That doesn’t – it’s not an excuse.”

“You don’t need an excuse,” Shotaro said, an edge to his voice. “It’s okay if something is difficult
“This might be the half-boiled part of me talking,” Shotaro said, more gently this time, “but it’s okay if you need help. It’s okay to ask for it.”

“How can I tell him?” Eiji tried to swallow the lump out of his throat, but it stuck there stubbornly. “How can I look at him, or at her, and tell them that they’re not – that I’m still not – that I don’t.”

“You’re friends aren’t going to hate you because you’re – how do I say this.” Shotaro turned to look at him head on. “Your friends and family aren’t going to hate you because you’re having trouble adjusting.”

“You haven’t met my father,” Eiji muttered. "And there's something else that I don't know how to fix."

“I was talking about Detective Izumi. Hina. Ankh.” Shotaro smiled slightly. “But your parents and siblings probably wouldn’t hate you either.”

“But they’ve already done so much.” Eiji squeezed his eyes closed, the reality of what he was doing abruptly and painfully clear. “You’ve already done so much, and here I am, just – I should go.” He set the mug down, hastily, barely managing not to spill the cooling liquid over the sides. “Thank you, for the tea, and for. For. For everything.” He was halfway out of the chair when he remembered his phone, and in the resulting grab for it, Eiji managed to trip over his own feet and land back in the chair, phone in hand and still firmly attached to the wall.

“Eiji,” Shotaro said, a tremor in his voice that clearly said he was suppressing laughter. “I’m your friend, too. I’m not going to hate you either.” He reached across the desk to open a drawer on the other side, groping around its contents before coming out with a small, unassuming box. He flipped it open, sifting through its contents until he came up with two small rectangles of stiff white paper. “Take these.”

Even though Shotaro was holding the business cards as informally as possible, between thumb and two fingers of one hand, all but shoving them at Eiji, Eiji still stood to accept them with both hands and bowed. “Thank you,” he said, and then he actually looked at the cards. Neither of them had Shotaro’s name, and Eiji looked back at Shotaro, puzzled.

“I know people who know people,” Shotaro said vaguely. “And sometimes it helps to talk to people about difficult things. If you decide you want to, just let them know I was the one who sent you, okay?”

The cards were for – oh. Eiji blinked, returning his attention to the business cards. No one had ever suggested he talk about anything; his father had just told him to handle it like a man, and everyone else had just assumed that if Eiji was smiling, everything was fine. “Maybe,” he said quietly. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s good.” Shotaro clapped him on the shoulder, the impact almost jarring the cards out of Eiji’s hands. He glanced toward the basement door. “Uh. Sorry.”

The door burst open, disgorging Philip and two cups of something that smelled like coffee, but judging from Shotaro’s expression, was something else entirely. “What do you think of this one?” Philip all but demanded, failing to indicate which concoction he meant, and Eiji stuffed the cards into one of his pockets before taking a cup at random.
“It’s, uh. It’s interesting,” he said, after the first sip. It was definitely not coffee. Eiji wondered for a moment if he trusted Philip not to poison him accidentally.

“Philip,” Shotaro said in a long-suffering tone. “You can’t subject guests to your experiments. We’ve talked about this.”

“Eiji’s not a guest. He’s a friend.” Philip peered at him, pushing the second cup forward impatiently. “Well?”

It was better than the first, and Eiji told him so. He did not say that he could actually taste coffee in it, unlike the first cup of whatever it was, but Philip seemed to know what he was thinking anyway.

“I told you people could tell the difference,” Philip said smugly, and Shotaro threw up his hands in resignation.

“Fine, fine, you win.” He clapped his hat back on his head. “Eiji, I’ll give you a lift to the train station, unless you feel the need to help Philip taste-test his concoctions.”

“The next batch isn’t ready yet,” Philip said absently, staring at the second cup. Eiji surrendered it and retrieved his phone, finally powering it on. “I mean, you’re welcome to stay, if you want. Absolutely welcome.” It was clearly an afterthought, but just as clearly the result of Philip being distracted rather than objecting to his company.

Eiji found himself genuinely smiling for the second time. “I think I should head home,” he said. The phrase felt good, the knowledge that he had somewhere to call home more comforting than confining for the first time in a long time. Messy and unresolved his life might be, but it was his again, and he could make of it what he would - an opportunity and not a trap. The last traces of the smile stayed with him at that thought.

“Train station it is,” Shotaro said, and held the door open.

By the time Eiji’s phone had finished booting up and loading the missed calls and texts from its months of inactivity, he was on the train back to Tokyo. He ignored most of them, scrolling through his contacts until he found Gentaro and Kenzaki, sending each of them a brief message. He would have to send something longer to Kenzaki, he thought, but it could wait until he knew how to express what he wanted to say.

The number Ankh had had before was still saved, and Eiji dialed it on a whim. Much to his surprise, the call went through, and was answered. “Where are you?” Ankh said. “I’ve been looking for you all morning. I was about to drag Hina out of class.”

“On a train,” Eiji said. “Why?”

“Because I found the Spider Greeed,” Ankh said. “You’re supposed to come kill it.”

“Don’t bother Hina, just tell me where to go,” Eiji said, obscurely comforted by Ankh’s total lack of surprise at the call and his perfectly normal conversation. He wasn’t surprised when Ankh rattled off a location as remote as it was possible to be and still be part of the city. “It’ll take me a while to get there.”

“Whatever,” Ankh said, and hung up without saying goodbye. That, too, was comfortingly familiar.

It took Eiji longer than he’d thought to reach the address Ankh had given him, and he could see his friend standing impatiently on the street corner, arms folded and tapping his foot. “What took you?” Ankh demanded, pushing the Driver into his hands. “We have a Greeed to kill.”
“I don’t want to be OOO,” Eiji said, hands closing around the Driver and the Scanner anyway. He hadn’t known he was going to say it until he heard himself speak. The bulk and weight brought memory with it, both good and bad, along with the certainty that he at least knew something he didn’t want.

Ankh stared at him as though he’d suddenly started speaking nonsense. “Of course you don’t,” he snapped. “Nobody sane wants it. Hina didn’t want it either, not after the first time. But we have work to do. You can worry about what to do with it later.”

“Kougami doesn’t care if you kill his creation?” Eiji asked, gesturing at the building.

“Tch.” Ankh smirked at him. “I negotiated with him.” He pointed Eiji toward a RideVendor. “It’s not that far away, but if it goes into the east block, it’s going to be a pain in the ass to get it back out.”

“This is the last time,” Eiji said. He didn’t think Ankh was actually listening.

“Oh, fine, we’ll worry about that later. Getting rid of the competition, which also happens to be a dangerous creature, right now.” Ankh gave up pointing and started physically tugging at Eiji’s shoulder.

Eiji dug in his heels. “I mean it, Ankh. This is the last time.”

Ankh stopped. “Did you have to pick now to find something you wanted? I thought you wanted to help people.”

Eiji blinked. “I do,” he said, and after the rawness of the morning, it was surprising how right the sentiment felt. He didn’t know how, exactly, but he knew he wanted to do something. The cards in his pocket were a comforting, barely-felt reminder that he could ask for and get help in figuring out what, or just in figuring out how to be, if he needed it. “But this isn’t how I want to do it. Not anymore.”

“Fluffy bunny,” Eiji repeated. “Yeah, if you were the bunny from Monty Python.”

Ankh cocked his head to the side in a very birdlike gesture. “What’s that?” He shook his head. “Don’t try to distract me. Philosophy later, killing monster now.” He glared at Eiji. “For the last time. The last time I will ask you to put that suit on and kill something.”

“Okay.” Eiji buckled on the Driver, already feeling immeasurably lighter despite the weight of the Driver and the Scanner. “TaToBa?” he asked, catching the Medals Ankh tossed his way without looking directly at them.

“Fluffy bunny,” Eiji repeated. “Yeah, if you were the bunny from Monty Python.”

Ankh cocked his head to the side in a very birdlike gesture. “What’s that?” He shook his head. “Don’t try to distract me. Philosophy later, killing monster now.” He glared at Eiji. “For the last time. The last time I will ask you to put that suit on and kill something.”

“What about what you want?” Eiji turned his attention to his friend, holding the familiar Medal case, long legs straddling a second RideVendor. He’d been so wrapped up in not knowing what he wanted that he hadn’t thought to ask Ankh the same question.

“Now is not the time,” Ankh said, dodging the question. Eiji folded his arms, keeping one foot firmly planted on the ground. “Fine, I don’t know either,” Ankh said irritably. “Except for this Greeed in
my city, dead. After that, I’ll figure it out.”

“I guess I will, too.” Eiji started the RideVendor, following Ankh in and out of traffic as though he’d done it only yesterday. The Greeed had gone to ground in a construction zone under a closed-off section of a major highway, with plenty of space for an arachnid creature to hide, and Ankh parked the bike as close as he could get to the edge of the paved road.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

Eiji nodded, unable to feel the Greeed lurking below the street but trusting Ankh that it was there. “I’m ready,” he said, and ran into the dark.

END

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaaaaand now watch all of this get Jossed by Heisei Generations Final in two months...

In all seriousness, thank you for reading. :) Hopefully you had as much fun as I did.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!