boy with a coin

by twigcollins

Summary

What's the worst that could happen? Spoilers through end of game plus secret reports.

Notes

story title is from Iron and Wine, chapter title is from Matthew Sweet
The door opens, and it's Saika standing there, still wearing her school uniform, eyes sparkling like dark diamonds and blowing a breath out around her perfect bangs. Irritated, as if there's a schedule they have to keep.

"I thought you would never get here. What, did you get lost?"

And it's a precipice, at the edge of her perfect house, but her slim, strong hands are around their wrists, dragging them over before they have a chance to even get their shoes off and really, house slippers, like there's a point. Mayu's hand finds hers, lacing their fingers together, and she doesn't let go, all the way down the long, wood paneled hallway and into the living room that looks like a museum because Saika's parents are ridiculously wealthy, enormous and spare and completely immaculate except for the cluster of girls gathered around the center table.

She keeps forgetting their names, nothing really connecting them other than this and they don't talk about it, don't even look at each other at school. Natsuki is the girl crouching down, holding another girl's hands, and they're staring at each other and speaking too softly to hear. Natsuki is a genius, perfect grades, plays the violin and aces all her exams and her family is moving at the end of the term, after they caught her in bed with the girl she's talking to now, and of all of them, Uzuki thinks, they really have the most right to be here.

A sheaf of papers, in the center of the table. At least one has already been crumpled up, no more than a few words in a row that haven't been scribbled through.

She'd leave a note, but there's less than nothing to say.

"Everyone's here then, so we can get started." Saika says, one foot on the table, taking a long drink, she's like a pirate or a gangster and that bottle's one of her parents and absurdly expensive and there's three more just like it, lined up on the table, someone's rock CD playing on her parent's amazing sound system. Another girl she doesn't know is sitting in the corner, a handful of blue pills in her hand, and she's eating them slowly, contemplatively, like sunflower seeds, paying no attention but taking the bottle from Saika anyway, one long swig.

Everyone pays attention to Saika. The prettiest. The most exciting. Always wins at track.

"Here," she says, one of those electric smiles, handing her the bottle, and it's hard to take it while still holding onto Mayu's hand but it's not that heavy, nearly half-empty already.

"Just don't get so drunk you can't make it to the garage, ok?" Saika says, laughing – she's like fireworks tonight, all lit up from the inside out and so dangerous.

"So, it's just like you said, right?" One of the other girls, looking normal and polite in her pleated skirt, can't imagine what she's doing here, why she would.

Her heart is pounding, her body feels two sizes too big and Mayu's hand is sweaty, hot but she can't force herself to let go.

"Just like I said." Saika nods.

"What if it doesn't work?"

"It'll still be better than this, klutz."

A bitter laugh from a chubby girl standing near the wall, eternally tugging down at the edge of her sweater, and the other girl flinches, pulling back into
herself and this is all so tiring, and Uzuki remembers why she's here.

"I promise." Saika says, laughter in her eyes, and fury as always, and she can see it even when she sees Saika in front of the row of teachers, wide-eyed innocence, panic and worry - didn't see, didn't know what had happened, only found the girl on the bathroom floor, nose broken, two fingers crushed.

The girl transfers out, and then it's like it never happened, like a secret between them when Saika looks at her and smiles.

"I promise, you get everything. It's just like it is now, but no one can hurt you, or tell you what to do," and she glances to where Natsuki and the other girl are still holding hands, "or keep you apart. It's like paradise. All you have to do is not chicken out."

Like a lash. She can see it strike, see the girls tense and quiver beneath it.

"Not that I have convince you, Uzuki. You'd do whatever I told you to, right?"

Saika teasing her, taking a step back, toward the garage, and Uzuki can feel the tide shifting, the other girls getting to their feet, the sound of sake bottles sliding off the table. Mayu's hand tightens on hers, and if she'd say something, if she'd stop Uzuki would stop too, would turn around, but maybe she remembers it wrong, maybe Mayu does stop, and she just lets go.

Uzuki remembers letting go.

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"... and after that horrible ramen incident, I'm thinking I need to re-establish my brand, you know. Well," he says, giving Neku's outfit a look-over. "okay, so maybe you don't, but that's artists, right? Do your own thing."

Oh god, oh god, he's going to have to do it, Neku's going to have to kill Eji Oji and Shiki's really not going to be happy with him. Neku can find her someone better. He could throw a dart at a map and find someone better.

The 'Prince' is currently flipping through one of Neku's sketchbooks with an affected boredom that makes his skin crawl and it's his fault, really. He forgets – he forgets – that when one of the store clerks mentions setting up a meeting with someone really successful and important he might actually be talking about an idiot with poofy hair and an – OMG – blog and if he really wants to see the true Prince of Ennui, Neku can introduce him properly.

"It's not about finding what's new and fresh, or what's going to be – you have to be on the edge of the edge, to get anyone interested at all – your work seems so... tomorrow, and I'm thinking of next week."

Neku wishes he was just a little better at tuning people out, watching far too many people stare at them as they walk by, a few girls taking pictures and Neku slides down in his seat and hopes he's not in the frame. Knowing the Prince isn't really a bad guy, that he's got at least a little integrity, that he's nice enough, it should be helping.

It's not helping.

"Wow you have how many friends on Mixi that's so amazing."

He mutters into the expectant silence, and that sends the Prince off for another twenty minutes
about some kind of new shoe trend in California and how he's got an in when they change from leather to snakeskin and this is the age of the Internet but so what, so what? No one can possibly be this completely talentless and be so successful. Neku's got Composer powers now, not that they actually seem to work most of the time, but he's focusing on the man and he should see it if it's there, whatever unnatural, evil power is actually keeping this idiot employed.

Did he mention the Prince has a manga? He actually has a manga, though the trees have not yet risen up in protest. Neku dodges a bullet – for a change - when Oji searches his pockets for a complimentary copy, but comes up empty.

"Ah, it's all this stress. It's just such a burden, sometimes, trying to carry Shibuya along to greatness. I don't know how I do it."

"Yeah, maybe one of these days you might be able to go F yourself."

The Prince pauses, mid-pithy diatribe, and apparently Neku's inadvertently given him some brilliant idea. Neku lets out a strangled squawk, lunging forward as the Prince rips a page out of his notebook, jotting down notes on the back, but thankfully it was just a few doodles, warm-ups – easier to just let him keep it.

*Never let it be said the spicy tuna roll doesn't know when to fold and walk away from the table.*

Neku grits his teeth and holds onto the last shred of his integrity, refusing to imprint 'extremely long European vacation' into the Prince's head.

"You know, now that I think about it do you know anything about those statues I've seen around? The piles – they're very 'found art,' very bleeding edge. Do you do photography?"

Neku doesn't, in fact, take the opportunity to stab himself in the eye with his pen.

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Higashizawa's last game ended the day before the Composer party, and so there isn't a Game for two weeks – the game he was in is apparently called 'the long Game' and yay, nice to know three weeks straight was an anomaly – but that gives Neku two weeks to think about what he's supposed to do. He's the Conductor now. People are going to die.

"People are already dead, Neku. You're hardly responsible for that. If there was no Game, they'd still die, and there'd just be less of a chance that anything productive would come of it."

That he'd woken up to this argument in Joshua's bedroom did not make the discussion any easier. At least he still had all his clothes on, even if the suit was unforgivably wrinkled. Joshua had been leaning back in a chair near the window, book in his hand, and Neku's concern over his current situation pretty much crashed head-on into the realization that this was where Joshua lived, actually lived, so much so that there were actually signs of life - a few books, a rumpled shirt sleeve peeking half out of a closet.

"We stayed in a sewer." The window view took up the better part of a wall, offering an incredible view of nearly half the damn city – a penthouse suite. "You had this place all along, and I kept visiting you in a sewer."

"You weren't complaining." Joshua looked up, more than a little irritated at his slack-jawed amazement, though Neku ignored him, still staring at the view.

"I have the power of life and death in my command, Neku, and you're amazed that I have an
"With this view? Yes."

Two weeks, then. Joshua says nothing when he finally gets up and leaves, lets him go with a polite, if distracted wave. Neku is still shaking off the party and so he's kind of grateful for the disinterest – the suit has to be professionally dry-cleaned but he eats the bill and gets it back to its rightful home with Shiki and Eri none the wiser – although neither of them are satisfied with his abbreviated version of just what happened at the party.

So in the end, except for the Conductor thing, everything is pretty much where it was before. Nothing resolved, not what Joshua did or what he's going to do, and certainly not the kiss or the... yeah, the kiss, but Neku's kind of learning to accept that as his fate.

He is prepared to roll with it, or thought he was, until he finally gets around to checking his e-mail.

A hundred and fifty messages later, Neku realizes that his account had some interesting new features, including some sort of universal translator and the fact that every Composer and half the Conductors have found his e-mail address – and there's messages.

Neku thought for sure he'd be a pariah after all that had happened, but there's notes from Ibiza, and Vancouver, and one from Vegas with attachment files and he really ought to know better and even then it still takes him a moment to crane his head and figure out what he's looking at. It really is her, with another girl's – and oh my god, there's a third girl –

"Aaaah!" Neku shoves himself away from the computer, and it doesn't matter that he's alone and his father wouldn't touch his ancient desktop anyway, he still has a hand over his eyes, peering through his fingers, feels the heat on his cheeks as he quickly clicks back to safety.

It's weird, real weird to have people talking to him like this, asking his opinions or introducing themselves or just chatting about nothing. Ibiza's even seems like half an apology, wishing Neku would have stuck around a little while longer, hoping they can meet up soon. Some of them are probably dangerous, he doesn't know enough to trust any of them, even with Vancouver's bracelet on his wrist, and it's less worrying about the consequences than worrying about Joshua laughing at him over the consequences and so it's two weeks.

Two weeks that are forever, and nothing, all at once.

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It's not that he's been ordered not to interact with the Game. Truth be told, Hanekoma hasn't been told to do or not do much of anything, little noticeably different besides the strict limitation of his powers, keeping him well within Shibuya unless he's called for, and even then only on a few different levels.

The reports are a pain in the ass, and though he's long gotten used to the more formal language he's well aware that every word he writes is being studied and pulled apart – and heaven help him, if he dares to go under five pages a day. It isn't all personal, Shibuya isn't the only problem area and they make the perfect example, a warning to anyone else feeling... overly creative.

Hanekoma's a cool guy, so it shouldn't be a problem, he's always worked at the edges of the system anyway, a little more involved than most of them prefer the Producers to be, keeping more than just a toe in the RG. It's different, coming from the Composer angle rather than Ascending any other way, even if he's sure most of the Angels think it just means he's a much bigger pain in the
Yeah, can't imagine why they're pissed. It must be because you're so cool.

The words are the same harsh rebuke they've been for weeks, worse than anything the higher-ups could have said, far worse – he already knows what he's done, how bad it is. It's not like they call them Taboo for no good reason, and it's not just because it can crash an entire sector of a city – it's a dark and messy business, twisting Noise, and leaves a mark, no matter how careful he was or how good his intentions were. It's Soul, there, that he deliberately destroyed, the raw creative potential of the universe driven mad and vicious and the wrongness of that is well beyond any arbitrary scale, even the Angelic ones.

He hasn't touched a brush or a pen or anything more demanding than a coffee mug for weeks, trying to pass it off as anxiety, worry over how the Game will end up, how Shibuya will end up, but that's just a convenient excuse and he knows it. This is all about what he's done, being punished by his muse or his own awareness of his sin, and even if the lack of focus is driving him stir crazy, there's no way to argue he doesn't deserve much worse.

The thing about making a stand, putting everything on the line, is that losing but not dying is still a possibility. It never quite seems that way when Everything! Is! Dramatic! – Hanekoma knows he ought to be dead – really dead – or Fallen for sure, maybe he is Fallen, but if there's no one around to say so for sure, how will he know?

The Angels don't say anything explicitly, because talking around the rules means they can pretend they're still flexible, but Hanekoma knows he's expected to keep a low profile. Stay in his little store and act properly cowed and wait for time to pass. A considerable amount of time.

It's still a relief to hear the bell chime over the door, to see Neku come in, finishing up a call, snapping his phone shut. He never comes here with anyone, and even if Hanekoma assured him – since it's true – that there's no danger here for his RG friends, he knows Neku wouldn't do it. There's only so far even his angelic trustworthiness will go.

"Hey there, Neku!"

Neku makes a face, patient amusement, knowing how this goes – so much like Joshua at times, it as if the clock has tipped back. Hanekoma has to remind himself who he's looking at, that in light of all that's happened, there are probably better things to do than be nostalgic.

"All right, let's try it, then."

Neku throws down the money, and Hanekoma slides the drink back across the counter. He had to double-check the recipe, but he's sure it's right this time. One genius iced caramel mocha. Neku takes a careful sip, runs his tongue over his bottom lip, thinking.

"Wow, so this is what fail tastes like."

"Give me that," Hanekoma says, stung, grabbing the drink back, popping off the plastic lid and taking a big gulp. It's a mistake. He tries, and fails, to swallow without wincing.

"It must be the beans. Beans are off today."

Please, the art has abandoned him for the moment, don't let him lose the coffee too.

"Right."
Neku is flicking through a sheaf of papers, printouts, and Angelic powers don't exactly extend to upside-down reading but Hanekoma thinks he catches a familiar character or two. The kid is doodling in the margin as he reads, and something in Hanekoma all but lunges forward in desperation and want, Neku and the city so intimately connected, sharing that perfect creative spark, and Hanekoma feels the lack of it even more profoundly.

"He forwarded me all of Kitanji's old files." Neku says, voice quiet and dryly amused. "Which is, you know, not creepy at all."

"Be grateful you're too short to wear his clothes."

Neku laughs, shaking his head.

"You use the same kanji for 'human shield' as 'conductor', don't you? It's okay, you can tell me."

He looks up, his eyes are sharp, there's a question in them, watching Hanekoma, and just because he's not planning a double-cross doesn't mean he's at all unaware, and Joshua still doesn't realize what he's gotten himself into.

"So, Mr. Producer, any words of wisdom before I walk off the cliff?"

He's half-sure Neku says it just to see if he'll flinch, and Hanekoma doesn't disappoint.

"Ah, Neku..."

"A Composer mistook me for one of his own – oh, did I mention some of them are kind of normal and totally not mental, so it's not just part of the job to be like that? He was talking about Angels, I kind of figured it out from there. And since it's kind of almost helpful, I assume I'm not supposed to know."

The reason the other Angels don't like him, Hanekoma with his cute little café and his fun little world renowned artist hobby and his handing off the city to a laissez-faire lunatic and whee, what are rules? It's true, Neku is hardly just a Conductor, by anyone's terms, but Hanekoma really doesn't want to try to bend another technicality until the rest stop creaking.

"Shibuya is a little bit... different." He could try a memory thing, but it might not work, and even if it did Joshua would notice and there's got to be an easier- "Listen, Neku, maybe you should just forget about... I mean, it could cause - there's an issue of instability."

Neku laughs again, nothing bitter in it. "Yeah, Mr. H, if I had to pick a word to describe all this, it would totally be stable."

"Well..." Hanekoma grins, one hand scratching at the back of his neck. "Yeah, I guess you have a point there."

"I don't need you to tell me anything you're not supposed to. I just thought you should know that I... know." Neku shrugs, flipping the edges of the papers again. "Between the two of you, I might just figure out the best time to clench."

Hanekoma's turn to laugh, and he'd held out the admittedly slim possibility that Joshua had been joking about the fight, but there'd been other reports, whispers along those few channels he was still connected to – oh yeah, Neku had come this close to gaining control of one of the most powerful sections of one of the world's most powerful cities – all for Joshua's sake, all to protect him, and big surprise he'd forgot to mention that part.
"How in the hell did he get the job, anyway?"

"Beat me at Tin Pin."

Neku gives him that look, like he's not quite sure Hanekoma's sane enough that it's not the truth.

"So you're looking at what, there, the overview?" Hanekoma gestures toward the printout. He doesn't think his reports are in any way an expression of his talent, but at least he tries, on occasion, to give them a bit of poetry. He hasn't looked at the official Conductor's documents in a very long time, can't imagine they've gotten less tedious though. "The actual thing is about the size of a phone book. I wouldn't recommend printing it out."

Neku blinks at him. Blinks again.

"You're not joking. I was expecting something a bit more, I don't know... Sailor Moon. Magical bureaucracy activation."

Hanekoma laughs, shaking his head.

"No, that's all on the Composer's end, I'm afraid. You just get stuck with the paperwork. Be grateful you live in the age of high technology. They used to do them on scrolls."

He grins, as Neku makes a little sound of despair, slumping down on the table.

"Word of advice: nobody really reads the whole thing."

Neku raises an arm, staring at him. "I just can't imagine why they'd be angry at you."

Hanekoma's going to grin at the joke, not letting the real truth of what he did out. Not ever, if he doesn't have to. Joshua doesn't care, death threats and breaking rules mean next to nothing to him – but Neku would care. He fights for people, not for ideals, and so he would care, and it's no real surprise when the next document he pulls out is one of Higashizawa's Game Reports, staring at it expressionlessly.

"A lot of Reapers died, in the long Game. A lot more than usual."

"Mm."

Neku flips through the pages for a few more minutes, and shuts his eyes. From a clinical standpoint, this is all fascinating, worth taking notes on, but from any other Hanekoma knows he probably ought to be worried. Neku already looks tired, a certain grim set in his jaw, preparing for the worst. It's a lot to ask, even of someone with his level of Imagination, so much more than just a Conductor, so much that could burn out, the city and the people and the Game all pulling at him. So many ways this could go wrong, but Hanekoma knows that it isn't the right answer, not to take the risk.

"You talked to him, about the position?"

Neku rubs a thumb against his temple, smiling. "Haven't had the chance, and he only comes to the RG to annoy the shit out of me. Usually with bullets."

Still not forgiving, and maybe that's all right, but it's hard to think that Neku doesn't have any idea, doesn't think for a moment the trust might go both ways. "Anyone else, Neku, knowing what you know..."

"No. Kitanji wouldn't have."
"Megumi considered the Composer... above limits and expectations. If he'd discovered that the man he worshiped was just another subject, being observed himself? Not as omnipotent, not as flawless as he'd assumed?"

"A kid playing with a stacked deck." Neku smirks. "Are you *sure* there's a good person underneath there? You know, Mr. H, sometimes beneath the bastard is another, deeper layer of total bastard."

"Neku."

"Have you taken core samples?"

"Neku..."

"Do you have sonar, maybe?"

"Neku, what's the worst that can happen?"

He's going to get used to this look from Neku, the judging-his-sanity look, and okay maybe he's got a point and Hanekoma's whole Buddha-beatnik attitude has been kicked down a few rungs recently, there's no doubting that.

"You ever hear that story, with the scorpion and the turtle?" He finally says. Softly, looking down at his notes. "You know, whatever happens to them, at least it doesn't affect the river."

Here he is, thinking Neku's here because he's doubting, because he needs his own determination shored up, but that's not what this is about at all. This isn't about acceptance or responsibility – this is about Shibuya, and Neku being ready to give it his all, ready to put himself on the line for it, but not ready to put anyone else in the way. It's not a Game to him, not in any way.

"Maybe..." He's an Angel. It doesn't mean he knows everything, and yes, Joshua can still surprise him, and yes, Hanekoma had half-expected Shibuya would crumble, but Neku's still looking at him like maybe he might manage to pull out some genius bit of wisdom, and he wants to believe it too.

"Neku, you don't need to... some of the Conductors, it's just business. It isn't all or nothing."

Neku's smile says it's a little late for him to be backsliding, and Hanekoma thinks that's all he's been doing lately, not guilty enough for atonement, preferring to do nothing useful in any direction as if it will prove something.

"Do you remember when you thought Joshua was dead?"

Except Hanekoma never did, and Neku knows it, and that's all the answer the kid is going to give him, for why. All the explanation he needs, for this Conductor and his Composer, and everything Neku will do. He gathers up his papers quietly, doesn't say any more as he goes to the door, the little bell chiming as it closes behind him.

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Uzuki bitches heartily when the Game starts up but truth be told, she's kind of adrift without it. Keeps checking her phone though Kariya never calls and they've got this thing about spending time together outside of work weeks anyway. It's more her determination than his, wanting to pretend she's got at least some kind of life.

Which she does. Okay, so her little articles don't end up in the world's trendiest magazines but she has enough to get by and freelancing is way better than any number of other jobs. It's enough
money to keep her in ramen and Kariya in ramen when he wins or just won't stop whining about it and her real prospects aren't in this world anyway. She's going to be the GM eventually, even if it means dragging Kariya's ass up with her, or hell, let him stay where he's happiest. Yeah they're a great team, no denying that, but her feet still get itchy from time to time and she knows he understands.

A lot of stores she doesn't even bother going into, when she can't exactly take along more than she can carry. She's squatting now, in some old lady's house. Dead for two weeks, and she's been able to dodge the son, no idea what he's going to do with the property but his indecision is all Uzuki's gain and he's even kept the TV on and the hot water running. Yes, a Harrier's life is all luxury and ease but at least she's not sleeping in the park, like she knows a few of the Wall Reapers have to be.

The money that doesn't go to ramen she spends in the stores that she can't swap pins in, no marks on their doors although occasionally she'll see someone or think it's someone from the Game, back to life, like when the new shipment comes out and there's the cutest DIB skirt and she reaches for it, only to realize she's playing tug-of-war with the girl who's grabbed the opposite end of the hanger.

The brat's little partner, what's-her-name, staring back at Uzuki – is that a challenge in her eye?

"I got here first," she says, not really managing the smile. The other girl is better at faking politeness.

"You must have been distracted, I was here first."

The RG rules really should not apply when fashion is involved. And the only reason she didn't destroy this little girl the first time is because her stupid partner was stupid and cheating – obviously – even if she doesn't quite believe Kariya, that there's no explanation for his wings except that he's the Conductor, and she tightens her hold on the hanger because this girl just is not giving up on her skirt!

"You need legs to wear a skirt like this, you know."

The girl's eyes sparkle, smile never wavering. "I don't know why we're even fighting. I bet if you asked, they'd have one in a larger size."

"Eri!" A yelp, and another girl pushes into the way, and it's funny but even though Uzuki can't remember the girl's name, she thinks that Eri sounds wrong. The new girl isn't quite the fashion plate, still put together well but dressing down, going for that shrinking violet thing. Obviously shopping DIB just because her friend is here, and she reaches up, prying the girl's fingers off the end of the hanger over her protests.

"No fighting! You'll get us kicked out - again." She turns to Uzuki, pushing up her glasses with her other hand. "Sorry about that," she starts, but looks more closely at the skirt, and lets out a little, disappointed sound. Uzuki can see her rethinking her politeness, and she finally rolls her eyes, letting go.

"Nevermind. You obviously need it more than I do."

"Yes! Cute power!" Eri says, pumping her fist and swinging the other girl around, who puts up a minor protest but allows herself to be led away. Uzuki sighs, not enough luck in her world that the girl would end up in two Games, far too much time left before she can sink her claws into a deserving idiot.
The Scramble is as packed as ever, more than one head turning as she passes. The temptation to try and pick up a businessman is high, preferably if he's married and might put her up in an apartment of her own for a while, her life made more comfortable and more scandalous all in one go. The rumor was that was how Konishi got by, though Uzuki hardly believed it – the Iron Maiden didn't need anyone, or anything.

Later, Uzuki will run the memory back, over and over in her head until it's faded and tattered at the edges. If she's sure of anything, it's that it isn't a sound that turns her head. If there is an opposite of sound, it might be that. Static, the whisper of wind through a hole in the universe, but whatever it is Uzuki hears it, and turns, glancing through the crowd like she's looking for Players even though she's RG-

Pale lips, shimmering in a sly smile – lip gloss only. Long, dark hair that just threatens to hang in her eyes. The edge of a plaid skirt, hiked slightly too high, because she always likes people looking. Imagines which of them would come after her in some back alley, and laughs. The laugh isn't something to forget, not ever.

Uzuki's a Reaper. Her heart stops anyway.

Saika lifts her hands, index fingers out, and slowly draws a heart in the air. Her eyes are dark, something shifting there, uncoiling.

Uzuki tries and fails to breathe in, one hand reaching behind her for a railing that isn't there, and a new group of people surge through the crossing, and that lip-gloss grin disappears in the crowd.

She scans the dull faces of strangers, the sea of bodies, backing up until there's a solid wall behind her and even that she's scrabbling against, afraid that it might not be real. Panting for air, wondering if she'll see it coming, if she'll feel it – but there's no attack, not even as the seconds turn into minutes and the crowd moves around her.

The phone is in her hand before she realizes she's reached for it, speed-dialing with Kariya's number on the screen and Uzuki's whispering under her breath, little snatches of nonsense. Forces herself to breathe in even if she can't bring herself to shut her eyes, even for a moment.

Thinks about Konishi, the woman's calm iciness, nothing ever troubling her, nothing that could touch her, and even if that little brat Player had erased her, certainly she'd gone out without a sound, giving him no satisfaction. Uzuki breathes out, steadily, heart no longer pounding quite so hard, and snaps the phone shut.

It takes much, much longer, to step away from the wall.
At some point, Neku figures, they really have to start respecting rules. Or at least obeying rules. Or at least recognizing that rules do exist and sometimes are worth taking a look over. So maybe Joshua at one-third power is still more than capable of taking all the competition – but hell, he's also quite capable of acting like he can, and then letting Neku step in the way when it's time to actually fight.

Maybe Kitaniji didn't die to save what he believed in. Maybe he took the best chance he'd had in years to get the hell out.

It's not safe for them to meet in the RG, not really, and he's not about to get the Composer killed before he's actually started the job. So he stays in the RG, and Joshua spends all his time in his throne room, or in Pork City, or maybe on Mars, for all Neku knows for sure. Doing what the Composer does on his off hours, keep the moon from falling, whatever. Neku's got to ease into this whole Conductor business even if it is really a freefall and that means asking Joshua as few questions as he can manage for as long as he can avoid it.

It's kind of ironic, really, when one of his teachers pulls him aside after class, asking if everything is all right, if he needs to talk. Apparently spending all his time alone and looking miserable for the past few months bothered no one, but now that he's got a way to spend his time – whether it's 'healthy,' exactly, is still up for debate – it seems they've noticed, and his preoccupation is a problem. School is of course, a long-distant third to both his art and his new position but Neku knows his grades haven't dipped that much and even if they wanted to get in touch with his father – ha.

Neku isn't expecting to see him until his first week of the Game is well over, thankfully – assuming he survives with body and sanity intact – and at least that will give him some time for his hair to grow out, for the highlights to fade. Ai did an absurdly good job on his nails, and it's just easier to leave them. If he gets any odd looks, it's not like he's got the time to pay attention, absolutely nothing less important to be thinking about.

The universe at large – through F Everything, which is a motto Neku increasingly agrees with - has decided to reward Minamimoto's pile of crazy, rule-breaking homicidal failure by making him unexpectedly trendy. His 'sculptures' are one of the only remaining memories of the month, and seem to have soaked up all the residual excitement, enough to get him more than one job, at least.

Neku tries not to grit his teeth as he walks past people taking their pictures in front of the heaps – not just tourists, not all the time – and he really, really wants it to assume the worst but even as crappy a Conductor as he is – he'd be able to tell. The darkness, the cold brutality of the Taboo Noise had been shocking enough when he'd been a Player – Minamimoto didn't have that kind of power now, hardly had any at all, simply a Wall Reaper enjoying a bout of good luck.

"You could always Imprint some basic art appreciation." Joshua says, not at all helpfully, as if Neku had taken advantage of that ability even when his life was on the line. He's not sure how they
even got on this topic, though Joshua doesn't always bother paying attention to conversation cues –
hell, he has a laserlike focus for whatever Neku wishes he wouldn't bring up.

"It's not my business what people like. It isn't a popularity contest."

And okay, so it's been dry for a bit, the cost of supplies leaving him eating cup ramen more often
than not – but he likes cup ramen, dammit – and he's still just starting out. This is a matter of
principles, and integrity.

"Despite the way it sounds, Neku dear, being a starving artist isn't very romantic. Or interesting."

He makes a face. Yes, Joshua is just as pedantic and annoying over the phone.

"Maybe I should start a blog."

Neku hangs up on him.

---------------------------------------------

"Mmm? What's that? New project?"

He's got a semi-permanent space, stretched out and sketching on Eri's floor, a spare room that's big
enough for the three of them and two dress forms, one of them currently buried under half-finished
whatevers and scrap fabric and the other with the newest project, a black dress with rather simple,
classic lines and Eri winks at him when Shiki leaves to get a drink from the kitchen – the dress is
for her, for a special trunk show they're going to, a little over a week from now. A big deal, a
surprise, and Neku's already thinking about things he's seen at Stationside, or maybe the
department store that might go well with it. They both take special care with Shiki, she's like an
orchid, needs a little extra attention to bloom.

He's doodling pin ideas right now – doesn't have a button maker, but the guy at Towa fairly fell
over himself to let him borrow one. Neku's not sure if he even knows how to make a pin, but he's
got a few interesting ideas – putting a little shading on the edge of a fishbone and, if he can get it to
work right, it will draw the Noise to the Reapers instead of the Players when activated. Which
would piss off Pinky, if nothing else.

"Hey Neku, let me see."

The girls hover over him, and Neku's not sure if he should be more careful, still a little wary of
being the Conductor around Shiki, but she gives no sign that anything is wrong, that she knows
what he's doing and Eri nods in approval.

"Cool. Buttons are in. You should make up some patterns for us to use, too."

He's been doing more than just reading the rulebook, of course. Texting with Joshua back and
forth, constant sniping over the way the Game's going to go now that he's involved. It's difficult,
not to try and get out of it, to refuse, but he's made a promise. If he doesn't go through with this,
Joshua will just pick someone else, someone cruel, someone who likes to see Players get erased.
Maybe that doesn't make any difference, maybe he might as well enjoy it. Maybe agreeing to any
of this is already unforgivable.

-No person is allowed to be anyone else's entry fee.

At least he doesn't have to pay for the ridiculous number of messages, not now that he's part of the
unlimited minute Conductor plan.
For the low, low price of your soul... and your dignity.

Neku hasn't had the phone at more than arm's reach since the party, though he's learned to ignore it when he's in the shower, nearly broke his damn neck the first time trying to scramble out to reach it, only to hear Joshua snickering at him from the other end of the line.

He's not exactly shocked to discover while he's reading through the manual, that the entire idea of entry fees seems to be Joshua's in the first place – and it makes sense, really. Only Joshua, only he could look at the Game and think "how can we make this harder?"

-She wasn't hurt. It wouldn't have hurt, if you'd lost.

The thought alone is enough to make him shudder, looking down at the tiny screen. Joshua doesn't get it – obviously – and it's not the sort of thing that Neku even knows how to explain, why the idea of Shiki's future in his hands still makes his stomach ache, if he thinks about it for long.

-I'm not asking permission.

A bit of a pause, though not long, and Neku kind of hates this - all his supposed power, in the end, resting on what Joshua deigns to give him. He's got to change that, somehow, because eventually he's going to piss the Composer off, and not in the funny, won't-we-laugh-later way but more in the deep-sixed Shibuya way – Kitaniji couldn't even stop that from happening, and Kitaniji actually knew what the hell he was doing.

It's too many lives, too much at stake to fall at a whim, and the Angels didn't stop it the last time, and Neku might not know them, but he knows Joshua, probably better than the Composer thinks he does.

-If you make my Game boring, I'm taking it out on you.

Neku blushes, even though it's just a text and he's only hearing Joshua in his head. A shadow passes over him, Neku immediately shoving his phone in his pocket – at least one of them ought to display some sort of survival instinct, but it's just Eri grinning down at him.

"So how's the mystery boyfriend?"

"It's not... we're not... anything."

Which is entirely true, because Joshua doesn't make life simple enough for things like descriptions or even nouns most of the time. Eri makes a little amused, suspicious noise – definitely doesn't believe him – and Shiki looks up from her work, smiling at him around a few pins. Happy for him. It's hard to remember the last time anyone smiled at him like that.

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So many rules, subsets of rules, and he stops counting which ones Joshua almost certainly broke when he runs out of fingers. Neku cleans up his room, finds the rest of his pins, the ones he hasn't given away. As the Conductor, though, he should be able to do anything the pins can do already, without having to search for them or giving them time to warm up.

Shiki said he was good with them, so he ought to be just as good without, right?

Neku sets himself mildly on fire twice, before seeking out a quiet corner of a nearby park for further practice. Flipping Frequencies is the easiest part, Neku realizes he must have been doing it even before now, that Hanekoma had probably noticed but decided to let him ease into it – as if
anything with Joshua was ever easy.

Shibuya is so loud, so insistent, and Neku thinks he's starting to adjust to it but there's not much he can do about the excitement, the way his heart is racing – it's like being on the starting blocks, ready to take that first leap forward, every second. He'd guess that being manic is something like this, but those people can't exactly call up spheres of lightning just by thinking they can.

At least he doesn't have to go into Noise mode to fight all the time. Neku had been a little worried about that, and how many of his enemies he'd kill simply by having them laugh up their internal organs.

He doesn't look at his wings, not ever. Usually can't even feel their slight weight against his back, and really that's for the best. He doesn't like to think about them. It's not like any of the higher-ups had ever pulled theirs out anyway, until they were ready to do battle.

He's going to scare them, the Players. Neku's going to scare them, now, and whatever his intentions might be, he's still going to have to stand there and watch as they die for good.

*You won't be Konishi. You won't be looking for ways to screw them. It won't be fun.*

A lot of variability between cities and even sections of cities, from what he can tell, according to the official rules. All Games are not the same Game, not only due to size and location, and so it's up to him, to at least try to make it fair. As fair as he can.

Fire's easy, the psych called up with a thought, and after he stops singing his fingertips he's flinging it out in perfectly aimed lines. Lightning takes a little bit more effort, and isn't as fierce or direct as he'd like, more difficult to hold together than it was with the pins. It probably wouldn't hurt to do more work with telekinesis, though it had never seemed as satisfying bludgeoning the Noise when he could just fry it instead.

Barriers. He should be able to make barriers, and that might come in handy, and no, Neku's not thinking about boxing up Minamimoto because that would be wrong and immature but rather satisfying, yep – and Neku spreads his fingers wide, imagining the barrier rising up, solidifying – wonders how he's supposed to know if he's done it right. He waves his hand, can't feel anything, and turns around to pace back a few steps and try again only to smack hard, nose first, into the invisible wall that's sprung up behind him.

It's really a very good idea to keep practicing where no one will notice.

---------------------------------------------

The Game exists to refine Soul energy, to make the world a better place through increasing human potential. Players can Ascend or Reincarnate – or they just turn back into Soul, even if they win.

Neku stops, reads it over twice, along with the bit about only the Composer being able to Reincarnate and yeah, he's no longer feeling even the slightest bit impressed by Kitaniji's noble attempt to save the city - they're all assholes. Every single last one of them and god help him he is working for their king.

... and no, he definitely doesn't want to know what happened to Joshua's first partner, the poor bastard the Composer would have had to play with the first time, when he'd actually jacked Shibuya.

-Actually, it's an interesting story.
Joshua never, ever uses shorthand when he texts, and Neku doesn't even bother to try, not needing the grief. He just keeps his replies short and to the point.

- No.

- You always complain that I never tell you anything.

When Joshua hasn't been irritating for a few hours or Neku hasn't called him – and these two things are a fairly 1:1 ratio – he feels a little guilty, that he's exchanging e-mails with Vancouver. Sure, he's talking to some of the others, too, a few of them even trading art tips and internet links – he needs a site like, yesterday – but it's different with Vancouver.

It's not like she doesn't tease him, will sometimes answer with some esoteric quote or a zen koan or song lyrics – and 'Common People' becomes his official Joshua ring tone the first time he reads through the words – but she knows about the Game. She knows a lot, and the one that she plays doesn't seem quite so terrible. The same stakes, the same costs, but it's not about being hunted, or trapped. It's not about fighting just to get back to normal.

*It's a question, it's asking a question - is the life you're living even worth fighting for, or is it better to throw your cards in and try for another hand?*

Always Games, always, but her words are not quite as dismissive as Joshua – he wouldn't be having this conversation with his Composer, Neku's pretty sure of that.

*I just wish I could give everyone a second chance.* Which sounds ridiculous – he knows it's ridiculous - but it's true.

*What else do you think you're doing?* He can feel her gentle humor there in the e-mail, just as easily as the ominous tone of the mission mails when he'd been in the Game. Will he be so terrifying to the Players now? Will he seem that inhuman, and cold?

*At our strongest, a direct Imprint is only a suggestion. We're just moving pieces on the board, because that's all we can do. You can give someone the opportunity, you can hope and cheer, but after all that, you can't change someone's mind for them.*

The Red Pins had been Kitaniji's attempt, and that had just turned everyone into zombies, stopping the risk by eliminating the chance for growth altogether.

Neku sure hadn't listened to Shiki, when she'd only been trying to help him, to keep him alive. So locked into his own certainty about the way things were, the way other people were. Would he have even fought so hard not to be erased, if he'd still had his memories? ... and man, that's a question Neku wishes he could un-ask himself.

The Game is cruel, and hard – but there is a truth to it, a logical mechanism. He's read through that section of the rules a half-dozen times, not sure he still has it quite right but getting the general idea. It takes a lot of power, to change a Soul's frequency from the UG back to the RG, to bring the dead permanently back to life, even for the Composer. If a Player doesn't want to go back, doesn't want it with everything they've got – it won't happen. If they're not strong enough, they'll just disappear anyway.

The Game generates its own energy, to keep the UG together, to keep the Reapers alive and give the Players any kind of chance at coming back to life. If it didn't exist, there would be no chance, not for anyone, and Shibuya might not even be like it is, alive and thriving, and Neku knows he has no choice. Maybe knew it from the start, even if he can't quite stop trying to convince himself.
- Vending machines.

Neku doesn't bother texting hellos any more than he bothers being polite in any other way, not that Joshua doesn't know exactly what he's talking about, doesn't respond in an instant. The Composer probably knows when his phone's about to ring. Neku wonders what his ringtone sounds like.

- Add a verb, Conductor dear.

- We need vending machines, pin-operated, at least between Cat and the Scramble.

Because CAT may be a fantastic artist, but his food is the kind of thing Neku tries to swallow without tasting, and the coffee... well, he's a really fantastic artist.

- I'll make you a trade.

Well, that didn't take long. Neku's more than a little nervous about negotiating – Kitaniji proved how well that works - but he has to give a little bit, if there's any hope of future taking, and Neku flips his phone out of text mode and calls, because they might as well get this over with at a proper speed.

"Also, no one gets attacked until everyone is paired up."

The laugh he expected, Joshua's indulgent tone making it difficult not to toss the phone into the street. "We might as well just open an amusement park. With a petting zoo for the Noise. Like Disneyland. For dead people."

"It's not coddling them, to give them a half-decent chance of surviving to day two."

"Hnnn." Joshua says, not really agreeing – Neku will need to push on the point later, or just ignore the Composer and do it anyway. Always better to ask forgiveness than permission – and with Joshua he's hardly about to do the former, either.

"It's going to cost you, Neku. A few night games might be a good start, provide a bit of well-needed variety."

It probably kicks up more Noise, or something bad, or else Joshua wouldn't sound so smug.

"Just remember, I actually have a life."

"Of course I remember, Neku."

And the menace in those simple, cheerful words is enough to take his breath away, and he's glad he's on the phone. Every once in a while, he almost forgets who he's dealing with. It's easy to stare in awe at the falling star, the tidal wave. It's something entirely different to befriend it.

... and is there ever, ever a story where loving it turns out to be a good idea?

The Conductor's guide has a considerable section of notes on the Composer, though nearly all of that has to do with his obligation to the Composer, his duties and responsibilities which are pretty much as "Neku Sakuraba: Meat Shield" as he expected they would be. Of course, no matter how low his expectations of Joshua can get, there's always another gem to unearth.

"The Composer's connections to other souls are by design tenuous. The Conductor has certain protections within his own power, but inevitably a Composer's Soul will overwrite the Music of
lesser beings, effectively erasing them from the inside out.”

Neku stops, reads it again, just to make sure it says what he thinks it does.

"Lesser beings.” Well damn, Josh. Glad you decided that was a risk worth taking. You ass.

It’s the truth, what he said to Hanekoma, what it meant. Joshua is the most irritating, unpredictable and dangerous person Neku has ever met, and he makes Neku feel alive, even more than Shibuya, more than his art – more than anything. No one else keeps up with him as well, listens to him if only for the chance to show him up – and it has nothing to do with what happened at the end of the second week, not really, not anymore. Joshua thinks it’s so funny, seems to believe that Neku feels the way he does out of some sort of stubborn obligation, like it’s all payback.

But this is exactly what it was like, the last time he had a friend, someone who understood it when the world was dull and boring and someone who laughed with him when everything was stupid and just knew him – and losing that, losing Joshua had been the worst of it all over again, a reminder Neku didn't need, of how alone he truly was. If there's anything that keeps him doubting the Composer’s omniscience, that's it - that Joshua ever thought Neku would be able to pull the trigger. He still doesn't seem to realize he couldn't have set the stakes high enough.

... and kissing him is still... wow, top on the list of his big, stupid mistakes, because being around Joshua tends to involve a lot of big, stupid mistakes – but would he really undo it if he could? When Joshua had kissed him back?

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Beat breaks his arm attempting to ollie the un-ollieable, and so they all gather at the hospital to wait with Rhyme, who kicks her feet just a little, hiding her nervousness well for being so young, although Shiki is quick to reassure her - everything will be fine.

It's a little strange, stepping outside of Shibuya, but other than the way the music wavers slightly, there's no real change. He doesn't see anyone, no challenges – their Game must be on an off week too, or else the story had already spread, what he'd done to Manhattan. Neku's in no way comfortable trading on that fight, but there's nothing to do, so he might as well take advantage of it.

A week to go, trying hard not to think about it. He's got plenty of homework and two minor projects and yeah, it's still barely a distraction. Neku's jumpy, doesn't even realize how much until he realizes what he's listening to.

The RG and the UG are less separate than ever, now that he's officially the Conductor, and for the most part he can ignore it, pushing his Frequency down until it gives him a low-grade headache but sometimes that's easier to deal with.

Beat's music is off slightly, the injury making itself known even there, but he's fine, his melody strong as always, simple but unwavering. Neku can hear the similarities between it and Rhyme's now, the connection they have as siblings. Still a few notes in hers that shouldn't be there, wouldn't be except that she had been Noise once, but it doesn't mean anything now. Whatever else might happen, his friends are safe in the RG. Shiki is a bright and steady presence at his side, as always, her Music as familiar as his own – and she'd be amazed, probably embarrassed, to know how loud she sings.

... but there's something else here, too. It keeps slipping in and out, beneath the ever-constant shuffle of what Neku's grown accustomed to, but this is different, a whisper, like a flicker of movement at the corner of his eye.
"Yo, Neku! You gonna tag this for me, right?" Beat says, grinning, proudly holding up his plaster-laden arm, wrapped nearly to the elbow, as Rhyme sighs in dismay, but relieved to have her brother still in one piece.

"Neku? Is everything all right?" Shiki's noticed his preoccupation, and Neku fumbles for an excuse. He's going to need to come up with a stockpile of them soon, doubts there's much in the book that will help him out there. Everything written in the rules seems to assume the Conductor is treating the Game as his primary duty – that no one has ever really tried to live a double life, or kept their RG life as paramount.

"I... uh, I just remembered there's something I gotta do. I'll, um, I'll catch up with you later. Ok?"

"Oh... okay." Shiki says, and Rhyme waves goodbye, Beat yelling something Neku doesn't hear – too focused on that near-silent melody, a distant sound at the end of some long hall. The hospital is huge, full of all kinds of unfamiliar Music – walking past the room full of newborns is particularly strange, their melodies barely more than a few plinking notes, but so loud, a xylophone shoved down a staircase.

Neku's got his eyes closed, after a while, a little surprised that no one is stopping him as he moves along, head tilted, trying to hear... what is that? Why does it sound so strange?

"Oh damn, finally. I thought I'd have to come out there and get you myself."

Neku stops, opens his eyes. The girl is watching him from a hospital bed, slightly inclined. She's maybe about his age, though it's difficult to tell, with how skeletal she is. Nearly bald, her skin an odd, gray color, but her gaze is sharp enough.

"So, what's your name then?"

"Neku." He says, too surprised not to answer.

"Oh, that's adorable. I would totally have stolen you from your girlfriend." She smiles. It looks like it almost hurts. "Sorry. I kind of stopped caring what I said when it stopped mattering."

He shouldn't be here, really shouldn't be, but the song is definitely coming from – and Neku knows then, what he's been listening to. What it sounds like, what a Conductor can hear when someone is dying.

The girl glances down at the I.V. in her arm, the room surprisingly empty otherwise. No monitors, no machines.

"Yeah, it's kind of a downer when they don't even bother hooking anything up anymore. I'm kind of in and out these days, though – in more ways than one."

She sighs, still hasn't moved much more than her head, giving him a surprisingly thorough once-over anyway.

"You're a little underdressed for a shinigami. I kind of thought you'd be taller. Beautiful wings, though."

Neku turns, startled, but the rise of black is definitely there, stretching out behind him – so he's in the UG, maybe, which is why no one has said anything – and yet, she can still see him.

"I'm not... I...."
"I've seen you before, all of you. My mom used to take me for walks, before it got bad, and I saw you then. What are you all doing out there?"

Neku did not sign up for this. He did not sign up for any of this. The girl hasn't looked away from him, her gaze intent and curious.

"I can keep a secret. I'll be finding out on my own soon, anyway, right?"

"It-they call it a Game. Some people who die, they have to fight, and if they win, sometimes they get to come back to life."

Also, it's full of absolute bastards, but if Neku gets into the specifics of that, they'll be here until sometime next week.

"Any sick people in your Game?"

Neku's read the rules. It's a game for the young, for unexpected, unforeseen deaths. Accidents, the kind of people 'taken before their time,' and he doesn't understand why illness doesn't count, but he slowly shakes his head.

"Shame."

"You don't want to play. It's... it's terrible."

Her gaze is withering, flexing her hand, the IV shifting in her arm.

"Worse than this? I don't mean to spoil your reputation, but you don't really seem that bad."

"You get hunted, like it's a sport." Neku says, wonders who he's talking to and what point he's trying to make. "In order to even play, you have to give up the thing you love most in the world."

"It was soccer. It would have been." She says, and her lower lip trembles for a moment. Neku finally notices the picture on the table next to her, the girl in uniform, a ball at her feet. Not so young, and yet it's hard to imagine they're at all the same person. "I was so fast."

Neku can see it, if he wants to look, it's all in her Music, so quiet and thin but he doesn't want to look, doesn't want to be here. Takes a quick step back.

"I think I should go."

"No!"

She reaches out, lets out a little whimper – it hurts her to do it, and Neku steps forward as she falls back against the bed, but her hand is around his wrist, her fingers like bone, holding on to him with her eyes because there's no strength in her, anywhere else.

"You have to. Please. It's why you're here, it has to be. Please, don't leave me alone."

Neku doesn't know what she wants, why she's looking at him so desperately, and then it all, sickeningly, snaps together, hits him hard in the gut as his world goes gray at the edges.

"No. Oh, no. No."

He's so stunned, horrified, he can't even pull away, and her eyes are glistening, tears and desperation as she tries to smile.
"Come on, I'll owe you one."

If his legs were working right, hadn't locked up, Neku would be running now, fast. He shouldn't be here, he shouldn't have to be here, this isn't the deal, this isn't any part of the deal.

"Please." Her voice cracks, her other hand reaching up as the first falls back, using up all her strength to keep him near. "Please, you're supposed to take me. You have to. Everything hurts, everything hurts all the time, and all I do is sit and think about who I used to be. How it's all over, and I don't -- I don't want to be scared anymore. It'll be dark, and I don't want to go. I don't want to go alone, in the dark."

She's crying, and before he can think Neku's sitting at the edge of the bed, an arm around her, her head against his chest, his free hand stroking the thin edge of fuzz where her hair should be as she clutches at him, still begging him brokenly, the words crumbling to pieces.

"Sssh, don't. It's all right. Don't, you don't have to..." Neku takes a breath around the sudden clench in his chest, fear and sadness and something very close to panic. "I don't even know how. I don't think I can -- I'm kind of... new at this, and I don't..."

She laughs a little, in between sobs, still leaning against him.

"Well, aren't we just a pair of winners."

She's so tired, he can see it in her eyes, feel it in the way she's slumped against him. So thin and so exhausted and in this moment, if he could Neku would trade his life for hers, but that's even further beyond him. He hates feeling so powerless, helpless, and reaches out for that thin whispery melody, maybe some comfort there, something he can -- and Neku sucks in a slow, shuddering breath as he feels it change, feels the fragile tension there - and the girl gasps, going still, watching him with wide eyes.

"You can. You can, can't you?"

Slowly, carefully Neku eases her back against the pillows. It's damn near impossible to stand up, his whole body cast from lead. He wants to tell her not to ask, that she doesn't have any right to ask him and he can't possibly, there's a rule, there has to be a rule – but she hasn't stopped watching him, red-rimmed eyes so afraid and so desperate and she's dying. He can't stop that, he can't save her.

"Please?" She tries to smile, obviously searching for a way to convince him. "Please, Neku."

He has both hands down, leaning against the bed, just trying to breathe. It's a beautiful day outside, the sun shining, the entire world a total fucking bastard and Neku screws his eyes shut, his wings stretching out – and her hand on his hand. Her fingers are cold.

"You're a good person. Thank you. I'm glad. I'm glad it was you."

He can't do this. He has no right to do this and he can't do this, and Neku takes a breath in, and reaches. Finds the thin, thready line of music, imagines his hand around it, pulling – and snaps it, feels it waver, crumbling under his touch.

The girl shudders, but there's not much left in her body to fight, and Neku hears her exhale, that last breath, feels her go. A shining ribbon of light and sound that unfurls like one pure note, rising up, twisting just for a moment around his wrist like a kite string, as if to pull him along. Laughter, and wanting, so much potential and so much joy and he knows her. Neku breathes in sharp and painful, and knows her whole life as well as he knows himself, and even as he reaches out it slips free, lets
go and gone.

She's gone.

He doesn't even know her name.

Neku's staggering back, away, but whatever happens next is a blind blur, all his strength left just to stay in control, scrabbling madly just to stay upright and keep moving down the hall and his hand hits a door, swings open and he's in a bathroom, shoes squeaking on the tiled floor. He makes it to the stall, fingers shaking, it takes two tries just to lock the door.

One hand against his mouth, tears falling over his knuckles and Neku really shouldn't be crying, curled up on a toilet and shaking and oh god, he killed her. He killed her because she asked him to, because she was hurting and he felt her go and she's dead and the loss of it crashes over him, like losing a sister, like dying all over again.

He can't do this. It's going to destroy him. He can't do this.

A vibration in his pocket – he switched his phone to mute when they arrived, and it's Shiki, looking for him, Neku scrubbing at his eyes just to see the message clearly. He tries to think of a reply, wants to text something. If she was here he'd just put his arms around her and never let go, not ever, but everything is blank – gone, so beautiful and gone forever – and he can't even think how his world's supposed to go back together and Shiki will just have to wait.
Maybe Hanekoma should have known, when Joshua stopped talking to him completely, that something was wrong. But Joshua had always been reclusive, rarely offering much in the way of conversation – and he thought he'd understood that, at least.

Still amazed by Shibuya's Composer, the potential there, all that he doesn't even realize he has yet to become. If the rest of the Angels don't see that, it's because they don't want to see their frustration as just a part of his ability. Joshua has never been a misunderstood genius – he pushes buttons on purpose, to challenge, because it's fun – and because the Composer takes a twisted sort of pride digging his own holes, testing himself as much as anyone.

At least, that was what he'd thought. Hadn't seen the fearlessness for what it was, Joshua's lack of interest in the stakes or the dangers or the potential costs as any kind of warning sign. It's difficult, even for Angels, to always see things for what they are.

He knows a few things for certain, now. Knows that Neku is the first thing – the very first – in Joshua's life to have consequences, and it's laughably obvious the Composer still doesn't want to admit it.

The little things, that show the difference, what's changed. A long time, since Hanekoma had seen Joshua at anything but his highest Frequency, but ever since the long Game, even in the Throne Room he's sprawled out in the form he played in, one leg hooked over the leg of his chair, laptop propped on his thigh, a pose both incredibly lazy and rather insulting to the entire idea of his position as a higher being.

"So, who'd you have to bribe to give your competitors so much trouble?" Joshua says, without looking up.

A massive coffee shop shutdown, an entire restructuring of the company worldwide, and does the store in Shibuya go? Hanekoma rolls his eyes.

"That person isn't talking to me anymore."

Violet eyes flick up to meet his briefly, and back down to the screen.

"Regret turning your nose up at those promotions?"

Hanekoma snorts. "As if they'd send anyone else here for you to pick your teeth with. You don't listen to me, I can only imagine what you'd do to the poor bastard put in my place." He shifts, Joshua is paying attention to him without paying attention. Knows why he's here, almost certainly could ask the question for him.

"You do realize-"

"Neku took his first Soul, and out of my territory." Joshua smirks slightly, without looking up. "It
wasn't Game-related, and she had weeks to live, if that. He was doing her a favor. Don't tell me anyone actually complained."

Oh, it had definitely been noted. Favorably, especially among those who worried that Sakuraba was perhaps too gentle, unable to make the tough decisions even when they had to be made.

"Have you talked to him?"

He doesn't have to ask, but it's interesting to see Joshua's complete non-response.

"I haven't seen him."

Hanekoma makes a slightly disapproving sound, and Joshua lifts an arm, shaking his phone slightly. "Don't worry. I'm not about to let him off the leash."

"He's not Megumi, you know."

Violet eyes watching him over the edge of the screen, and Hanekoma only arches an eyebrow, staring back, willing to match him inch for snotty-prince-bitch inch.

"I'm aware. Megumi didn't bitch at me for an hour when I mixed up trance and trip-hop."

"He's not you, either, boss."

It was always a risk, even with Yoshiya Kiryu as a perfect fit, already able to see the UG and practically set up to take over. The kid had wanted it, badly, maybe even before Hanekoma had explained exactly what 'it' entailed. Still, a natural fit for the UG meant drawbacks for the Game. Joshua had grown up on it, had enjoyed its casual callousness. No need to care about anyone, everything in constant transition, with the only value in the end result. No need for things like worry or trust.

The UG had filled with the results of that choice, with people like Konishi, and how she would have descended, how she might have Fallen. So much further than Minamimoto, if only she'd known how. Different versions of her, in different universes, but Joshua had found himself a real diamond in this one, flawless and brilliant and utterly inhuman. Hanekoma had never even considered her, far too dangerous, to risk unleashing that on Shibuya.

"You have come here to tell me something I don't know?"

"You're not teaching him."

A smirk. "... and yet, he's learning."

"Just wondered if you were going to let Phones hit every branch in the tree on the way down. Not a very nice thing to do to your Partner."

A soft snort, Joshua not exactly shaking the pom-poms when it comes to the value of team-ups. The Game isn't always a matter of partners, has run solo in the past, but things had the nasty tendency to turn into gladiatorial competition, more or less bloodsport, and even the victors weren't likely to learn much of anything at all.

"It's all semantics, whatever you'd like to think. The Players don't change, just because there's two of them together." Violet eyes watching him, amused – Hanekoma rarely tries to shield his thoughts from the Composer, Joshua not really as interested in secrets as he is in getting to the point of the conversation.
"Which is why we're here now."

Joshua rolls his eyes, stretching his shoulders, flexing his hands in a motion that is quite catlike.
"Two out of every five thousand."

"Mm?"

"That aren't completely useless. People that are actually worth the time. Give or take."

Hanekoma takes half a moment to add it up in his head. Six billion, split and multiplied....

"Nearly two and a half million? Rather high for you."

The Composer shrugs, the slight lift of a shoulder. "It's an estimate. I'm sure the math is off somewhere."

"You should talk to him."

Joshua shakes his head dismissively, back to typing away, multitasking long before the word had ever been created.

"Neku didn't know when to let go of her, he held on too long and he panicked. If he could handle three weeks in the Game, he can handle giving one girl a half-dignified death." His eyes narrow, when Hanekoma stays silent, but stay focused on his screen. "He shone brightest when he couldn't even remember who he was. Neku can keep up. The less I tell him, the more he learns on his own, the better he is. It's not like you ever taught me much I couldn't have picked up on my own."

Oh the tact and grace at the Composer's command - that one could have drawn blood, if he'd really been trying. Hanekoma lets it go, knows that an irritable Joshua is a Joshua trying to dodge the conversation he really doesn't want to be having.

"So, after you're done moving the goalposts to Hokkaido..."

"Did you want to give him over to the Angels? Let him just pass on through? I thought you noticed him first." Joshua snaps, badly missing the mark this time for all of his precognition. It's true Hanekoma didn't want to see him ascend, there's so much Neku can do in the RG, so much he can learn as Conductor. Losing him this young to the higher Frequencies would be tragic, even if he's aware no one else agrees with him.

"Phones is better alive." Hanekoma can't remember the last time – if there's ever been one – where the Conductor didn't really care about the Game. Practically half-Angel and entirely human and just barely out of the starting gate. So much possibility – he can do anything, absolutely anything. "He's tough enough to take it."

Joshua rolls his eyes. "... and with that, we're right back to the beginning. Keep all hands and arms inside the conversation until we come to a complete stop."

"He's not the one I'm worried about, Josh." Hanekoma pauses for a moment, to let it sink in. "Will you be ready, when he's finished jumping through your hoops?"

This isn't like any other battle, isn't at all the status quo, and as much as it might be nice to know what the Composer is thinking, at this point Hanekoma doubts it will do much good. Joshua stares at him for a moment, rolls his eyes, half a bitter smile.

"You must be loving this."
Chaos. Uncertainty. The Composer suddenly reliant on more than his own resources. Suddenly *wanting* more, without the certainty of success, without any certainty at all. The change that saved the Composer, it saved Shibuya.

Hanekoma can see, how it can be absolutely terrifying.

"Well, I suppose he could still try to kill you."

It isn't a threat – if it ever was - what Neku was supposed to do, to prove that Joshua had been justified all along, but Neku very, very rarely does what he's supposed to do.

Hanekoma can see the beginnings of the kid's message already, the spirit of Neku's work in his sketches and paintings. Bravery, not being afraid to act even if the goal is unclear, trying more important than anything. Courage and determination and strength, and if the higher-ups thought Hanekoma's work was unsettling, Neku's will be downright revolutionary.

"Do you know who put their mark on him?"

The bracelet. Neku's wearing it, completely oblivious that it might mean anything, let alone carry a specific message, but Hanekoma noticed, and Joshua was definitely supposed to notice.

Dibs. One of the other Composers has called dibs. Polite enough, just a little mark of interest. If Neku ever wants to leave Shibuya he won't have to look long for a new home.

"It could be anyone. He's talking to a lot of them. You thought you could show-off something like that at a party and not get people looking?"

Of course he knew. The entire point, for Joshua to shove Neku away with both hands, because it's not losing if he forfeits first. He knows the Composer can hear that thought, can actually feel the Throne Room shrink slightly, nothing visible but all the power present contracting around the Composer, responding to the tension he refuses to show.

"I put him back, didn't I?" He says, very quietly. "I barely wore him. Still had the receipt."

Maybe Joshua had intended only to watch, all along. Kitaniji's move and Minamimoto's appearance on the board had forced his hand – and at the time, they had been the only threat. No way to recognize that Neku had been just as dangerous, his earnestness claiming victories no ruthless cunning could hope to match.

"It won't get easier. I can't give him a different world, I can't change it. This is what I am."

The first time Hanekoma's ever heard the Composer sound less than pleased with that, Joshua staring at the back of his slightly glowing hand without any kind of pride.

"I don't think it's anything to worry about, that bracelet. Probably just someone letting you know they're watching. Trying to make you jealous."

Joshua lets out a little bark of a laugh, staring down into the space between them – and his eyes are dark and distant, not really there, Hanekoma can tell. Seeing something else, the past or the future or some split of the two. The connected universes and their endless possibilities.

"I don't suppose it really matters, does it?" His voice is very soft, hardly more than speaking to himself. "I won't clip his wings. I... can't make him less, than what he is."

The more generous Angels considered Joshua's actions the sign of a lack of vision, a tepid failure.
The rest thought it was spite, pure selfishness, claiming Neku for his own. At the time, Hanekoma knew Joshua knew exactly why he had done it, but those simple truths don’t usually tend to fall apart so completely in his hands.

Hanekoma sighs, sliding his hands for a moment into his back pockets, stretching out his spine, feeling the weight of invisible wings.

"You know, when he looks at you, he doesn't see the Comp-"

"Don't."

The irritation there doesn't quite mask the hollow undertone in his voice, and Hanekoma can see Joshua flinch, still staring into nothingness. Facing the worst, before it can find him?

"Where are you, boss? What are you seeing?"

Joshua blinks, once, eyes sharp and instantly back in the here and now.

"Nothing you need to worry about." Back to his computer, as if they've been discussing the weather all this time. "He'll be fine."

Which wasn't the point of any of this, and they both know it, but it doesn't matter, Hanekoma well used to this, the conversation over for now.

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It's supposed to be a matter of honor. If he were better, more like his father or his elder brother were, it would be. Of course, if that were true Kariya might still be alive, but he is not, and this is not about honor. He's not sure he ever knew what the word meant except that he can't feel it. It is pure selfishness, to be here, to love another more than himself. The Composer has demanded nothing of him, and so all Kariya can give is his obedience.

He is the Conductor of an Underground that will not be his tomorrow.

The song is simple, but beautiful – all the Composer's songs are beautiful, even now, the melody plucked perfectly from the koto and it makes him think of falling leaves, of gray fog in the morning and ripples on the water, even with his sword laying naked across his thighs, the sounds of combat no longer so distant, Reapers dead and dying. No way to stop the intruders, or turn them back, all gates breached and the lords of heaven turning a blind eye. Abandoning them, and Kariya has never felt a hate like this, the anger so pure it might as well be awe.

"Koki."

The song has stopped. He tenses, swallows. Glances to where the Composer's armor hangs waiting on the wall. Listens to his master's robes rustle against the floor. He is not afraid.

"My lord."

He does not move, waiting for the order, his heart beating fast – anticipation, determination. He will die, facing the enemy Composer, the one who has come to take their world from them, but Kariya is determined to give him blood for blood, will take the other Conductor with him as he falls, will give his lord one final victory.

A hand against his chin, he startles out of his thoughts, glancing up and quickly away. Outside, the sound of battle is fading away to an expectant silence. Waiting, because they can.
"My lord, there is little time."

The Composer sighs, the light in him fluttering softly, the moon washing over the surface of the water.

"I was never blessed with children, with a family, even when I was not as I am now. You are my son, Koki, in every way that I could want. Will you do as I ask?"

Kariya shuts his eyes, the swell of pride, the grief of the loss to come enough to stop his breath, just for a moment. It is not so easy to speak, even if he has the words.

"I will fight for you."

"Will you do as I ask?"

"Anything."

It is with grace, with unimaginable gentleness that the Composer lifts his hand. Gestures to the door at the opposite end of the room, and damns him forever.

"No." Rising, on his feet sword in hand even though Kariya knows he has no right, not even now, to stand face-to-face with his lord, but the panic and the silence demand it and the Composer is watching him with the same contemplative smile that he loves to see, that he has served so faithfully. "No. I won't leave you to them."

"You have to."

"You could Ascend." He says desperately, searching the serenely shimmering countenance for any hope, already knowing the answer. If this has happened, if they have been allowed to be overrun, there is nothing waiting for his master above. The Composer lifts his hands, gently pressing on Kariya's shoulders – the most he has ever touched him, the feel of his Composer's music cool and deep and flawless, flowing through him in a river, a sense of clarity he knows will not last.

"All that I am will end today, will vanish from this world, except for you. I ask you, to obey this final order - to give up your honor, break all your vows, and live."

He is connected to the Composer, can feel the blow when it hits, splintering against the walls of even this inner sanctum. Enough to make the room shiver from the force of it. But the Composer never turns, is still watching him, and smiling, and Kariya doesn't want to live through this, doesn't want to have the echo of this song forever in his bones.

"Don't be afraid, to give your heart freely, completely. Whatever comes, don't be afraid."

Oh but he has, has given his heart and his loyalty and look now what it has brought him. Look what the reward is, not even to die here where he belongs. Kariya will go, he will leave but it is the last impossible order he can force himself to follow. It will never be the same again, he will never be anything again but a ronin, a stray dog, wandering.

And his Composer lets go, as another blast rocks the room around them, as it shudders and flickers, and Kariya feels the music pulling away from him, a great wire net dragging through his entire body, splintering his power, ripping him from every mooring. The Composer's song fades even as he tries to listen for it, as the door opens and he falls into a new life he does not want to meet.

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"Oi, Kariya" Uzuki waves a hand in front of his face, and takes advantage of his distraction to go for his ramen. He snaps his chopsticks together but she's too fast and he's too distracted, and she wiggles the piece of fish cake, cackling before swallowing it whole. He stirs the broth, watching noodles and flat pieces of seaweed rise and fall.

Uzuki points at him with a slight, teasing frown.

"You're quiet today. Even for you."

He catches her chopsticks in midair, when she goes for the biggest piece of his egg.

"... and you're in a good mood, for the day before a Game."

Uzuki seems off, somehow, just at the edges of her words. A little keyed up, almost nervous, though with Konishi dead Kariya can't imagine she's worried about looking good, moving up. Especially with the rumors they know are facts, the identity of the new Conductor.

The kid doesn't have to meet with them, doesn't have to do much of anything, and Kariya can't remember the last time Megumi chatted with more than the top ranks of the Officers, let alone called a full-out meeting, but Sakuraba's apparently called Higashizawa and told everyone to show and has no idea that it's at all out of the ordinary.

"Little brat. I can't believe we'll be taking orders from that kid." Uzuki grumbles, poking a dumpling halfheartedly around on her side plate, until Kariya relieves her of it, payback for stealing his naruto.

He doesn't say anything, a few remarks swirling about half-formed in his head, fading when he gives them no attention. Uzuki's flipping through a magazine, making the occasional disdainful sound at whatever pair of shoes or jacket has failed at being fabulous.

It's been strange as hell, since the long Game ended, has taken Kariya this long to flip it all over in his head, decipher what he can, try to figure out what he's going to do next.

Or not so much what, but how, and how far he might have to go. He pushes down on the hot rush of anger – it's gotten easier, as the weeks have passed and the memories have dwindled for the rest of them. Uzuki's a child, only two years in the Game, she hadn't recalled anything moments after it was over, and by the time Kariya thought to ask Minamimoto, the best he got was a sneer and a shrug – he doesn't remember anything, except that maybe once, he was more than he is. Much, much more. No one remembers, not the Taboo Noise or those godforsaken Red Pins or – and this is the interesting part – who Neku Sakuraba's partner was that second week through.

Kariya had thought the boy was alive, had thought he was special – half right is certainly better than nothing. The Composer isn't his primary concern, though – certainly doesn't know who he is, what he is, or he wouldn't be here now.

The Composer hadn't been responsible for that third-week breakdown anyway, those Red Pins, that kind of shit always came from above and Kariya didn't know why or how the Conductor had managed to reach the Angels but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered, matched up against the sick sense of rage and betrayal he felt, remembering those last few moments, feeling the Conductor's amplified power washing over him. Being dragged down into that, his mind and body no longer his own.

Someone is going to pay for that. Possibly quite a few people. And the new Conductor is going to show him where to start.
"Hey." Uzuki says, a piece of his coveted egg in her chopsticks, but he ignores her, no longer hungry, and stands up instead. Nearly time for the meeting. Uzuki frowns at his back, rolling her magazine in one hand, dropping the egg with a splash back into his bowl. No fun, when he doesn't care if she's stealing.
Chapter Notes

Chapter title - iron and wine: the trapeze swinger

Things Neku cannot do: Roll an omelet up with chopsticks. Walk past a bakery without buying at least one thing for later. Accurately remember his times four tables past five. Win arguments with Joshua that actually end with the Composer conceding an actual point.

Trying to actively tap into the power of the city instead of passively letting it flow through him, using what he's been given? Big no, there. Apparently reaching for the former is a Composer-only activity and man would it have been nice to be warned maybe, a little, before he'd gotten curious and spent the rest of the day flat on his back with a nosebleed and a migraine.

At least the nail polish has finally worn off.

Other things Neku can't do include being here, now, the UG level of the city more familiar than he wants it to be. Hachiko's statue, but not as a Player, not anymore. Standing in front of a group of Reapers, most of whom passively or actively or rather eagerly sought his death not that long ago, and – lucky day - Minamimoto looks totally ready to try it again the second his back is turned.

There is no easy way to start this, so Neku just dives in.

"I figured everyone should know, I'm the new Conductor. My name is Neku Sakuraba, in case anyone wasn't aware."

No one says a damn thing. Pinky looks bored, staring down at her nails. Kariya may well be asleep. He can't tell anything from the assorted Reapers lurking in their hoodies. Neku rolls his eyes.

"Well then, that's great, class dismissed. Everyone have fun being assholes."

"Where's Mr. Kitaniji?"

Higashizawa has his arms crossed, not really looking at him, but Neku's surprised by the question, by the strange, flat tone. By the question, at all.

"No one... told you?" He glances around, can see one or two more curious looks in his direction.

"I've been conducting the Game according to the Conductor's orders, before he... disappeared. You erased him?" Higashizawa shifts where he stands, sounds gruff, defensive – and Neku realizes that someone the man respected is gone. He's made an enemy now, just by taking his place.

"Kitaniji made a personal bet with the Composer, and lost." Neku says, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "The business between them was private, and it wasn't my place to get involved." Neku frowns. "I didn't kill him."

Helped. Kind of. Joshua is such a total dick.
"Yes, sir." Higashizawa says, and Neku's frown deepens. The man doesn't want to be polite, his words have that sense of I-respect-you-or-you'll-erase-me and boy, that shit ends now. The last thing Neku wants from any of them is their respect.

"No. No calling me sir. Nobody here calls me sir, okay? Neku is fine." He turns, points to Minamimoto, leaning against a lamppost with all the bored disdain he can manage. "Except you. You definitely have to call me sir."

Minamimoto's moment of shock quickly turns into a death glare, yanking the brim down further on his hat – hey, when'd he get that back? Kariya snickers, hiding it badly behind one hand. At least Neku knows he's awake.

"So, if nobody's got any questions?" Actually, all Neku has is questions. He's pretty sure that by this time tomorrow, Kitaniji will be spinning in his lack of a grave. No hint of an idea, on how things are going to actually play out, but at least the bluffing's working out pretty well for him so far. "Higashizawa, I don't see any reason to change things. Are you up for being Game Master again?"

"Yes, sir- Neku." The man grinds his jaw a bit, as if there's an eating of envious despair or a plucking of the chicken of despondency or something, but if there is, thankfully he keeps it to himself.

"Neku?"

It's the other members of Def March, BJ and Tenho, stepping up cautiously, looking just a little nervous. Like maybe Neku might remember the day they spent jerking him around over a stupid microphone and a in-band feud? He tries and fails now, to really feel annoyed about it, Joshua's participation on all levels kind of trumping everything else that happened in the course of the long Game.

"Yeah? What do you need?"

"We want to be promoted, the both of us." BJ says, a little uncertainly, his arms crossed and his feet planted, like he's expecting Neku to do... something. Neku wonders what Kitaniji would do, if there's some sort of protocol. No one else is giving him any cues, no surprise, barely interest – Kariya's asleep again.

"Sure. Yeah, go. Rock on. It's probably against the rules to bump someone up who won't try to kill me in my sleep. Whatever."

There's probably something to be said, about the people who don't make the cut for resurrection, about every Reaper here. Neku doesn't feel guilty, exactly, about what happened to 777, but it doesn't mean he's happy that the other man is gone. The least Neku can do is give the rest of the band a boost, if that's what they want.

Minamimoto lets out a short, annoyed sound under his breath, pretending he's talking to himself. "When do I get raised to the next power?"

"When you can square the circle?" Neku offers, and wonders as the weirdo sneers back if he has any idea what he even wants - to be the Conductor, let alone the Composer. Neku remembers more about that week than anyone else here does, and none of it was exactly 'fun,' not even for Kitaniji. He can't imagine Minamimoto would enjoy the job nearly half as much as he thinks he would - or maybe this is just how Reapers refine.
He's received his official Conductor orders, Joshua sending him the world's most cryptic and yet
anally detailed instructions for this week's Game. Something about clearing out negative energy
from Spain Hill, trying to add more Reapers to the ranks, and stirring up things near the 104. Also,
that he's got to get the Players eating chili dogs. Lots and lots of chili dogs.

So yeah, Neku's sure the Composer is totally jerking his chain with that last one, and eventually
he'll probably figure out what to pay attention to and what he can ignore, but that week is not this
week. So, there's just going to be substantial business at the Mexican Dog.

"All right, then. Mostly, I wanted to let you know of the changes to the Game. You'll notice a few
vending machines, pin-operated, in certain locations, to give the Players a few more options – don't
eat all the good stuff. Also, I want at least one route left open to CAT Street at all times."

"Why?" Higashizawa says, suspicious, and Neku tugs on the edge of his jacket.

"I like staying fashionable."

The J to the M store will get some extra business and also, hopefully, Mr. H might be able to help a
few of the newbie Players, even at the cost of an absurdly overpriced coffee, or being the victims
of his next test batch of iced caramel mocha.

Neku knows he's got to be careful. He's not even supposed to know about Mr. H's other job,
besides being CAT, and he's got to protect Joshua now. Censured down to a third of his power, and
the Composer's already proven he's an Olympic-level contender in suicidal behavior, so it's up to
Neku to look out for the both of them. It's what being a Conductor means, he supposes, except it
really shouldn't be so much about protecting Joshua from himself.

"I've got classes, so we'll be having night Games on days three and four."

"Sleeping in!" Kariya says, flipping the stick on his red bean paste to the other side of his mouth,
what Neku can only assume is approval.

"I think it should be rather obvious, my school is totally off limits during the day." He glances at
Higashizawa. "If something happens that I need to handle, send one of the Wall Reapers, someone
who looks like they might possibly have a shot at being my brother, or something. So, if there are
no other questions?"

Five minutes later, he's the only one left standing there, surrounded by the phantoms of the RG, and
after so long in the Game it's easy to let them fade into the background, barely noticing them.
Tomorrow, there will be Players here, and Neku is going to have to watch the Game happen, force
himself to face it no matter what. Maybe Kitaniji was more hands off, but he wasn't new at this and
he also didn't care about the Players. Neku half wishes he didn't have to care. He hasn't dared to
look at the papers in the last two weeks, doesn't want to see the local news even if it might prepare
him for who will show up.

Higashizawa is responsible for giving phones to the Players that don't have them, handing out pins
and all the other bare necessities and Neku isn't quite brave enough to see that, not yet. A whole
section in the rules, on how the setup works, and the breakdown. A Player gets erased, and the
goods go back to the store, if the Reapers don't want them. The stores that run with the Game don't
even notice the surplus. Which means he was wearing dead men's clothes – well, extra-dead men's
clothes, and why is it that those little, pragmatic details make everything so much worse?

He doesn't want to add more Reapers, doesn't want anyone to have to make that choice. Neku
doesn't want to feel anyone else die, not ever again – it took days after the hospital to stop aching,
as if he'd been punched in the chest. Days to feel even remotely normal again, and Neku feels a little ashamed, even now, for thinking he has the right to.

He hasn't told anyone, about what happened to the girl, what he did to her. Tried to write a message to Vancouver, but deleted it every time.

He doesn't want to meet with Joshua later, didn't need to see that note added onto the end of the e-mail, but it will be the end of his first official day, and he can't dodge it forever. Deliberately ignoring the Composer will force Joshua to get creative and – no. No no, bad idea.

Neku stays where he is for a moment, knows its an illusion, knows it isn't really what he wants, to be here in this world where no one can see him, where he's not obligated to be anything to anyone, not even himself.

Maybe it will be okay. Maybe.

"Ok, listen, no. Yeah, yeah – he's gone. The other Conductor's gone now, and I don't care how he used to run things. It's not the way we're doing it anymore."

Neku is holding a cello. Well, he knows it's not a cello, but he can't remember what the one slightly smaller than that is called at the moment. It's barely morning, about the time he'd expected to watch the Players pair up and start bracing himself for the bad news, until Higashizawa called, sounding nervous and resentful all at once.

There was a problem.

The three young musicians are gathered behind him, two boys and a girl. Higashizawa had been able to take the one instrument away, the one Neku's holding, but the other boy had threatened to beat him with his and the girl, the girl hasn't stopped crying since Neku arrived, still swallowing the last of his rushed breakfast.

A tour bus crash. The fatalities are from a youth orchestra, on tour from all corners of the globe. First day off the plane, here's your random, horrifying death. All three of them are Italian, and Neku's just not letting this happen.

"I don't care if this is the way he did things. I don't care if this is the way we're supposed to do things – this is ridiculous. They don't know Shibuya – they won't last fifteen minutes. No. No, I'm not pairing her up with one of mine. Well, for one, she won't stop crying."

Rome is eight hours ahead and still, somehow, Neku swears he's interrupted the Conductor's sleep. The man does not sound happy. At least they can understand each other, somehow, and thankfully the Conductor seems to be answering him in Japanese because the musicians obviously don't know word one. Neku sent a Wall Reaper off to get him some kind of translation book but of course the stores aren't open yet. Ha ha, his life is a giant crap fiesta.

"Listen, call your Composer – you think that's some kind of threat? Call her up. Tell her I'm not pairing up my Players with people who couldn't point out Shibuya on a map of Shibuya. No, I don't know where they're from, Rome was my first guess – Sorry, I'm not Italian."

He had to call up Ibiza for Rome's number, and there's no remote possibility what he's done hasn't already circled the globe a couple of times even before he's finished doing it. Neku has deliberately not allowed himself to calm down, preferring anger to the ache in his stomach that is still there now, the one that kept him up all night – dread. As insane as all this is, it's almost a relief, even if
it's just delaying the inevitable.

"We put mayonnaise on our pizza. You do know that, right?"

A slight tap on his arm. The tallest of the musicians is looking at him nervously, enough of a determined set in his shoulders that Neku figures he must be the group spokesperson. He's got a translation guide in one hand, and a dictionary, because Neku doubts the guide has much in the way of "pardon me, I didn't realize being dead was this much of a hassle."

"Shin... shindeiru?" He says carefully, his eyes never straying from Neku's, bright and worried. No, but close enough.

"Uh... sort of? I... uh, Si?" Neku finally manages, which is Italian? Maybe?

The blood drains out of the kid's face, so it was at least close enough. He staggers away before Neku can think to maybe give him the instrument back, and within two seconds of returning to his friends, the girl is wailing twice as loud and Neku shuts his eyes, rubs the bridge of his nose awkwardly around the not-cello. He really needs to take up meditation.

Brilliant move, to be 'professional' and leave his headphones at home.

At least Higashizawa's shooed the few Wall Reapers that are out away from this train wreck, though Kariya and Uzuki have been watching things from the other side of the Crossing for as long as he's been here. Neku doesn't want to know what time it is, the sunlight brighter and brighter letting him know he already has to be late, and the Game still hasn't officially started.

"We can help you with that problem, boss!" Kariya yells, and Neku shifts the instrument to his cellphone hand to flip him the bird, though both Harriers are laughing and he can't just destroy them because they're down on Reapers as it is.

The Conductor of Rome mutters something to someone off the phone, says something in his loud, bored voice, but before Neku can ask him to repeat it, the line goes dead.

Neku flips the phone closed, wondering where the other Players are, wondering how long he can put this off. The first Day's a short Game anyway, just a warmup – is there any chance Joshua doesn't know about this already? Neku ponders just keeping his phone off, but the Composer has ways around that, certainly.

He sighs, walks cautiously over to the students – the girl isn't crying anymore, leaning against the boy and they go silent as he approaches, hands the instrument back carefully. Afraid of him, and maybe it's a good thing Neku can't say anything, can pretend it's just the language barrier that makes them so nervous, that makes him feel so ineffective.

Neku can feel it, when the Conductor arrives, like a sudden gust of wind snapping across the street, surprised when Kariya and Uzuki are suddenly right next to him, and two figures are coming from the direction of the 104, although they weren't there a moment ago. The man is tall, younger than Mr. H but no kid, the woman with both her arms wrapped around one of his showing her power blatantly, Reaper wings folded gently against her back.

The Conductor of Rome. One of them. Ibiza hadn't been that particular when he'd passed the number along. He's wearing a light brown suit that screams personal tailor, already scowling and Neku's aware his school uniform doesn't really make this any better. The Reaper on his arm looks even more fashionable – Neku's been hanging out with Shiki and Eri long enough to spot the real thing when it comes to designer clothes, any visible labels less than the size of a postage stamp,
delicate yet glittering gold jewelry at her throat, wrists, fingers.

She's giving Uzuki a very deliberate once-over, one eyebrow raising in a perfect mix of disdain and pity. Neku swears he hears a growl behind him, very quickly puts himself between the two Reapers and hopes Kariya gives just enough of a shit to help avoid an international incident, though he doubts it.

The Conductor says something to the boy Neku had spoken to earlier, and the boy startles, answers him carefully – they're speaking in Italian though Neku knows the Conductor could make his part of the conversation understandable, if he wanted to. It's obvious he doesn't want to, and his tone is sharp, the musicians all but flinching, the girl gasping, the other boy reaching for her hand. Neku doesn't want this, doesn't want the Conductor taking all of this out on the Players just because Neku dragged him here. What if he'd made a mistake – what if this just got them erased without any chance?

"So you're the one who went after the American." He doesn't expect the sudden shift in conversation, the Italian Conductor suddenly staring at him, very closely, as if Neku is not who he ought to be seeing.

"That's not exactly how it happened." He says, and doesn't want to think about the sudden silence behind him.

"You're forfeiting a lot of points, letting them go like this." The Conductor sniffs, with a casualness that isn't casual at all. Trying to size Neku up, he can tell, and is this going to be the way it always is, from now on? Everyone he meets trying to figure out how to play him, or use him, or beat him? "You sure this is what you want to do?"

"I'm sure." Neku says, whatever chance they've got in Rome better than the zero chance they have here. The Conductor shrugs, turns his head to speak quietly to the Reaper, and she nods, shouting a few orders to the musicians, gesturing for them to stand, shooing them along. The boy looks back at him for just a moment, and Neku wonders if any of them will be alive again, if he should have done it all differently, if he made the right decision, but in a few more moments the Conductor has joined them and they vanish as if they were never there at all.

"Her shoes?" Uzuki says. "They were really ugly. I thought Italians had better shoes."

Neku sighs, has just enough time for half a pensive thought until he looks down at his phone and finally notices the time.

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He's late, by the time he reaches school, super late. Of course, it's one of his first tardies ever and Neku runs all the way to class and – the most important thing – he forgets to switch to the Realground until he's practically in the classroom. So when he gets to the door and stops, the rest of the world doesn't, tilting sideways instead with all the blood rushing to his feet. The next thing Neku knows he's on his knees on the floor, with the teacher putting a hand on his shoulder, asking for someone to help him to the nurse's office.

No one does, which is not a surprise, but Neku manages to brush off the teacher's concern, comes up with a fast explanation. He couldn't sleep, woke up late, ran here and skipped breakfast. It's mostly true – his stomach grumbles, definitely the better part of a headache starting to make itself known, and as Neku takes his seat he wonders if switching back and forth between the Frequencies is doing something to his metabolism because he did eat breakfast even if it doesn't feel like it.
Neku's already broken the promise to himself, to see the first Game through to the end. As if it even matters that he's in the classroom. His eyes still keep straying uselessly to the window, and no matter how much geography or math or literature is put in front of him, his choice of thoughts are either the Game or lunch, and then he's eating lunch and it's just the Game.

It's not exactly a surprise when his phone beeps, just after class is dismissed. Joshua texting him, as if Neku had any intention or capacity for forgetting their little meeting. Asking him to bring dinner along, and Neku rolls his eyes, considers getting burgers just for spite but knows he'll be hitting up the ramen or he'll just be sent back for it anyway. Now that he's the Conductor, keeping the Composer happy is actually a real part of his job and good god but just imagine the ways that is going to go horribly wrong.

The Wall Reaper finds him just outside the school gates, quickly passing along Higashizawa's reports – Neku still can't tell the hooded Reapers apart very well, should probably work on that, but when he flips the folder open all the thoughts about food and school and even Joshua fade away, and Neku remembers why he should have said no, why he should have pretended to see nothing, to forget the Game entirely.

Twenty-five minutes, and seven pairs erased. As if they'd been trying to make a point. Neku had done his best, to make it clear that everyone should be partnered, before anyone attacked, but as far as he could tell they all were and there was no sign it had done any good at all. Three of the pairs had been erased – died, Neku tells himself, no need to be kind – near Lapin Angelique, nowhere near the day's goal. Lost, and probably afraid, and there are pictures of them in the folder. Off to some celestial file – his name was Takumi, and he'd fallen off a ladder at his part-time job. Her name was Kei, and her entry fee had been her place in the world.

Other than a picture, one page that sums up her entire short life, there is no other record of her in existence. No memory, no one to realize that she'd come or gone. No loss.

After a long moment, Neku carefully takes her sheet, folds it up and tucks it carefully in his wallet, behind his student I.D.

So that's day one.
i know this love is passing time

Chapter Notes

chapter title - sarah mclachlan: elsewhere

The food is getting cold on the table and the reports are scattered nearby and really Neku shouldn't even need them, the details of this stupid, horrible thing he's a part of. Shouldn't need them to know why it's a bad idea to have Joshua pressing him against the kitchen wall now, kissing him like they'd never stopped, as electric as the first time which wasn't really all that long ago.

He shouldn't be doing this. Hadn't planned to do this. Hadn't even planned to stay longer than it took to drop off dinner and let Joshua snipe at him over the business with the Italian Conductor. That was the plan.

Yeah, that would have been a great plan.

When Joshua pulls away Neku should know better than to follow, because he knows it's what Joshua wants, what the Composer expects him to do. Knows Neku will pull him back, tucking one hand around the Composer's back as Joshua reaches out, pins Neku's other hand high over his head and yeah, kissing again. It feels just like breathing, really, like the first deep breath after too long underwater and Joshua is glowing slightly but Neku doesn't bother to point it out.

It's beautiful, it really is, the slight, flickering glimpse of the Composer's real power beneath the falsely frail body that is just a disguise, a shell. It might be the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

"You still have to pay me back for dinner." He murmurs, when Joshua gives him room to breathe, and the Composer gives him a look – a hungry look – and Neku takes a half step sideways even as his body protests his retreat in about fifteen different ways.

No, he's not doing this. Bad idea. It's fairly freaking obvious that Joshua's an 'enjoy the chase' kind of person, a cat that probably gets bored as soon as it... pounces. Also yes, he's never even kissed anyone else and really if he is totally awful at the 'more' he'd rather not fail with Josh first, thanks, who will let him know in detail. With diagrams.

So Neku takes another step back, ignores the counter-arguments from the parts of him that preferred being warm and touched and maybe it's more than that, even. He's a part of Shibuya now, and the city loves the Composer blindly, as if the past never happened and there's no reason to be cautious. A part of that is in him now, urging him along into truly unfathomable stupidity but Neku's not the city and he remembers what happened, why forgiveness is an absolute non sequitur in this situation, permanently off the table. Joshua didn't look so different from this, watching Neku, the last time he'd raised his hand and put a bullet in him.

Discretion is by far the better part of valor, and Neku turns his attention back to the food, where it should have been all along, and when Joshua slips an arm around his waist he does not jump, does not acknowledge the little electric-like sparks that go up his spine from the simple contact.

"Katsudon? I thought you were getting ramen."
Oh, thank god. Joshua's sulky pout drops everything back to reality with a near-audible crash, and Neku can focus entirely on stepping away, snapping his chopsticks apart and wolfing down the food as fast as he can go – absolutely starving.

"This was closer. I'll eat yours if you don't want it."

He makes the offer around a mouthful of egg and fried pork, and Joshua grabs his own container quickly, picking at it a bit more delicately. As if they both didn't remember the way he'd packed it away during that second week, though maybe that had something to do with the Composer playing the Game, taking a human form, something like the same reason Neku's so hungry now.

Joshua's fridge is not the horror show Neku half-expected it to be, and he keeps eating as he wanders over, takes out two cans of green tea, handing one off without comment. Joshua is looking at him without looking, but Neku's grown used to that, not surprised when he finally breaks the silence.

"Most Conductors wait at least a week, you know, before they invite all their friends over to play."

"So you had fun watching that?" Neku glares back, hating himself for actually trying to read Joshua's moods, for caring if the Composer is angry or not but this is Joshua and he might be at a third of his usual power but he knows how to use that third a lot better than Neku knows how to use all of his.

Joshua can kill him, without trying very hard at all, and it's really a good idea not to forget that.

"Well, you did manage to piss off the Composer of... Campo something something." Joshua makes a vague gesture with one hand, and Neku can't help looking shocked.

"He called you?"

"Of course. Mostly to hang up on me. I can't say it wasn't fun, but if you get rid of all our Players, Conductor dear, there won't be much of a Game."

Neku makes a face, caught between arguing and shoveling food in his mouth. "It's your own damn fault, you know. If you'd given me the job before I played the Game, I would have gotten rid of anyone you wanted."

He almost flinches at his own words, talking without thinking – it's true. Neku doesn't remember himself as well as he probably should, exactly what he was like, but he remembers what it was to be lonely – and that Neku, the one he had been, would have been a Reaper without hesitation.

Joshua hasn't said anything, and Neku takes the rare opportunity to jump back into the argument before he can. "Three Players is not all the Players - and you did a hell of a good job eliminating enough Players as it is."

"I did?" Joshua says, and Neku does flinch this time. It stings, an unnecessary reminder that he is the Conductor, as responsible for all of this as anyone, and he busies himself with picking out every last grain of rice from the takeout container, rather than thinking about it.

"Kitaniji would have let them hang, wouldn't he? Those musicians - they would have just been erased right away."

No answer, which in Joshua-speak is a resounding yes. The more time Neku spends in the country of Absolute Bastard, the more fluent he is in the language, though he's trying very hard not to learn.
"You're going to have to come up with a better plan, Neku. I can't have my Conductor giving up our unexpected bonuses to other Games."

Neku ignores the obvious goad there, the food putting enough of a buffer between him and the need to snap back about people not being bonuses and also, Joshua won't listen anyway.

"Three music stores on the list, and you don't add a book store."

Joshua makes his usual face. "Who'd buy at a book store?"

"Who needs a music store?" Neku says, rolling his eyes. "Except me, but that's because I'm insane. Example: I am here. Talking to you."

"I'm not giving them all maps, Neku," Joshua says, "or we might as well install speedbumps and handrails in the Crossing."

Neku thinks about rolling his eyes again, but if he does he might never stop.

"You know, I'd believe a lot more in this whole sink-or-swim, let's-all-learn-to-be-better-people thing if there was actually water somewhere between the sharks."

Ok, so he'll need to get one of those pocket translators for himself, at the very least. List out the most frequently asked questions, the things he expects of foreign Players. 'Oh god, oh god, why me' - things like that.

At least he'll probably learn how to swear in a lot of new and exciting ways.

Neku sighs, poking at the bottom of his empty bowl and half-wishing for another, but he's already spent too long here and it doesn't seem like Joshua has any other pressing business to annoy him with and besides, he's got homework to do, before the Game tomorrow.

"You're staying over, of course."

"Yeah, of course." Neku says sarcastically, though it's obvious Joshua isn't joking. "No. I'm going home. It's late, I have homework, I'm tired and there's the little problem of that job I have to do for you in the morning."

Fifty minutes, which means he has to get up even earlier than before. Of course, there's no reason the Players can't complete the mission faster than the time limit. Neku won't let himself consider what will happen, on the day that the clock runs down to zero, when nobody's managed to win.

"You're going back home, to sit in the dark, all alone."

Neku reminds himself that he did, in fact, make the first move all those months ago. Wandering back into Joshua's realm had been his idea, and no matter how brain-damaged an idea it obviously was, he will have to live with it now.

"I didn't pack anything." He's already taken his jacket off to eat dinner. "I can't exactly slum it through school, they kind of frown on looking like you slept in your clothes there."

"You can borrow something for the night. I kept most of your clothes from your time in the Game."

"You kept my clothes?!" Neku's not sure whether to laugh or gape in horror. "Why thank you, creepy pedo stalker. How incredibly helpful and disturbing."

Joshua scowls at him, pretending this time that he's just too dignified to respond. Right.
It's not exactly a surprise that the Composer's closet would hold exactly as much as he needs it to hold, the dimensions of the apartment already ludicrously oversized, Joshua no doubt manipulating it beyond that. All his clothes are indeed there, including a few items from D+B that were the result of a few unfortunate Wall challenges and some exceptionally fugly and amazingly overpriced items from Dragon Couture he must have bought for some reason even if he can't imagine what it was.

If he doesn't look at the frilly Lapin Angelique dress, it's like it's not even there.

Neku picks out a pair of sweats and a t-shirt because they're comfortable and also because he knows it will annoy Joshua. The Composer is curled up in an armchair, flipping through a book, pointedly not looking at him. Neku takes the couch, tugging the low table closer with his foot, pretty much in no mood to deal with any of his homework. He expects Joshua to interrupt, but the Composer is surprisingly quiet.

It's silent here, just like it was in the fishpad, that same absence of the city's sound that he only notices when it's gone, the rushing, howling torrent of all the different voices, thoughts, panic and joy and despair – it's not that he doesn't appreciate it, but Neku's glad for the respite.

It takes a minute, shuffling through his papers for a math assignment half-finished, but as Neku concentrates, putting pen to paper, he realizes it isn't entirely quiet. He can hear... something, just above the surface of the silence, like a dragonfly skimming across still water, wind curving over glass. It feels... familiar, somehow, and Neku reaches out for it without thinking, even though this has never, ever been a good idea, and he barely seems to brush against it when Joshua jumps in his chair, looking up at him with wide eyes. Actually startled - because he had touched the Composers music, hadn't he? Familiar, it felt familiar because they had made a pact even if Neku had no idea what it meant at the time.

Joshua's eyes narrow, the slightest quicksilver smirk in the corner of his mouth and Neku is hit with a blinding mental image of him and Joshua that Vegas would easily give six figures for and he nearly falls off the couch, one hand checking to make sure his nose hasn't started gushing blood.

"Tit for tat, Neku dear."

"Sexual harassment, jerk." Neku coughs back, hoping the shivers aren't obvious, clutching at his homework as if it might subdue the Imprint still running rampant behind his eyes.

There is no section in any document on conduct between Composers and Conductors, what is allowed or what is forbidden or whether he actually might – say - belong to the Composer. Neku definitely noticed the lack of detail, practically the only omission in an otherwise obsessively thorough rule book.

"So that's what they're teaching in school these days."

Joshua's dry, soft tone is more than enough to make him jump. Neku was certain the Composer had been across the room but now he's here, staring over his shoulder at his half-finished homework and, more importantly, the doodles covering the margin of his notebook.

A little bunny in a spacesuit, chasing after a floating carrot inexplicably wearing a jetpack. It's cute, shameless, with no other purpose than to be adorable and with any luck, at least a little popular.
Neku wants to get Shiki something for her special show, knows the Pegaso drop pendant in their newest line that would work perfectly with the dress Eri's made, but it's well beyond his current allowance – although selling all those clothes of his in Joshua's closet would be a good start.

"The Seikan tunnel opened in 1988," Joshua makes a little clucking sound of dismay, reading over his work, "and it's the second longest undersea portion of any tunnel in the world. You should take more specific notes."

"Thank you, trivia machine." Neku says, glancing up and back down just as fast. Joshua's got that look, like he's getting ready to crack the case and void Neku's warranty.

"You can manipulate them, you know. Imprint a few grade suggestions. Teachers are overworked as it is, they won't notice. It's not difficult, and better than spending your time on this."

"I could do a lot of things." Neku tries not to clench up, at the Composer's indulgent chuckle. Oh wasn't he just being childish now, refusing to treat people like things, like tapes he could rewind and erase whenever it was convenient.

"You don't mind what you do to them with your artwork."

"That is so not the same thing." Neku says. "I just show them a possibility, a different viewpoint – they can choose to believe it or not, to pay attention or find something else to look at. Besides, you should be glad I'm learning this. I thought you liked incredibly tedious history."

Joshua makes a fluid gesture with one hand – god, but he sure does love to pontificate. Maybe he does it in a mirror, when no one's around to listen. Kitaniji probably had really discreet earplugs.

"It's the only fair way to accurately see the present, or the future. At least some of the lies fall away, the stupid games people play, to avoid seeing the truth as it happens. You can tell nearly anything about what a person will do, Neku, by what they've already done."

"Like pretending to sacrifice themselves for a friend?"

Joshua smirks. Neku doesn't like sitting here, with the Composer leaning over him, but standing up would mean admitting it.

"Well, you won't be so surprised if it happens again, will you? Think of it as emotional armor, dear. No one will be able to hurt you like that again."

Except you. Neku thinks, but doesn't say it.

"It's getting late."

Neku rolls his eyes, not quite as surprised at Joshua's sheer audacity as he used to be, though the line carries a certain deliberate obviousness that means he's being teased.

"You should have made the couch less comfortable." He looks up, when Joshua lets out a little laugh, and Neku's smiling himself, surprisingly. God, he's insane. Maybe it's a part of the job, a Conductor has to be as crazy as his Composer is. "I'm not putting out on the first date, Josh."

"Technically, the party was our first date, and if memory serves, Neku, you weren't exactly-"

"The couch. Is fine."

It's fun, to watch Joshua not get what he wants, even if Neku's certain he only wants it because he
can't have it. Definitely satisfying, as the Composer refuses to admit that he's annoyed, as if it's Neku not being logical that's the problem here, crossing his arms, letting out a little huff.

"I find your arbitrary rules to be deeply flawed."

Neku pushes back the laugh that threatens to burst out, choking it back to a mild chuckle.

"How is it my fault? It's the arbitrary rules that keep me alive."

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Joshua doesn't need to sleep, not even in his... lesser form, especially when there are much more interesting things to do. He's kept his distance for a while, thoroughly destroying a Composer from somewhere in the Netherlands in online chess, half his attention still on Neku, his little Conductor with no idea Joshua is listening in. Disappointingly, he doesn't get distracted again, dutifully finishing up his tedious, unnecessary homework without complaint. Joshua is quietly compiling a list of better books, things a Conductor might actually need to know. Musashi. Kierkegaard. Machiavelli.

The Machiavelli is pretty much a given.

By the time he's hit checkmate on the frankly embarrassing rematch game, Neku is asleep. Adorable, really, the way he thinks stubbornly sticking with the couch actually means anything.

It does deserve an extra moment's attention, though, that he's actually sleeping sound, one hand across his chest, sprawled out and utterly vulnerable. Joshua would say he has no idea what he is risking, no idea of the stakes, but he's shot Neku twice now and his Conductor is hardly stupid. The Composer is not so sure, not like he used to be, that he knows just what Neku is. Maybe the outlier to his rule, that past history predicts future action.

He can still feel it, the shivering tremor where Neku brushed against his music, a clumsy, fumbling touch that still left him breathless. No one has ever, ever dared to try something like that before. Kitani ji had been skilled but nowhere near Joshua's level of power – Neku has no skill to speak of, and yet he'd very nearly drawn Joshua – a Composer – into his own Music, an overwhelming brightness and chaos and warmth – and this is the same person who says he doesn't want to influence people.

Neku can do so much more than he thinks he can, than he can even begin to understand.

As much as Joshua liked to think he could calculate the outcome, even a Composer was not immune from retrospect. Looking back, Joshua could see what he hadn't noticed at the time, what had gone wrong. The way his perception had gone two-dimensional and distant, Shibuya turned into a Fotomo world, tilt-shift photographic miniatures. The Players had seemed like mice going through a maze, a blank and pointless scratching down dull corridors, and even when they'd won it didn't matter, didn't mean anything.

So numb, that Joshua hadn't even seen Neku for what he was, nothing more than an amusing chip on the board, part pawn and part wager – even Rhyme's sacrifice hadn't caught his attention as anything more than chance and stupidity and of all the creatures on any plane, Joshua should never have been complacent enough to believe in chance.

It's easy enough, between his powers as Composer and his natural clairvoyance, to seek out other worlds, tune into those other Frequencies. Even now, at a third of his power, they can even show up unannounced, not exactly dreams but close enough.
He has yet to find a Neku in any of them, who actually pulled the trigger.

Joshua leans against the back of the couch, reaching down, brushing Neku's bangs out of his eyes, surprised at himself when it becomes a caress. He hadn't expected this, but that's what Neku is, isn't it? The unexpected. His, as Conductor, the same way the city is his, but not at all, nothing so reliable. Throwing himself in front of Manhattan without hesitation – and that, that had not gone exactly as he had planned, but Neku had done it on instinct, protecting his Composer, protecting him. Yet he has utterly no interest in being subordinate now, nothing like any Conductor Joshua has ever had before. Disrespectful, disinterested in the possibilities and potential of his new position. Hanekoma can fret and worry all he wants that the Composer isn't instructing his new Conductor, is taking unnecessary risks, but Neku has made it very clear that he doesn't want the help.

As if Joshua has ever been so careless, as to break his toys before he's done with them.

He moves around the couch, sits on the floor, leaning back with Neku behind him, and reaches for the piece of homework he'd completed just before he fell asleep. Joshua frowns halfway through the history worksheet, reaches for a pencil and erases one answer – technically accurate, certainly what the teacher wants to hear, but not the truth as he remembered it. Neku will not be pleased, when he gets the grade back, and the thought of that furious glare makes him smile.

Neku burns hot, louder than Kitaniji ever was, nearly making the Composer's ears ring, even now while he sleeps. Joshua closes his eyes, reaches out, adjusting Neku's music in ways his Conductor hasn't learned yet, something a little less tiring for him – and then he feels the slight, chilly tingle of the Noise Neku brought with him, nothing with a life of its own yet but still draining.

Joshua opens his eyes, reaches for Neku's wallet. Pulls out the printout, the girl who slipped through the Game so fast he hardly noticed she was there. But Neku did.

It isn't only that, he's still carrying the guilt of what he did to the other girl, in the hospital, a sorrow Joshua doesn't even pretend to understand. She was suffering, now she's not, free to take her next chance, to improve – and the Players who fall so fast, he can't help but think they must know, must choose such helplessness, choose to fail. Aware that they're not strong enough, that if they can't make it through the Game there's nothing to go back for. It's the common perception, that the UG is worse than the RG, the more difficult to survive, but Joshua takes the longer view.

He erases the Noise, not enough of a negative feeling to be much more than low static, and shifts the dying girl back in Neku's memories. Not an erasure, he'd notice that - just some distance, as if it happened years ago, nothing left to hurt. The other girl, he takes that outright, a memory he has no intention of returning, nothing of her worth remembering, though he keeps her page, to add back to the file later. The Angels have been keeping a close watch anyway, no reason to jab at their more anal-retentive tendencies.

Neku makes a soft sound of protest, not waking but aware on some level, as he hadn't been the last time Joshua took the memories of his death. He's getting stronger, better - learning his own way makes it so, Joshua's been sure of that from the start. He turns where he's sitting, reaches out again for the physical contact – it shouldn't feel so good, to be able to just touch him like this. shouldn't surprise him as much as it does, to reach for a memory to soothe his Conductor, and find himself, the way they had been a few hours ago, all tangled up in each other, even if he knows seduction is simply convincing someone to do what they already want to do.

Joshua loves the idea that the Angels are watching, wants them to see this, everything that they weren't smart enough to win. Hanekoma is a friend, and if anything, Joshua likes him better for his betrayal, for having the courage to follow his convictions. The rest of them are hardly worth the
effort of his disdain.

He knows damn well why the Angels have blunted his Composer's powers, why they'd been looking for the excuse. Even with all of his gifts, he can't see every divergence, every alternate world, but he's seen enough to find the one where Neku is a Reaper looking for the chance to overthrow him, the world where Joshua never gave him back all his memories, trying to hold on – the world where Neku is dead and Joshua is very, very much Fallen and not at all regretting the drop.

The Angels have been waiting for years, for the other side to try and recruit him. If they knew he's already spoken to his Fallen self, Joshua imagines he would have been destroyed years ago, even if the other him hadn't really had all that much to say. A startling conceit among the top half, that the Fallen have any plans for revolution or takeover, that they want anything at all as any kind of collective, except that the Fallen Composer had wanted something, had asked if Joshua had seen a certain boy, a different kind of person. It took him all this time, three weeks through a mostly broken Game, to realize who he meant. Why he hadn't recognized his own eyes in that mirror face, so haunted and hungry beneath the disaffected air. At the time, Joshua had just found the other him somewhat annoying, rather certain even if he'd been bored enough to Fall that he would still have the temperament for a war in Heaven.

Joshua hasn't found the Neku that pulls the trigger. He also hasn't found the Neku that stays.

In some worlds, it happens fast. Joshua chooses to ignore the change, to let Neku die and Shibuya wither and call it responsibility. In others, there's time and opportunity and yet somehow he destroys it, always destroys it. Neku leaves him, to save Shibuya and disappear, or he just walks away. Leaves Tokyo, runs from Japan and vanishes into a million places, a hundred cities where Joshua can't follow. Joshua has looked, followed the pathways down until the fractal worlds splinter further and further and it's even past his ability to see clearly, blurry half-images of potential futures and even there, he is alone.

He wants to tell himself it's because he's the Composer, it's the price of the position, half-wishes he was stupid enough to believe it.

"Nnn." A noise behind him, Joshua startling from his thoughts as Neku turns, leaning forward, one arm curling down over his shoulder, as if somehow he knows. As if somehow he knows what Joshua knows, and still isn't afraid of the consequences. The kind of things the Composer is capable of, to lose him here. Really, it makes perfect sense, Joshua aware of his own superiority for ages – who else will make a worthwhile enemy, but himself?

He reaches up, twines his fingers together with his Conductor's, tries to pretend the word means more than just a title. Pretends it is a chain, or a red thread, or any kind of promise. Makes believe, that if he keeps looking into those other worlds, it will start to hurt less. By the time it finally happens to him, he can make it not hurt at all.

Joshua tips his head, resting it against Neku's arm, because they might be watching Shibuya, but this is his domain, this is his and there's no one here to know.
"Hey!"

The two Players look entirely too indignant for Uzuki's tastes. She'd watched Konishi hunt, taken
notes, and even when her targets were annoying, they still feared the Iron Maiden, and their
bravado never lasted. Uzuki has tried to match that cool, effortless menace, but it's clear she still
has a long way to go.

"You're a Reaper!"

Uzuki rolls her eyes, fighting back an irritated groan. Every one of them, every Player thinks
they're the first and only, that this isn't something she does at least twice a month, and that none of
their complaints or problems are anything she hasn't heard of a thousand times before. The Game
is pretty much full of rejects, people who really suck in some specific way. Not that Uzuki really
cares, but sometimes she tries to figure out exactly what damage the Players are carrying. Maybe
the girl in front of her is too arrogant, she kind of looks that way, and her little friend needs to stand
up for herself more. Or maybe they're both pathological liars. Or they think everybody hates them.
Or everybody does hate them. Whatever.

"Yeah, so? What are you going to do about it?"

The girl's face scrunches up, determination and arrogance and fear, but just as Uzuki laughs she's
slammed in the face with a blast of water, powerful enough to strike like a blow and toss her right
off her feet. The girls are laughing, she can hear them laughing but by the time she's done
spluttering and wiping the worst of the wetness away, the Players have disappeared and she's still
sitting in a puddle and, oh yes, the Conductor is here, watching her. If it was the old Conductor,
she already would have died of embarrassment. As it is, Uzuki has to fight with all she's got not to
go after the stupid little jerk in a way that would certainly get her erased.

"What are you looking at?" Like that, really. More than enough to have her facing erasure, if she'd
mouthed off like that to the Games Master, let alone any higher, but this kid is either too stupid or
too weak to threaten her. Easily the Worst. Conductor. Ever. What kind of a meeting was that, on
his first real day, anyway? He'd been like every half-assed teacher she'd ever had in school, too
incompetent to be effective and trying to pass it off as being friendly instead. Except maybe, if that
were true, he wouldn't look now as if he's barely holding back from laughing at her.

"So how would you rate the humiliation level? High?"

Uzuki gasps in outrage, as she gets it.

"You *made* that pin?!"

"Firehose." Neku nods, nonplussed. "Surprise."

Uzuki is suddenly shaking with rage, hand twitching for her gun. She'd had him, she'd *had* this
stupid little punk ready to kill his partner on the second day and damn it, what is wrong with the Composer and there is no way-

"So, the wet look is back in?"

Kariya's voice coming up from behind, his hand on her shoulder, and she slips from UG to RG and back again, maybe a half-second slip, but the effects of the pin can't follow her across that gap and don't stay here, and she's dry again. Not feeling like a drowned cat also nudges her mood back into the mostly not homicidal, and the Conductor's gone anyway. Off to go unnerve another bunch of Reapers who aren't used to seeing the upper ranks descending into the day-to-day. Or maybe he'll call another Conductor in for a surprise visit, and he'll bring two skanky Reapers along for the ride.

"He's screwing everything up. I hate that kid. What's his damn problem?"

Kariya is smiling. "He knows you're good for it."

Uzuki rounds on him. "Who's side are you on?"

Kariya raises his hands, submissively backing away, though he's still grinning. It's a stupid question, when she already knows the answer. Kariya's on the side of whatever's the most fun to watch.

The Game on day two is only fifty minutes long, but Uzuki takes full advantage of every second - she might not be as interested in kicking ass up the ladder as she used to be - not right now, anyway but she's still ambitious even on her off days, and since that humiliation right off the starting block, she's looking for a little bit of payback.

It doesn't take long to find a target, to set up a half-decent plan of attack and even that, she thinks, watching the Players ineffectively battle the low-level Noise, fighting with each other more than anything, is probably more work than she needed to do. The girl trips, falls, and even before the Noise cover her, it's over. It should have been over yesterday, Uzuki's been watching them, the only thing that saved her the first time around was the fact that someone else finished the Game before they could get erased.

Her partner is staring, shocked, at the place that she vanished, but it isn't sorrow that she's gone, sadness that his incompetence led to this. He just doesn't know what to do, now that he can't yell at her for taking away his only strategy of... yelling at her. It's been pathetic to watch, and Uzuki absolutely loathed the girl for just taking it - he's nothing. Nothing at all, to deserve her flinching and apologizing and trying to appease. If she took it from him, then she probably took it from everyone and Erasing her just saved her fifty years of the same. Uzuki steps into view, just long enough for the doomed Player to see her, and then the Noise take him from behind and she's alone on the street, nothing but the ghostly Realground images of the rest of the blind world crowding around her.

"Nice kill." Kariya says, leaning against the wall at her left.

"Somebody has to," she snaps back, and he smirks like he always does, eyes half-lidded and only vaguely interested. As if every moment just happens to be where he ends up when he rolls out of bed.

"I have enough so far. It's important to leave some for the rookies. Besides, I thought Conductor Jr. wanted a few new Reapers. Build the ranks back up."
"Yeah," Uzuki rolls her eyes, "because we're actually listening to him now."

Of course they aren't. Higashizawa's actual orders were out five minutes into the first day's game, not to anyone's surprise. Make it a sweeps week. No players surviving to even reach the end of the Game, with as many erasures as possible per day. Show the little brat what the UG was really like.

"Well, as long as we're not being petty."

Uzuki lets out one of her usual stilted half-screams of irritation. "Who does he think he is, just taking over as Conductor? He's not even a proper Reaper. He shouldn't just be allowed to jump the ranks like that. He's not even dead." Kariya doesn't answer, and as Uzuki walks away, she hears him push away from the wall. Following her, though she can't hear his footsteps, lighter on his feet than anyone she's ever known. "I mean, who the hell gives away Players? Those were easy points."

"Maybe he wants to give us a challenge? Maybe he thinks we're better than easy points."

Kariya doesn't believe a word of it, he's just goading her, and Uzuki doesn't mind rising to the occasion.

"Are you defending him? All he wants to do is... I don't know, wreck the game, but he's too chickenshit to just go after the Composer like anyone else would. And what was all that business with that other Conductor? What was he talking about, something about Manhattan?"

"Beats me."

Frustrating, that no matter how fast Uzuki moves, Kariya still manages to keep up with her when he wants to, that slow-ass lope of his still managing to cover a lot of ground. She's back into the Crossing now, scanning the throngs of normal people for the Players - the ones who aren't as familiar with the area, or who have interfering entry fees tend to use the Crossing as home base. She catches sight of a pair, two boys, but as they move away she sees the two, newly promoted Harriers on their tail. The band freaks, the ones the Conductor upgraded himself. It would probably hurt him, to have his own Reapers Erased, but Uzuki thinks it will hurt a lot more when he sees how many Players his handpicked pair have managed to take down. She didn't consider herself a slacker by any measure, but they were obviously hell bent on staying in the upper ranks.

"I give him a week." She says. "You watch, by Friday, he's going to be begging someone to off him and take over."

"You should ask Minamimoto for the odds, I'm sure he's already taking bets." Kariya replies.

"You've got two, on your left."

The same girls she'd fought with earlier, headed for the 104, and Uzuki takes off, not waiting to see if her lazy sometimes-partner will follow. It's not like she's worried or anything, but he has been more quiet than usual, in this new Game. Thoughtful and pensive, when he usually doesn't care about planning anything except how to score free ramen off of her. Uzuki draws the Noise in around her, throwing them out at the Players, nothing too exciting on Day Two but always the possibility she can score another takedown. It would be nice to get them back for soaking her through.

The girls are certainly a better team than her prior targets, they might have even been the ones that won yesterday's Game. A good rhythm between them, like they really trust each other. Uzuki's not a trust person, Kariya only as important as he is because he refuses to go away. Trust is a very, very dangerous thing - it's giving someone a loaded gun and then turning away.
"So, this is it?"

The simple question knocks the breath out of her, and Uzuki wants to turn around, but can't. Frozen in place. As if it wasn't always this way, some part of her deigning to Saika even when she knows its stupid, and when she knows the other girl is well aware how stupid, how hopeless she is. As if this wasn't impossible.

Cold arms wrap gently around her shoulder, twining around her arm like an old school friend, playful and affectionate, and a strand of dark hair brushes against Uzuki's face. The sun goes behind a cloud, every world shadowed, every one darker, and there are holes, there are places tearing open all around her, a shuddering, horrible moan, and she can't breathe.

"You just… watch them? Throw things at them, for points?"

All that she's managed as a Reaper, everything withers and dies beneath that judgment, and Saika's not even trying, merely making a quiet observation. Uzuki finally sucks in a breath, as a cold hand wraps around hers on the other side, squeezing. Another hand, clutching near her waist, and another, hands grasping at her even though Saika is still leaning on her shoulder, one fingertip poking at the edge of her wing and Uzuki can't look, she can't look to see the grin she knows is looming just behind her back.

"You changed your hair. I like it. Very rebellious."

It wasn't like she hadn't known what might happen. It wasn't like Saika ever hid the truth from her. It just didn't matter. At the end, nothing had mattered, and Uzuki hadn't really believed it, when Saika said it wasn't the end.

Because Saika wasn't scared of anything. Not even death.

"Oh, Zuki-chan, but you're still taking orders, aren't you?" Playing with her hair now, twisting one pink strand around a long, delicate finger. "Still living for your limitations? Letting other people tell you what you're worth."

"You c-can't," Uzuki's teeth are nearly chattering, as she struggles with the words. "You can't be here. You didn't…"

Didn't go to the UG. Never had to play the Game. Never made the choice to stay.

"But you did." Saika murmurs, her voice smooth and soft, like a river of ash. "You left us all behind. We were lonely without you."

The hands are grabbing at her, more urgently. Desperate and afraid, the fear leeching into her like Noise cranked up past bearing, and the word comes - Taboo - but Uzuki has to shove it away, the edges of her thoughts already splintering in panic. She knows who the hands belong to, what is in the darkness looming behind her. It doesn't make sense, this shouldn't be allowed to happen, but it is. It is, and Saika isn't a Reaper. Isn't Noise or a Player or anything Uzuki understands. It isn't fair, either, but then nothing about her was ever fair.

"I didn't… I didn't…"

"I'm just teasing you, silly." Saika's voice is wry and obvious - of course she's teasing, how sad of Uzuki not to realize. The chill is growing sharper, rising up around her like the tide, and Uzuki shuts her eyes. Waits for the hands to finally just drag her under, as her old school friend whispers in her ear.
"I found you, and now I'm never letting you go."

"Uzuki!"

The sharp shout shakes her free from the past, the urgent voice that doesn't belong there - Kariya's voice, and her eyes snap open just in time to see the Noise she'd sent at the Players isn't where she'd thrown it. The Players are gone and the Noise is racing toward her, and all she can think is buildings, streets, people. It's all still there. A thousand years haven't passed, she wasn't standing alone at the end of the world. Her muscles are slow to respond, all the panic already drained out of her, and even this imminent threat doesn't seem to really matter. Uzuki pushes back, but it isn't fast enough, isn't going to save her. Sharp claws slash out - not even that big, not a Taboo Noise or anything remotely impressive and this stupid, rookie mistake is going to kill her anyway.

An arm, solid around her, and Kariya is there, shoving her to the side and throwing a blast of energy that destroys the Noise instantly. Uzuki is pushed back, hits the wall, and looks up, over his shoulder to the empty space where Saika had been standing. The world feels like it's fading back into view, the noise of the city rising up around her, just like changing Frequencies. Kariya hasn't moved, breathing a little hard and still mostly holding her, and she thinks about trust again, and the way people are, and the other reasons to push them away, to keep them safe.

"What the hell happened?"

"You didn't see anything?" Uzuki hates the way her voice cracks, hates that she already knows the answer, because if he'd seen Saika he sure as hell would already be asking, demanding to know. The look he gives her is unfathomable, confused and concerned, looking down to where his hand is on her arm. It's never been really romantic between them, and isn't now, but that doesn't mean it isn't dangerous. He's closer to her than anyone else in her whole life, whether she wants to admit to it or not.

"You're freezing. Did that Noise hit you?"

"No. I'm fine." Uzuki steps back and he lets her, wings fluttering slightly behind her as she tries to regain control. She can't help but look around, any sign, any suggestion, but there's nothing. Saika was never here - couldn't be here, because she died. She died along with everyone else, and disappeared, and it was only Uzuki and Mayu to even play the Game, and only her here, now, a Reaper. Kariya cocks an eyebrow, still watching her, and she knows its an opening and for a moment the words are right there, desperate, to tell him, to beg him for help. If she starts, though, it means telling him all of it. All of her life before this one, the life that no Reaper really talks about, the past they can give up for a second chance.

"I'm fine," she says again, and this time it actually sounds convincing. "… thanks."

Kariya nods, and lets it drop, though she can still see the question there and he is remarkably patient, when it comes to waiting for answers. "Any time."

It will be another hour, before she realizes her gun is gone.

Neku goes through long periods of thinking he can take it, can handle the job. Enjoying the moments where the Players take the advantage, watching them defeat the Noise, and they grow stronger, they do. It's kind of peaceful in the UG, even more now that he's not the one running for his life. Neku doesn't hate the world anymore, but there still is something nice about being invisible in the crowd. It's easy, to see the rhythm of the city and the people moving through it and
if he concentrates he can even hear little snippets, whispers of thoughts, like he'd done before with his pin. Nothing too exciting, people thinking about lunch, or work, or getting to class - it's going to be close, today, for him, and his eyes still ache. Drained, even if sleeping over at Joshua's had been surprisingly comfortable and the Composer hadn't - hard to believe - tried anything funny. Hadn't even been there when Neku had woken up, and he was surprised to raid the fridge and actually find a few things in it worth eating.

All of a sudden, the Players he's keeping an eye on flicker, and vanish. Neku looks down at his watch - seven minutes left to go, which means a pair of Players made it to the day's goal. He shuts his eyes, lets out a soft sigh, a tension he wasn't aware of slowly letting go of him, at least for now. He picks up his school bag, slings it over his shoulder. Makes the mistake of staying in the UG, easier to cut through the crowds of people that way, and so he can't help but notice the gathering of Reapers out of the corner of his eye as he passes the 104.

A whole group of them, like a cluster of carrion birds, and he realizes what they're doing a moment too late, flickers of color passing between them - Player pins. Player clothes, one of them coolly examining a watch before slipping it on his wrist. Dividing up the spoils, and Neku's fingernails bite into his palms, he's clenching his fists so hard. One of them sees him, a slight flutter slipping through the group as they freeze like the cowardly predators they are. A part of him wants to destroy them, just take his hand and sweep the board, but they're only doing what they've been told to. It's what they are, and if he punishes them he's got to punish himself too, right?

He's the one who can't figure out how to make it better.

Neku has to sprint the last few blocks to school, but manages to get in under the bell, even remembers to switch to the RG on the way down the empty hall, and so his attendance actually counts. It's a lot more difficult to actually care once the teacher starts talking, however, Neku's gaze drifting to the window more often than not, all the esoteric questions he's ever had about the nature of good and evil, the true reality of the universe - these are questions that aren't supposed to have answers, dammit. He's not supposed to be able to go up to evil and look it in the eye, let alone let it sex him up against the kitchen wall.

Neku can feel himself blushing, and sinks a bit lower in his seat.

At least he doesn't have to worry about listening in to anyone else's thoughts, that power purely a UG phenomenon, and even if there's no pretending he can have a normal life, that he has any chance of compartmentalizing, at least this is a break. School has always been a little dull, a little obvious - and really, Neku thinks, he'd be dropping off to sleep right now except that he's starving. In between classes, he sneaks into his bag for the emergency onigiri he'd snagged, devouring it in little more than a bite, and barely tasting that. He should probably pack two for the rest of the week.

His phone buzzes, and he glances up to see where the teacher is, before pulling it out of his pocket. He's not supposed to have it on, but there's the Game to worry about, and he's far enough in the back of the room to get away with it.

-Purple lace. U in?

That would be Eri. The two of them are in the costume department, for theatre, or maybe it's home ec, and it's not the first time they've texted him. It's certainly not the first time she's texted him about women's undergarments.

-Pants better. He types back, glancing up now and again, but the teacher is too busy enjoying the sound of his own voice to pay any attention to his students.
-not w those hips, boy

Neku stifles the slight laugh, amazed at how good it feels. He can only imagine the furious wrestling match on the other side of this conversation.

-Neku? U OK?

Shiki, finally snatching the phone away. If this were an actual conversation, she'd be apologizing, but texting cuts down the options there. He kind of likes it that way, when she doesn't feel so obligated to feel sorry about everything. The Game helped with her confidence, but she's still shy - and he's still shy of about half the money for her gift. It's going to be tight, he has a few commissions that will hopefully turn out, on top of all his schoolwork and the Game. He's begged off hanging out for most of the week, promised them he'd make it up on the weekend, but it doesn't change that he misses her. Not enough to risk putting her anywhere near the Game, but he misses her.

-Fine. U still pretty?

He knows the smile she'll have now, just the slightest hint of a blush.

-Come back soon. Eri says need 2 borrow ur hips.

Neku smiles again, and snaps the phone closed, just as the bell rings.

Lunch used to suck in a big way, by far Neku's least favorite part of the day. He envied the schools without the money to do anything but let their students sit in homeroom - St. Michael's has an expansive lunchroom, favoring a western-style setup, which gave him a great chance to sit by himself every day and try to pretend it didn't matter. An illustration in just what was such crap about being a kid - adults could just avoid complicated and painful situations, change jobs or even move if it came to it. Neku, on the other hand, had pretty much gotten used to looking up and seeing his old best friend walking around with his new circle of friends - more popular, better than Neku was - whenever it was the worst possible time to see him.

It's one of the only facets in his life that the Game has unequivocally improved - he might still be alone, but he doesn't have the time to spend caring about it, thinking about what he might have done wrong, why he'd been so thoroughly shoved out of the one place in his life he'd felt had been safe, and welcome. In the face of the Game, and death, and the whole new world it opened up, it really doesn't matter what the other students think of him, whether they like him or not. Neku has more important obligations.

It doesn't hurt anything, that he can imagine what Joshua would say, watching the other boy and his friends walk across the edge of the room. Neku can see the Composer rolling his eyes, bored, disinterested - just another person, no different than the rest, not worth thinking about. It's a shock, when Neku realizes he can see it. He might not be as good with reading melodies as Joshua is, but even in this room with all its competing songs, it's his friend here and Neku can hear him. Except he can't, really - all he can hear is harmony. Between his former friend and the group surrounding him, there's hardly any difference. The same melody. He'd changed - he'd chosen to change like this, sublimated into the crowd, and maybe it had nothing to do with Neku at all.

The thought makes him pause, and the other boy looks up. Their eyes meet, and Neku drops his gaze, automatically. It still hurts.
He'd been surprised, when the Reaper had caught him in between classes, passing him the day's summary. Only a few years older than him at the most, and he'd glanced around the building with a wry, disdainful smile before he noticed Neku staring and quickly handed over the folder, leaving without a word. Neku wonders what they do in their free time, why they take the job - and bites his lip, because it shouldn't matter. They are predators, not his responsibility, not who he needs to think about if he wants to make a better Game.

Flipping through the day's account, Neku tries to ignore the sinking feeling that he isn't going to do anything good at all, not against a system like this. Nothing to improve, just feeding souls into a chipper-shredder and fishing out the ones that get stuck. Joshua could have killed any of them at any time, and nothing, not Beat's determination or Shiki's resolve, none of it would make a damn difference. And Neku still doesn't know why, why Joshua had done as he had. If this is an actual reprieve, or just time ticking down until the Composer gets bored again.

Neku's finger stops at the top of the tally - BJ and Tenho took three pair, a total of five in two days. All of them near the arena - that isn't so surprising, they'd likely stayed where they were comfortable, but the number is startling. He'd promoted them on a whim, a moment of senseless rebellion, hadn't expected them to really be any good at it.

So all the ones they Erased, that's your fault too, really.

He's jolted out of his thoughts at the sound of rustling fabric, a bookbag thunking heavily against the table. Neku looks up as a boy slides into the chair across from him. His hair is - somehow - both spiky and shaggy, blue-tipped at the ends in a way that has to be breaking dress code. Neku looks around, just because he doesn't care anymore if people make fun of him doesn't mean he shouldn't pay attention, but there is no one watching that he can see. Just the other boy, unpacking a rather messy-looking lunch with one hand, flicking out a card in between two fingers with the other.

"You're Sakuraba, right?" When he speaks, Neku can see a silver flash in between his teeth - tongue stud. That is definitely against dress code.

"Yeah?" Neku takes the card, for lack of anything better to do, still aware he is on his guard, waiting for things to get ugly.

"My name's Tsuyoshi." The card says as much, a web link and an e-mail and a little silhouette of a band inside the outline of a camera, 'rock and roll photographer' underneath in heavy font. Neku tries to think of any reason the other boy would be sitting here - was this because of that business with the nail polish?

"You're an artist, right? I've uh… seen you doodling. Eri showed me some of your stuff, she said she knew you."

"You know Eri?"

Tsuyoshi nods. "Everybody knows Eri. My sister goes to her school. I mean, I was kind of surprised that you knew Eri, but…"

For all his rock and roll appearance, he looks nervous, and Neku feels like he's definitely missing something. "So, you're a photographer?"

"Yeah," Tsuyoshi says, brightening immediately. "I take pictures of all the local bands around here, publicity shots, stage stuff, whatever. Some bigger bands too, and idols, occasionally. You know, whatever."
"Cool." Neku nods, shoving the folder of Conductor business underneath his sketchbook.

"Yeah." The silence stretches out. Neku isn't any good at this part, even if he knows he's supposed to be saying something. Maybe if this wasn't a Game week - his first Game week - but it's only two days in and already he feels like he needs a month to process everything that's happened.

"So, uh… there's this show coming up, in a couple days. The band wants me to do some shots. I thought maybe you… if you wanted to come. It should be cool. Loud, and punk and… you know, cool."

"You want to hang out?" Maybe it's pathetic, how the question flops out, but Neku can't hide his incredulity or his confusion. It's not like - no, it's exactly like he thought he had an agreement with the rest of the school, that obviously he was weird and untouchable and that was just the way it was going to be from now on.

"Yeah, if it's good with you."

Neku doesn't know exactly what to say. Maybe he should be more on his guard. Maybe he shouldn't change anything else, with the rest of his life in flux. Maybe he's already trusted enough. Except the part of him that's the Conductor sees something bright and alive in Tsuyoshi, and the part of him that's Neku thinks it might be nice, not to have to eat alone all the time.

"It's good." He grins, feels the awkwardness of it slip away when the other boy grins back. "It sounds good."
Eri is an amazing designer, with a natural eye for the sharpest angle, the most stunning image, the effortlessly iconic look. Shiki can't help but be a little envious, even if Eri is quick to point out that without her skilled needle, even the best designs would end up as nothing but vague suggestions of what they ought to be. Of course, on occasions like these - with their first big show looming just around the corner and their line still a few pieces low - Eri's pencil can get a little ahead of her, her artistic vision trumping things like three dimensions and the laws of gravity, until Shiki has to stop turning the design around in her hands and just admit defeat.

"Eri, love, I know you're set on this particular fold, but to make it look this way we'll have to break the model's shoulders."

It's the fashion club, and one of the other girls has her hands on a copy of Vogue's newest runway overview, a thick catalog of every designer and every outfit, with the rest of the club standing around her making remarks about each page. Most of them are just there to trade makeup tips, talk about new stores and new sales and who wore The Wrong Shoes In Public over the weekend. Which is just fine by Shiki, there need to be people to buy the things they're designing, and though she used to feel a little self-conscious, nervous surrounded by all those chattering voices, she's a little less shy now, confident in her abilities. One day, it's going to be her work in that magazine.

Eri is standing over her shoulder, looking at the seam she's pointing at, and Shiki can hear her blow her bangs out of her eyes - not angry, just frustrated with herself. Eri hates it when reality gets in the way of her vision, and she quickly snatches the paper out of Shiki's hand, moving back to her drafting table. Frowning as she makes a series of careful, deliberate marks, erases, makes new ones, erases some more and then starts adding what might possibly be the start of a train to the back of what was supposed to be a trim, minimalist pantsuit.

Shiki rolls her eyes, and pushes the fabric she was working on out of the way. When Eri gets like this, it's usually easier to wait for her to beat the ideas into submission, and start from scratch.

The second bell rings, and all the other girls leave for the day, until only Shiki and Eri remain. The club room is practically like their second home, and neither of them feel any urgent need to leave. Eri's mother is completely supportive of her daughter - not that Eri would have brooked much argument - and Shiki thinks her parents are just glad she's spending her time with a nice girl instead of some boy somewhere.

Oh, if only they knew all the ways Shiki has found to spend time with a nice girl in a deserted club room. Of course, that doesn't mean she can't also worry about some boy, somewhere.

"I hope Neku's doing ok."

Eri snorts, not looking up from her design, and grins. "If I were a lesser woman, I think I'd be jealous. I bet he just got bit by the art bug. Probably trying to drag a screenprinting rack into that tiny apartment or something."
It's a relief for her, that Neku has finally found his passion, a way to get out some of what he's always thinking. It hasn't always been that way, she can remember when he wasn't this happy. Still, Shiki doesn't like to be too nosy, doesn't want to push, but she is shy and Eri is gregarious and Neku is one of those people who will spend all his time in his own world if nobody cares enough to drag him out of it.

Eri notices she's frowning, and sighs. "You don't have to worry. My spies are everywhere."

"What are you talking about?"

"Chiyo's brother goes to St. Michael's. I told her to tell him to go poke Neku sometime at lunch. He does that photography thing, so they've got something in common. They can totally hang out."

"Oh, Eri..." Shiki says, chewing on her lip in sudden worry. Eri is wonderful, and kind, and friendly, but she also just kind of does her thing, and if you get in her way, you become her thing. It's not bad, that she wants to help, just...

"What? Why are you giving me that look?"

"Well, I mean... Neku can be kind of... defensive. He needs a little time to get to know people."

The details of the first time she'd met him are not so clear anymore, but Shiki still remembers that it hadn't gone very well. They'd been thrown together for one reason or another, and Neku had wanted very little to do with her or anyone else who wasn't in his headphones.

"Are you kidding? He's a kitten." Eri as always, undeterred and eternally determined, staring at her with her hands on her hips. "So some waste of space broke his heart - he needs new friends. A lot of them, so he can get over it and be happy again, as fast as possible. Why mope over some idiot?"

"What?" Shiki says, eyes wide. "Who? When was this?"

"Chiyo said her brother said he heard something, he wanted to know if that was why Neku didn't hang out with anybody. Apparently it happened a while ago, before you knew him. I don't know if they were just friends or what but... yeah, it was pretty bad."

"He never told me."

"Well, I don't think he told anybody. No one wanted to point out this guy to me either - probably afraid of what I'd do to him." Eri crosses her arms and scowls, and Shiki knows for sure that's the reason, that nobody wanted to be the one to start that fight. Eri has always been very, very protective of the people she cares about, and Shiki can't help smiling, knowing that somewhere Neku is probably starting to realize just what being her friend means for his social life.

"So, I don't suppose he's mentioned the other guy again? The one he went to that party with?"

"Eri..."

Neku had given the suit back, carefully dry-cleaned at no small expense, but no matter how they'd asked he'd been evasive, leading the both of them to assume that quite a bit must have gone on.

"I'm just saying. If he messes with Neku, I'm going to redesign his face."

"Eri!"
She laughs, and Shiki can't help but laugh too, and before long they're both busy, back to work, not leaving until nearly sunset.

The night game gives Neku a halfway decent chance to catch up on his sleep, although the trade-off is now he's doing his homework in the UG, which is really kind of weird, trying to concentrate with shuffling steps and half-heard conversations - verbal and otherwise - all swimming around him. He's already heard a few things he'd really rather have missed, and there are a few stores that might be worth avoiding now, for varying reasons.

Varying… like if they want you shirt or pants-first.

The UG seems even more vibrant somehow, all lit-up, the Players all the more ghostly as they flit across the city streets, Minamimoto's statues rising up in the darkness, craggy silhouettes that still aren't impressing him much. Neku's somehow managed to get worse at math as he's gotten better at art, which cannot possibly be true, he just doesn't have the time to put into really thinking about it, giving it any extra attention and it's all neither fair nor logical anyway as there's a ton of practical math in the application of any number of artistic… Neku grimaces, erases his answer, and then the entire tortured equation preceding it.

"Bollocks," he says, and then "merde," because it sounds pretty good and it's nice to be learning how to swear in multiple languages.

"1.61803399."

He should have saved up on those swear words. Minamimoto is looming over him - god, but every Reaper taller than him never misses a chance to point it out, do they? He's smirking. He's been smirking every chance he can get, since they're both well aware which one of them is Shibuya's darling new artistic talent, and which one of them is running a Game with his popularity entirely in imaginary numbers.

"Am I interrupting your minimal compilations?"

Neku tries to keep his expression blank. "Don't you have a wall to talk to?"

Minamimoto stretches, shrugs. "These random coordinates plotted a different curve, nothing for us to do but sit back and wait."

Neku smiles a little at that. He's been watching out, today's challenge a bit of a scavenger hunt, bouncing the Players past the Mexican Dog twice, around Molco, and even up to CAT street, pretty much everywhere except where most of the Wall Reapers are stationed, unless they get unlucky enough to get turned around and slowed down there. Two sets of Players, two girls and two boys have been the ones trading off wins so far, neither of them showing any sign of slowing down. He's refrained from looking at their stats too closely, doesn't want to get his hopes up, or think about what will happen if all four of them do make it to the end of the Game. Neku's absolutely forbid the kind of cheap shots that took Rhyme down in his first week - fair play only. Not that he can trust any of them to listen to him, which is why he's been around, letting everyone know he's here, and he's already seen the two pairs criss-crossing paths, downing chili dogs and high-fiving each other as they go. Neku's feeling pretty good about their chances, even if he's still worried - which is why Minamimoto's able to reach out and grab his workbook right out of his hands.

"Hey!"
"Zetta slow!" Minamimoto crows, and attacks the book with a vengeance, brow furrowed as he makes his way through the problems, letting out a chuckle now and again at Neku's obvious stupidity. It's easier to let him think he's winning something, and hell, if he wants to do someone else's homework, might as well let him. Neku's stomach rumbles, reminding him that - Minamimoto or not - he's been increasingly lightheaded and headache-y for the past half an hour, and even if it means having a second dinner later, it's time to eat now. Neku considers the potential dangers of leaving Minamimoto alone with his homework versus having to eat with him in the same room and just walks off, leaving the guy who'd nearly killed him a couple of times, who'd opened a can of Taboo Noise whoop-ass across the entire Game, scribbling in his notebook and making half-garbled declarations to the empty air.

He has to have a serious talk with Joshua about Reaper qualifications.

"… and make sure you be careful, getting those boxes!"

Ramen Don is more popular than when he'd been there during his own Game, increasingly busy since getting the top space on the Prince's blog. So maybe the guy is good for something. Still, it's a little past the rush hour and, more importantly, there are no Players around for him to have to think about while he eats. Neku grabs a seat at the counter just as a shape pushes past the back room curtains, yelling back.

"I got it, don' worry about me!"

He sees Neku, and freezes, and for a moment there's nothing for them to do but blink at each other.

"Beat?!"

"Oh, hey Neku. What up?" Beat grins weakly after a moment, scratching his head with the arm not in the cast. Neku's glad to see the work he did on it has held up, a simple black and white pattern, strong lines and bold curves. A little bit like the Taboo Noise on Minamimoto, maybe, but just because he'd been an idiot didn't mean it didn't look good elsewhere.

"What are you doing here?" Like he needs to ask, Beat wearing an apron splashed here and there with varying degrees of brown broth. "You got a job?"

"Yeah. Kinda. Mom and Dad weren't too happy wit' me skateboarding wit' this," - he says, holding up his broken arm, - "so they said I should find somethin' else to do. I saw a sign, this place needed some extra help. The owner's teachin me to cook, too, so that's better than jus' flinging fries, right?"

"Sounds… great." Neku says, still surprised, but it does make some sense. He can't really imagine Beat holding down a regular job, being a salaryman and pushing papers around. Maybe this is the kind of thing he would be better at. A noise from the back room brings Beat out of his surprise, and he ducks down beneath the counter, coming back with a box under his good arm.

"I gotta go do some prep work in the back. You want the special today? It's good."

"Make it two."

Neku startles, maybe expecting the words but definitely not the voice, deeper than Joshua's, Kariya sliding into the seat beside him with a friendly grin. Beat glances between them, shrugging when Neku nods, going into the back as he turns to glare at the lazy Harrier.

"Come on, boss. Be a little magnanimous to us poor, working stiffs."
"Yes, my heart, it is breaking." Neku mutters, though of all of the Reapers he really has the least problem with Kariya. How he puts up with his uptight, high-maintenance partner is beyond Neku's understanding, but alone he is quiet, not trying to pick any fights, doesn't even say much unless there's something to say.

"Oh," Neku says, reaching in his pocket. "I keep forgetting to get this back to you."

Kariya's keypin, and the Harrier looks a little surprised to get it back. Of course, when he'd handed it over none of them had been so sure that anyone was going to survive, and Neku spends the next few moments trying not to think about that, until the food finally shows up. He digs in, only realizing how fast he is wolfing it down when Kariya makes a slight sound of amusement, and Neku forces himself to slow down, eat like a human being instead of some ravenous Noise. Beat pops in and out of the back room, focused on his job, and there's enough conversation around them that they can talk without being overheard.

"Nice pin you made there. Uzuki nearly got herself Erased."

The rebound pin, throwing the noise back at the Reapers. Neku is half caught between an apology and being surprised it worked so well. He wonders what Kariya is expecting, if this is going to turn into a fight. If he's actually going to have to say 'let's take this outside.' Kariya was not exactly easy to beat the first time, and Neku's not looking forward to a repeat, even if he is the Conductor now.

"Relax, boss. I'm impressed, really." Kariya sips at his broth, eyes down. "She wasn't paying attention - it shouldn't have gotten anywhere near her. I don't suppose…"

"Mm?"

"Nevermind."

He really shouldn't want to continue the conversation, the Reaper can't be expecting it, but Neku has nothing else to do to stretch out the meal but try to think of something to say.

"So do you two live together?"

Kariya lets out a chuckle, shaking his head.

"Uzuki? No way. She'd kill me for sure. Way too picky. I don't know where she is, these days. I'm staying in the apartment of that tall kid. The Player that won the Game yesterday."

Neku stares. "You… what, squat in the Players apartments?"

Kariya nods. "Sometimes. If their parents rent them for them, or if there's some other reason they're alone. So, you see, sometimes it's nice when they don't get Erased right away. I mean, I got lucky with you for those three weeks."

It takes him a second, and Neku nearly chokes around a mouthful of ramen, spluttering. "My house? You were in my HOUSE?"

"I wouldn't worry about it. You're pretty boring." Kariya is completely unfazed by Neku's outrage, picking the last of the chicken out of his bowl. "I think some of the Wall Reapers all cram together in some little apartment, they pool the rent. A few of them still have families, or they're homeless, but the ones with a place will help them out when they need it."

"I didn't…" So much time, thinking about them as cruel monsters, Neku never really considered what the Reapers did with the rest of their time. Especially for the Wall Reapers, the ones who
didn't get to hunt, who didn't go up in rank, it really was just another kind of part-time job. "I didn't think about that."

"Shibuya's a little tight, hard to negotiate sometimes. It's different in other places. I used to do a lot of camping, or sleeping on the beach."

Neku looks at him in surprise, but Kariya is still quietly picking apart his meal. He's trying to remember what he's read about Reapers - but most of that doesn't match with what he just said, not even the higher-level Harriers tending to leave the boundaries of their UG. "You… you weren't always a Reaper here?"

He shrugs. "I get around."

Nothing in his tone to suggest he cares one way or the other, but Neku doesn't think that asking more questions is going to get him anywhere. Kariya pushes his bowl away, grinning at Beat as he walks by, grabbing it off the counter.

"Higashizawa would love that. You can't get him to shut up about the slow food movement, the need for the next generation to go back to the old ways of cooking, whatever. I don't know why in the hell he wants to be Games Master so badly. One of those type-A chef personalities, I guess."

"So he actually cooks?" Neku says, and scowls when Kariya gives him a look. "Listen, I don't think a team of shrinks could tell which of you jerks have actual personalities and which are just batshit insane." Like the fraction-obsessed freakshow running around out there somewhere with his math homework. Kariya shrugs, conceding the point.

"He's in culinary school. Nearly done. I think he teaches some class to little kids and old ladies on the weekends. He's good with kids."

"He…" Neku trails off, but the brain damage is already done. Good with children. Seriously. What.

"Neku!"

Two arms grab from behind, pulling him into a happy hug, Rhyme leaning her head on his shoulder with a bright smile. Neku has quietly and determinedly tried to divide the UG and RG parts of his life, or at least the people involved. Shiki, most of all, but Rhyme is a close second - she went through way too much during the Game for Neku to want her anywhere near any of it now, not even Kariya, even if he doesn't seem to be interested in doing more than digesting his meal.

"Are you here to see Beat?"

"I didn't know he was here."

Rhyme frowns, kicking one toe against the floor. "He's trying not to let anybody know. I don't know why. Everybody needs to eat, right? What's wrong with wanting to be a great chef?"

Did Beat not want him to know? Neku never thought it mattered much to him, who was smarter or had the better grades, but for all his transparent nature Beat is obviously just as capable of keeping secrets. Rhyme steps back, and grins at Kariya. Neku flashes him a warning glare, but all the Reaper does is smile back.

"Listen, Rhyme, I've got to get going. I'm kind of… busy right now. It was good to see you, though. Tell your brother I said thanks, and I think he'll do great."

"Okay!" Rhyme chirps. Neku slaps down some cash against the counter, a little more than
necessary but he wants to get out of the place more than he wants to wait for his change. He hears Kariya walking behind him, but doesn't look back. Isn't thinking enough to remember to flip Frequencies when he goes through the door, slipping back into the UG, and completely misses it when Kariya looks back from the threshold, Rhyme watching him, even when he steps through the door. He stares for a moment, surprised, and winks at her before turning away.

Neku gets maybe ten steps onto the street when Minamimoto appears out of nowhere. He slaps the workbook against Neku's chest, smirking proudly, standing tall - he really thinks he's the adult in this entire thing, doesn't he? Neku tries not to listen to what he's saying - some random mnemonic, but at least he's easy enough to read, a part of Neku always watching his body language, always aware of the way things stand. Minamimoto and Kariya aren't friends, he's pretty sure of that, but all he needs is for some crazy-ass deal to be made, so much he still doesn't know about any of this, and it's already fairly established that everyone wants his damn job.

He flips quickly through the book, Minamimoto has done the entire assignment for the day as well as half of the one for tomorrow, including the practice problems. In a moment of sadistic inspiration, Neku flips to the back of the book, where the answers are given for at least those few.

"… my superior skills, a logarithmic equation of awesome to base twenty-" 

"It's not right."

Minamimoto stops talking. Neku flips the book flat in his hands. Kariya is leaning over from the other side.

"It's the wrong answer." He's honestly surprised, and checks a few more, the ones he'd deliberately left empty because he's pretty sure he knew the answers and needed to focus on the more difficult ones first. "I think this one is wrong too. If you do out the whole thing, you should have negative seven, right?"

Minamimoto is silent, watching Neku work out the problem, calmly erasing his grandiose computations. Kariya is making a choking sound from behind his hand, as Neku flips the page.

"Uh… yeah. So… thanks for getting it back to me."

Kariya is laughing so hard he's leaning against his knees, wings sticking straight up. Minamimoto howls with anger, storming away down the street, screeching about binomials and high school and stupid freaking hectopascals as Neku sighs and tries to think of the closest store that sells really big erasers.

The clock is ticking down, and nobody's won yet, and even though this night's Game is longer than the days before, it's still starting to worry him. Of course he doesn't have to be here, he can just go home, but Neku knows he won't be able to sleep if he does. He'll only toss and turn and stare at the ceiling and wonder if anyone's made it out alive. The sky does strange things in the UG at night, the city just as bright but the sky above lit up as if there's no city at all, a sea of whirling galaxies, a whole pailful of glittering sand tossed out into the darkness. It's beautiful, and for a while Neku can't help but glance up at it, try to figure out how to draw it.

He does circuits of the area, the Scramble to Dogenzaka and back, up through the hall, over to the park. He keeps away from where Joshua is, doesn't linger near CAT Street - he's here to keep track
of the Reapers, not the Players, tries to stay out of their way while letting the Reapers know he's around, and watching. It still kind of feels like being a nature photographer, dispassionately watching the lions chase the gazelles, but the closest he's gotten so far to having to see anyone Erased is coming around the corner to find a pair of Players circling the edge of a Blue Noise, wary and curious, while a pair of Wall Reapers egg them on.

"That's cute. Real cute." Neku snaps, and the Wall Reapers instantly scatter, disappearing into the night, leaving him with the Blue Noise and two Players, both in battle stances, the one in front glaring at him while the other watches warily from behind. It reminds him so much of Shiki and Eri that his heart goes tight in his chest.

"Who are you, then?" The girl's hand is glowing slightly, possibly an ice pin and probably very well charged. This is one of the pairs, the girls, the ones he's hoping can take it all the way.

"I'm somebody nobody ever feels like listening to." Neku can't help but glare in the direction the Reapers have vanished. The Blue Noise is still hovering patiently, waiting for someone to make the mistake he made the first time he walked into one, thinking it was part of the day's challenge, that it was super important to beat. And Joshua, ever-helpful Joshua had said nothing at all except to chide Neku for not doing a better job as he'd crawled out of the battle pretty much on his hands and knees.

"He's really strong." The meeker of the two girls whispers to the other, she must have some affinity to the Game, the type of person who might make a good Reaper, if she wasn't obviously scared out of her mind.

"I'm not your goal, and neither is this. I suggest you get moving, you're running out of time."

"We want to go home." The girl in front says, and her eyes are flashing with anger but her voice quavers on the word, and Neku doesn't want to be this, doesn't want to be freaking Kitaniji. It's so easy, it was so easy to give into the fear and turn on Shiki, and it would be so easy to stop caring now, so much more enjoyable, to forget what it was to be powerless.

"Win the Game. Win the Game and I promise I'll get you both home." If he has to turn Joshua upside down and shake the Composer power out of him.

"How do I know you're not lying?"

Neku knows the pin she's using, knows what it is to clench his fist and call the cold. Feels it now, and draws the block of ice together silently, effortlessly, letting it fall - it's half the size of a car, smashing to the ground only a few steps from where she stands. Her partner shrieks, clinging onto her arm, and she's jumped to the side, staring at Neku with wide, shocked eyes.

"Get. Moving. Win the Game. It's what you have to do, so do it."

Neku can't relax, can't even manage a deep breath out until they're gone, and it's just him and the Blue Noise, still content to hover in place in a really kind of annoying way. Like hell he's letting it hang around - maybe tomorrow, but it's still too early on for them to have to put up with this kind of thing. Neku reaches out, feels the cool tingle - the regular Noise do not come near him, sensing his power, he's by far the biggest threat around. And they were people too once, right? Bits and pieces of former players, collecting more energy, trying to move up just like the Players are trying to move up, and the Reapers - nothing changes. Or everything does.

*Omnia mutantur, nihil interit.*
Vancouver's asked him, how it feels to be the Conductor. Neku still doesn't know what he's going to say.
The world shifts, not quite the way it did when he was a Player, as he prepares to fight. He simply touches the Blue Noise and it fades, and he knows there's a boundary around them now. Waits for the creature to appear in its true form, to attack. Glancing above him, in case it is preparing to swoop down, or to see some version of himself with a fox mask face - but the minutes pass, and nothing happens. The area seems entirely empty, and Neku exhales. He can read people's thoughts, he can throw all kinds of power around without Pins, he ought to be able to find one Noise. He drops his guard just slightly, forces himself to relax just that much further, and reaches out, looking for... well, he figures he'll know when he finds it. It doesn't take long, although it's kind of... smaller than he thought it would be.

Neku walks over to a bench, looks around again for the sneak attack that just has to be coming, and puts a knee on the seat, leaning down to look underneath.

"Hey. Hey, I can see you."

One small, liquid eye, watching him from the darkness, but it doesn't move. Probably waiting for a better shot, a moment of vulnerability. Neku weighs his options, and the possibility this will all end in some humiliating way, and drops down to the pavement, so he can reach a hand out.

"Hello? Come on, you're supposed to be attacking me. Otherwise Joshua's going to turn the channel." He's almost certain the Composer is somewhere watching all of this, probably recording his least impressive moments for the 'greatest hits' collection.

The shape seems to cower a little further back into the shadows, but just about the time Neku's ready to drop his hand it takes a tentative step forward, and another. Well, not really a step - more of a hop. It's a bunny, a little, tan mini-lop with a teardrop shape around each eye, like dark brown eyeliner. So this is either a baited bear trap or some sort of Angler fish Noise with a cute bunny lure. Oh, what the hell, it will make for good comedy either way.

"It's ok. I'm not going to hurt you."

It would really be off-sides to destroy it, even if it is supposed to be some sort of high-level Noise. The tiny creature still hasn't actually done anything, and it's really kind of adorable. Neku waits, keeping his hand still, his knees starting to ache from the forced hold, when he feels a soft, velvety nose against his fingertips, and fur, and then the tiny creature is hopping out, nose twitching - obscenely cute, for Noise, and oddly... familiar, somehow. Neku gently strokes the soft fur at the crown of its head, glancing around and behind him, but this tiny creature is really all there is.

No, Game. He's not murdering the tiny bunny. Just, no. But he can't leave it here for the next player to pound flat, either.

"Come on, then."

Neku gently picks it up, and puts it on his shoulder. The lop might be small but it's still a Noise, and he feels its claws dig in firmly, not enough to hurt, but certainly in no danger of falling off. Hanekoma has sent him some extra material Neku was sure he wasn't supposed to see, nothing on how to make Noise but on their various properties and needs - basically, everything about how Rhyme had been in her Noise form, how she'd pulled all the energy she needed from her partner, and if Beat could handle that, Neku's pretty sure keeping it fed won't be a problem. He glances over, watching the tiny nose twitch.

"If you try to eat my head, the deal's off. Got that?"
One dark eye blinks at him, and he feels the slight shift of the 'battle' ending. He's back in the UG proper with no Blue Noise and now, a fuzzy souvenir. Neku turns at the sound of footsteps - didn't even notice when the Game had ended, but here's the Reaper with the nightly report. Neku flips it open, immediately, to the day's winner, relieved to find there is one.
thoughts meander like a restless wind inside a letter box

Chapter Notes

chapter title - the beatles: across the universe (although for this fic I prefer the Fiona Apple cover)

It's purgatory, which really might as well be hell, and yes, damn it, yes he deserves it all but if Hanekoma doesn't get something down on paper soon he's going to run mad and screaming through the streets. He tries to pretend that shuffling through the shop is doing anything but killing time. Tries to do anything other than admit the truth, that he's lost his inspiration and it's not coming back. Hanekoma reaches for a package of beans to feed into the machine, grimaces as the top refuses to open, and pries at it with both hands. The bag splits suddenly, coffee beans pinging absolutely everywhere, cascading in a waterfall across the floor.

He lets out an inarticulate scream of frustration, jaw clenched and eyes closed, and opens them to find himself someplace new. Still a coffee shop, but the walls are painted a rather soothing blue, a framed picture of the Eiffel Tower on one wall, a case of fancy pastries accompanying an espresso machine twice as complicated as anything he uses. Only two people seated in a table near a window, and one of them turns away for a moment to look at him, raising a gloved hand. Joshua… or perhaps it's Josephine here, delicately outfitted in Lapin Angélique's finest but still with the same wry, amused smile, almost pitying. Across the table, this universe's version of Neku is still busy chatting into her cell phone, adorned with all kinds of beads and glittery charms, kicking her feet out in a nervous habit, beneath a long, full lace skirt.

A sound behind him, someone clearing their throat, and Hanekoma looks into his own eyes, more or less. Long, dark hair framing a narrow face, cat's eye glasses - she's not any happier to see him than any of his other fractal selves have been. He's made a big enough mess for all of them.

Hanekoma grimaces, shuffling his feet.

"Uh… yeah, sorry. I'll just… uh… let myself out."

It isn't the first time he's aggravated himself across dimensions, and it never helps to go, a fabulous array of universes where he can be reminded that it was Neku - not him, not anything he did or tried to do - that actually made the difference. The worlds where he did not act, the Hanekomas that populate them look at him as if he's something either stupid or mad or both. Still better than the universes where he did more, planned bigger, although there tends to be a distinct lack of anything left in those. It's the reason the Angels are still not sure if the punishments they've meted out are fair, or enough. The drastic decisions of either Producer or Composer have a nasty tendency to spill across dimensions, affecting wide swaths of universes similar enough - poisoning them.

It is not a small thing he has done, whatever the reason, and so it's no more comfortable now, being back in his own space and time. If it wasn't exactly what he knew they wanted, what everyone was expecting him to do, Hanekoma might just step down, walk away. Except he can't really take a break from doing absolutely nothing, and as satisfying as it would be to wait until they called, begged him to come back and deal with Joshua, the Composer isn't on any sturdier footing than he is, even if he's pretending he doesn't care, utterly preoccupied with his new Conductor.

In a way, Neku is protecting both of them. Still quite the darling of the higher forces, they don't
want to cause him any undue grief, and Neku is inconveniently attentive and alert. He would notice, if anything changed. Not that any of it has anything to do with Hanekoma's sudden and complete artist's block. He only wishes he knew what capricious god or muse he could grovel to, begging for a poster or a pin or a damn doodle on a napkin. He's currently on a professional sabbatical, which is a really fancy way of saying 'no fucking ideas,' and at the moment that's mostly pacing, knocking himself into alternate dimensions and trying not to bang his head against the wall in the hopes that the pretty colors might give him something - anything - to work with.

Hanekoma glances at the clock, watching the hand slowly slide to 6:45. Nearly seven a.m. He resists the urge to just lie on the floor for the rest of the day.

The bell rings, just as he ducks under the counter for a dishrag to polish the already sparkling counter top. Hanekoma doesn't hear any footsteps, and comes back up just as Neku drops to a halt in front of him, tiny claws skittering against the shining surface. He folds his wings delicately behind him, tail twitching, and lets out a soft sigh. Dragon form. At least Hanekoma isn't the only one having an extra fun day.

"So."

"I don't want to talk about it." Neku mutters, tips of his wings shifting in annoyance, and Hanekoma shrugs, reaching for a cup. He feels like an actor on a stage, playing at the person he used to be.

"Fair enough. I can put the coffee on your tab."

"I have a tab?"

"The Conductor has a tab. I can't give them to the Players - what if you went and got yourself Erased on me?"

Neku lets out a small laugh, even smaller now that he's a third the size of the cash register. "See, I knew you cared."

Hanekoma puts the cup down, low and shallow enough to be sort of like a bowl. Neku eyes it for a moment, and then the small, long and snakelike tongue darts in and out, lapping at the House Blend. It's adorable, and unfortunately the kid glances up just as he's looking down and manages to scowl pretty well despite a noticeable lack of eyebrows.

Before he can ask again, Neku blurts out an explanation, semi-unintelligible, something about "trying to work on his powers, or possibly his wings, and getting startled or stuck and ending up in his Noise form, something something bunny." Hanekoma blinks, hopes his expression looks wise and knowing enough.

"It's okay if I just go with the parts that make sense to me, right?"

"You do know I breathe fire now." Neku mutters, snorting out a disgruntled bit of steam to make the point. He sighs, and his tail droops, blinking over the cup of coffee like a weary morning commuter. The kid has been in the Game, watching from the start, and that on top of his other life, school and friends - but he's still as strong as ever. He's an artist, it's not information overload that's ever going to be the problem.

"If you're not getting the hang of it, I'd talk to your Composer. He would be able to help you learn a little faster." Hanekoma has no reason to indulge Joshua in his belief that he can take an entirely hands-off approach to this. Not that his words have much effect. It isn't just scowling, little dragon
Neku can also look at him as if he's completely stupid.

"As if this is somehow worse than having Joshua for a teacher."

He can't help but smile. One of the implicit orders of his new series of reports is to keep an eye on the 'situation' between Conductor and Composer, as if there's anything Hanekoma can tell them that will help, a way to explain that makes sense. The Composer certainly hadn't expected this outcome, and though Hanekoma had always had a feeling, he knew he could be prone to bouts of 'unnecessary optimism,' as Joshua called them. The Angels had been expecting Neku to take care of the problem, Joshua had certainly assumed it, and even if he asks the kid about it now, Hanekoma's not sure Neku could give him an answer, why he'd done what he had.

"So, have you seen anyone?" Neku looks up from his cup, the end of his tail twitching, slightly nervous. It's a less hands-on Game now - obviously - than when Neku and his friends had played. Hanekoma has had to scale back his 'interference,' along with the rest of his activities, could never dream of doing what he'd done for Rhyme that first week, not now. Still, he keeps the door open, tries to offer some advice here and there, although there's no kind way to say it - most of the Players he's spoken to this week are already gone. Either Neku doesn't know that the Reapers aren't trying to recruit, that they're out for blood, or he's trying to ignore it.

"Nothing much to report, Phones. I hear there's a couple good prospects running around out there."

Neku doesn't say anything, only that twitching tail to betray his troubles. Hanekoma can't remember a time when a Conductor was so completely opposed to the Game, treating it as a necessary evil at the very best. Of course, Neku is at his most uncomfortable here, knowing just enough about what Hanekoma is not to be able to trust anything. It's selfish and stupid of him, to miss that naive, trusting kid, the Neku who seemed to just open up to him, to understand exactly he was trying to do.

"Actually, Neku, I'm kind of glad you're here. I know you're busy and all, but I hoped we could talk for a minute. Artist to artist."

The kid goes very still, and even if he feels like a fraud for doing it, Hanekoma knows he can still dazzle Neku with that CAT reputation. The kid's wanted to ask him about it, he can always see the starry-eyed hero worship there, but the only mention of it so far was that the mural he did - half the reason Neku's in this mess at all - is, according to a Neku who didn't dare look at him, 'reallyuhtotallykindasupercoolyeah… awesome.'

"Uh… what?"

All surprise and astonishment now, even though Hanekoma's been tracking his progress and knows how good he is, how good he's going to be. If he wanted to, Hanekoma could give this to him like an indulgence, a mentor's side-project given to a deserving student, but it would be a lie. As much as he doesn't want to crack his perfect reputation, he also doesn't want to lie, not about this. Neku deserves better.

"I'll be honest, Neku. I've been having a little… difficulty lately, getting much done. I'm not taking on any new projects, but there are still some loose ends I'm having trouble tying up."

Neku stares. "It wasn't just Joshua they punished, was it? Because of… what he did, you were hurt too."

The truth, right there, all he needs to do is come clean. Let Neku know that for all Joshua had done, Hanekoma certainly did his best to make it even worse.
"It's… complicated, and it's not like I can blame anyone else for a lack of inspiration. I just don't think I can do a proper job on this." So he's a coward. Again. "It's an album cover - the girl was the most popular singer in the group, and now that they've broken up she's trying to kick-start a solo career. I've got some pictures, but she was pretty vague on the whole concept."

"Cute but not too cute, trendy but not too trendy. Kind of like that thing, that cool thing, you know the one I'm talking about? Like that, but not too much like that." Neku says sarcastically, and Hanekoma grins. Obviously, he's had some experience with picky clients.

"You got it, Phones. Everything to everyone without looking like you're trying too hard. I've kind of been putting this off, hoping something will hit me, but it hasn't. So it's a little bit of a time crunch, they'll need something soon, but the pay is pretty good. You interested?"

Neku's tail is lashing back and forth wildly, even as the rest of him is stock still - definitely interested, even though this has to be one more project he just doesn't need, and Hanekoma chuckles slightly as he lets out a tiny flick of flame without meaning to.

"I… uh… I dunno, Mr. H. I mean… if it's a CAT project, and they want… and you think I could…" A tiny tongue licks at nonexistant lips. "You said they'd pay me?"

He's back to human when he hits the door, thanks to something Mr. H does on his way out, but Neku is practically floating anyway. He's been asked to do a job - CAT trusts him enough, to have him pick up a job. Yeah, he's got no time to do it in, but that's beside the - CAT asked him to do a job. Holy crap holy crap holy crap.

The mini-lop is waiting for him just outside the door, must have followed him here, and Neku kneels down, letting it climb up on his shoulder. He's carried it around for a while, both in the UG and the RG, and though he can see it in both places, no one in the real world can, it's just like a Player to them, invisible. He's got to figure out a way to keep it - her, he's fairly sure it's a girl bunny - safe the rest of the time, can't carry her everywhere until he figures out what to do with her and CAT just gave him a job. A job. For real.

If Neku can get him the specs, something good to show by the end of the week, Mr. H has even offered to front him the payment, that's how confident he is in Neku's abilities. It flutters in his stomach, the possibility, and he's sure he'd be a lot more nervous and uncertain if he wasn't running on four-and-a-half hours of sleep and a half a cup of slurped-up coffee. Neku all but attacks the first vending machine he comes across, barely paying any attention to what he's ordering, or the crinkle of wrappers as he inhales the makeshift meal - he can get Shiki's necklace now, with what the job will pay. The job. CAT just gave him a job.

He thrusts his fists to the sky and does a little dance in front of the vending machine, and to hell with anyone watching.

Obviously, now that he's got a place weaving together the tapestry of the universe, and a godhead boyfriend - boy friend - friend who happens to be a boy when he's not being a nightlight and who Neku sometimes feels the insanely stupid urge to suck face with - whatever, having an absentee father is a bit more of a plus than it used to be. He doesn't have to worry if the Game keeps him out late, or if he ends up sacking out at Joshua's - doesn't even have to think what might happen, until well after this Game is over and even then his dad will likely come back for a few days just to turn around and leave again.
Neku's a little worried about it, not if the school calls him - the number they have to reach his father is probably three years out of date - but if his dad suddenly does come back, and suddenly takes an interest, there's so much that Neku just can't explain to him. The other option is obvious, to mess with his dad's head, the way Joshua took all his memories away - and Neku shivers. Can't do it, knows he can't ever do that, and if he's doing this all the difficult way it's still better than the alternative. Better to feel tired, hurt, angry than not to feel at all. It's probably better that all of this is hard.

His phone buzzes. Neku's head jerks up, he can't believe the teacher doesn't notice, but apparently obnoxious Composer texts exist outside the realm of RG attention as well as the realm of sanity, and he reaches for his phone before Joshua can get impatient.

- So this is what you're selling out for, dear?

Did Hanekoma tell him or does he just know somehow? Whatever the case, Neku won't let him ruin this, knows he's not exactly painting the Sistine Chapel or anything but still, it's a job. The bunny jumps off his shoulder, perching at the corner of his desk as he types his reply. Luckily, the rest of the class is as distracted as he is, no one noticing when he reaches out to pet at empty air.

- I'm doing Mr. H a favor. I wasn't going to say no.

Which is the kindest way of saying he'd jumped at the chance to take CAT's castoffs, but there's no dignity in art, not until he's famous enough to cover up all his early jobs, and Joshua and dignity are like opposite ends of a magnet anyway, so he's kind of given up on trying to impress anyone.

- You've listened to it, of course.

No, but he can guess. Bad pop. Bad pop-rock. Bad pop-rap. Some combination of the three. Whatever, all he's got to sell is the image and why does Joshua think this is any of his business, anyway? Can't he just annoy Neku about Game stuff and stop monopolizing all the humiliation?

Neku jumps, nearly drops the phone as it suddenly explodes into life, a ringtone which has to be from that album even if it hasn't been released yet. It doesn't prove anything, especially with Neku too busy trying to shut it off to bother listening, aware as it cuts off and the silence falls that he's screwed. At least having it confiscated for the day means Joshua can't idly torture him anymore - ha ha! god, but even his victories are pathetic - and the teacher gives him a disappointed shake of her head, passes back a paper as he hands over the phone.

Neku stares down at the errors. The error, an answer erased and rewritten and not in his hand. So it's not enough to upend his life, Joshua's got to go after his homework too.

Is there a law that says he has to step up and protect the Composer? Maybe Neku can just give them some advice on where to aim.

Lunchtime is the first chance he really gets to flip through the material Hanekoma has given him. Honestly, Neku's not really sure this is a good idea, definitely not his style of music but the girl is still pretty, there a few photos of her that might help him think of something, and if he's going to do this art thing he has to work to what other people want, right? He figures if he can get three or four different concepts down, that will be enough for them to either pick one or decide he's completely wrong for the project - no, not this. He's not going to fail this, not with Mr. H's reputation on the line, putting in a good word for him like this.

"Hey," Tsuyoshi says, sitting down, pushing one of the pictures out of the way, craning his head to try and see it right-side-up. "Girlfriend? She's cute."
"It's a job. I'm supposed to do some cover art for her new album. Well, at least make a pitch."

He's going to get the job. If it means not sleeping until next month, he'll get it.

"Wow." Tsuyoshi takes a closer look through the pictures, studying whatever makes them interesting as photographs, things Neku doesn't notice. "Yeah, this is Fighting Kittens, right? She's going solo? Cool. You're still going to be able to make the concert tomorrow, right?"

He really shouldn't. It's tempting fate, with the Game tonight and a visit with Joshua afterward that will be brief, dammit, even if he has to set himself on fire to get away, and trying to pull this job together and homework and yeah this is tempting fate, but Neku can't help but be curious, doing something normal with a normal person and he's paused a little too long, Tsuyoshi a little wary now, watching him.

"It's cool if you don't want to. No pressure."

Neku thinks about Beat, about how nervous that just sounded. Is he intimidating, somehow? It seems impossible, not with him feeling like the awkward one, the one taking all the risks, so bad at being normal. Still, a creepy image of himself with Joshua's cool stare, Joshua's impenetrable disinterest flickers by - hell no, he's not like that. He's not.

"I'll be there."

"Awesome. I… uh…" Tsuyoshi reaches out one hand, sets down something in front of Neku with a light snap. A small stack of business cards, with a glossy detail of part of the window display he'd done on one side, blank and matte on the other.

"I got a friend at the copy shop, he was making up some for me so I asked him to do up some for you. I wasn't sure what you wanted on there, but I figured some blanks would be better than nothing. I took a shot of your window, that thing's pretty cool."

"Thanks." Neku said, trying not to react too much, to play it easy - but this was weird, having friends again. Nice but weird, and he should think of something to do in return, sketch up a bag or do some art for Tsuyoshi's website - and add website to the list of things he still needs to get done, but that means a computer upgrade and that means a lot more work.

So he'd better fill out some of those cards, and go to that concert, and get his ass networking.

Neku hasn't had much more chance to practice with the Game up and running, not even wanting to risk having a Harrier watch him make an ass of himself. Getting stuck in dragon form before he'd had the chance to brush his teeth was bad enough, but his attempts at any sort of flying are beyond comical. The wings don't really do much, didn't really feel like flapping, but if he concentrates he does manage to hover - it's hard, though, and he keeps threatening to fall into every bin he passes. So with the Game on, he keeps his feet on the ground and just tries to follow the pitch and flow of the Game.

At first, it was just a random, jumbled cacophony, always threatening to give him a headache. Now, on day four Neku's starting to hear the difference, the softer RG melody faded behind the stronger UG vibe, pulling and warping around him like a tarp stretched across all of Shibuya, each person weighing it down, making it bend and shift with their thoughts and feelings and if he focuses too long he's dizzy, stumbling, like he's trying to walk the deck of a ship caught in a bad storm. Somehow, Joshua can do it, sees more than this, all the patterns and every subtle alteration.
that will affect the whole, and all of it. Neku would be even more impressed if he was actually certain the Composer had a plan, and wasn't just throwing pebbles down to enjoy the pretty pattern the ripples made.

Minamimoto's statues annoy him a little bit more each time he passes them - and it's not jealousy, they're just so damn ugly. Especially at night, rising up in dark, hulking lumps that break up the otherwise pretty play of clamoring light and deep darkness that is Shibuya at night. It's definition they need, to join up with the rest of the activity of the city - and Neku instantly has an idea, something he saw on a website once. Something that will definitely piss Minamimoto off, and Neku grins, jotting down the idea in the back of his mind, for the first chance he's got at some free time.

Free time, the thought nearly makes him laugh. From where he's standing now, just one week in, it's difficult to imagine there was a time when he didn't have eight million things all demanding his attention. He's pretty good at keeping it in order, but Neku's sure that even the slightest slip now and the whole great pile will come tumbling down. Unfortunately, this matters a little bit more than just missing a homework assignment or even being late on a job - and damn if just for one moment, he thought he could actually outthink Joshua, actually get something past the Composer. The thought - and he doesn't want to consider it - but what if this is just another Game, somehow? What if all of this is just Joshua messing with him - for the lulz. Shit, he probably /invented/ the lulz.

Now and then, he imagines creating a Pin that would destroy the Game. The whole thing. Bring it down from the inside. Kitaniji had all but done as much - it's not impossible. He knows what Hanekoma thinks, and Joshua, and Vancouver - but maybe this just isn't enough. Maybe it's more merciful to just let the Players all die the first time, than to torture most of them for the sake of a handful of second chances.

He's in the Game now, keeping an eye out, and Neku thinks he's paying attention, not too distracted even with half his thoughts on his schoolwork and the rest on vague morality, but when he turns the corner the girl runs right into him, Neku rocking back on his heels and if she'd have been solid she'd have knocked him over but she isn't, and his fingers are slipping through her, like trying to hold onto sand as he grabs her upper arms, her legs giving out.

"No. Please, no."

A whisper, terrified. Neku knows what this is.

"It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you."

Not that it matters. It's already over. He's trying to help, he really is, but for all his power he's not Hanekoma, he's not anyone but a stupid kid with a stupid 'Hello My Name Is The Conductor' badge and he can't save her. At least the last thing she sees won't be a Reaper, laughing at her as she fades away.

"I'm scared. I'm scared."

"I know."

Neku hears her gasp, but it doesn't gut him like he expected it would - maybe not even afraid, just surprised, the softest 'oh,' and her hand clenches against his arm and she's gone. The bunny is leaning forward on his shoulder, nose twitching at the air, and Neku can feel what it must sense, the slightest feel of her, not even strong enough to be Noise, and he shuts his eyes and strains to feel it, but after a moment even that fades away.
Kariya is standing there, when he opens his eyes. Slouching really, nothing in his pose or expression to show what Neku knows - that was his kill. Treat him to a bowl of ramen one day, watch him destroy two people the next. Welcome to the UG.

"Nice bunny, boss."

Neku's not sure what to say, so he stays silent. The number of remaining pairs is small now, which means more Reapers clamoring for a chance at each one, which means Day Seven is going to be a nightmare, even before they reach Higashizawa. Kariya crouches down, sifting slowly through what looks like loose change on the ground - pins. The girl's pins, and Neku hadn't even heard them fall.

"I'm usually faster than that. Most times I get both at once."

Nothing like an apology, but Neku doesn't even expect the explanation. Kariya looks up, flips a pin across the back of his knuckles as he stands up, a dexterous little move for his usual lethargy. Neku's still not sure what to say, what he feels, maybe anger and maybe sadness, stupid betrayal, as if he didn't come into this knowing full well what would happen, and how can the city be so bright, how can he feel that pulse of life so strongly, when it comes from this?

"It used to be harder. It wasn't like this," Kariya says, leaning back against the wall, not looking at him. Looking up at the sky. "You weren't like this. Everyone... everyone was the same, always. No school, no night life, no waiting to grow up. He lets out a little huff of a laugh. "No one 'grew up,' and there was so little time, for change. Even for the best."

Neku can't help staring, wonders why he's being told.

"How long have you been in the Game?"

Kariya still doesn't look at him, nonchalant, almost bored.

"You would have been married by now. You would have had children. Or you would have been dead." Kariya is staring into the distance, at nothing in particular, and Neku can see him thinking and for a moment he can feel the ages there, memories shifting like the tides, so much more than he knows, or understands. Freedom, and wanderlust, and a sad, deep melancholy that he never would have suspected. Kariya is watching him, and there's an odd little smile in the corner of his mouth and really, Neku, really, listening to other people's music without their permission is going to get your ass totally killed one of these days.

"Sooner or later, you would have figured it out."

Neku wonders what it is that he's figured out. Except that Kariya is very, very old and certainly more powerful than he's letting on and almost certainly capable of being Conductor, if not Composer, if he at all wanted the job. That Neku defeated him in the first place seems like a fluke, laughable.

"I was fighting the Red Pin. Trying to, at least. I hope that made it a little easier for you." His eyes flash, a sudden flicker of anger, and Neku isn't going to ask Joshua about this, whether or not he knows about Kariya. Hopes Kariya doesn't know about what really happened, or just assumes the Conductor was working alone. Discovering that the Composer found the entire business highly entertaining would not, Neku thinks, be a very productive thing.

"The Def March twins took another pair. So they're top ranked now. Number one with a bullet."

With that news, Kariya turns, and Neku stares at his back, the way his Reaper wings seem to eat
The streets are thinned out, Neku can feel the lack of Players, the way the music itself has changed, a string being tightened, the highest key on the piano struck, producing an odd, nervewracking, hollow tone. At least let one of them make it, one pair. Please. It will be worth the inevitable fight with Joshua, but he'll dig in his heels and weather the worst. He'll face that and win again, and he'll send them home.

He makes it as far as Lapin Angelique without seeing anyone. The shopkeeper's getting ready to close for the night when he sneaks in to look for any extra Players, hoping but not really expecting to find a few unexpected survivors. Before he can make his escape, the girl lets out a sound like a hemorrhaging whale, dragging him further inside the store.

She's faster than she looks, wide eyes fixed on the mini-lop, who is visible here, if mostly indifferent to the attention. Neku's a little worried, not sure what will happen, but the Noise doesn't make much of a fuss as the store clerk produces the world's tiniest top hat - Neku can't imagine where it came from - and perches it jauntily on the tiny bunny's head.

Neku escapes as quickly as he can after that, although not before she gets him to promise to bring his little friend back for afternoon tea.

After that, he's half-ready to call it quits, but the fact remains that BJ and Tenho have scored a startling number of points for being so new at the job, and Neku hasn't been able to get over to this area as thoroughly as the others, and hardly at all during Game time. The newbie Harriers are nowhere to be seen, the streets empty, and Neku makes his way to the most likely destination, the venue where Def March used to perform, where he'd run into enough problems during his time in the Game. No objectives ending here this week, and yet so many Players Erased?

Neku pauses at the entrance - the mini-lop is trembling on his shoulder, body cuddled against his neck as she shivers. He reaches up, giving her a gentle pat, moving cautiously inside. It's creepy as hell, it always has been when it's empty, and though Neku had a decent guess before now, he's startled by the coiled-up power he can feel moving in the room, knows he's being watched, studied with sharp eyes.

His wings come out, no helping it. Neku doesn't trust himself just yet in full-on Noise form - the whole business this morning was enough of an embarrassing failure, and he is not getting stuck like that twice in one day. He's fast enough like this, the wings just for show but Neku can do the teleporting thing, just as well as Minamimoto or Konishi now, except for that time he hit the tree but yay, no trees here.

"Focus, Neku." He mutters. The bunny is still shuddering, would probably crawl inside of him if she could just figure out how.

Time slows, and he doesn't move, watching the shadows and seeing nothing, remembering bats and Taboo noise and all sorts of fun, and this has to be how they're doing it, BJ and Tenho luring the players here and letting this thing take them down. The way Pinky did with Rhyme, except that little shark was nothing compared to this - and then he sees a claw come out of the shadows, a talon, and Neku realizes he's wrong. It has nothing to do with BJ and Tenho gaining points at all.

The enormous white bird shakes its head a little, craning down to preen, shivering blue markings stretching across its wings, in and out of view as it fluffs itself up before turning sleek and smooth, regarding him with a steady, icy gaze. Neku wondered what had happened, when Konishi had
erased 777. What happened to Reapers, what sort of Noise they would become. Here was his answer, 777 as dangerous now, as majestic as any of the Reapers had been in their assumed Noise form, and though he doesn't seem ready to attack, it's clear that's entirely by choice.

777 had tried to help them. He'd done the right thing, wanted to be free, wanted what they wanted and had gotten Erased because of it. Maybe Neku doesn't owe him anything for that, but it's hard not to respect him and his sacrifice, to understand what BJ and Tenho are doing now. Helping their band mate, their friend, the only way they can. It's a friendship, as real as any Pact. The same thing he'd do for Shiki or Beat, hell, that he might have done for 777, if they had been friends. The half-formed plans of stopping whatever his two new Harriers were up to are gone, just like that, and Neku lets his wings slowly slide back down as 777 returns to his place in the darkness.

The Game ends before he reaches the door. Neku checks his watch - five minutes to spare, cutting it very close this time. He's going to need to go over the next few objectives, keep an eye on everything tomorrow morning - god, tomorrow morning, and he's already too tired - and will he stop them, BJ and Tenho, if they lure other Players this way? If it comes down to choosing 777 or his best - maybe only - chance at seeing a Player get through the game?

His phone beeps, Neku knows who it is without looking down, and what he wants, and how soon. Neku lets his Frequency shift to the Realground, pulling up, drawing that energy together with an almost laughable ease. Instantly regrets it as he steps outside to find it raining hard, and here he is with his headphones and his bookbag, a bunny with a top hat, and no umbrella.

"You're dripping." Joshua sniffs, opening the door and instantly backing away. Neku glares at him as he steps inside, obviously resisting the urge to shake off like a dog. He carefully reaches under his shirt, pulling out his headphones, carefully protected and the only thing on him that is still dry. The Composer rolls his eyes.

"You could have just stayed in the UG."

"Not any longer than I have to. It's creepy when the Game is over." So stubborn. Blindly, stupidly stubborn. It's one of his better traits. "I have a bunny now, but it wouldn't come with me. It stayed in the lobby. Must be smarter than I am."

"Are you feeling all right, Neku?"

Joshua reaches out, mostly for the excuse to touch him, playing at taking Neku's temperature, the back of his hand brushing lightly against his Conductor's forehead. Neku lets out a little yelp, stumbling backward far enough to hit the wall. He's blushing. It's obvious he hates that Joshua can see him do it.

"Does my Conductor have anything interesting to report?"

Neku tries on a serious, impenetrable gaze that was Megumi's only expression, the only one Joshua could remember, but it doesn't fit very well, or hide much.

"Well, this would be the fourth day out of four I've had to order the objective adjusted, to keep Noise from burying Shadow Ramen."

"I said interesting things." Amazing, that Neku's even had a chance to even notice that, as busy as he is, although from all that Joshua can tell Neku is quite prepared to run himself ragged for this Game he supposedly hates.
"Oh come on." Neku says, "Stop torturing him. He has like zero self-esteem as it is."

"Did you ever consider, Neku, that some people /shouldn't/ follow their dreams?"

"Only when I'm standing here." Neku rubs at the bridge of his nose, dragging the subject off the lost cause. "It doesn't look like there will be many people for the last few days of the Game, but the pairs that are there seem extremely capable."

Joshua smirks. "Are you complaining that the Reapers aren't following orders, or begging me to send all the Players back if they win? You know, Neku, I only did that for you to cut down on the paperwork."

"Which I'm doing /anyway." Neku glares - and he's still hiding something, keeping secrets. Good. That makes it fun. "I'm not complaining. The Reapers can do whatever the hell they want. I don't mind working around them."

"It's your job to keep them in line. Maybe you should make yourself a Red Pin next." Neku shivers, looking away and it has nothing to do with the fact that he's still soaking wet. His hair is different, all the product washed out, all the time he must take in the morning to get it looking just right now for nothing. It looks softer now, feathery, and no matter the arguments Joshua makes with himself or the vague disinterest that is so often his life as Composer, even now in this new Game…

What a marvel it is, to want again. What a terror and a joy.

"I've been too busy working on a pin to dump curry on your head." Neku mutters, but his heart's not in it. He looks tired. "Listen, can we just not talk about killing people for a while?"

"We don't have to talk at all."

Neku stares at him for a moment, like he always does when Joshua is deliberately unsubtle, and he'll either turn and leave, still a possibility, just because things are past that first hurdle doesn't mean - but he doesn't move, just sighs and shuts his eyes. Joshua reaches forward, reaches out and his Conductor leans into the touch. Joshua knows he's taking advantage, the simple fact that his power is a comfort, the Conductor meant to be sensitive to his Frequency. Smoothing out all the discord, the off-notes and minor keys in Neku's beautiful song.

Joshua shakes his head, as Neku tries to step forward.

"You're not dripping all over my apartment. You'll have to take those clothes off."

"The hell I will."

Joshua smirks. "Or you can stand there until they dry. Your choice."

Conductors aren't usually like this, Megumi's devoted service notwithstanding. Usually just tools or shields or threats, to be put between himself and danger, when they aren't the danger themselves. Joshua usually considers that betrayal more of a palliative against boredom, a chance to step back and watch them try to destroy him, usually destroying themselves before he ever has to get involved.

"You made it rain, didn't you."

"I can't make it rain." He can't, not even in Shibuya, but it doesn't bother him that Neku doesn't really believe it. Which is he, little Conductor, little half-Angel? What is he, tool or threat, that Joshua hasn't already figured out what to do with him and how it will all come to an end?
"Just for the record," Neku says, stepping back and making a face. "This isn't sexy. Damp clothes are disgusting and I feel like a drowned rat and you are an asshole and this is really not sexy. At all."

Joshua raises an eyebrow. "… if you catch cold, I'm not being nice to you."

He could figure out a way for Neku to dry off rather than stripping down, but that would be nothing less than criminally stupid, Joshua somewhat amazed he actually managed to provoke this response. The shirt hits the wood with a wet slap, and Neku pauses for a moment, glaring at him and obviously weighing his options, before taking off the his pants as well, blushing only a little in his rather pedestrian boxer shorts.

"Stop looking."


Neku folds his arms across his chest, glaring back. "This was all your stupid idea. Let me go get some clothes."

"In what universe would I make that deal?" It isn't a rhetorical question, the answer is that there are none - definitively - and Joshua doesn't care about rhetorical questions or tactics or anything but Neku, warm and still slightly damp and embarrassed, muttering out little half-hearted protests just to save face. Not pulling away, not doing much besides making rather adorable noises when Joshua's hands find bare skin, pretty much everywhere they can touch.

"Jerk. Manipulative unfair Composer jerk." Neku says, a little breathless. Nervous. Fingers still tight against his shirt, holding him close, not that Joshua plans on going anywhere. It's been too long, and he had been solitary all of his life and all of his death and it didn't ever matter and now just two days, two days has been too long.

"It's hardly my fault if you're so easily persuaded. It's completely fair." Joshua smirks back, and yes they're still standing in his foyer, practically pressed against the door, but Neku has this weird tactical strategy about his apartment, the couch some sort of Maginot Line between here and the bedroom, neither of them actually 'safe' territory. So he might as well stop caring about the where and focus on the now.

It isn't difficult, Neku's warmth is quite distracting. The way he looks and glances away when Joshua looks back and what it is to be given something, not to fight for it or win it by skill or subterfuge or all those things he's so good at. To be given it willingly, just like this.

He nuzzles Neku's throat, sucks on the skin, smirks a little at the thought of leaving some mark Neku will have to explain away in the morning. His Conductor ought to be more careful, although he can hardly complain, Neku drawing him up to kiss him deeply, everything in him shining, nothing like the rest of the gray, dull world.

Joshua has exploited his powers in the past, when he's curious, when he's bored. So much easier to have a one-night stand when the random, pretty thing he picks out of a crowd won't remember him anyway. When the tedious, boring complications of even the simplest relationships never have to happen. Some of the Composers find a considerable delight in it, the novelty of breaking the same heart over and over again, the bitter amusements of tiny Gods. He thinks he's broken hearts; he's been cruel, deliberately so, just to study the results. Except the outcome is always so tepid, so inane, a few tears, and it doesn't matter, feels like a stage play. Heartbreak for the sake of heartbreak, that the jilted are going through the expected motions as much as they think he is. Love is one of those words that should require a license to use, so often wasted, describing so much
sound and fury, so much meaningless, vacant nothing.

His disinterest hardly stops the speculation. There are rumors about him that could strip the paint off a wall.

Joshua would disappoint them all, here and now, nothing more impressive than another stand-up make-out session - seriously, Neku, does standing-up somehow make it count for half? - and he slips his hand down Neku's side, under the band on his boxers, and his tongue has been keeping Neku distracted - though his Conductor is rather good at kissing, Joshua half-distracted himself - enough that he's got the matter well in hand - so to speak - before Neku realizes it, Joshua giving him a good, long stroke.

Neku makes a startled sound, half-moan and half-yelp, would jump back but he's already against the wall, nowhere to go, and Joshua kisses him again, even as he splutters, knows he's caught.

"Josh..." He says, half-swallowing the sound, biting his lip - he looks amazing, Joshua knew he would, flushed and uncertain and happy, wanting this, wanting him, and all of the Composer's thoughts are full of blithering idiocy - clips of inane poetry, metaphors about flowers and enduring passion. "I don't... I..."

"You're not allowed to say no unless you mean it, Neku."

A withering glare, Neku knowing he's lost.

"You are such an..." He growls, the specific insult lost as Joshua picks back up where he left off, Neku's arms around him, whimpering, shivering, pushing against Joshua's grip on his cock. This won't last long, isn't difficult, hardly an impressive conquest to have his way with horny 15-year-old except that this is perfect, absolutely perfect. Joshua buries his face in Neku's hair and breathes him in, listens to him sigh and shudder and this is just all that he wants, all he could want.

"Fuck, fuck, Josh." Neku mutters, head down against his shoulder, rocking forward, pressing against him as he comes and he's Neku's first, almost certainly, and it doesn't mean anything. Except that it does, even as the moment passes and Neku leans back a little bit and Joshua reaches down for the bit of fabric he can see out of the corner of his eye.

"Did you just wipe that on my shirt?" Neku breathes, staring up at the ceiling, sounding a little distant, but when Joshua stands back up he's grabbed almost instantly, pulled close. The cuddly type.

"I hardly ruined it. It's not that nice."

"... and to think I'd have the chance to regret this /later/." Neku mutters, but for all his bitching he doesn't actually go anywhere, hot breath against Joshua's neck and this would be the time to push for the couch, if not for the bed, but instead Joshua stays where he is, snaking an arm around Neku's waist, enjoying the way he tenses when Joshua runs a finger along his spine.

"You didn't..." Neku draws back, looking at him. "I mean... you..."

"I've still got my clothes on?"

"Jerk." It's fascinating to watch him, expressions like little birds that never perch anywhere for more than a moment. Neku blushes a little, cutting his eyes away. "I could... uh..."
"Are you any good at it?"

"No, you absolute bastard. It's not like I…” Neku splutters, violently red now, looking everywhere but at him. "How about I just go down there, and I don't come back up until you're satisfied."

Hard to expect something like that, and the offer goes through him like an electric shock. Neku grins, too close not to notice that even if Joshua is better at hiding these things, and before he can say anything, Neku's hands are unbuttoning the waist of his pants, tugging and teasing.

"Yeah, I'm so surprised that turned you on. You ass."

… and Neku is there, then. On his knees, guiding the soft fabric down around Joshua's legs, underwear following the pants, and for one blinding, terrified moment Joshua very nearly reaches down to yank them back up and run like hell, just run. It's pride alone that keeps him from moving, locked in place, heart hammering as Neku notices none of it, and how can he feel lost, now? He's risking nothing. Why does he feel so unsure?

"Oookay then…" Neku blows out a breath against his bare skin, not at all seductively. "So am I like, licking or sucking here?"

He sounds like a plumber looking for a clogged line.

"Sucking. You're definitely sucking."

"I really hate you. You cannot imagine how much."

Before Joshua can mention the logical flaws in that particular statement, given the circumstances, Neku's lips are there, tongue giving him a tentative flick, mouth warm around the head of his cock and it's not really enough to make him shiver but Joshua can't help it. Even if it is imperative that Neku work for it, if he has any hope of improving. At least he's not getting creative with his teeth or anything, but Joshua smirks as Neku pulls back, glaring at his crotch.

"You know, Neku, I hear the girls are even more picky about this sort of thing. No chocolates on Valentine's Day for you."

"I could just punch you. In the junk. Right now." Neku sighs, dropping his head a little. "Seriously, Josh, a little help? Please?"

In his most optimistic moments, this is hardly what Joshua imagined he'd be teaching his Conductor.

"Cold. Colder. No. No. You know, it boggles the mind that people prefer to sleep with virgins." Joshua smirks when Neku flips him the bird. "You might want to think about putting those hands to better use. Warmer. Little warmer. Mmm," he chuckles in the way he knows Neku hates the most. "I think you get better the more I insult you, Neku dear. We might want to explore that avenue in the future."

"Is this the avenue that ends with you gagged and locked in a closet? I like that avenue." Neku leans back, glaring up at him. "Are we trading insults now, or do I… keep going."

He blushes. It's beautiful. Honestly, at the moment, one is as good as the other. It's been a long time since Joshua has pushed and anyone has pushed back, not only refusing to treat him with deference but a disbelief that anyone ever has. Even Hanekoma's chiding had long fallen into routine, and Megumi's respectful obedience, that worshipful treatment that felt more and more as if he were just being ignored. A pretty bauble on a high shelf, gathering dust in between an
occasional admiration. An anachronism, of no real use to anyone.

Neku's true to his word, his single-minded stubbornness not so much a drawback here, and after a little more helpful advice the noises Joshua finds himself making aren't really words and he's not doing it to be polite and this is what he wants, isn't it? Isn't it?

Easy and safe and perfectly in control with Neku on his knees and Joshua with a hand in his Conductor's still-damp hair and this is exactly as it should be and Neku - Neku is a star, he burns like a star and Joshua is a fool to imagine he can control that and yet, it's his choice to be here and his choice to do this and why. Why.

He says Neku's name, can't help it slipping out, but doesn't think he's heard. Neku, who hasn't forgiven him, but trusts him. Half of heaven thinks Joshua's mad, but who wouldn't take the risk, who could walk away from this? Just for a moment, arching a bit, the warmth of Neku's mouth working on him, Joshua wishes it could be this simple. Wishes he could just be some boy and Neku could just be some boy and wants to see that universe, betrays himself with the wish and doesn't care.

Reaches out with a thought, grasps for Neku's music because it's well within his rights as Composer, but this is nothing like it has been, Megumi familiar and steady and reliable but Neku is sharp and fast, a hummingbird poised and trembling in midair, nothing but power. Nearly a force of nature, raw and wild, so fast and so bright and Joshua loses himself in it, feels himself let go, and for a moment he is utterly lost and better off for it. Remembering the ocean, the way it had cast him about without interest, the way he hadn't touched the ground and the first thing he notices, sensation coming back, is how his heart is pounding.

Neku hasn't noticed, one hand splayed against his thigh for balance, and Joshua absently notes the difference there, he is so pale to where Neku has been in the sun. Reaching out with his other hand for the abandoned and already ill-abused shirt, wiping his mouth with a clean corner.

"I am never, ever going to be able to wear this shirt again," he mutters, sighing, and looks up. Everything is in those eyes, everything that matters and Joshua is so good at this, unraveling mystery, weaving it around himself, wearing it like a prize, but he doesn't understand. He just can't figure Neku out, no matter how long he looks.

"Next time we do this, let me order dinner first. It could have been here by now." Joshua's glad, when his voice comes out completely normal, and Neku rolls his eyes, comes up slowly, allowing Joshua to get his pants buttoned back up before he leans in, head cocked slightly to the side. Looking at Joshua in nervousness but mostly awe and wonder and that's really the end of him, the crumbling remains of all his attempts at distance. No one has ever, ever looked at Joshua and seen a new horizon before.

"I think I like how you taste," Neku says, and kisses him, and those few, simple words pretty much kick his legs out from under him. Joshua is tumbling, the world rushing by, and it's a damn good thing they're kissing. A good thing Neku has his eyes closed, because Joshua is completely out of indifferent ways to look and clever things to say.

Neku borrows the shower, as Joshua orders dinner. Miraculously, the other boy doesn't try to jump him or take pictures, although there's no telling about hidden cameras. Neku, for the most part, just stands under the spray and wonders what he's supposed to be thinking or feeling, touching his lips absentely every now and again, wishing he could stop blushing at some point in ever, the jittery, twitchy feeling in his stomach so much more than just hunger.
So. That was. Wasn't it. Yes. Unless it wasn't special, not for Joshua, who's probably been through this a thousand times before with a thousand other idiots. Important to keep that in mind, the Composer wasn't some stupid kid. As good a chance this meant nothing to him as it did that anything changed. Nothing changed. It was just…it didn't mean anything.

*You think maybe between your first Game, making a new friend, taking on a new project, fucking the Composer - you think you could have saved one of those until next month?*

It is just so late. He is tired and hungry and he has class tomorrow and he'd just had real, actual sex. Of a kind. With Joshua. And there is no way he can just stay in the shower for the rest of his natural life.

By the time he's out, dinner has arrived. Fancy Italian, nothing like what he usually eats. It's delicious, or at least hot and in front of him, and Neku wolfs his down half out of hunger and half because if he keeps his mouth full, there's less risk of witty banter. It's hard to even look at Joshua and not think about…the rest of the evening. Not that this bothers the Composer any, Neku can almost feel his eyes on him, amused and teasing and completely at ease. Neku can't wait until he's lived long enough to see and do everything, the jaded ennui will almost be worth the trade for knowing what the hell is going on.

"So, how are things at school? Make any new friends?"

Neku looks up. Joshua is nibbling at his own meal, expression mild. Total bastard.

"Oh come on, Neku. You don't really think I'd-"

"Yes." Of all the people to dare to look wounded. Neku rolls his eyes. "Don't you /dare/ drop anything on him. He's harmless."

"Harmless?" Joshua says. "Not like me, you mean."

Neku jabs a fork in his direction, feeling a little bit punchy now that his stomach's full, weariness like iron bars pressing down on him, and like Joshua's at all ashamed or embarrassed of being at least two-thirds bastard. "Hey, I like you because you're unlikable. It's a scientific fact."

Joshua laughs as Neku pushes his bowl away. He considers getting his bag, checking on Mr. H's stuff again - it's dry, he was careful to make sure of that. He has to think about getting home, but one glance out the rain-streaked window has him hating the whole idea, even if he borrows an umbrella which will no doubt end up being that stupid parasol Joshua carried around and like to jab him with at inconvenient moments. Neku leans back, closes his eyes for half a second, enjoying the feeling of being full and warm and clean and, yeah, Joshua, touching him. Whatever it meant, however little the Composer intended or thought or felt about it, it was still nice. Pretty good, for a first time, and Joshua hadn't said much but ok, maybe that's the best he can hope for.

The next thing he knows, he's being half-dragged somewhere, someone muttering at him as he tries to keep his balance and figure out what the hell is going on. His knee hits something soft, and Neku's eyes snap open. A dark room, no couch, a bed - Joshua's bed. Big red warning lights - danger, danger - but an arm that's stronger than it looks snakes around his waist, dragging him back even as he's trying to crawl away.

"Please, dear, I'm not that much of a bastard."

"You so are," Neku snaps back, but unfortunately he can't do much more than that, kind of out of the energy to put up much of a fight. Especially with Joshua warm and pressed against his back,
running his hand along Neku's arm, kind of… petting him. Just there, and he never though the Composer would ever, ever be much for cuddling but this is really comfortable and not demanding and kind of nice.

"So, how did I do?" Not sure why he's even asking, managing the words around a yawn, his eyes far more interested in staying closed for the time being.

"Mmm." Joshua's hand pauses on his arm. "Well, you have plenty of time for improvement. I suppose that's to be expected. You did die a virgin, after all."

If he rolled over to look at Joshua, he'd probably have to punch him, and he is really too tired to do either. "Who's fault was THAT?"

"Twice."

"I hate you so much. So much." Neku mutters. Joshua might be laughing quietly, but he doesn't say anything. Keeps touching, light and chaste, not asking for anything. He's strong, still. One-third his usual power and his music is all that Neku can hear, all around him, and it's easy to let it take him. It feels safe, strong, which is not true at all but Neku still takes the risk, turns, curls up against Joshua's chest, expecting to be shoved away. It doesn't happen, nothing happens, and after a few moments he realizes Joshua is talking, quietly. Little Composer bedtime stories, nothing in particular Neku can make out, just the sound of Joshua's voice and this? This is not bad at all. He thinks Joshua might be talking about famous Angels, some names Neku recognizes, pretty much any artist so famous that everyone knows them, but they're in the levels above Hanekoma, far above, places that even other Angels cannot measure the depth and breadth of. So many places, so many other universes…

"Wait." Neku mumbles, trying to drag his thoughts back together from the edge of sleep. What was that? What he just said. It was important. "What… what did you mean? You said…"

A hand cards through his hair, careful, gentle. Joshua's affectionate voice, and this time he might not even be teasing. "It doesn't matter, Neku. Just go to sleep."

It matters. It does, everything always does, but if it matters now it will matter tomorrow, and so for now he can follow his Composer's order, and sleep.
He's laying in bed and it's very dark, very still, and Neku can just barely make out the shape of the girl in the chair near the wall. He knows that he's dreaming.

"You're not dreaming."

It's the girl from the Game, the one who fell into him just a few hours ago and died, died a second time, for good. The rabbit is in her arms, she's stroking it gently. He can't see her eyes, either she's sad or she wishes he were dead. It has to be one of the two.

She tips her head, hair falling down in front of her eyes, and when she looks up, it's Shiki staring back at him. Not Eri, but Shiki, the way she looked in the Game, petting the bunny that's perched on her lap and watching him sadly. She never got angry, not at him. Neku's heart drops.

"Why did you let me die, Neku? Why did you kill me?"

"I didn't." He stammers, unable to move. Cold, because he can't remember what happened, who died and where and how. Maybe he did kill her. Maybe he's wrong, that she survived, maybe those memories are false. Maybe Joshua's decided to rescind his good opinion - he can do that. He can do anything he wants, because Neku doesn't know enough to stop him, has no power of his own that can match what the Composer is and what he knows and what he can control. Shiki leans over, lets the bunny hop out of her arms, and away.

Looks up at him as she sits back up and it's the girl from the hospital, the one that he… the one he killed.

"So you've forgotten me already."

He cringes. It's true.

"I didn't. I was… it's been… crazy. I'm sorry." Neku cringes again, as if a math test is some kind of explanation, that he can still hide behind old rules and old excuses. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe you should find out why you're apologizing so much, an' fix that instead."

Beat looks up, from where he's standing in the corner, putting together a quick stir fry, flipping the pan with a few expert motions, nudging the contents with the wooden spatula in his other hand. Neku stares. He didn't know his bedroom had a kitchen.

"Where's Rhyme?"

"You don't got enough problems?" Beat casts a hard, skeptical look over his shoulder. "You know, Neku, it's past time to get off the damn fence. You gotta choose."

"I'm trying. I can't just… it's okay." Neku protests. "I can do this. It's just… but I'm fine. I'm doing… I'm fine. I won't let anyone down." It's too fast, it's just all happening so fast, leaving him scrambling just to keep up. There's got to be a way - he's not losing himself in this, in the Game, in
being the Conductor. He's learning, but that doesn't mean he's allowing it to change him.

"So you're jus rollin' over."

"No! It's not…"

But he is, isn't he? He's with Joshua now, it's his choice, and this isn't kid's stuff Neku, this is the real world with real consequences. So maybe he can't keep the blood off his hands, not completely. Maybe that's what this means, that he won't come out of this completely clean. It's still better than the alternative. It has to be. Beat looks over his shoulder, dumping his pan into a bowl. He's not impressed, listening to all of Neku's inner rationalizations with his usual tin ear. But maybe he's right to be so unimpressed. This wasn't what they fought so hard for, that third week. This wasn't the victory, to end up on his knees.

"Fuck." Neku growls, manages to press a hand over his eyes, blushing and still thrilled, in awe of it all and hating himself for the way his heart is pounding. "I don't… I don't know what to do."

"Order up!"

Neku glances through his fingers, lets his hand fall, watching a pale hand reach for the bowl. He would do anything, in that moment, to shut his eyes, as if it could somehow keep her from seeing him, like a child pulling the covers over its head to keep the monsters away. His breath catches, he doesn't know her and it doesn't matter.

Darkness, a river of languid, drifting shadows embraces the islands of her pale hands and face, and her eyes are flat pools of that empty space and they burn, studying him intimately, sharing a joke that isn't funny at all.

"Who." His lips barely form the word, too dry, too breathless to speak. She gets the idea, and smiles like a lightning strike. He can almost smell it.

"Me? I'm the night sky. Who are you?" Her voice is gentle, and amused, telling him the punch line but he missed the sendup - and then he gets it, should have got it before she ever showed up - he's the joke. It's him.

Neku takes a step back, falling off the edge of the world.

He snaps awake, tense as hell even though he's sprawled out, in a bed that's too big to be his. By the time he remembers where he is, it crowds out all but the barest remnants of the dream - that he might have hurt someone, that the world is rushing by too fast for him to even grab at it, too fast to notice if he might be turning into someone he doesn't want to be. Half a second later, it registers that he's alone, and a half second after that Neku rolls over, rubbing at his eyes, focusing on the clock on Joshua's side table - not at home. He's not at home. It takes a moment for the numbers to process. He's rarely slept in so late. Especially on a school day.

Joshua's halfway through his morning news update, five different news sites, and lolnews - the most useful commentary, in his opinion - when he hears the strangled shout, and what must be Neku falling off the bed. A few moments and some panicked stampeding later and he's greeted to another sort of update, less familiar but certainly welcome. Neku, in t-shirt and boxers, with his hair sticking out in an entirely different way than it does when it's sticking out deliberately, glaring at him with equal parts disbelief and murder.

All right, so that part is familiar.
"Good morning, sunshine." Joshua says, and clicks over to the next tab in his browser, the Nikkei index. A lot of Composers don't pay attention to much beyond the little coterie of artists, musicians and sycophants that make up their little world, only to be shocked when the market bottoms out and they're left watching the Noise surge in. "Sleep well?"

"You… you…" Neku lifts his hands, lets them fall. Drowning in the sea of Joshua's calm disinterest. "You know there's a Game this morning."

"Already over, lover. Personal appearances by the Conductor should be for special occasions, anyway. Otherwise the Reapers will start expecting you to hold hands. I ought to have said something sooner, I suppose, but I assumed you'd figure it out. Besides, Neku, you looked so cute while you were sleeping. I couldn't bear to wake you."

He doesn't have to look up, to know the gesture Neku likely is giving him, a strangled scream cut off in the air as his Conductor stomps back toward the bedroom - the closet, with at least one spare school uniform. Joshua can't imagine why Neku wants to go, why he hasn't considered that his position as Conductor might make him exempt from such small concerns as a day job or a stupid piece of paper judging him adequate. Joshua could teach him more about the world than any of his teachers are capable of, all so limited by rules and requirements and the need for mediocrity. Start instructing the students how it all actually went together, and they might start thinking for themselves, and then where would everyone be?

Neku is moving at escape velocity, more than fast enough that Joshua hears it when he slams his foot against the corner of the wall and goes hopping across the floor, cursing and shouting.

"Careful, Neku."

"Go to hell, Josh!"

He clucks his tongue, flipping to the next news site, ignoring the latest list of who's been caught ass-up and puking behind a nightclub dumpster. Once upon a time, the great hedonists had also been the most exceptional artists, though modern times seem buried in vice that produces little recognizable virtue.

"I could write you a note."

"No blowjobs for you! No blowjobs ever again!" Neku yells back, and Joshua knows the walls are thick enough that no one else can hear it but no doubt Neku's going to regret shouting it later, and slamming his feet into his shoes his Composer is through the door and gone, door nearly bouncing off the hinges in his wake. Joshua counts out the seconds, keeping his eyes on his laptop as the door creaks back open and Neku grabs his forgotten book bag.

"I-"

"Nobody cares, asshole!"

And Joshua's left, quietly laughing at a closed door.

He doesn't eat, doesn't even think about eating, too busy being furious and panicking and trying to remember if he has any homework due. The bunny is waiting for him just outside Joshua's building, leaping onto his shoulder with one happy bound, hat still perched on its head. Neku reminds himself to put one of his own pins on it soon, just to make sure everyone's aware she's protected.
His empty stomach catches up with him about two blocks away from Joshua's Horrible Den of Sin and Idiocy, but Neku ignores the furious growl, grateful for the way the hunger nearly makes him stumble. He deserves it, doesn't remember exactly what he was dreaming about but the feeling of guilt and shame lingers. Not about Joshua, not that stupidity, but the fear that things are slipping out of control. It sits in his chest, too heavy to be completely ignored, even if it helps to be out and running in midday, for the moment nothing but a normal boy unbelievably late for school.

His intentions are nothing but the best. but Neku still has to stop off and raid the convenience store nearest to his school. Tosses at least three full lunches worth of food in his bag, five minutes now not possibly making any difference as he chokes down a breakfast and a half in an alley just outside of school. Very glamorous, this Conductor thing.

Neku half-expects to see a Reaper waiting for him at the gate, but there's no one, and that's not good. Did anyone even survive the day? What did he miss? Why in hell hadn't he set an alarm?

Like Joshua would have let you.

It's the Composer's fault. Yes, for now let's go with that. Neku takes the stairs in twos, stopping at the top to make sure he looks as good as he can for someone who's going to be in trouble anyway, and he steps into class. Ignores the teacher's questioning, slightly irritated gaze and the small murmur from the other students, the sprinkle of laughter as he slides into his seat. He's forgotten his textbook, but the class is already half over anyway - the day is nearly half over.

He's going to have to murder Joshua in some really tacky way.

On the way out the door to lunch, the teacher hands him a letter, giving him a significant glare.

Oh the joy of going to a private school, where they're paid a great deal to attend to each of their students, not to let a slip turn into a fall, or let even a single student tarnish their reputation. Neku flips his phone open, hasn't bothered checking it yet this morning. A message from a phone number he doesn't know, a voice mail, and since it was in the middle of the night it means his father wasn't paying attention to the time zone when he decided to call. Which means the school's almost certainly managed to get in touch with him.

Neku opens the letter, letting the rest of the class shuffle past him out the door, taking just a little bit of amusement in the fact that none of them can see the rabbit watching them from its perch on his arm. The principal wants to meet with him tomorrow. How do delinquents do it, skirt the system for months at a time, while Neku can't even manage one stupid week without getting caught? No real reason he was a good student to begin with, except that it wasn't very difficult and he didn't have anything else to do. What will his father think? Neku knows he shouldn't be scared, it's stupid and childish to care what the man disapproves of - isn't he supposed to be a rebellious teenager?

He doesn't want to hurt his father, doesn't want to upset the equilibrium of vague disinterest that defines their relationship. Nothing good will happen if he does.

Neku sneaks into an empty computer lab, avoiding the lunch room entirely, doesn't want to get any strange looks for how fast he eats or how much food he's packing away, and he needs to check his e-mail. Three full pages waiting for him, and that's after he culls the spam. He desperately needs to get a new phone, really, with whatever the job he does after the one for Hanekoma will get him - a fair certainty his father is not going to up his allowance anytime soon.

The messages include a concert schedule from Ibiza of people he mostly doesn't know, and a photo set from some place he's never heard of, some Conductor in Brazil spamming everyone with his rather impressive set of tags. A thank-you from a skater with one of his decks, another who has this
DJ friend who wants some stickers - does Neku do stickers? A message from Joshua, and Neku hates that he opens it immediately, looking behind his shoulder even though he knows its an empty room and praying it won't be something hideously embarrassing. In general, the Composer's e-mails are never more than a couple of sentences, sometimes a forwarded article he finds illuminating for some reason or another, politics or economics or art, whatever catches his fancy at the moment. Thankfully, this one is just a reminder he doesn't need, about the day six game returning to morning hours - so there must be Players, still, and Neku lets out a slight sigh of relief.

- Keeping you busy, are they?

The tiny box pops up in his browser, Neku recognizing Vancouver's screen name immediately.

- You have no idea.

Neku types back, and blushes a little, as if it's the most obvious of entendres. He's trying not to think about it, though it still feels like he has a neon sign permanently stapled to his back, brilliant, flashing letters informing the world that he's had SEX. SEX with a GUY. SEX with THE MOST ANNOYING GUY EVER IN THE HISTORY OF EVER. And he LIKED IT. Neku had the moral high ground, being murdered twice and all, even when he started as the Conductor - but no jury in the world would let him claim his innocence, not from this, not now.

- Is it so bad, to be responsible?

He nearly jumps, not expecting that, though it's less that Vancouver is reading his mind and more that he hasn't written to her in a while, and she can't possibly believe it's because he has nothing to say. Neku's tugging on the bracelet she gave to him, worrying it between his fingers. The one she gave him that very first night, the night he became Conductor, even before he'd realized it.

It is. It is so bad, to be responsible, and at the same time Neku can't help but be glad, that this world, this school world, isn't really his anymore. It wasn't innocence, merely ignorance, and he certainly wasn't happy, surrounded by nothing that wasn't tedious, just shy of being unbearable. But this, still - god, he doesn't know what he wants anymore. The bunny is sitting next to his keyboard, and Neku reaches out, pets the soft fur, glad he can offer a moment of comfort or kindness to anything.

- It doesn't feel like a week. It feels like its always been this way, and it won't ever change. I don't know if I can keep watching people die.

The girl he held, disappearing in his arms. All of those that have fallen to 777. So many he didn't even know, not responsible for except that he is the Conductor, and he's responsible for everyone. Neku hasn't always been able to look at them afterward, filing the reports. Can't look their photographs in the eye and explain why they had to stay dead. He still refuses to use the word Erased, even if it's a stupid, probably futile line in the sand.

- You still think it's meaningless? That they disappear for no reason? That it's cruel?

Yes. Neku understood how it worked, the system of balances and obligations and responsibilities. Watching the Game from the other side, seeing it for what it was, and it - still, he didn't know what to think.

-I don't know if it's right, to hurt people. If there's a good enough reason for it.

The reality of the Game has brought on a few larger questions Neku hasn't had the chance to think about, matters of existence and God. What if the Game didn't exist? Why was it all like this? Why
did people have to suffer and die in the first place?

No answer, for a long moment, and then there's a hyperlink on the screen. Neku clicks it, watches a simple page come up, a filled-in password at the top - this is Angelic, almost certainly. A database well beyond what he should be looking at as a Conductor. Neku knows he's aware of things he's not supposed to see. Being friends with Hanekoma, knowing what he is, knowing the layers of the Game well beyond what the other Reapers understand, it isn't information he was ever supposed to have. Not that he understands it, why the Angels would be so secretive. Maybe hiding the machinations of the Game from regular people is the way it has to be, but surely it only hinders the UG in the end? Imagine Minamimoto as Composer, suddenly realizing there was an infinite bureaucracy stretching above him, charting his every movement in all directions, that he was no more free to act than he had been as a Harrier.

He smiles at that thought, but the smile quickly dies as Neku scrolls down, not quite sure he can trust what he's looking at, what Vancouver's given him. Neku clicks the print button, lunch a few moments away from ending, and signs off without responding, knowing Vancouver knows exactly what she's done, giving this to him.

Neku waits until he's sitting down in class, to pull the few pages out of his bag, the teacher droning away in the front, not one to surprise random students with sudden questions. A good thing, since he can't think about anything but the record he's looking at - Shiki's record, of her time in the Game. Just like the ones he has to file now, with her real picture, the terms of her Entry Fee, a short timeline of all their battles together, with links scattering out to everything from Uzuki's attempt to make him Erase her, to her subsequent assistance in the fight against Kitaniji, and her final status, restored to the RG. Still, not even that is important, compared to what he finds on the last few pages, a continuation that doesn't exist in any of his forms.

An alternate life, a universe that no longer exists. Shiki's future, if she hadn't played the Game at all. The bunny is hopping a few times, back and forth along the edge of his desk, feeling his distress, but Neku can't pull himself away long enough to calm her down. He can't calm himself down.

It's a small list, a few general dates, a short timeline. Shiki and Eri just drift apart, Shiki never gaining any confidence, seeing herself forever as second-best rather than part of a team. Any tender feelings between them wither on the vine, neither one goes to an art college. Shiki studies business but drops out in her second year, falls into a marriage that unravels quickly. She makes dolls for her only child when she comes to visit, and at twenty-seven, the last date listed, she picks up crochet for a short time, before giving that up too. Nothing after that, Shiki still alive but no longer of much interest, no longer capable of any act of greatness in creation. No guarantee - did he think there was? - that talent would last forever. That inspiration and desire wouldn't fade, that promise couldn't simply dry up and disappear. Neku tries to imagine the Shiki of that other world, compared to the vibrant girl he knows here, so full of ideas and excitement and love.

Neku is suddenly, utterly grateful Vancouver chose to show him Shiki's undone future, instead of his own, and it's a damn good thing he's in the back of the class, that no one can see the tears in his eyes. The bunny nudges at his frozen fingertips, but he's still lost in the space where Shiki, alive and never threatened, was still utterly erased.

"Neku! Over here!"

He's amazed that he can hear Tsuyoshi over the sound of the band gearing up, preparing to test the amp by - it seems - breaking it. But if his new friend is shy and quiet at school, Tsuyoshi's
certainly in his element now. The 'club' is little more than a notch in a basement that Neku never would have found without instructions, what's probably a ridiculously illegal amount of wiring snaking over the naked brickwork, and around the feet of the people ranging from his age up to past high-school. All Neku can think is that if this place were to go up suddenly, the following Game would solve all their Reaper recruiting problems in one go. Thankfully, his bad mood cannot, in fact, wreck the day, and by the time he scrambles through the crush of bodies to where Tsuyoshi and his other friends are waiting, Neku is feeling better.

It's not hard to know where it comes from, so many young people in such a tight space, all their Music starting to ebb and flow together with anticipation. Chattering about this and that, and Neku would have hated being here, not all that long ago. Except that now he's got a reason to be here, a friend waiting for him, and it still feels weird to walk up to them but it's a good kind of weird, like a jacket he's worn for the first time, still a bit stiff but destined to be a favorite. He wasn't sure what to wear so he just went with the usual, the crowd a mix of all different types, none of them rocking the goth look quite as hard as Tsuyoshi is. He really is a different person outside of school, extra piercings, his hair spiked high and crazy, and he looks confident. A young prince, inviting Neku into his kingdom. It's a good look for him.

Names are exchanged, along with a quick card swap. Neku can hardly hear anything with the bassist and the drummer working out some complex bridge piece in the background, but a few smiles suggest at least a few of these people know of him. Tsuyoshi gives him a thumbs up, tinkering with an impressively large camera. So this is what it looks like when he's working, calmly flipping out lenses and checking his focus, easily navigating around the large crowd.

"Hey, Neku." A girl with purple highlights grins, shaking a pair of foam earplugs out of a bag, passing them over. She has tiny hearts carefully painted on her nails. Neku takes them, sticks one in each ear, the bunny sniffing at his hands as he does so. The little Noise likes it here, leaping up and kicking her back legs now and then, playfully. Honestly, Neku can't help but agree. He feels more relaxed than he has in days. Already he's had a few hours to himself, between school and now.

Neku had actually gone home, aired the place out a bit. The voice mail from his father manages to take up a few minutes without his father actually saying anything, just checking in to let him know he's ok. Letting him know he'll be back no later than the middle of next week. Maybe, if they were just slightly more wealthy, his father wouldn't bother coming back. Just get Neku a place of his own, or leave Japan entirely. He tries not to let himself get envious of people with families - Beat had looked like he wanted to strangle Neku out of jealousy, the last time he'd mentioned one of his father's month-long trips.

The room is increasingly stuffy, and Neku tries to keep to the edges of the crowd, listening to his shoes make noises against the gluey floor, whistles and cheers rising as the band takes the stage. Tsuyoshi has moved his way up to the edge of the makeshift stage, already taking pictures, and Neku misses the lead singer's introduction as the girl on bass hits a low note that plucks at his breastbone, the impressive amp setup making his whole body tremble and then they're launching into it, and the crowd is following and Neku forgets to breathe. The music has nowhere near the same polish as what he'd heard at the Composer party, and maybe he's stronger than he was then, or it's some combination of the two that knocks him - physically, right on his ass, though he only notices when there are hands on his shoulders and arms, the crowd parting a little to help him back to his feet. Neku nods to reassure the voices he can't hear, vaguely grateful the crowd isn't interested in slamming into each other - the power rattling around inside of him is more than enough to keep him unbalanced. Neku nearly laughs, as he notices the surging energy at least has the decency to stick close to the beat.
He doesn't recognize the song, possibly an original, or maybe they are covers and just so loud that he can't actually tell. Even the earplugs seem to rattle against the thudding beats. One song flows into the next, the crowd nodding along, a few people dancing near the stage, the music loud and the Music even more so. Neku can see energy like a puck pass flowing from the stage to the audience and back again, rising in power with each careful chord. It isn't the technical skill, but the heart behind it, the dreams and wishes and drive of young talent, of potential - so much life in this room, like the birth of some new galaxy. Is it like this every time, in every little band? Raw creation, an unencumbered fusion reaction - and Neku can see how the Game could have formed from this, to want to help this, and he takes a breath in and reaches out and lets it just flow through him. A girl next to him is yelling into her cell phone, trying to find out where her friends are, but she's laughing too. All her thoughts buoyed up, lighter and sharper with the music, all her troubles unraveling in front of his eyes. Tsuyoshi is in the front, trying to get a picture of the lead singer without pulling any glare from the light - Neku can't see him, just hear his thoughts, a steady patter of photo composition and technical jargon that barely makes sense - … hope Neku's having a good time - and Neku grins, the band roaring into the next song. He's lost count, heart pounding with the surge of vital energy, creation, desperation - the drummer's in love with a girl who doesn't love him back, doesn't want to risk dating a musician - and it all goes in the music, all the hope and all the fear.

The Noise…

Neku's eyes widen, straining to study the Music, listening to the smaller, dissonant notes fade away around him, the sort of thing that would attract Noise disappearing. He glances over, a little worried, but the bunny blinks back, unaffected. The music is like a forge, little cracks in every soul disappearing, the small hurts that make up everyone's day melting away, leaving them all stronger. It's a healing thing, but he knew that already, didn't he? The days when all he had was the world in his headphones, all his protection, pretty much the only thing that made the day endurable. Now it isn't just soothing, but encouraging. It celebrates itself, the Music weaving around him, and Neku feels an itch in his fingertips, suddenly grateful his sketchbook is practically glued to his arm these days.

A few steps back leaves him pressed against the wall, what passes for the fringes of the crowd here in the tight space, and Neku pulls out one of the photos he'd liked, the singer, CAT's job, and wedges it in the upper half of his book. The bunny peers down from his shoulder, watching him start sketching her into place, his newest inspiration. She's cute, she'll work, the nexus for a galaxy of sound. The world doesn't go away, not like it used to when he'd vanish into the music. Instead, Neku can feel himself disappearing. Only his pen remains, sketching out the shape of the vibe, the energy of the crowd, letting it translate, and when the feel of it changes he flips to a new page and follows. The rush is unbelievable, and even for all his newfound ability, it's rare to have the lines go down exactly as he wants them, from the very first try. To feel some of what he's pulling from the music go directly into the sweeping curves and delicate shapes, to feel that he might pass some of this along. The people who see this, they'll catch that same excitement - and maybe it is like an Imprint, but only as a gift. Just that brightness, that beauty, and anyone can do what they want with it.

Neku grins, as the drummer changes beats again, and he turns the page.

"Nice bunny, boss."

It's kind of cute, that he can still manage to get one up on the Conductor, watching him startle. Kariya plans on taking advantage of it for as long as he can. Neku's been walking with another kid
for a while, and at his intrusion they exchange a few parting words, Neku saying what he thinks almost looks like 'older brother.' He smirks as the Conductor waves goodbye to his friend, and jogs up toward him.

"Mom says you're grounded." Kariya snickers.

"Get bent." Neku fires back, "I'd kind of like to wait a little bit before telling my friends I meet up with strange men in the middle of the night."

It's all wry, good humor, just teasing, and Kariya doubts the kid is even capable of a negative feeling at the moment. He's practically getting a contact high off the Conductor, Neku throwing off power enough to leave little flickers of light when he moves, glowing edges around all his gestures. No idea, of course, that he's doing anything at all. God, this kid. Kariya's impression of the Composer was never all that high - he seemed competent, lasted long enough to be novel and kept Shibuya buzzing. But if he's truly smart enough to keep Neku around, if it amuses him the way it amuses Kariya to see someone this unexpected, this full of life and excitement, then he might be the first Composer Kariya's almost sort of been impressed with in a very, very long time.

"Had a good time, I take it?"

"I have to get up in four hours." Neku laughs, wiping at his hair, fairly soaked through with sweat. Kariya's never seen the kid like this, so open, honestly happy, not that the Game usually brings out the cheerful side of the Players. It's not the majority opinion, but he's not all that disappointed when a few of them make it back out, and he sees them again in the RG.

"You know, I bet if you listen, you can hear my class rank falling."

Kariya shrugs. "Usually the Conductor doesn't worry about graduating from his job."

Neku snorts, a knowing sound, as if he's already intimately familiar with the ways the UG can affect the rest of his 'real' life. Kariya figures that has something to do with the reason he didn't show up for the morning Game.

"Yeah, at this rate that's not going to be a problem. I'm on the fast track to the hairdresser's academy."

All this time, the Conductor's mostly been looking up at the sky, strolling at an easy pace, blissed out and pretty much useless and Kariya's unable to get the stupid grin off his face even though he has no reason not to know better. It's not that he doesn't enjoy the job, watching the power plays, cheering on idiots like Minamimoto as they crash their egos full-speed into reality. But the kid… well, the kid is a Conductor with all the power but - it seems - very little training, and has no idea that he's bleeding energy enough to power nearly the entire UG on his own. Enough to affect Kariya's mood without even trying to, and has there been a time in the last five hundred years when he's been so off his guard, not even bothering to be suspicious?

Kariya knows what it feels like, this kind of easy peace, this happiness. It ought to be an echo, it ought to be little more than the memory of a memory, that he has sat beneath a tree and the moon and listened to a koto and felt something so close to true enlightenment. All he can remember now, not even the feel of it, only that nothing since then compares to what was lost. Nothing, except now the night air is just as cool as it was then, and he can hear the rustle of long-distant leaves, and Neku has zero idea of the past that he's calling up so easily, of the vulnerability in it - and Kariya isn't sure if that's even true. Even if Neku knew everything, controlled himself and his power completely, is that really what he wants? Would he wield that knowledge as a weapon - could he? Before he was the Conductor, Neku was still the Player that had saved them from the Noise. A boy
entirely unsuited for this position, too young and too gentle and too much of everything, and Kariya feels a sudden spasm of emotion, something deep and fierce and more true than is at all convenient.

Ah, hell.

"Hey, uh." Neku stops short, glances down a side street. "I gotta go do something on the way home. I'll, uh, be at the Game tomorrow."

"Later, boss."

The smile is dazzling, a lover's smile, and not at all meant for him, Neku and his UG in perfect harmony as he walks away. Kariya waits a moment, putting a little distance between them, wanting to shake off the effects of the Composer's happiness because damn - damn he knows better. He does.

It's been easy, shadowing the kid, especially with Uzuki so grumpy and distant he can't get more than a few words of conversation out of her when he can even find her. A good thing Neku's not the kind of Conductor who takes insolence personally, or holds a grudge, or man would she be in the shit. It might be nice, really, if the kid would be a bit more cruel - Kariya can handle that, the game inside the Game, knowing that he can't trust a damn thing anyone says or does. It's the Conductor's restraint that throws him off, knowing the kid's taking this all to heart and still not playing to bleed the rest of them. Because eventually, he's going to snap - no good deed going unpunished and all that - and it very well might be the file in Kariya's hand that does it. The results of the morning's Game that he'd offered to pass on to the Conductor himself.

It's tactical, keeping that information in reserve. Waiting until the right moment, when it can get him the advantage he wants. It's just coincidence, that there's no way he could have pulled out the file tonight, to be the one to make the Conductor's magnanimous joy shatter like glass on concrete.

It's strategy, nothing more, and Kariya doesn't consider it any further, as Neku finally arrives at his destination. The little cafe is like a beacon on the otherwise shadowed street, completely empty except for Neku and one other. All lit up for Kariya, like two actors on a stage. He's tucked himself into a corner in the dark, likely to be unseen even if this were a bright day and they were looking. It still doesn't hurt to take precautions, when it comes to dealing with Angels.

Neku's done as good a job as a regular, living school kid can do, dealing with universal forces and limited answers - and if there's something Kariya can depend on, it's that no one will tell the Conductor any more than is necessary, for him to do the job they want. Even when Neku deserves their trust, even when he takes it seriously - even tonight, when he glanced back into the darkness, before going down the street that led to the little coffee shop. It's cute, the kid's attempts to protect the people he thinks are his friends. All that power and self-aware naiveté - Neku's cautious, aware of how much he doesn't know, and even that won't protect him, not really. Kariya feels that clench in his chest again, as the Conductor spreads something across the counter and the Producer - the Angel, leans over, picking up a piece of paper to examine it more closely.

It isn't an enviable position, for Neku to catch their eye. The kid is secretive about these visits, which means he knows who the Producer is, which means that he knows far more than a Conductor is supposed to. It's an anomaly in the system, and the Angels don't usually allow those sorts of things to last very long.

Kariya's eyes narrow, watching the interplay, the exchange between Conductor and Producer, and isn't the Producer friendly now? All laid-back attitude and slightly disheveled charm, the careless cool that passes for wisdom in this age. Kariya's done a bit of research - the Angel's an artist, too, no big surprise there. If he had paid more attention he might have noticed it from the very
beginning, the minute he'd arrived here, but then he hadn't planned on staying in Shibuya for long. Hadn't had plans, that was always the point.

Isn't the Producer so smooth, grinning encouragingly at whatever Neku is saying, so mellow and harmless, and the kid can't possibly know what this Angel has done, how much of his own pain this Hanekoma is responsible for. Neku doesn't know enough, to see the tension in the Music around the cafe, the way the Producer is fighting not to show that there's a strain at all. He's fucked up, he's fucked up /badly/, and he's doing everything he can not to let the kid find out.

Kariya's hand flexes, drops gently around the familiar hilt of a sword. He hasn't been allowed to use it in nearly thirty years, the only thing left in this world that has followed him from the beginning, that remains unchanged. A symbol of all that he is, how he has survived. The foolishness of his youth, the stupidity of betraying his master, happily running back to the Angels when they offered him the chance for revenge.

He is angry now, dangerously so, but he's no longer that arrogant, stupid child, rushing in without considering all the consequences. It's no surprise, that the Angels don't recognize this. Well accustomed to his obedience, forgetful of the past, the reason he needed revenge in the first place. The Angels are gods, for some limited definitions of the word, but still human enough for complacency. Blind enough, to give him this chance, and expect nothing but swift results. Kariya thumbs the hilt of the blade thoughtfully. Who knows, he still might give them what they want - but it will be for his own reasons, on his terms.
Neku gets - maybe - two hours of sleep, so keyed up that when he gets home he inks up a few of the sketches, the ones Mr. H didn't want to hang onto, and has to forcibly pry himself away from the table before he can think about colors. Neku doesn't remember falling asleep, only that he wakes up before his alarm, feeling awake and alert and almost the way he had as a very small child, the morning light through the window carrying a certain, silent promise. Except it's not silent at all, it's Shibuya's Music, welcoming him back into the day, even louder in the UG, and he's in the rhythm of it, gets dressed and ready for school and grabs, on the way out the door, a bag that Rhyme gave him the day before, running into him as he'd been going home, paths crossing for a moment. Some sort of red bean crepe thing Beat's been practicing, more than enough to share, the bag full of nearly a dozen lopsided and lumpy attempts that still make for a delicious breakfast, Neku making his way to the Crossing, a little early, but he can stand around and snack, or maybe get another drawing in.

The first warning sign is how they're all gathered, all of the higher officers and Harriers and maybe even all of the lower ranks, the Wall Reapers with this singular ability to look as if they've arrived by accident, sullenly waiting and yet able to make it seem as if it's all their idea. Neku's still full of the city and the morning and the remaining energy of the concert, and notices nothing out of the ordinary, doesn't question why everyone has assembled.

He shoves another crepe in his mouth, pulls out his phone, dialing in a moment of stupid manic amusement, letting the Reapers wait. Maybe they're all here because of the mini-lop on his shoulder, and he can't wait to hear the clever quips about the Conductor's new pet bunny, he really can't. Trapping his phone between shoulder and ear, Neku tosses one of the last three crepes to Lollipop - Kariya, probably better to think of him that way, now. The older Harrier is not being such an absolute dick, for some mysterious reason of his own, and Neku might as well extend the olive branch before anyone gets beaten with it.

"Beat." He says, when the voice mail picks up. "Blame Rhyme, she's the one who went and shared your food. You're spectacular, and I'm marrying you. Set a date. I'll even wear the dress."

Neku hangs up, half aware that he's kind of out of his mind, a little too hyper but not caring. It's probably the only thing keeping him awake, and he's imagining Beat's response when he gets that message and he kind of owes him at least something back for some of the idiotic crap in the third week, whether the other boy remembers it or not.

"So..." Neku looks up, addressing the crowd, aware that he's not cutting nearly as impressive a figure as Kitaniji ever did, but still willing to let them come to him. Kariya looks as sullen as the Wall Reapers, for a moment, and maybe Neku's not really going to make any friends here, maybe they're all just here because no one expected him to make it this long.

"Here's last night's report."

"You saw me last night." Neku grins. Usually the Reapers enjoy reminding him he's chained to the
job. Kariya shrugs, too disinterested to even meet his eyes.

"Must have forgot."

Neku flips the folder open, and everything slows, the Music wavering on one trembling vibrato.

It doesn't take long. Pieces start falling into place, a few at first and then quickly, like a rainstorm or an avalanche, and as the sound of it rises the Music of the city dims and fades. He gets it, because it always happens this way, no matter how many times he gets his legs kicked out from under him, or how he tells himself he'll be smarter for the next time. No matter how determined he was to duck into his headphones and not come out, no matter what. He never sees the worst until it's got him in his jaws, and maybe Mr. H is kind but wrong. Maybe sometimes the world ends with him. Maybe sometime the world is more than content to end on its own.

He feels the bunny's grip tighten against his shoulder, his voice a strained whisper.

"... what?"

Higashizawa asks first, if there should be a meeting, not because he cares but because there's half a chance they can all call off a day early. Kariya knows that's what they want, still thinking they can argue or cajole or bully Neku into following along, still thinking in terms of the way it's always been for the Shibuya Game. Kariya shrugs, half-certain that gathering all the Reapers in one place is going to be a very bad move, but just as sure that it will happen regardless of his input. If they haven't noticed the changes, any explanation he tries to give will be useless.

"Hey." Uzuki says, looking at the file he's been tapping nervously against the palm of his other hand. "I thought you said you were going to…"

"Yeah." He snaps back, and out of the corner of his eye he can see that he's startled her, never interested enough to bother with getting nervous, or short-tempered. The Wall Reapers are like a flock of birds, muttering to each other, and he can tell when Neku shows up because they all stop. Kariya hears a giggle from somewhere, whoever wasn't in on the gossip of the Conductor and his new pet Noise now able to see for themselves. It's amazing, really, that the thing hasn't sprouted wings or some other sort of evolution, with the power Neku's still radiating - Kariya glances back, maybe Higashizawa is staring a little more closely, studying the Conductor as he laughs into his cell phone, but most of the Reapers don't have experience with this kind of Frequency - few Players are that ready, to Ascend at the end of a Game. Fewer Conductors would ever show up like this, so open and unguarded - Kariya looks down at the snack Neku threw at him as a greeting, a doughy red bean crepe, and then at the file in his other hand. It's exactly the card he needs to play, but it might as well be a land mine.

Usually Kariya's happy to be a bastard, but even trying, he can't find the satisfaction in this.

"Here's last night's report." He passes it over, can't look up, and it isn't nervousness exactly - he's strong, and even if things go down all the way he can grab Uzuki and get them out of the blast zone, at least that.

"You saw me last night." A smile in Neku's voice, not sarcasm or superiority or self-congratulation, just an open happiness, and Kariya reminds himself that this is his opportunity. The further off-balance the Conductor goes, the longer he's going to have with the Angel, with no chance that anyone will interfere. It's what he wants.
"Must have forgot." Kariya mutters, doesn't mean to look up but he does, just in time to watch the smile get slapped off Neku's face, and he feels the shock, and even the Wall Reapers notice the change, falling quietly silent.

Uzuki happily shows all her cards when she's angry, screeching when she's even the least bit frustrated, almost gratefully abandoning her maturity to enjoy the fury. Higashiawa gets flustered, confused and unsure when he's thrown off his guard, painfully aware of his status at all times. Many of the Reapers considered Konishi to be the peak of cold disinterest, but Kariya always thought she simply kept her anger on a low flame, so constant it could pass for invisibility. He'd never actually seen Kitaniji angry, not that it gave him any real respect for the man.

Neku is silent, just the one shocked word and then nothing more, staring down at the folder that's telling him of last night's tally, the unexpected surprise. The two strongest teams, the only two remaining teams, have combined into one. Near the completion of yesterday's Game, one Player from each team eliminated their own partner, in order to Pact together. Survival of the fittest. Desperation can breed ruthlessness, although it's rare to have a team peak quite this late, a betrayal in the eleventh hour. The Conductor doesn't move.

"Boss?"

Neku looks up at him, and Kariya realizes how much the Conductor has been looking forward to the end of the seventh day, to being able to congratulate at least one set of virtuous and worthy winners, to send someone - anyone - back home. It's probably the only thing that carried him through this first week, that kept him going, and here they are with this. Kariya's long been used to bad endings, more than content to watch the Game bring out the worst in people, surprised by the timing maybe but not the act. It's obvious Neku never even considered it as a possibility.

It ought to make him laugh now, a Conductor putting their faith in the Players not to be assholes, but the silence around Neku is sending up the hairs on the back of his neck and it's not funny.

"They killed their own partners." Neku murmurs, more to himself than anyone. "They were winning, and they killed their partners anyway."

"Hey, bunny boy. Are you going to give us some orders today or what?"

Uzuki, probably egged on by Minamimoto, and Kariya very nearly flinches as Neku's eyes snap to her, and this, here, this is Neku's anger, and it's neither hesitant or slow-burning, enough to make him shuffle a half-step back. A force that could destroy every Reaper here on not much more than a whim, and is Kariya really the only one who's wondered just how strong a boy who'd spent three weeks in the Game must be? Just why the Composer chose him for this job?

Neku says nothing, and Kariya lets out the breath he's been holding, as he looks back down at the folder in his hands. Scrambles for some comforting or inspiring words, if just to keep the Conductor from thinking about how he might best fry all of their asses - what a way to start the goddamn day, and at least he needs to get the attention off of his silly-ass partner with her silly-ass determination to get herself Erased.

"Kariya. Can you get BJ and Tenho for me?" The polite lilt in Neku's tone is entirely false, and Kariya really wishes he wasn't standing this close. "Now."

"Yeah, boss."

A flicker, a matter of moments, reappearing at Uzuki's side as fast as he can, still waiting for the sword to fall. She can't sense the Conductor's anger like he can - Neku's not projecting anymore,
he's like a damn dead zone, utterly silent - but Kariya's nervousness has at least managed to catch her attention. Before she can say anything, the two new Harriers shuffle around the corner, unsure and wary, standing nearly shoulder-to-shoulder and not looking the Conductor in the eye.

Everyone knows what they've been up to, certainly the reason there aren't at least a few more Players in the Game today. Obviously working for their own gain, and it's certainly worthy of a punishment - most anything is, Kariya knows, if Neku decides to take offense. It was a ridiculous risk, for their first time as Harriers, going so deliberately against the Conductor's plans - and he's angry, and might as well take it out on them. It will be a lesson to the rest of the Reapers, a warning, and no one's going to touch the final team of Players. Whether it bends the rules or not, no one will dare. Kariya doubts that even Higashizawa is that brave.

"You two, stay right there." Neku says, and they cringe a little, just from the slight gesture he makes. Shoulders slumped and wings drooping, muttering to each other too quietly to be overheard. They're trying not to look as if they know what's coming, bracing themselves for the worst, and even when they'd been low-ranked, they'd certainly heard about what happened to those who crossed Kitaniji. The rest of the Reapers are paying attention now, cautious and excited and intrigued at the promise of bloodshed. The Conductor glances over to where the Wall Reapers have clustered.

"I want you to wall off everything but the 104. Push the Players toward A-East. No one else is to touch them."

The two Harriers straighten up a little, watching Neku closely, confused and unsure now that certain death isn't quite so certain. The Conductor's voice is soft, empty of emotion.

"Once they get to you, I assume you can do the rest."

No one speaks. Even Kariya's not sure he heard the kid correctly.

"Not quite the mission, boss." Not the mission at all. He doesn't really know why he says it. Kitaniji wore sunglasses all the damn time, some stupid sort of attempt to intimidate. Neku doesn't need to, doesn't have any problem meeting his eyes. Kariya wonders if this was the same look Manhattan saw.

"If they're that clever, they'll get through."

It's a lie. The Players - even this late in the Game - have next to no chance against 777 and Neku knows it. BJ and Tenho are slouched now in nervous relief, not quite sure they can take their eyes off the Conductor, and Kariya watches as they mumble a few words in tentative agreement. Neku doesn't say anything, doesn't look at any of them, just lets the folder fall from his hand as he turns away.

---------------------------------------------

He's early to class, for the first time since the week began. Neku slides into his chair, and tries and fails to have a coherent thought, at least one that he wants to have. The sunlight is moving across the floor, a long rectangle of warmth sliding away two rows in front of him, and he can't find the energy to do more than watch it go. Neku knows he'll need to start thinking eventually, will need to come up with just the right way to tell Joshua where he can shove his super special Conductor job. He's done with this. It's over. He tried but he's just not strong enough, he's not the one the Composer wants and he's not going to let himself become that person.

Except that's pretty much what he just did.
His phone rings. Here's his chance. Neku looks down, feels his stomach twist, and shuts the phone off, suddenly too tired, too empty to cobble together the energy to entertain Joshua at the moment. That's all he's good for, all he's supposed to be, he gets that. His job is to distract the Composer, to be just entertaining enough to keep him from doing anything to Shibuya, and it seems inescapably stupid to imagine any more to their relationship - there is no 'relationship', there is no 'him and Josh,' there's just Neku, alone, balancing on the wire, trying to keep from falling off and wondering when it will disappear under his feet anyway.

The first few of his classmates come through the door, chatting with each other, and the distance between them stretches out, a yawning chasm so wide Neku wonders if he's still in the UG, maybe, and keeps wondering even as the class fills up and right up until the point that the teacher takes attendance. He tries to pay attention, even watches his hand take down a few notes, but all he can feel is the cold reality of what he's done clutch at him, and the Music is nowhere to be found, as if abandoning his position was as easy as wishing it so.

You wanted to destroy them. You did.

It could have been different. If he'd been smarter, if he'd been better - should he have known? Could he have seen it coming, if he'd paid attention? Joshua would have known, but Joshua wouldn't have cared. He would have seen it from the beginning, what kind of people they were, and Neku shakes against the sudden jolt of rage that fills him. The old, familiar feeling of betrayal, and he's glad they're Erased. He would have done it himself, those two cowardly, useless morons. How stupid. How fucking stupid and how fucking weak and pathetic - they didn't trust him. He would have fought for them, he would have gone up against the Composer for them, and they couldn't even trust him to be fair.

It was the frightened girl, the one that reminded him that little bit of Shiki, she was the one who'd betrayed her partner in the end. He never would have guessed it - the stronger ones, maybe. Or maybe they just acted stronger. It doesn't matter, motivation makes no difference when they're all gone now. Neku's throat closes up, grief passing through him with all the force of a Noise attack, and he wonders if that black sorrow is always from the Noise or if it just feels that way. His little mascot left him hours ago, the mini-lop hopping off his shoulder as he walked away from the Crossing. Neku hopes she's ok, that he didn't hurt her somehow, by being angry, can't bear to think of the alternative.

All they wanted to do was live. They were afraid and they were desperate. Can you blame them? Can you?

He can. He can't and he can, all at once. Somehow, the day lurches forward, and Neku vaguely watches it get worse and worse as the same thoughts circle in his head, an aquarium full of restless sharks, biting at each other when no prey appears. It's then that he remembers he's got to go talk to the principal.

He's starting to get flickers of thoughts from the rest of the class, like he would in the UG when he searched for them, except he's still very much in the real world and not asking, and they're coming anyway. Neku suspects he might be out of sync with the RG, just slightly, but can't bring himself to care. He's no more prepared to try and stop those thoughts than he was to answer his phone, and just leans back in his chair and plays spectator in his own life. Lets every pointless, banal thought flicker by. Just random static, even the best of them, the boy in the front corner actually in the middle of a pregnancy scare, with some girl Neku thinks might go to Beat's school. Most of the rest aren't that interesting, parents who are too nosy, too overbearing. Girls that might be cute, and interested in going out. Cars that would be cool to own.
Neku alternately hates himself and hates the world in ten minute intervals for the rest of the morning.

Kariya rolls the little bean crepe over in his hand, his appetite gone the way of the rest of the day, and he throws it into the nearest trash bin, glancing down as something warm and Noise-feeling presses against his ankle. It's Neku's little mini-lop, and entirely his imagination that the little beady eye is staring at him in accusation.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Go away." He grumbles, nudging at the bunny with the toe of his shoe when it doesn't move, although they both know better than to think he'll actually kick her. It is a her, or she used to be, and Kariya narrows his eyes, can almost see the faint flicker of a different energy there, who she used to be and could easily be again, given a little time. She's Blue Noise, anchored quite firmly to the Conductor now, and growing stronger. Neku either doesn't know or doesn't care about the power he's providing her - he's certainly got enough to spare, and Kariya wonders how he would feel if he knew that even with this Game lost, he's well on his way to bringing a Player back on his own.

It's all over now, it took about as long as he thought it would, the two Players either overconfident or impatient to reach the end, or perhaps too busy being guilty over what they'd done to think about why the path had changed so abruptly. Either way, they're gone now, the Game over a day early with enough kills spread out to make everyone happy. BJ and Tenho have disappeared, and Kariya wonders if they got the reward they were looking for.

"Stupid Players, we didn't even get to have any real fun." Uzuki has been complaining for a while now, staring at her nails, although her mood is absolutely smug. Higashizawa is also failing to hide his satisfaction - he's gotten everything out of this Game that he wanted. Even Minamimoto is feeling self-congratulatory enough to stick around, enjoying the company and the conversation when it's all about hating the new kid and his undeserved promotion. Kariya feels old, then ancient, watching them with the same disbelief that he used to in the real world, so many years ago when he'd first become a Reaper, all those fools with no awareness of how things worked, of the world inside the world.

He has the sinking suspicion, never as present as in this moment, that the Angels too, are only masters of their sphere because they can't see beyond it, that they are, in the end, just within another, greater world. Human, whatever else they might claim to be, whatever power they've found, in the end they are still human, glorified Players, and they can do all the things that Players do.

Even die.

"Did you see him?" Minamimoto crows. "I thought he was going to cry. Konishi should have kicked his ass to the tenth power. What an improbable variate."

Uzuki flinches, just slightly, still a sore spot, but Neku's utter failure today, his show of weakness obviously lessens the sting.

"If it had been a regular Game, then, you might have won." Higashizawa rumbles. Kariya's surprised, they don't talk much about the long Game, and he's been morbidly interested to see how it would be rewritten in their eyes. Even standing where he is, with a slightly better perspective and a while to consider it, Kariya still has mostly questions.

"LIFO, easy as that." Minamimoto, always a paragon of the lack of humility, hands in his pockets
and leaning back on his heels, as confident as if he were still a Harrier, as if he hadn't hasn't his ass handed to him, more than once in plain view. "If I did it again, I'd be the Composer for sure. I'd walk all over that negative outlier."

"You all do know that he nearly destroyed the Composer of Manhattan." Kariya says even as he wonders why he cares, not usually bothering to give Minamimoto this much attention. All three of them are looking at him now, Uzuki surprised, the other two mostly confused. "Yes, that Manhattan. The story's been all over, I'm surprised you haven't heard."

Minamimoto snorts, aggressive stupidity his only real default. "Some of us have better things to do than listen to chatter across the border. It doesn't change things - If Konishi were still here, he'd be buried under the x-axis by now, and I'd be in charge. We could have been done days ago."

"You can't possibly be that stupid." More staring, because Kariya's never thought the math freak ingenue-wannabe was anything but an idiot, but he'd never bothered saying it aloud. "You weren't anything to her but a convenient meat shield. Do all the work getting rid of the Composer for her, and then she could either go through you and make Composer herself, or you'd die trying before you ever got there, and she could pretend she had no part of it. Or she'd convince him that she'd ousted you as a troublemaker from the start, and gain herself a nice little promotion. Why else would she have bothered helping you?"

Minamimoto blinks, and Kariya wonders, for the first time, just what exactly was between them. Had she been goading him into it, assuring him that he was special, that of course, he deserved to be the Composer? The thought of just how far Konishi would go to convince him they were in it together, that she had his back on such an obviously stupid plan… well now.

"So what's your problem?" Uzuki snaps. "Why are you on his side, all of a sudden?"

"Do you know what happens, when a new Conductor takes over? I mean, besides our lunatic rules-optional Game?" Everyone knows he's been a couple places, other than here, though Kariya has never bothered mentioning where or when or how long. It's still more than most of them, as far as he knows none of them had been that far out of Tokyo before they'd joined the Game, and besides a few crossovers from Shinjuku and Akihabara, most of them have never thought of leaving Shibuya. Kitaniji was well established when Kariya arrived, he doubts if any of the current crop of Reapers have ever even known another Conductor.

"Is it a big party?" Minamimoto says snidely, because he is incapable by any physical law of keeping his mouth shut.

"The Conductor will cull the ranks. Usually Erase everyone with any power that might be troublesome, and assign a new Games Master, promote up from the Wall Reapers. Although there are cases where they'll just Erase everyone, and play the first Game after on their own, for the chance to pick new officers with some chance of being loyal."

A good deal of the other Reapers hadn't bothered to disperse after the Game's end, hovering at the edges of the square, enjoying Higashizawa's crowing and Uzuki's bitching, and Kariya knows he has their full attention now.

Minamimoto snorts. "Everyone? No one erases Wall Reapers."

"Like you said, it's a big party." Kariya stares him down, glancing at Higashizawa and Uzuki in turn. "You think he's weak, and stupid, and soft, because he hasn't done anything, when he's got all the power he needs to raze this UG down to the pavement and start over, and you've given him every reason there is to do it. Maybe that makes him an idiot. Maybe we should all be grateful he's
Kariya turns away, unused to being the center of attention, not exactly sure if that was the smart thing to do. Not that he doesn't have more important concerns. Neku is effectively out of the way, and the path to the little cafe is wide open. It's a little less impressive, with a small bunny Noise hopping a few steps behind him, but Kariya is cool. He can deal.

The nice thing about executing two people before lunch is that it makes dealing with the principal a lot easier. Neku finds he isn't even worried, the part of him that's still a school kid is silent now. He feels hard and cold instead, a thick, dead space standing as armor between him and the rest of the world, even without his headphones on. A snarky voice that sounds a lot like Joshua points out the principal's rather ridiculous combover, the fabric on his suit that Shiki and Eri would surely shake their heads at - really, whatever his salary, he could do better.

"So, Mr. Sakuraba." The man lifts the edge of the file in front of him, before letting it lay flat, glancing up at Neku and all of these little gestures are supposed to be intimidating, Neku knows. Might very well have been, once upon a time, before he'd spent three weeks dead and another week being in charge, watching people die. Making it happen. It hurts, cold and hard in the pit of his stomach and Neku looks out the window, forcing his expression to stay still and empty.

"It looks like you're having a bit of trouble. Would you care to talk about it?"

Does that ever, ever work? Neku's sure that his cool, shuttered expression isn't doing him any favors here but he can't actually get himself to care about it, all his emotions slipping away, all smooth glass where his heart should be. It wasn't ever quite this bad, not even before the Game and the mural, not even when he'd been dragging himself through day after day - this is new, this curious detachment, this silence. Neku thinks he should probably be worried about it, but it's so much easier not to care.

The principal frowns. "We're a bit concerned about your recent performance in class."

No. No, he's not. At the surface there's a little irritation, mostly that another student has invaded on the time he needs to do up a memo for the teachers, and always the recognition that every student's performance reflects directly on what they can charge for tuition. Mostly, the principal's thinking about the affair he's having with the youngest math teacher, and her beautiful legs and the lingerie he's purchased to slip off of them. Teal, with a little lace at the edges. Neku watches the thoughts pass by, no more interesting than the rest of them, as the man continues to make pointless noise.

He's starting to get it, a little. Why Joshua is the way he is. How funny it might be, to watch people so wholly uncommitted to anything suddenly panic, suddenly fight so hard when the life they're not even using is in jeopardy. No wonder Joshua got tired. Neku has only gone through a week of it, and he can't imagine why he bothered. He's sitting here now, because he cared so much about them, and now there's no one left. No one.

Neku presses his hand against his mouth, hard, just for a moment. The principal doesn't notice.

"We've attempted to get in touch with your father, several times."

"He's at a conference." Neku says. "He should be back soon."

The principal nods meaningfully, and Neku hears what he thinks about his father, about Neku himself, and the kinds of things he must be up to, on his own. Neku tries to see himself there in the
"I think, Neku, you might want to reconsider the company you're keeping."

It's the first real surprise of the entire meeting. Neku blinks. "I don't…"

"I understand you've taken up with some of the more… eclectic members of our student body. We have many types of young men here for many reasons, some of whom are on quite different… paths than others."

"Are you talking about Tsuyoshi?" He is, Neku can see his friend in the principal's mind, or at least a detailed map of his piercings. If this had happened before the Game, he never would have asked the question, but he's not intimidated anymore, nothing much to be afraid of after facing down a three-story tall Kitaniji. Neku's aware that he's making the man nervous, for reasons he doesn't quite understand, and keeps himself from smiling.

Joshua toys with people like this, because really, the man is incredibly useless. The head of some school he thinks is more important than it could ever possibly be, he wouldn't even merit a place in the Game. Not even a Game for principals. Neku tries not to cringe at that thought, of how carelessly he's just thrown this man's life away. Of how very little he's capable of giving a shit right now.

The principal tries, inexplicably, for a smile of his own, but it's weak and uncomfortable. "Your attendance has been slipping as of late, and if this continues, we expect that your grades will likely follow. You realize that we can't help but notice such a decline in one of our brightest students."

The rage is at his fingertips, blisteringly raw and coming from nowhere. Neku can feel it, lightning ready to strike. He doesn't know what it would do, to release it, what effect if any it would have in the real world. His Frequency is off, he can still hear nothing but the Principal's beige thoughts, longs to lash back with some of his own, decidedly less than bland - why didn't they notice, when he was all alone? Why didn't they notice how quiet he was, how he ate by himself every day, how he'd obviously done something wrong, but no one even cared enough to tell him what it was?

"I'm doing all right. I've been a little busy lately." Part-time job, he doesn't say, but thinks it, along with another moment of amazement - Tsuyoshi? Really? He's not even that over the top, a few piercings and a little black fabric not exactly going to blow up the world. Neku would tell him how he'd obviously done something wrong, but no one even cared enough to tell him what it was?

"So, I can expect to not have a repeat of this week?"

Again, the clench in his chest, the ache down his bones and all that Neku's done, clutching at him.

"I hope not."

It's the truth, practically a prayer, but the principal doesn't hear the words for what they are, doesn't see anything but what he expects to see, another wayward student to be nudged back into line, whatever it might take. He frowns, folding his hands over Neku's file, and Neku imagines it is that other file, the one Vancouver might have shown him, with the future in it that never happened. Would it feel like this? So empty, and meaningless? How long did he survive there? He doesn't want to know. He doesn't.

"You must have had other friends, Neku, before now. Why not make the effort to pursue those
friendships?"

"Why don't you leave your wife, sir, if Miss Inoue's got such amazing legs?"

It comes in a rush, a snarl, before he can stop himself, and a part of him is shocked but the rest of him is quite satisfied to watch the principal go very pale, eyes widening, panic quickly taking the place of his bland professionalism. Finally, he has the man's attention. It's another Joshua moment, although the Composer would have been more subtle. Just refuse to give people the chance to be assholes, take that power away from them, and they are easy enough to control. Except there's nothing all that impressive about being able to intimidate morons. It just hurts, like someone's beating him up from the inside. So he's blackmailing the head of his school. Yay.

"I'd like to go now, sir."

Neku gives the principal the easy out, and after a moment the man recovers, and takes it. It seems very unlikely he will have to deal with the man again, at least face-to-face, and Neku doesn't know what that means. He doesn't want to think about it, or anything else, especially not the anger that's still leaving little fire flickers in the corner of his vision, the way the world wavers around him as his Frequency continues doing whatever it is it wants to do - nothing else is in his control, why should this be any different?

The bell is going to ring. The school day will end, and Neku realizes he is more than capable of Erasing anyone who crosses his path, that if he sees Minamimoto at any point in the near future, he's just going to kill the man without a moment's hesitation, and it's probably going to feel pretty damn good, and that - Neku shivers - that is not a good thing. It's every bad day, every one he's ever had where he wanted the power to tear a hole in the world and now he's got it to spare. Neku can feel it, the energy that makes him shiver, hot and cold, makes the world unsteady beneath his feet, just waiting for him to choose a target - no. God, no. He's the Conductor of Shibuya and he will not hurt his city and he will not hurt anyone else, whatever it takes.

The bell rings above the door, and Hanekoma knows instantly who it is, even if it's a bit of a surprise. It isn't at all safe for the Composer to be walking around during a Game week, with his powers still so heavily restricted, though with Joshua it's rather more impressive that he's endured his house arrest for this long.

"Coffee?"

"Tea." Joshua slides into a seat at the counter with his usual quiet elegance. Favoring the old drinks more than usual these days, and Hanekoma sighs, goes beneath the counter for the overly elaborate setup of small cup - no handle, simple but expensive china, as Joshua had glared at him the last time he dared try and use a regular mug - and tea, and teapot. Once upon a time, he'd bought a plastic, single-cup brewing pot and strainer, a marvelously simple little device that was as easy as it was compact. Joshua had leaned forward, pointedly taken Hanekoma's telekenesis pin from his pocket, and levitated it into the trash. Hanekoma has gotten back at him by demanding he use a saucer, and as long as he never goes lower than high-grade sencha, the truce stands firm.

Except that other things have changed, whether either of them will ever admit it, though they still know each other well enough to pretend that nothing's wrong. Joshua reaches into his pocket, pulls out a phone and slides it across the table. Hanekoma recognizes it, one of the last pieces of merch he slapped his art on, before the long Game and his longer dry spell. It really hasn't been longer. Every day is just a goddamn eternity.
"Thanks for rubbing my face in it."

A slight smirk, though Joshua tips his head down so it's hidden under his hair. "If you'd killed me properly, maybe you could still manage to doodle."

"I doubt it." Hanekoma says, entirely serious. "So I'm guessing this is for Phones."

"A gift for my Conductor, for his first successful Game."

He never gave Kitaniji gifts. It never even came up, just not the way things were ever done in Shibuya.

Hanekoma hits the teapot with a pyrogenesis pin, and sets it next to Joshua to cool. "You want the usual features?"

"Yes, and I want you to add something, so I can turn it on remotely."

Hanekoma laughs. "I think this will end up under a bus, if I do that."

He looks up, when he realizes Joshua is not laughing, is not smiling at all. The look on his face is deceptively mild, fiddling with the lid of the teapot, reaching out for the proofs Hanekoma has been studying since Neku dropped them off. Simple sketches, but they'll be perfect when they're finished - the company might decide to go with more than one, print off variants. He'll give Neku a day or two to ask for finals, since he's already fulfilled his commitment days ahead of schedule - and yes, he's as jealous as ever, thanks for asking.

"He did miss the Game, yesterday morning." Hanekoma says, fishing for hints when the Composer offers nothing, and Joshua smirks, foxlike, always evasive except when he's proud of himself.

"That would be my fault. I guess I wore him out."

It could be innocent. Hanekoma could at least feign ignorance, if it were anyone other than Joshua talking, and he weren't wearing that amused, possessive evil little smile and if there hadn't been room for suspicion for at least a little while now, the exact particulars of the relationship between Composer and Conductor. Hanekoma still goes for the whiskey, more than justified in starting his day with a nice Irish coffee. The Composer picks up the teapot, gently swirling the brewing leaves.

"You won't have to report it this week. The Game's over." Joshua says quietly, as if the words aren't loaded. It's like a parody of a rational conversation, where all the right things are said but the meaning is somehow exactly the opposite. Hanekoma puts his hands flat on the table, treading carefully.

"A day early?"

"Mm-hm." Joshua sniffs, pretending to be engrossed in getting his drink exactly right, which Hanekoma knows is just bitter enough that no one else would dare touch it. He also knows what it means, for things to end early, and he can't help but feel a pang of sympathy for Neku. The kid would have taken it hard, to have a Game go like that.

"Where is he, Josh?"

The bitter little laugh sends the hairs up on the back of his neck, Joshua looking down into his cup, turning it in his hand. "I wouldn't know. He's not answering his phone."

Deliberate obtuseness - that's a very, very bad sign. Hanekoma wishes he had the range he needs in
this moment, his usual Producer ability to know exactly what's wrong with Shibuya before the Composer even steps through the door. He's so muted now, by the time he figured out what had gone wrong it would be raining sulfur.

"You need a phone to find him now, boss?" As if asking the question in an easygoing manner will somehow influence the outcome. The best case scenario, actually, is that Joshua tried to work around his limits and damaged his Frequency, or that he's destabilized in some other way. And that's the best he can hope for.

"Neku's not in Shibuya anymore." He drops the bombshell with a calm, practiced ease, and flips around another of the sketches, staring at it more closely. "Well, this is a new style for you."

"What do you mean, he's not-" Hanekoma trails off, not at all sure where to take this conversation. It's more than Neku wandering off to some other district - most large cities in the world allow their Conductors some mobility, and as far as Hanekoma knows most of them are simply curious about Neku, wouldn't mind getting a chance to see him up close, no real danger there yet. Joshua has enough power even now to keep Neku from dying in any permanent way during a Game - and even if he did, even if one of the Reapers managed to get absurdly lucky, the Angels would not hesitate to send him the news of that particular Ascension. No other option he can imagine seems at all likely - not Fallen, not Neku - god, not this soon. Even if they'd had their eye on him, even if there had been an opening -

"I would think you'd give me a little more credit than that." Joshua snorts, reading his thoughts, and his body is still young but his eyes are still and always the Composer's eyes, and old, with a resignation Hanekoma hasn't seen there in so long he thought that maybe, maybe pushing Shibuya to the brink of annihilation would be enough to banish it forever. Except it isn't the way it was before, that grim boredom is thin and transparent in parts, and what rests behind it is fear. Hanekoma hasn't seen Joshua pretending not to be afraid in so long, not since he was truly mortal, and it's more than enough to lift him up and set him right on edge, just waiting to knock him over.

"Help if you talked to me, boss."

"I doubt it." The Composer says, still in that same, bland monotone, as if he really did come here for nothing more than a cup of tea and a shuffle through Hanekoma's paperwork.

"Joshua."

The Composer's hand stills, and he lets out a breath, glancing toward the wall. "The last two Players today, they Erased their original partners at the end of yesterday's Game. Neku took this as proof that they were worthy of a larger challenge, and adjusted the Mission accordingly."

Hanekoma blinks, instantly untwisting Joshua's particular view of the truth. It wasn't a matter of time running out. So Neku, the Conductor, ordered an Erasure. Really, it was practically protocol. Even if the Players had made it through the rest of the Game, they never would have been allowed to return to life. Given a chance as Reapers, maybe - ironically, they had a better shot even at Ascending than they would at ever going home, although Neku's final decision to even deny them that chance was certainly in line with precedent.

He's a little surprised, trying to see it from Neku's perspective, that he could reach that decision so quickly, especially after being pushed to that edge himself with his own partner. It hadn't been a tactical move for him, though, only fear, Hanekoma knows that. Panic and confusion and that sense of betrayal that had followed him, even with his memories gone, such a part of who he was that even Joshua couldn't erase it completely. The Composer believed Neku would be ruthless when it was necessary, and he'd been right until it had mattered most, until he'd been certain Neku
would pull the trigger. The boy just didn't operate like that, nothing so simple, so easy to understand. Even if he'd wanted to do this, Erase them, it would have cost him. His very first Game, to end like this...

"I knew he would get angry. I expected that… but he's withdrawn from the city completely. He has no idea what he's risking."

Hanekoma blinks. "You can't get him back."

"I doubt Neku even knows anything is wrong."

Joshua shrugs, takes another drink, and Hanekoma resists the urge to add another shot to his own mug. He doesn't even know who to try to call, it's been made quite clear that the Angels are not interested in hearing from him unless they ask. If they don't know about this yet, bringing it to their attention won't exactly make things better for either him or Joshua. Or maybe this is what they've been waiting for, maybe Neku is not quite as valuable as the one, final failure that will allow them to start over with Shibuya from scratch.

"I'm not as strong as he is, not now. Usually, it's less than meaningless. He's easy enough to anticipate. I thought…"

Joshua pauses, both hands around his cup, staring down at nothing. Hanekoma can fill in the gaps. He thought it wouldn't matter, if Neku got angry, or upset, or hurt. He thought it would be a learning experience, a nasty lesson, and Neku would learn that he was simply being stubborn, trying to make a distinction between the Players and the Reapers, to believe that they weren't all capable of the same ugly endgame.

"You know him, Josh. You knew Neku would pull away, when he got hurt. It's what he does."

"Yes, it is. He's quite adept at it."

It's a feedback loop, then. Neku in his own little hell somewhere beneath the UG. Surrounded by negative emotions that will feed on each other, strengthening the Conductor's detachment from Shibuya, pushing him further away from anything that might counter that distance, that despair. Bad enough, for Neku to put his headphones on and disappear from the world, but now he has more than enough power to truly disappear, not to be found if he doesn't want it, not ever again, and he doesn't even understand what he's done.

"I can try to-"

"Oh I doubt anyone would show up in time, even if they did believe you." Joshua flicks his hand in a slight, dismissive gesture. "If he doesn't come back to me, he'll Erase himself. Simple as that." He sighs in something that would be annoyance in any other circumstances, fingertips tracing the curve of a line, the pictures spread around him. Proofs for the cover of an album full of silly nonsense, and Hanekoma knows people will remember Neku's work long after they've forgotten the songs or the singer.

"You didn't do these, did you?"

Hanekoma shakes his head. The sound he can hear, very lightly, is the cup, chittering ever so slightly against the saucer, because Joshua's hand has started to shake. It lasts for half a second, no more, and then the Composer is standing up, still graceful, still every inch the ineffable ruler of his domain.

"If you could make those modifications to the phone, I'd appreciate it. And if you see Neku, tell
him I'd like to see him."

"Yeah, boss. You got it." He has the impulse to leap the counter, do something, anything, even though he hasn't so much as put a hand on the Composer's shoulder for longer than he can imagine. Hanekoma occupiles himself by rubbing at the edge of an already clean mug, until the bell rings over the door again, and Joshua is gone.
save the skins for a better and the rest for a better. we can’t open, no nothing. can’t open, no nothing

Chapter Notes

chapter title - TV On the Radio - Young Liars

Neku feels as if he could throw a stone, and watch it skitter to the horizon, and fall right over the edge of the world. He remembers the last time he watched a man at an open-air market gut a fish, giving it a few quick, merciless slices before reaching down, ripping out all the bones and all the guts with one hard pull, from mouth to tail. He wonders what he would have to give up, to remember what it was to be normal.

Shibuya howls quietly to itself, and even with his headphones on Neku can hear it clearly, the low tremble shaking his ribcage, the long, dull moan, interspersed with long periods of nothing at all. He finally shuts off the music he's not listening to, sets the headphones aside and lets the silence of the UG fill him, what it feels like without Players or Reapers. He can't hear anything seeping in from the RG, only the bare outlines of the crowd milling below to remind him that the entirety of Tokyo isn't some vacant, abandoned ruin. He's not exactly sure how he ended up here, with his sketchbook, perched on top of the 104. It doesn't really matter. The paper is blank and white under his hand. He hasn't even tried sketching. Does it matter?

How stupid is he, that he thinks he even needs to ask.

Any of them might be Players next time, any of the people below. Somewhere in this city is already someone who will die, and who will fight to live again, and more likely than not will fail, and Neku can only watch them disappear for good and it's like it's already happened, week after week of pain and trial and failure. Somewhere, the friends and families of the Players from this week - no, but they would have already mourned, wouldn't they? Nothing will change, nothing will be undone, not this time.

Neku tucks his head against his knees. It's almost a comfort, the emptiness, asking nothing and expecting nothing, and he thinks he might just go to sleep. He's so tired, because he got up early for the Game, because he was going to do it differently. Stupid, so naive and so stupid to think that he could change it, that his effort would show any results. Joshua thought he was an imbecile, the entire time they were partners, and he was right. The Composer's not the way he is for any other reason than it's the way things are, the only way to do it that doesn't involve being smashed to the curb at the end of the day. The only reason Neku's ever gotten hurt, the reason it keeps hurting - if he'd just learn to expect betrayal, to know it's all going to end in nothing, a waste - Mr. H is wrong, he just is - it would stop.

All he has to do is give up, and mean it.

A flicker of movement, a familiar color catches his attention, the only brightness in the dull, gray sea below. It's Eri, animated as ever, vibrant as a candle flame, and Shiki is with her - twin stars. Even now Neku smiles, just watching them walk together across the street - he's glad to see them, like a beautiful dream, a memory.
Shiki won't betray him - or if she does, somehow, she won't mean to do it. He could bear that, being hurt by her - he owes her one, anyway - and even measured against all that's happened, Neku can't really regret that she played the game, if it means he can see this, her and Eri. What perfection looks like, the two of them shining together, almost painful it's so brilliant, and right. Shiki stops suddenly, pulls out her phone, and Neku knows instantly that she's calling him. He feels a moment of panic, but he turned his phone off long ago, and even then she's not Joshua, she couldn't do anything horrible to force an answer, even if he did pick up. Neku can't face her, not now. He'll do something, say something to hurt her, and he'd rather exile himself forever, it would be better to watch the world pass behind a thick pane of glass than make her ever regret knowing him.

He could leave. Becoming the Conductor isn't just a matter of a few extra hours work, or even a moral crisis - it changes everything, it's undone his entire life. Opened paths, made so many things he never thought possible all too real. He could go. He's got just enough money to get him practically anywhere, at least one-way, and Neku thinks a few of the Composers might trade his talent for a place to sleep. He could couch-surf with Ibiza, almost certainly. Leave his life in Shibuya, walk away from everyone the same way he's been abandoned before, actually have the upper hand for once, and the thought is terrible and wonderful and rolls out like the tide after a few moments of near-drowning, leaving him desolate again. It isn't worth it. Whatever Vancouver thinks, whatever trite condescension Hanekoma felt like feeding him in between his actual business with Joshua, in the end, none of it matters. The bigger picture is only this, blank and empty, a canvas that doesn't need him to fill it.

What am I supposed to do now? Where the fuck could it be!? Why do these things always happen to me?!

The thought is violent, cutting through his dim attention with a desperate anger that nearly unbalances him from the sign. Neku frowns, scanning the crowd, until he sees a businessman pacing back and forth, opening his briefcase once, snapping it closed, his thoughts a panicked chaos of frantic half-sentences chopped to pieces, a good deal of self-recrimination and all of it reminds him instantly of Makoto, and Shadow Ramen, sound and fury and trying way too hard.

Stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid-

Calm. Down.

He doesn't like to Imprint, but in this case it seems the only alternative to letting the man's head explode. Neku watches him stop short, hears or feels or whatever it is that he's doing, sensing all the man's thoughts piling up in a landslide, leaving the present moment perfectly clear.

Deep breath.

His cell phone. He's looking for his cell phone, because there's a message on it, and a date and a time and a meeting. It's all Very Important and Very Urgent and Very-

Take. Another. Breath. Neku rolls his eyes, amused despite himself, with somebody else's freakout intruding on his own, a momentary distraction. Did you check your pockets?

Yes. The man thinks he's talking to himself, which is fine. Neku doesn't mind being someone's mental checklist.

All your pockets?

Yes.
Except he's only shoving his hands in the pockets in his pants, and the lower pockets on his coat. Neku can see there is another pocket up higher, and what looks like a bit of a bulge. People with nervous dispositions just shouldn't have razor-thin cell phones.

Your upper pocket?

Neku quickly backs out of the man's thoughts as he slaps at his chest, his fingers hitting the phone and a tiny supernova of joy and relief taking the place of the rational thoughts he wasn't having anyway. Neku considers Imprinting the suggestion of a little anti-anxiety medication, but there's little chance the man would even notice, too busy filing through the menus, searching for his message as he moves briskly down the street away from the 104.

Shibuya's music is still muted, and Neku is making no great effort to reach out, but the man has opened some sort of floodgate now, and it seems a considerable number of city dwellers are having as much fun as he's having today. A girl leaning against the wall beneath him is eating a bag of fries as fast as she can manage, trying not to cry, rejected by a boy who'd asked about her sister in practically the same breath. Another man, maybe college-age, is staring down blankly at the drumsticks in his hands - the gig bombed, the band is breaking up, he's got no other options, and Neku finds himself reaching out even though he's still feeling numb himself.

It's one thing to Imprint a decision, a command, and he still is horrified by what Joshua seems to believe is his right in that regard, how little he cares for even the most personal boundaries, but Neku doesn't try for anything so specific now. He just lets his thoughts tread lightly across theirs, mostly lets them tell him what they already know, and reminds the girl that the only reason she wanted this particular boy was because her sister did. Sends the drummer off in the direction of the record store - inspiration is what matters now, even failure is better with a soundtrack - although he can't help but Imprinting a few better suggestions into the man's fairly pedestrian tastes. Apparently Tsuyoshi is starting to rub off on him.

I could get her another cake. But now she doesn't want a cake. She doesn't want anything, not the cake, not me. It's over. It can't be over. It's over.

It seems quite possible, actually, that Shiki and Eri are the only functioning couple in all of Shibuya, even if one of them did have to die for a while to make it work. Neku feels a little more amusement than pity as the man shuffles toward him, his thoughts a hopeless jumble - he'd tried to make a birthday cake, and it hadn't worked, and his lopsided attempt hadn't been as cute as he'd hoped - and Neku thinks the man might be better off looking for a new girlfriend instead of a new cake, but he keeps that opinion, just barely, from reaching the level of an Imprint.

I can't even grow a beard. That makes him stifle a laugh, Neku can't help it, even though the man is serious, scratching at what really is a bad patch of stubble, less of even a five o'clock shadow than extremely mangy dog, and he's still thinking about what he can do for her, what kind of food says 'I'm sorry' and Neku wonders, if he doesn't show up and bring food with him, does Josh even remember to eat?

Wow. That's pretty cool. Maybe I should have made her a cake like that. The man thinks, standing in front of one of Minamimoto's piles of junk, and Neku rolls his eyes, out of patience for the moment, abandoning him to what will be the world's worst goatee and a girlfriend who deserves it.

… and deserves it isn't the right way to say it, for what he did, for what happened to the last two Players, is it? Neku doesn't forgive Joshua, but he won't be any kinder to himself, he can't afford to be, not about this. Still, they made their decision, cold-blooded and inexplicable, but it was their choice and he had to do something in response. He had to make a choice of his own, and now he has to deal with the fact that no one will ever tell him, he'll never be absolutely sure it was the right...
He could stay here, instead. He could just shut his eyes, and let the crowd fade again, let it all go forever. It would be easier than the alternative, and nothing would change then, and he wouldn't have to care. Neku closes his eyes, and breathes in, and on the exhale he accepts it, too tired to fight, lets his muscles relax and hears his sketchbook clunk next to him, abandoned, and waits for whatever's going to come next.

It isn't a considerable amount of time that passes, but he's still expecting something a bit more dramatic than... nothing. Neku ponders the philosophical dilemma of being impatient for oblivion, and slowly opens his eyes again. So now he's offered himself up to the void, but it's clear the void has better things to do. So that's it, then. He has to keep on going.

Freaking typical.

The walk to Pork City is the longest of his life, and Neku's pretty sure he's still in the UG even though he made a half-assed attempt to shift Frequency. It's a mistake to go there, he knows that, but his feet are taking him to Joshua's instead of home and even with all that's happened, he'd rather sleep on the street than go sit in an empty room. Better Joshua's inevitable bitching - or hell, maybe worse, it feels like failure, so maybe he has. At least Neku knows what it looks like, what it feels like when Joshua pulls a gun on him. It's bad, but it's over fast enough. Neku drags himself to the elevator and considers the benefits of simply falling over and blocking the entrance. Joshua would let him lie there, though, stand over him and make fun of the marks as the doors tried to close on him.

He's still got to do the paperwork for the Game, and that thought very nearly undoes him, Neku half-stumbling across the threshold. Joshua is nowhere to be seen, Neku unsure if that's what he wants or not, the world still keeping with its strange, drained black-and-white quality. Frozen, the way he'd thought it was the very first time he'd opened his eyes in the UG, but with the added height he gets from the window it seems even more empty. Neku watches the tiny figures below, until he can convince himself they're actually there.

He drops his bag, shuffles aimlessly into the kitchen, surprised that he's not hungry - maybe he's finally got control over that, at least. Does Joshua really find it that funny, that his Conductor doesn't know anything? Is it so hilarious, to watch him prat fall through life, day after day? He wanders into the bathroom, maybe a shower will at least get rid of the nagging chill that's been clinging to him since... who knows when. The start of this horrible day, that seems like a century ago. Neku looks up, the flat marble counter top and three-panel mirror like some sort of judgment, giving him exactly what he doesn't want to see, and he puts his hands against the counter, shuts his eyes. Feels the cool pressure, the weight of his wings settling against his back as they unfold, rising up. Forces himself to look at his reflection, the great, dark expanse of what could really be a set of massive, wrought iron gates - abandon all hope, blah blah blah. Neku shuts his eyes again, turns away cringing, as if he's been slapped.

"Well, at least you made me wait around."

He wondered exactly what would happen, when the Composer finally appeared, only mildly alarmed at the way the wry, vaguely irritated tone slides across his nerves like sandpaper. He's not interested in playful banter, or being entertaining, or even being tolerable.

"All finished, and a day early, even." Joshua says, ignoring any kind of tension in the room, as always. "I never imagined you'd be so efficient."
"Go to hell." Neku growls, still fighting to control that dark, ugly emotion, still not wanting to hurt anyone until he hears the Composer laugh, shrugging off his anger with all the power of a fizzled firecracker. The bastard is laughing at him, raising an eyebrow as if inviting Neku to try to do some real damage, and it hurts to be this angry, this ready to lash out. "It must be terribly boring for you, Josh, being so perfect."

"Interminable. But I try to find ways to amuse myself." Joshua smirks cutely as Neku scowls. "Well, aren't we grumpy." He sounds serenely patronizing, but before Neku can turn around and just kick his damn head off the Composer has moved, faster than he'd expected, lacing his fingers through the gaps in the strange architecture of Neku's left wing. It's warm, the only point of warmth in the world and the jolt of pleasure goes straight across his back, across his shoulders and down into to his groin and leaves him trembling, utterly overwhelmed. Neku leans a little further against the counter, his other wing folding up against his back and he's pretty much pinned, immobile in that simple hold. The wings are an extension of his Soul, of his power, which shouldn't mean - oh why the hell not, of course the Composer can exploit it. Joshua giggles again - and no, it never stops being annoying.

"Let go." Neku snaps, but that dangerous anger is draining away, he can feel it leaving him and damn it, damn him for being this easy to play. Joshua is just toying with him, rubbing his thumb against the curved gap of a bend of his wing, and he refuses to shiver or pretend that it's even happening, even though that doesn't help because the Composer is a total perv and it's obvious by now that this is how he gets his kicks.

"I hear there were a few Reapers out making their own rules. I'm surprised you didn't notice, with all that time you spent in the middle of things."

Neku grits his teeth against a flurry of emotions, all fighting furiously for dominance. "You're not going to make me say it."

Joshua chuckles. Because Neku doesn't have to say it, the Composer knows exactly what he saw and exactly what happened. "You made a choice, Neku. Eventually, you knew you would have to."

It's like acid eating into him, how clear it is the Composer doesn't give a shit, how he considers Neku either sweetly naive or sweetly brain-damaged. "Go to hell, Josh-"

He knew this would happen, Neku knew the Composer wouldn't give a shit, and he came anyway, and now Joshua has stepped closer, is holding onto him, pressed against his back, one arm around his waist and the other across his chest. The Composer sighs, a weight behind it, a grandeur. Everything Joshua will ever do will always be that way, inherently valuable, and Neku feels angry again, and bitter, and tired.

"I don't suppose it would help, to tell you it wouldn't have mattered if they'd won? Killing your partner is not the way to save yourself."

"I don't-" Joshua's hand on his wing again, slim fingers teasing an inner whorl, and Neku has to bite his lip, hard, glaring up into the reflection of violet eyes.

"You should be proud of your wings. They're a direct reflection of you, and your power." He waits, and smiles, that strange secretive smile. "You really don't get it, do you?"

No, he doesn't, and he hates feeling stupid for not being able to say whatever it is that Joshua wants to hear.

"Really, Neku, you could try to meet me halfway, at least."
Barely an effort in his voice even as Neku jerks away and finds that he's held fast, the frail boy's grip like iron. Neku grimaces, the world wobbling, and suddenly he's cold and dizzy and feels just horrible, fragmented and unsteady. "Josh... something's... something's wrong."

"Listen."

Fear mixes with the old fury, Neku terribly aware that he's in control of no part of this. "Let go of me, asshole! I don't need-"

"Neku. Shut up and listen." It's his Composer-voice, no trace of disinterest or sarcasm there, this is a command and Neku obeys without realizing it, without even realizing he hadn't been listening, until this moment.

It's like a wall falling, or maybe the floor bottoming out as he stops, takes a breath - and the Music of Shibuya sweeps over him, brilliant joy and welcome, kind of like being buried in a dump truck full of those ridiculously cute puppies with the stubby little legs, or like the first kiss from a long-absent lover, falling into his arms. Neku takes in a sharp, trembling breath, watching the world leech back into color around him, feeling more solid now, thawing from the inside out. He realizes after another moment that his legs have buckled beneath him, Joshua supporting all of his weight - taller than him at the moment, reverted to his glowing Composer form. Neku will care more about that as soon as he can get some air back into his lungs, needing the support, whatever it might cost him later in dignity, feeling as if he's just woken up. Weak and small, as if some terrible sickness has finally broken.

"What... what did you do?"

The Composer says nothing for a long moment, and then he's Joshua again, pressing a kiss against Neku's temple. "Do you have any idea the sort of endless bitching I'd have to put up with, if you went and Erased yourself?"

"I'm... just a Conductor." Neku whispers, not recovering as quickly as he'd expected, heart still pounding, the Music surging and ebbing around him, feeling more solid now, thawing from the inside out. He realizes after another moment that his legs have buckled beneath him, Joshua supporting all of his weight - taller than him at the moment, reverted to his glowing Composer form. Neku will care more about that as soon as he can get some air back into his lungs, needing the support, whatever it might cost him later in dignity, feeling as if he's just woken up. Weak and small, as if some terrible sickness has finally broken.

"What... what did you do?"

Joshua sighs. "I didn't do anything. You, however, seemed to think that destroying yourself would be a memorable way of finishing off your first Game. Which isn't entirely wrong, I suppose."

"I did?" Neku says stupidly, and realizes it's the truth. Utterly bizarre, to view what's just happened standing here on the other side of it. Here in what is the real world even if he's still sporting a giant pair of wings and Joshua is softly glowing, and only a few moments ago that dark place was equally real. God, and he'd told himself it wouldn't be like that, that he would do what Mr. H wanted, and try to work it all out for himself. He wouldn't let things to back to the way they were, the way he was - and Joshua's grip slackens slightly, as Neku recovers his balance, though he's still wobbly and grateful for the support. The Composer smooths down the collar of his shirt, tucking the tag down almost playfully, not moving away.

"There. All better."

"... thank you." Neku murmurs before he can stop himself, still off-balance.

Joshua snorts softly. "Once you were through the door, you were safe enough. I just helped a bit."
He's angry. Neku can see his eyes glitter in the reflection in the mirror, the expression he thinks he's hiding. Joshua's angry and he's trying not to show it, which is strange, when he's usually happy to show exactly what he's thinking. Neku tries to turn, but Joshua is still standing between his wings, and he can't do much more than shuffle and nearly lose his balance, and at least he's not the only one laughing like an idiot.

"Hold on." Joshua says, and does something and Neku can't help the sound he makes, nearly doubling up against the counter as his wings slide back into his body with a rush of warm, exquisite pleasure and damn ok, ok so anything involving the wings is going to end with him and a screaming boner and thanks universe, thanks a lot.

"What the hell is this." He mutters, managing to get some control of himself even with the other boy still pressed against him, not really expecting an answer. Already doomed, even if he wanted to try and chew off a limb to save himself.

"Reward for a job well done?" Joshua says, nuzzling his neck as he turns around, never quite leaving the circle of the Composer's arms.

"Do this with Kitaniji often?" It's supposed to sound icy. It just sounds bitchy, and maybe even a little jealous. Oh dear god, Erasure was by far the less painful option.

Joshua laughs against his skin, ticklish and warm. "He never did this good of a job."

"You-"

The Composer kisses him then, and Neku reminding himself to stay angry is exactly as effective as reminding himself not to go for the ice cream when he knows its in the freezer, Joshua's tongue doing horribly efficient things to his resolve. The Composer probably wouldn't take it as a compliment, that he's easily just as persuasive when he isn't even talking. He snickers slightly, and Neku pulls back, can't help the blush, feeling stupid and of course Joshua can hear all that just as easily.

"I know I'm asking a lot," He murmurs, the lazy-lidded look in his eyes sending another aftershock through Neku, he hasn't really stopped shaking, "but can you admit the very slight possibility that I might actually know what I'm doing?"

Neku had thought the teasing, the heartlessness, the contempt is the worst that Josh can do, but it's the compassion in those violet eyes, the terrifying fact that Joshua might not be lying about it that sloshes over him like ice water, and Neku swallows hard. Leans forward, Joshua's hands coming together low on his back, right where his spine curves in, and holds him close. It's frightening how badly he's wanted this, just this, to be important enough to anyone to hold onto.

"I didn't… I didn't want the Game to end like that."

"I know." So this is Joshua, gentle. It's scary for an entirely new set of reasons. "Neku, do you really think I took this position to kill people?"

"I don't know anything." It would be exceptionally nice if that were simply dramatic, instead of true. Joshua's expression is wry and sympathetic and not at all what he needs to maintain any sort of reasonable distance or composure. "God, please Josh, don't. I really need you to be an asshole right now."

"You trust me." It's not even a question, and Neku tips his head back, lets Joshua's tongue trace a slow path along his neck, before pulling him down again into a kiss. He's getting pretty good at
this, he thinks, even without much in the way of comparison. "So if you do trust me, you have to believe it - you're making it better, Neku, not worse. Shibuya is pleased, and so am I."

So here he is again, and Neku always wonders if it will feel like this, the two of them together. Like falling, like he's taking a step out into the void, holding his breath and with no armor and nothing but a blind hope that it will all work out. Joshua's not wasting any time, not really into teaching, Neku knows, way more about the show than the tell. Pulling him into the bedroom like it's a natural law, no way to argue with gravity, and he could stop this, Neku's pretty sure he could and he would like to be a moral paragon, but he's had a really, really shitty day. The worst since he was dead himself, really, or maybe when he thought Joshua was dead, and the Composer is offering a blatant respite from having to think about all the ways he's failed. Spirit willing, flesh weak, etc.

"Oh please, Neku," Amazing, the slightest difference in the Composer's tone, how warm he can be when he's trying. "One little sidestep, and suddenly I'm the master strategist?"

Neku glares as best he can at what he can see of Joshua's ear. The Composer's hands are under his shirt, slipping the buttons free with ease, his hands warm against Neku's stomach, and he fights to keep his breath from hitching. Now that he has some idea of Joshua's real power, it must have seemed funny then. A cheap magician's trick, shut the box and the boy disappears.

"I thought you were dead, you ass." This is the first time, Joshua pressing him down, that it doesn't hurt to say it out loud. As if the Composer's amusement is somehow his own, taking him into his confidence.

"And here I thought I'd made it too easy. I was sure you'd figure it out."

He's just this side of distracted, enough to open his mouth to say something that won't be at all as good as he needs to be, nothing Joshua's going to find a logical counter-argument - it's really better that all the Composer wants is to slip him the tongue, pushing him back on the bed, stretched on top of him and it takes a minute, Neku's hands against Joshua's shoulders and those slim hands sliding along his thighs and the reason it makes him shiver is because somehow he's not wearing any pants. Neku turns his head, as much to look as to tip his head back, everywhere Joshua touches leaving little drops of liquid fire, like he's no longer quite as substantial - it's the Music. Joshua's doing something to the Music, too subtle to follow. Of course he is, he's the Composer and this is practically the heart of his domain and yes, Neku notices with the one brain cell left that can pick up on these things, those are his pants, crumpled next to his underwear on the floor, and he damn sure never took them off.

"You are so cheating. You're cheating and I don't even know the rules." He's breathless, and that's cheating, and distracted, and the Music - he can't focus on it, the notes are beautiful but they keep slipping away from him, fast and bright - Joshua's own song, practically all that there is here and Neku is afraid, afraid to face him at full power, that Joshua will eventually be as strong as he was and even now, even now he could disappear into it. The report, still as clear as ever in his mind, how it had been a heavy strain on him to have Joshua with him in that second week, how the Composer could Erase his partner, given enough time -

"Stop thinking." Joshua's voice again, a breathy whisper full of want and command, and Neku holds onto the edge of the anxiety through sheer stubbornness, force of will. He's hard as hell, by the way, and it's now the second time in his life that he's not taking care of it by himself, and even if he wasn't with a… whatever Joshua actually is, it probably won't ever stop feeling unexpected. Neku blinks, sliding his hand down the Composer's bare hip, the skin so smooth and flawless - cheater. Damn pervy, pants-erasing cheater.
"Indeed." Joshua's voice is rough, not quite amused, not quite angry - and there it is again, that strange, unexpected hurt flashing in his eyes, threading through the Music, but even as Neku reaches for it, the melody shifts out of reach.

"Josh…"

"Neku, this is not a duet." Joshua cuts him off, voice wry, twining their fingers together, sliding Neku's hands above his head with one of his own as he bends down for another deep kiss and the force of his Music hits Neku like a landslide, a desire, a demand that has him arching against the Composer's body, and he comes and it pretty much wrings him out, nearly as shocking as being shot, maybe even more so, since he's still alive at the end of it. His heart wasn't hammering then like it is now, breath coming in ragged gasps as Neku tries and fails to make any sense of it, and his thighs are sticky and he's kind of surprised - hey, he still has a body - watching in dazed half-comprehension as Joshua lifts the hand he'd had against his leg, tongue licking at the pads of his fingers, pleased with himself, and hey, why not. Neku can hardly argue the point even if he could remember how words work.

"Huh." All he manages before Joshua can catch his mouth again, fingers trailing across his skin - he's buzzing, still on overload, or maybe he's just turned to Music now himself, another piece for the Composer to arrange. An instrument, it isn't any kind of poetic stretch, this isn't exactly in the realm of the normal or the known, not anymore, even his body somewhat of an afterthought. It's better, much better than it's supposed to be the first time around, nothing awkward, not with Joshua leading the way. It's not really a surprise, that he'd make sure Neku compares those imaginary future lovers against this moment, as if anything about this could be forgettable.

He can feel the Composer's hands against his skin, touching in all the right places, because he's had who knows how long to practice - unfair. Unfair. Cheater. The words stutter out, Neku aching for Joshua's touch and the Composer teasing him, long fingers sliding into places Neku cannot even name, inside of him - Joshua is inside of him, their bodies sliding together as if this is not something new, but old and familiar. So easy, and the Music fills him, the Composer's song that is too much, too bright and too loud and he's not strong enough, not whoever everyone seems to think he is, and Joshua's supposed to be smarter than that. He is not a crucible for this fire, it will burn right through him.

"Josh… I can't. I'll dis.. I'll disappear." He bites his lip, shuddering, grinding closer even now, wanting more even as he gasps out the words. He's on the edge again, the Composer has brought him there, and he's burning, Joshua there where his own heartbeat should be, and he'll shatter for certain. "It's too much, too much… I'll break."

"I've got you." He's not even sure if Joshua actually says the words, not sure if that matters here, and Neku feels a vague moment of irritation, even here - Joshua's got him, well that's sort of the problem, isn't it? A laugh, the teasing, mercurial laugh that could mean practically anything and the Composer's hands dig into his shoulders, and this is not the time for a moment of clarity, or revelation, not with the Composer surely trying to screw him senseless, Neku jerking, shuddering, peaking a few moments before Joshua follows, the waver in his Song - the Composer's holding on so hard. As if Neku had meant to do it. As if he'd have some reason, to choose the empty darkness over this - is that what Joshua thinks? Is that what this is about, the reason he was angry?

The world returns slowly, the sheets bunched up around him, a pleasant ache when he shifts, a soft moan as Joshua withdraws, although his hands are still there, holding him, and Neku wonders idly if he'll have bruises later. Neku shuts his eyes, listening, the harmony of his Composer and Shibuya impossible to distinguish, but strong and beautiful, and he wishes he could apologize to it, but Shibuya has already forgiven him. The Composer, on the other hand… who can tell? He's finally
let go, stretching, sitting up so that all of Neku's view is taken up by the narrow expanse of his pale back, softly lit by the yellow city lights coming through the gaps in the blinds. Joshua looks so fragile, but that's all a lie, everything Neku thought he'd known was a lie - and is it still lying, that Joshua was angry, or is Neku mistaken? - but he doesn't think so. It isn't just a matter of the Composer getting what he wants; there's the very real possibility that this is proof, actual proof that Joshua gives a shit about him.

Hanekoma waits and polishes the counter and waits and picks up his phone and puts it down half a dozen times. He hasn't been this human, this helpless in so long that he wonders how he ever found it tolerable. Or maybe he didn't. It's been long enough now that he's not exactly sure if the step over to the UG had been an accident or not. Astonishing, how a whole past can be lost to time and disinterest and more pressing concerns. Here it is now, all his secret satisfaction, all his pride in his rebellious meddlings with the Game, his career, the refusal to distance himself from the Real - this is what it all amounts to tonight, the sum total of his ability, to sit here and wait.

It's usually the Composer's place to tease him, whenever Hanekoma is less than satisfied with the result of a Game, when a Player with a particular bit of extra potential is lost. If Joshua loses Neku now, he might very well choose to follow him down. Hanekoma is not as certain as he once was, that he knows his Composer's mind. He would almost certainly abdicate his position, which is still a better outcome than what they'd been facing before the Long Game. From an Angelic view, it's a step up, Neku's loss a regrettable loss, or perhaps sacrifice - and Hanekoma stops playing devil's advocate, will not let himself finish the thought. He feels sick, acid and heartburn even though he hasn't had a cup of coffee in weeks.

Death has many forms in the UG, and there are those slower and worse than just a quick Erasure, and woe to the Reapers and Harriers who think that their strength will make them invulnerable. The slow dissolution of an Imagination, the corrosion of a Soul, it is a horror unlike anything else Hanekoma knows. He believes in Shibuya, he believes in the Game, that eternal engine blazing against entropy, the attempt to balance out great dreams lost, promise abandoned. So much is lost in the world, and so easily. It will hurt, losing Neku this early, when the whole weight of it finally settles on him. Hanekoma will lose the both of them, and he won't recover from that, even if the Angels let him keep going - and they will, out of spite, and he'll die in that slow, slow way, where he keeps existing long after it's ceased to matter. He can play at the penitent all he wants, but it's still terrifying, looking down the barrel of that moment, and he doesn't want to pay for his sins at that price.

It's not safe to go out, but eventually he does. Usually, Hanekoma's above such self-destructive impulses, or perhaps this is simply careless grief, some attempt at atonement, trying to bargain down that grim future. Or he's just distracting himself.

It's a mistake, whatever his intentions, the convenience store lights as frozen and lifeless as a tomb, the buzzing stillness exactly the Realground version of all that he's been trying not to think about. The magazines are garish and loud, full of words that have no interest in arranging themselves for his benefit, and this is what would have taken Neku. Hanekoma can recognize it in his own grim thoughts, that helpless despair. An emotion powerful enough to make the entire world turn spiteful, brittle and empty, simply by believing it so.

He knows better than that, too many years in the UG for such a dramatic end, and doesn't dissolve into Noise as he makes his way to the counter, buys a pack of gum simply to stall for time. He ought to buy cigarettes but his lighter is back at the shop and he doesn't trust himself to try for fire, and the box next to the register is empty. The woman behind the counter is a foot away, but he's
viewing her from orbit, from the other end of the world, and she takes his change without a sound, turns away as he leaves. He's as close to glad as he's ever come, that he can't hear anything from Shibuya now.

A buzz in his pocket, and the phone nearly bounces out of his hands as he snaps it open.

"Josh."

"He's fine." Confident, as if Hanekoma is the only one who'd even been concerned.

"Josh-" Two words are all he's going to get, though. Joshua is already gone, abandoning him for his Conductor and that's fine, really, it is but Hanekoma's definitely pondering how he can add a feature to shock Joshua through his phone, hears himself let out a funny little laugh, and leans against the nearest wall for a moment, definitely does not stumble, or feel his knees start to give. Hanekoma breathes slowly in and out, smoothing it off, smoothing the wrinkles out of his habitual laid-back nature. For an Angel who prides himself on spontaneity, on the benefits of riding the edge between creativity and destruction, he could use a few decades without any real surprises.

The streets are empty, and the night is relatively quiet. Hanekoma steps into his shop with a smile, now that it is not the foreboding place he'd left less than an hour before. He hopes Joshua - well, he has a good idea of what Joshua is doing with Neku, but afterward the Composer had better give his Conductor a few tips on how to keep a little distance between his emotions and his newfound powers. Hanekoma cringes now that he has the space to be grateful - this will be yet another bitching out, and Joshua must know it too, and he flips the lock on the shop door, a small formality now that his mood has improved enough to actually advertise his existence again, but at this moment, he's definitely closed for business.

"It's not the kid's fault. He tried to keep you a secret."

The cafe is the only space left that is really his, that hasn't been censured away, and Hanekoma still never felt the intrusion, never sensed a thing until the man speaks. He turns, half expecting one Angel or another, proactive when they're disgruntled - but this isn't an Angel. Isn't anything so familiar, and Hanekoma follows the long, slow curve of black, the neck of the Crane Noise following in one sinuous brushstroke down to the curve of its pale, moon-colored wing, perfectly poised.

"I can't imagine you're worth it."

Noise changes form depending on location and the time of its creation. Most modern-day Noise mimic various graffiti, the most popular visual mediums, although Hanekoma has seen some that mimic Impressionist paintings, pictographs, even advertising campaigns. Calligraphic Noise are not entirely gone, especially here in Japan, but this one isn't anything he's seen, not for a long time. Hanekoma thinks of a dozen stories at once, bullshit rumors and conjecture and all those who have disappeared over the years, Conductors and Composers and even Angels that most assume either Ascend or are Erased or simply vanish into obscurity. What else could it possibly be? Surely they're all too mature for conspiracy, for the mortal absurdities of secret groups, or hidden assassins.

The crane lunges, one wing extended, the long black tips of its feathers with the sharpness of perfect blades.

The space is his, but it soon becomes clear how little that matters, even when he adjusts his Frequency and the close quarters are no longer such an issue, walls and tables not so important in the higher plane. It's too much to expect the Noise couldn't just follow him here, and if he weren't
the one attempting to land a blow, Hanekoma would be impressed with the grace and speed with which his projectiles are deflected, absorbed, as if this were some sort of dance instead of very real combat. And ok, so this is the first time he's done any real, actual fighting in quite a while, but he's still surprised as he darts back, dodging one wing and scrambling out of the path of the second only to recoil from the first again, to find that he's actually afraid.

Out of nowhere, the long beak jabs forward, and what Hanekoma thinks at first is first blood is actually much worse, the tearing sensation the feel of the Noise grabbing at his shirt, at his entire being, and flinging him down with one sharp snap, back into the RG, and even though Hanekoma leaps up from the floor, swings back as the wings make another concerted effort to take his head off, he realizes it goes no further than that. The crane has - impossibly - frozen his Frequency, and now he's very much at the mercy of four small walls and - damn it - the shop he just finished rebuilding from the last time.

It's a real coffeeshop, not just for Players and Reapers but - hooray for his Angelic eccentricities - for everyone, even though he's in a weird location and mostly people love to show their originality by going to the chain stores in busier areas and what this means now is that while Hanekoma's fighting for his life, a part of him is keeping track of the rising cost of each cup and salt shaker and chair that he's hurling at the Noise. He winces as the wings slice through the countertop and the espresso machine - shit, that was expensive, and a bitch to install - with no resistance, metal and glass screaming as gravity sends it to the floor, beans crunching beneath his feet as he dodges another strike, and the Crane still making no sound. Oh well, he did need a new ice machine.

Feathers shoot out like darts, cracking the wall, deep into solid concrete, and Hanekoma dodges all but the last, and that one doesn't even cut, just tugs a little at his arm as it goes through his shirt, nudges his balance ever so slightly to one side and then it's over. The crane moves, fast enough to lack even the slight blur of a teleport, a frozen beat in time, and Hanekoma stops, caught just as he's ready shift his weight, the edge of one wing resting against his throat. He's breathing hard, waiting, as the moment stretches out, follows the length of the ivory wing to where the crane stares at him with one, unblinking eye.

"I can draw faster than you can move."

"Yes." Hanekoma says slowly, carefully. "I noticed."

One more breath, and the crane steps back, wings folding down, and even as it moves the wings shift and melt, into a hand sheathing a very old sword in a very old way, the Noise form disappearing, revealing the Reaper beneath, though Kariya is still watching him with the same cold, unblinking gaze. After a moment, he smirks, because Hanekoma knows he is gaping.

"Yeah, it sure sucks when they don't tell you anything, don't it?"

"What?" Hanekoma stammers, reaching behind him so that he'll maybe hit a chair instead of ending up on his ass on the floor, grateful to find one still standing. He usually doesn't lose his cool so thoroughly, but there's little reason to pretend he knows what's going on. Of all the people, he never would have - but that was obviously the point. He wasn't just good enough to take on a censured outcast, this was meant for more than that, much more. What were the Angels thinking, to grant anyone this kind of power?

Kariya doesn't move, his hand still firmly on the hilt of his sword.

"You must know you don't need to do that."

The Reaper's eyes narrow. "Yeah, because you'd never lie."

So much venom in his voice, Hanekoma wonders what the Reaper is waiting for. It's been a hell of
a night, even before this sudden revelation, and Hanekoma finds he can do little more than lean his elbows on his knees and wait for his execution. "I assume this is about the Taboo Noise."

"You didn't." He smiles, almost in awe. "Oh, you did - you absolute bastard, I didn't give you enough credit."

Hanekoma's eyes widen at the response. Apparently he's even less popular than he assumed, if there's competing reasons to take his head. "They didn't… do this to you, because of me?"

"Humble, too."

Kariya laughs slightly, though his eyes never change. Hanekoma can't remember the last time he'd given the laid-back Harrier a second glance, Kariya so easygoing, so nonthreatening by Reaper standards that he tended to slip right into the background. Kitaniji paid him little attention, as far as Hanekoma knew, and even Joshua tended to overlook him, quickly bored with the unambitious. The past in Kitaniji's file, the life, the death, the penalty - all of it must be entirely false - so where did he come from, then, and when? If he's anywhere near as old as Hanekoma is, there won't even be a record…

"I get the power when they want to give me the power. Congratulations, you fucked up faster than they could anticipate. Now that things have stabilized - well, it's better than them doing things themselves, isn't it? Keeps their hands clean. I think you know something about that. If I'd had it then, I would have killed you and your Composer before you could take things half so far."

Shit. He can't get Joshua into this, he won't. "I was the one who taught Minamimoto-"

"Fuck Minamimoto." Kariya snarls, looking nothing like himself, and so that lazy, feckless boy has always been a costume, a mask. "You made those goddamned Red Pins. You gave them to the Conductor."

He really is going to die. "The Composer didn't-"

"He thought it was a joke. You don't think I know that? How you play? What you are? You, the Angels, the Composers, you're so high up we just look like ants, and you play as big as you want because you risk /nothing/."

"I…" Hanekoma can't defend himself, won't risk what will certainly make Joshua the bigger target. It's almost fair, to be judged so wrong, to be accused of taking this lightly, of all things. "Everything I did, I did for Shibuya. Either I tried to save it then or we lost everything, everything, that was the choice."

Whatever the Angels told him, whatever Kariya's figured out on his own, Hanekoma can see he didn't know that. What has he seen of Angels - who - that he believes Hanekoma would go to those extremes on a whim?

"I can see it worked out well for you." The first glimpse of the Harrier he's familiar with, there in Kariya's smirk.

"I'd do it all again, if I thought I had to." Hanekoma says, and it's true. As badly as everything he'd done turned out, as close as he came to destroying everything that mattered, if it happened again he would have no choice, wouldn't want the choice not to act.

Kariya isn't looking at him anymore, staring at a point just a little to his right. Still paying attention to every move Hanekoma makes, anything that might be threatening, but he's obviously considering his options. The Harrier finally lets out a little sigh, lifts his free hand to rub at the
bridge of his nose.

"If it were just about the two of us, you'd be dead now. But you're pissing off plenty more than just me, and I don't like them any more than I like you. Besides, Sakuraba would get all over my ass, and keeping him happy seems to be pretty high on everyone's priorities."

Hanekoma doesn't quite have Joshua's sense of humor for assassination attempts. "So because of the Red Pins, you kill me-

"And Neku kills the Composer, and then everyone moves up. Except he didn't feel like playing their game."

You have no idea. Hanekoma thinks, and takes pride in being just mature enough not to reveal everything, just for the fun of watching Kariya's jaw drop. It's an effort.

"… and I don't feel like doing all the grunt work, just for the privilege of being Conductor of a shiny new Shibuya."

"Composer, probably."

A disbelieving choke of laughter, and it's strange to feel a moment of camaraderie with a Reaper who wants him dead, but just happens to hate upper management a little bit more. Still, Kariya has been around, has probably seen everything Hanekoma has and at a much closer proximity to the worst of it. He knows what the upper ranks are capable of, the politics, the ruthlessness of righteousness. And he seems to know Neku, at least enough to understand what he is, the value in him.

"Neku would Ascend, the moment they could get him."

A derisive snort. "He's better off down here in the dirt. Kicking the crap out of foreign Composers."

The story of Neku fighting Manhattan will follow him forever. Hanekoma never bothered to check if New York had suffered any sudden dips in trendspotting for the weeks after the party, though it wouldn't have been surprising.

"He's all right now."

"What?"

"Neku. He's safe." Kariya is staring at him, as if he's not sure exactly what Hanekoma's getting at, but he must know something, the frown there no longer the Angel-killing kind. Hanekoma probably should have stopped talking before he'd started, but there's no backing out now. "He destabilized slightly, after what happened in the Game today. It... he's still here. He's all right."

"Good."

The way he says it is perfectly clear - it's a miracle, unbelievable that you didn't fuck up again. Hanekoma can't exactly argue with that.

"The Composer is... demanding, but Neku's learning. Stability won't do him any good. Shibuya isn't a safe Game, it never has been."

"It's fair. At least, a little more than it was."
A predatory stare that cuts Hanekoma to the bone. He knows, Kariya knows that the Composer's been censured, as weak as Hanekoma himself, and who knows if Neku knows or not, what he is, what it means. All it would take is an order, one ruthless decision, and that would be it, the fastest coup in the UG, approved on all levels. Not that Neku would ever, that he could - but people change, and he knows that and Kariya knows that. Knows that giving up his anonymity is worth it, just to make Hanekoma squirm. Knows Hanekoma can't tell the Composer, won't do it, and he's right. Joshua is far too territorial and in no shape to fight, not this, not a creature granted all the powers of Heaven for the direct purpose of destroying him. Destroying them both.

Before he can think of anything else to say, a small, brown shape hops out from behind Kariya's shoes, and Hanekoma is happy to transfer his dumbfounded look to it instead. A tiny mini-lop, wearing an even tinier top hat. Ok, sure. Fine. Why not?

"I told you to wait outside." Kariya mutters, but the bunny stares back at him, unfazed. A tiny Noise, but Hanekoma is good with them, at seeing the patterns within them, the history, especially a high-level like this, and he understands instantly. Yes, of course, it does make sense that she would still be here.

"I don't suppose I could have that." Hanekoma asks, trying to sound as harmless as possible, though it doesn't seem to work, Kariya staring as if he'd asked to cook it up for a midnight snack.

"It belongs to the Conductor."

Of course it does. Hanekoma leans down, very slowly, and the tiny creature hops into his hand. He lifts it up onto the table - and Hanekoma enjoys the random nature of the universe, he really does, but even this seems to be a bit beyond the pale.

"Who are you? Really."

Kariya pointedly ignores the question. Hanekoma gently pets the mini-lop, scratching under the hat, in between its ears, and she leans into the touch.

"You could have Ascended by now."

The Harrier lifts one shoulder, a familiar, lazy shrug.

"Everywhere's the same."

"You want a cup of coffee?" Hanekoma says, because he hasn't been properly intimidated in several hundred years at least, and he's rather out of practice for how it's supposed to go, especially now that it looks like he's going to survive. Hard to tell if the look on Kariya's face is pity or contempt.

"The kid likes you. Who knows why. I'm not going to tell him what you did, with the pins or the Noise. You handle that shitstorm on your own."

"I-"

Kariya holds his free hand up, cutting him off. "Save it, I don't care. Keep the bunny too, for when the kid comes looking for it. It'll be safe enough here."

"What are you going to do?"

A slight shrug. He has the feeling even Kariya wasn't sure where this night would end, surprised to find himself at the end of it without any blood spilled.
"Enjoy my week off. The kid's keeping it interesting, I might as well stick around for a while." He raises an eyebrow. "And yes, that's a threat. Here's another one - if you ever do anything like that to me again, I will spend the rest of eternity hunting down every you that ever was."
"You don't have to go."

And Neku laughs at him, hard and bitter, staring at him from the doorway as he yanks his shoe up on the back of his heel. Joshua doesn't move, if this were real he could do a thousand things to keep his Conductor from leaving, but what he's seeing now - Neku, his Neku, is still laying next to him, sleeping soundly.

He thinks they're the same age, thinks this might not be exact premonition, but an echo. Yes, maybe an echo and not a taste of the future. There's some other world with some other Joshua who didn't do it right, wasn't clever at the right moment - *lucky* enough - though Joshua doesn't believe in luck.

"Spare me, Mr. Composer. We both know you're better with bullets than drama."

Neku's eyes are hard, and bright - it's up to Joshua, if he wants to think there's anything left there between them. He swallows back what would have had the edge of an apology. It's habit, it's instinct, and Neku sees him do it, smiles in disappointment and disgust.

"I thought you were special, Josh. I did. I thought you knew things, I thought it was all for my own good - but you're a coward, you're pathetic and it's not." He's not wearing a school uniform, Joshua doesn't recognize the clothes - did he drop out? Neku would attack him now if he could, not to kill, just to hurt. "It's ugly, this is ugly right down to the core, and what am I then? I'm the present you got, to cheer yourself up? Well, fuck that. You deal with it. You take your pretty cage and your stupid Game and you deal with it all on your own."

He's broken Neku's heart. Joshua instantly tries to see, get inside his Conductor's mind to figure out how it happened, but there's no way to read the heart or mind of a possibility.

"What happened?" He blurts, ignoring the hint of edgy panic - this isn't his world, this might not ever exist at all, but whoever this Neku is, the boy doesn't care, burned far too many times to be sympathetic.

"You really thought it would be enough. You don't want to talk to me, so fucking me changes everything? Makes it all better? You're not even worth hating." He turns. Opens the door.

"Don't." Joshua says, struggling forward, the ugly world more real than his own for a moment, and he reaches out to push himself up and the illusion disappears and succeeds only in pretty much backhanding his own, still-sleeping Neku, the other boy lurching awake with a yelp, one hand up to his face.

"Fuck, my nose! Damn, Josh, what? What is it?" Neku blinks at him, at where he's staring, trying to figure out what's caused the alarm, where he should attack first. That other world has faded to nothing, and Neku doesn't know, can't see what Joshua sees anyway. His confusion quickly turns
to irritation, Neku grimacing slightly as he rubs the ache away. "Don't worry, if it's Minamimoto again, I'll just shoot myself."

Joshua still hasn't answered, can see this Neku - the only Neku, his - frown at him out of the corner of his eye - concerned, curious - not at all sick of him, not yet tired of being the Composer's newest toy.

"Josh, if this is some freaky test of loyalty I will set you on fire. I mean it." And he flops back down on the bed, hand over his eyes, lifting his wrist up to peek from underneath, as Joshua stays silent. The naked worry there only reminds the Composer of the hate, the loathing he'd seen in the other Neku's eyes - how does it happen? How will he lose?

"Bad dream?" Hesitant, and really, Joshua hasn't been asked many of these questions yet. Or maybe it's just that obvious he won't answer. "I thought you didn't… I mean, you don't sleep, do you?"

"It's nothing." Neku makes a little noise of disbelief, casually falling against him, snuggling up, mussed hair tickling his bare hip. Joshua can keep himself from thinking then, letting the worst of the feelings fade. Refusing to acknowledge the curls of ghost-time, feeling his Conductor shift around a bit in the dark room.

"We didn't… I mean… in this bed. It seems kind of… not rumpled enough. Where exactly were we… uh, um…?"

It finally makes Joshua smile, his voice sweetly innocent. "Yes, Neku?"

"Oh for fuck's sake, nevermind." He grumbles, burying his face in the pillow. Still not quite ready to deal with the concepts of time and space and dimensions as they relate to his sex life. A pity, really, no reason to think he'd be less inventive there than he is in everything else he does. Joshua reaches down, strokes his hair, the novelty of being here at all mixing with the vision of that other reality, and how close he did come to losing Neku. Joshua frowns, reaching down into Neku's Music, to cut off the chance of that happening again, a slight adjustment -

"Or you could just talk to me about why you're pissed." Neku sighs, rolling onto his side, not quite glaring at him. Joshua is so used to slipping in and out undetected, from thoughts, from lives. He's less sorry for what he's done than that Neku has caught him at it.

"I should have curtailed your powers, until you had better control over them."

Neku snorts, with the stray thought zinging off that he'll have better control of them sometime around never.

"You could have just told me I could knock myself emo. It's not like I did it on purpose." Neku frowns. "And it's not… it really didn't have anything to do with you, okay? I mean, from now on it'll probably all be about you, so don't feel left out."

"So what was it about?" They both know he doesn't have to ask. The boy is so clear in Neku's mind's eye Joshua barely has to try to see him. The past, the betrayal so important it became an entrance fee. A really great argument for why Joshua hasn't bothered having many friends.

Neku goes quiet, and still. "No. No, I get to keep that one. You don't tell me why you wanted to destroy Shibuya, I get to keep that one for myself."

The fact that Joshua can look for himself isn't the important part. He's given Neku that, hasn't he? Allowed his Conductor to become important enough, that it makes a difference.
"What did you mean, about my wings?"

"Mm?"

"Last night. You said there was something I didn't understand about them."

Joshua runs a fingertip down Neku's shoulder blade, getting a shiver and an adorable scowl as his reward. "Open them up."

"No touching." Neku grumbles, sitting up, and Joshua smiles innocently, putting both hands up and away, and his Conductor will simply pay with interest later on, so he might as well be chivalrous now. Neku frowns, obviously trying to summon them, rewarded after a moment only with the sound of his stomach trying to eat its way out of his body.

"The hell…? So, how do I control this?"

"Control what, Neku? You need to eat something. I can adjust your Music, but I can't do anything about the fact that you're alive. It takes a lot of energy to walk between worlds."

Neku nods, and the sudden loss of a warm body beside him is balanced out by the sight of Neku shrugging himself back into his underwear, ambling around the foot of the bed, groggy and wobbly and entirely unaffected. It shouldn't be so captivating. It all shouldn't feel so new, but Neku looks up at the doorway, sees Joshua watching him, and he can see the blush, even in the dark. It catches in his throat, this perfect moment, he can feel it digging in, urgent - look at this. Look at this and remember, for when it's gone.

Neku makes a gesture, a short motion with one hand, and Joshua reaches up instantly to deflect the telekinetic throw, the pillow hovering an inch or so from his head. His Conductor, casually wielding his powers, and in the Composer's inner sanctum at that, too innocent to think it means anything. Maybe he thinks all this is normal, to wander through Joshua's home in the extremely late or very early hours, the lights off, only the slight glow of the fridge being opened to light the way. Joshua listens to him rummage through the shelves and refuses to feel grateful. Desire is the path to all suffering. Unfortunately, it's also where the fun is.

"You had a lot of food in there." Neku says, an assortment of takeout containers tucked precariously under his arms so he can make the trip back to bed already shoveling food in his face from the top one. He makes a face back at Joshua's frown, easily communicating without words - if Joshua's going to twist the laws of space and time for his own gains, he's just going to have to keep twisting them now.

"Besides, I don't make that much of a mess." Neku says, breaking a second pair of chopsticks and handing them over, and they pass the container back and forth, eating shrimp and rice.

"Did you do this for me?" Neku says, a vague gesture with his chopsticks at the container in his other hand.

"I thought some congratulations were in order. Until I realized I could just take advantage of your fragile emotional state for sex." Neku's stopped in mid-chew, Joshua can hear it, and smiles. "You're welcome."

"You are such an asshole. Quit hogging the blankets."
Her Fallen, her newest, weeps softly to himself, clutching at his shoulders, bowed and shaking. Still fresh enough to cry, to remember why he should. The others are mostly silent, have been quiet for so long, although as Saika thinks of them she can hear dim echoes of their screams as they startle and scatter, pressing to the very edges of her, birds in the eaves. It would be just like it was. It had been her promise then, and Saika has never lied. They were never strong and now they never will be, it is the natural order of things. Only Uzuki slipped away, played hide-and-seek for this long - so clever, so good at running.

Shibuya's Conductor is the thin spot, the place that will tear away. How wonderful. It took her a moment, when she felt him falling, felt the emptiness reach for him, to remember what the name was for what she was feeling. Surprise.

She's never met anyone else here, in the dark, only the ones she brings with her. He is like her, though - he will be like her, he just hasn't realized, the thin membrane between him and the end of all suffering like an egg stripped of its shell, all he has to do is ask. But then, he didn't join her, did he? He faded, and it was as if the darkness had never seen him, and he slipped back into the world of bright lights and paper towers - the lie of the Real.

Uzuki's gun is still warm in her hand, and important, a way to tie her to this place. She gets… distracted, otherwise. So much to want in the world, so many places to go - she wants an Angel, to wrap her hands around, to feel it crack and splinter and scream. The Fallen have already learned to keep their distance from her, clever little things, but the Angels will try to stop her, yes they will. They will. The anticipation is thick blood in the back of her throat.

Neku's trembling, can feel his wings quivering all the way to the tips, stretched up high enough to brush his ceiling back home, but nowhere close in the Composer's posh apartment. Big surprise the hands-off order didn't last more than five minutes but hey, it's not exactly like he's complaining, straddling Joshua's thighs and trying to catch his breath. Joshua's no longer touching, just humming something quietly, but the sound resonates lightly through his wings as if they're hollow, and it feels amazing, and he could seriously just stay here forever and the only thing that keeps him from begging for more - a lot more - is that Joshua's expecting to hear it, and he gets even more pleasure at the moment not giving the Composer what he wants.

"At least this time, it won't be the bullets that kill me." He manages, though Joshua doesn't need the compliment. He's got to get back to making out in the Realground. It's the only way he stands even half a chance.

"I'm not the one who keeps flapping about." Joshua says dryly, as if he hasn't even been paying attention. Neku's wings drop down with a slight snap as he all but squawks in outrage.

"You told me there was something I needed to know! Unless there was no secret, and you're just being yourself. Again."

"It's not any secret, dear. Just look." Neku cranes his head back, it's easier to move them when he's not thinking about it, and it takes a few moments to bend the wing down, stretch it out to where he can get half a good look. He still doesn't know what Joshua's talking about, the dark twists and curves providing no answers.

"Do you remember what Konishi's looked like?"

"Not really. I was a little preoccupied with kicking her ass, so I could go Erase the Composer and save Shibuya."
"And avenge me."

Neku leans back. Joshua smirks. If he takes the bait, it will lead to another twenty minutes of bitching and then another twenty of groping and then he'll probably be hungry again and this night really is going to last forever.

"What about her wings?"

"The points. The wings are an expression of the soul of the owner - hers were weapons. All the Reapers, Neku, theirs are sharp right to the tips. Yours though, yours are..." The Composer trails off with a slight gesture, and now Neku can see what he means, the gently sweeping curves. Twists and arcs but not a single edge, beautiful and elegant but lacking that particular killer instinct.

"So you're saying I'm too weak to win." Neku sighs, not needing another lecture on this subject. Surprised, when Joshua catches his chin, forcing his gaze back up, violet eyes still piercing, even in the dark.

"I'm saying you're you, and you still win. You don't seem to need what the rest of them can't live without."

Neku wonders if Joshua meant to say so much, or if he's just musing aloud. It almost sounded like a compliment.

"Minamimoto tried to shoot you, in the Realground." Neku braces himself, not sure what might happen, but the question's been with him for a long time, and this might be the first real chance to get something like an answer, nothing between them but a twisted bedsheet and whatever distance the Composer chooses to keep. "You deflected the shots, of course. He never had a chance."

Joshua doesn't answer, not even the slightest smirk. Waiting for what he's probably already heard in his Conductor's thoughts, no surprises even if Neku feels as if certain pieces are just now choosing to slip together.

"So then I was supposed to shoot you, in your own Throne Room, where your powers were at their strongest?"

"With an Angel watching." Joshua says, because Neku is thinking it. Thinking a lot of things.

"I failed your test." The only way to save Shibuya. It had been an ultimatum, there had been no other choice. His life and his friends and all of Shibuya, and still, Neku hadn't been able to do it. "You pushed me right to the edge and I didn't do what I was supposed to... but I was never going to kill you, was I? It wasn't the point. If I'd pulled the trigger-"

Joshua sighs, leaning back, a strange, bitter little smile playing in the corner of his mouth. Neku thought that this close, he might see something, might catch a hint of what the Composer hides so well. So here it is, the very little details, and it's still a code, an ancient language he will never understand.

"Shibuya would have been saved. You would have proven your devotion to it, to the people who lived in it. It would have been saved."

"I didn't shoot you, though."

Joshua smiles.

"Oh, Neku. I was just bored, that's all. It was a little fun for me. My own Game. I'm whimsical like
Except he's lying, not even trying to hide that he's lying. He was going to destroy Shibuya and then he just... didn't, and Neku would like to think it was because he didn't pull the trigger, that he passed some other, secret test of innate goodness or some bullshit, but that's really stupid and - obvious, and Joshua's never that obvious. The Composer's hand has slipped to Neku's wrist, one finger beneath the bracelet he's still wearing, rolling it between thumb and forefinger, thinking. It may be the first time Joshua's actually thought before saying something to him.

"I was just bored."

If this were before the Game, Neku wouldn't have understood. Even after, up until just today he would have been angry at the flippant explanation, and Joshua's still leaving him the opening to take it that way, if he wants to. Except that it doesn't mean the same thing here - those simple words, those everyday feelings of frustration and ennui have nearly unlimited destructive potential in the UG. Joshua is being deadly serious.

"The future I saw for Shibuya... it was better to raze it down to silence, then condemn it to crumble away." The Composer isn't with him, staring into some distant, solitary world, and Neku thinks he might know that place very well. "I was certain of this." He lets out a suggestion of a laugh. "I let Megumi have his say, make his attempt - but I knew better."

"Who hurt you, Josh?"

It's entirely the wrong thing to ask, because Neku's too close and because he knows he's right. Joshua flinches, his eyes brilliant and sharp in the fraction of a second, before he looks away, and Neku knows, he understands some in some small part because he was just there. Neku has just watched four people die rather than let him save them, watched Players choose to kill their partners, their friends, and how many times has Joshua had to stand back and let it happen? The Composer has always seemed all-powerful, dedicated only to making Neku's life, everyone's life more difficult - but they can hurt him back. Any Player, anyone can, all Joshua has to do is see something in them, write the Song of the city in their favor and watch them turn away from it, watch them betray and abandon and fail. How many times would it have to happen, how much stupidity and futility and squandered possibility, before Neku would lose hope? Before he would give up and just let them all drown in the Noise they'd created?

"It was mostly a matter of... perspective. Unfortunately, that has very little to do with strength, or power." A small smirk. "If I were more popular, Ascension would have been... strongly suggested."

All this time, Neku never realized Josh already had the choice. "You don't want to go?"

Joshua snorts. "More paperwork, less fun. There's a reason Hanekoma prefers it here, why he has a job here, and I... well, if I'm down here I might get Erased, and that's too good a possibility for them to want me to leave. I thought any other warnings were simple arrogance. Angels justifying their inadequacies by blaming it on the Realground."

"It wasn't true, then? About Shibuya? Nothing was ever... wrong?" Neku says, treading carefully on the thinnest ice. Joshua glances away, barely shaking his head.

"Megumi made a bet with me. And I suppose... I suppose I made one with myself." He looks straight at Neku, violet eyes rapier-sharp, going right through him, so that there is no doubt of what he means. The Composer changed, realized his mistake entirely because of him. Neku's heart does that strange twisting thing in his chest that feels very much like flipping Frequencies.
"It took you three weeks to realize you had to shoot me again?" He murmurs, and sees what is an incredibly satisfying moment of surprise on Joshua's face, and the Composer laughs, not his usual calculated chuckle but something much more honest. Neku suddenly goes cold - if Joshua had been more perceptive, if he'd realized the flaw wasn't in the city, that it was personal, he would likely have removed himself from the board long ago, and not by Ascension.

"You bastard. You selfish, stubborn bastard." Neku murmurs, loving him for it, feeling the same shock and gratitude as he did when Joshua came back from the dead in the Throne Room, the world ending and everything going straight to hell, but Joshua was alive. He leans forward, elbows against the back wall, and kisses him fiercely, grateful at the moment for every one of the Composer's worst traits. Joshua's expression, when he can see it again, has returned to its usual quiet, foxlike amusement, glancing over at where Neku's left arm is bracketing his cheek.

"I think I'm going to need to invest in a headboard." As if he has to do more than think - and Joshua quirks an eyebrow and Neku flushes furiously - that was not a request, jackass!

"Promise me something." He says, as good a time as any for things he shouldn't say, Joshua's hand stilling from where it had been sliding slowly up his chest, the Composer's eyes instantly sharp and wary, closed and arrogant and confidently smiling all at once, and Neku nearly laughs at the sight, Joshua so defensive with him of all people, just a little Conductor who wasn't even that a few months ago. Joshua doesn't consider him an equal - not even close, and why should he? - but that's fine, Neku can deal with that. But there are things here that matter so much more than he does, and this… this is one thing he might be able to fix before it breaks.

"I'm not going to let up on that horrible ramen shop, Neku. It's practically a personal insult."

"Josh." Neku says softly, not letting it go. "When you get tired of me, when I'm… when I'm nothing special anymore and you've moved on, or when we get into some stupid fight and you throw me out of here on my ass - promise me. Promise, no matter how much you hate me or don't care or… whatever, that you won't take it out on Shibuya."

It isn't anything Joshua expected from him, Neku can see that. After a moment, Joshua reaches up, pushes a few strands away from his eyes, but Neku can't back down from this. Needs the answer.

"You can't possibly think that little of yourself."

Neku shrugs. It feels easier, because his wings are gone. He wonders when they went away. "It's life, right? Things change. People change. Even when you give it your best, sometimes… it all just goes wrong. But I can't make Shibuya a consequence. I can't."

"I bet I could convince you." Joshua says softly, and for a half-second they're in the Throne Room again and Neku's hand is sweating around what might very well have been the gun that killed him, now pointed at a Conductor who can turn his feelings off at a whim. But then Joshua smiles, what almost seems wistful, a sad nostalgia that's all a part of his position and his ageless world. "I promise."

The relief is greater than he'd expected, and Neku kisses him again, because hey, it's the thing to do when your boyfriend promises not to destroy a chunk of the world, right? Also, he's here, and it's still the middle of the night, so they've got time - but it's been the middle of the night for what seems like way more than the middle.

"You know I'm still going to be here in the morning, don't you?"

Joshua smirks. His eyes actually glitter. The Composer combo package.
"Not that it wasn't tempting to add on some hours until they came pounding on the ceiling, but Sanae's already a bit twitchy. He'll start shedding feathers at this rate."

It's not - maybe - quite as bad as his father walking in on them making out, but it's close enough. Neku scrambles back, gaping at what he should have realized long before now.

"Mr. H? He knows? About you and me and… oh god, he knows. He totally knows."

"The Music, Neku. I'm sure you've seen it out there on the street, people who are dating, or married - and especially when they're cheating." Neku can feel his cheeks burning, surprised there's no actual spontaneous combustion, as the Composer's words sink in. "You know I have Very. Strong. Music."

Joshua's leering would mean a bit more if Neku weren't currently frozen in the headlights of oncoming humiliation.

"Oh god. Oh crap. Oh… wait, wait - is everyone gonna know?"

"Are you ashamed of me, Neku?" Joshua instantly pouts, looking almost like a human being with actual feelings, except for his eyes, shining in triumph. It's obvious he'd be in hysterics if it wasn't so far beneath his dignity.

"Oh my god, I'm actually having sex with you." Neku groans, shoving a pillow over his face and hoping against the laws of physics that he'll just smother. "I'm having sex with you and everyone knows."

"Well, you'll probably still have to tell all your friends."

"Shut up!"

A call to the police, an anonymous, concerned citizen worried about suspicious activity. Uzuki is forced out of the apartment she's squatting in within twenty minutes, and two hours and another call later, she's out of her backup as well.

It's raining. Saika leans against a wall and lets it drip down and through her like oil. Just for fun, she sees if maybe fate will bring Uzuki to her, without any special help. She'd take her now, but it would be a shame. There's so much she can do here. The Composer is so strong and this place, this place is home and there's so much she can do.

She taps out the number with her pinky finger and purrs a hello when Uzuki answers, and listens to the bleeps and swearing of her beloved childhood friend, too terrified to press the right button to hang up. Hears the sharp intake of breath, a trembling sob, and bounces the gun against her thigh until she is listening to nothing but a dialtone.

There is a still time between places, a dark sea well below the Underground, thick with tides and currents, and it's there that she drifts and waits, unraveling with anticipation. All there is anymore, the wanting before the having, and even in this world where she never has to wait, this will be special. She closes her eyes, and dreams Uzuki. Pressed against the green tile in the girl's bathroom, cigarette ashing between her fingers as she yields, gives Saika all that she wants. Trembling and loving and hating for everything she can't have - Saika loves her for that envy, so beautiful in surrender. Always calling to her, always desperate to be free. Poor little Uzuki. Saika will save her.

A boy and a girl are walking along the street, the umbrella flashing white in the glare of a streetlight.
Saika puts them down the center of the barrel, but that's not what this weapon is for, she's doing more damage than that now. This world she used to know so well, she can't touch it anymore, but it isn't a sacrifice. Not with what she knows and what she is.

The phone jingles as she closes it up, a few charms attached through the tiny loop. One of them is a bead of glass with a real four-leaf clover inside. For luck.
Your love is life piled tight and high set against the sky; That seems to balance on its own.

Chapter Notes

chapter title: snow patrol - lifeboats

Neku feels good. Better than good - the last time he'd been this glad to wake up was the day after he'd finished the Game. The irreplaceable thrill of being in his own bed, safe, not about to be murdered by bastards, and with all the rest of his life in front of him.

So yeah, his life hadn't exactly gone back to normal after that, but he was still going to take this as a win.

The Composer is nowhere in sight, not in the bedroom or the main room, and Neku relaxes a little bit, no reason Joshua would bother spying on him in his own house, so he is alone in his own thoughts, for what feels like the first time in ages. He grins at his reflection, and it is absurdly thrilling to dig some leftovers out of the fridge and just stand there, eating them and looking out the window and this is his life now? The ridiculous apartment, the insane schedule, the wild - well, yeah, it was a pretty wild night. It totally counted. Neku feels a little bit like a rock star.

He has a lot to catch up with, free week or no, still with all his homework and art projects and the reports of the Game to write up - and he still feels the pang of sadness, but this - it mattered, what he was doing. Even when it didn't work out, even when he tried and failed, it's too important to give up. It doesn't make any sense, that the little that Joshua had said should somehow balance out against all the crap, but it did. He'd seen something real there - and maybe it was ridiculous, for that to be enough, but it was. It is.

And the sex? Well the sex has taken any chance of his ever being taken seriously by his Composer and clubbed it to death with his dignity, but the likelihood of a real battle of wits with Joshua was certainly more wishful thinking on his part than reality. So now that he's firmly ax-murdered his reputation, he can get on with his life.

He needs to get some clothes and he needs to get out, before Joshua can come back and render the entire clothes part irrelevant. It's a little easier said than done, as the clothes seem to be in the order of most to least embarrassing. The Composer's obviously been in here since the last time Neku flipped through the racks - there weren't really two girls' school uniforms here the last time he checked, were there? A lot of it looks really flammable, and at some point soon he needs to take it all out into an alley and practice his pyrokensis. Neku finally settles on some Tiger Punks pants with a few dangly belts and the first t-shirt he grabs for, kicking some boots out of the closet as he shuts the door.

Given the Composer's command of subtlety, it's really only a matter of time now before some brand starts up a line of designer whips and chains. Neku blushes a little bit, promising himself not to be such a total freaking slut the next time, and then blushes at the thought that next time is probably a lot closer than he thinks.

And then he remembers that Mr. H knows. Or will know. Soon.
The sound is unintelligible, 'oh' 'god' and 'why' and 'me' all crashing together in one pathetic groan.

Halfway home, Neku reaches for his phone, might as well start there with getting back into his normal life. He's surprised to feel an unfamiliar shape in its place, with a shinier finish, much slimmer than his admittedly crappy phone. It wasn't like he'd needed to do much with it when he'd had it before the Game, one of those things his father had bought him because it was just easier to act as if they were average people than bother with the particulars.

It's a CAT phone, the limited edition in yellow with the little black stars edged in gold and Neku has pictures of this phone on his computer, just like he has catalogs and brochures and photo sets for pretty much everything CAT brands that he can't afford. Maybe it's not a good idea to be just accepting such expensive gifts from his Composer, because wow it totally doesn't make him feel like a high-class hooker or anything - his virginity for a really posh phone - but Joshua's sidestepped the issue by just throwing it in his bag, so he's also saved Neku the effort of half-hearted protests he doesn't really mean.

He flips it open, not so surprised to find that all his information has been transferred over, including an unexpected number of voice mails. Two of them are from people he doesn't know, both stammering through a fast question about his work and his pricing and Neku imagines they're going to try and beg it out of him for free. It really is feast or famine - he'll have to spend some of this week just trying to network - still needs a website, really does - and Neku reminds himself not to mention any of it in front of Joshua. The phone is one thing, but Joshua's shown no reservations so far toward tweaking and altering whatever the hell he feels like, and Neku's art is his and only his, and it's going to fail and succeed on its own merits, or on luck, or a fickle marketplace. Anything but the Composer's influence.

The next call is actually a surprise, Tsuyoshi hesitantly apologizing for getting Neku in trouble with the principal, even though Neku hasn't thought about that since - well, he'd barely been thinking about it while it had been happening. How did the other boy even find out - or does everyone know? It's weird to think he might actually score a hit in the school's gossip network, after so long as little more than a shadow.

Two calls from a worried Shiki - he can hear it in her voice, and she even apologizes for bothering him - this was the message she was leaving, while he watched her from above, yesterday. Trying to be light-hearted, just that they hadn't seen him for a while and if maybe he wanted to do something and, you know, no pressure. She misses him. Eri says hi.

Neku nearly calls her then and there, but he's almost home and there's a lot to get done and he's still not quite done processing everything that's happened. He's still a bit of a loner, needs a little space and time for himself, and so it's satisfying to climb the stairs to his somewhat rundown apartment, let himself in, and shut the door on the world for a while, though Shibuya is ever and always humming and burbling away in the back of his thoughts.

"Hey Neku."

A long, pale arm lifts up over the back of the couch in the living room, waving slightly at him before disappearing again. It's way too muscular to be Joshua. Neku blinks, shuffling forward in the silence that follows, more in confusion than wariness. That voice, he maybe kind of might know who -

"Long night?" 777 asks, looking at him through barely-slitted eyes, stretched out and shirtless, flat on his back. Neku opens and closes his mouth a few times, quite stupidly, but the Reaper's already
shut his eyes, one hand over his face, sheer exhaustion in every inch of his lithe frame, like a piece of meat that's been pounded flat.

"You were dead."

A slight chuckle. "Still am."

"Erased." Neku corrects himself, although really, close enough when there's more important things to discuss. "You were… I saw you. At the venue. You were Noise."

"Yeah." 777 sighs, opens his eyes a little wider. "It was you that went along with their stupid plan, wasn't it? BJ and Tenho. You made them Harriers and everything. I can't believe they had the balls."

"So you…" This is something he should know, something really obvious. Probably part of the Conductor's manual he sort of skimmed while looking for information about Joshua and trying to keep himself from getting celestially pantsed.

"When a Noise at a high enough level absorbs enough energy…"

"The Players." Neku murmurs. He didn't… he hadn't wanted to think too much about it, so he'd never considered that BJ and Tenho had wanted anything more than to keep their friend secure and together, feeding him just to keep him from dissolving. He'd never let himself imagine there might be more.

"It was those last two that did it. You played them for a while." 777 says, and there's a question in it, because he knows enough to know that Neku wouldn't screw over two winners for his sake. Neku doesn't say anything, not quite sure what to feel. Except that it's not regret, and whatever's slipped into its place is far less simple.

"The idiots dragged me here." 777 sighs, hand flopping down to his chest. "I can get going pretty soon, just give me a few more-"

"Take your time." Neku says, half-surprised at himself, but this… it's not unwelcome. 777 doesn't say anything, maybe he's fallen asleep again - it's still quiet, and if Neku goes into his room and shuts the door, he can just sort through this right along with the rest of it.

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"I don't know if we should do this."

Eri frowns, and looks at her as if she's crazy, because in Eri-world hesitation is just a silly waste of time. Of course getting to the bottom of this - not that either of them are sure what 'this' is or if there even is a 'this' - is absolutely imperative. Anything but a direct, open confrontation will just make things worse and Neku will be glad they care so much about him to come barging in like this and Shiki mostly wishes she'd never said she was worried out loud.

"He said he was going to be busy, this week. So it's probably no big deal."

"Well, now it's the end of the week. So it's fine if we see if he's fine. Besides, if you keep sighing like that I'm going to pull all my hair out."

"I'm not sighing. I'm just…"

"Worried." Eri laughs, winning the argument, although her smile somehow includes Shiki in the
win - it would be frighteningly easy to hate her, Shiki thinks, if only a few little things were
different. Shiki shrugs - she's probably right, it probably is the right thing to do and Neku won't be
mad. Even if he is, they won't stay long, just long enough to -

Eri lets out a little, impatient sigh, and Shiki glares at her and presses the buzzer.

Nothing happens. Shiki realizes she's holding her breath, and feels stupid and silly for being this
nervous - it's not really her business, is it, what Neku does or where he is and he told them he was
busy. It's this wierd nervousness that she can overlook when they're all together. As soon as she
sees Neku it's usually all right but when he's gone it comes back, the reminder of how boring she
is, how bad at making friends on her own. Neku's the first boy who's ever - it doesn't matter that it
isn't romantic, or maybe she's stupid for needing it at all, Neku in the 'friend' category, something
she's won on her own.

The sound of movement, and before she can think about what she's going to say, the door opens.
Shiki squeaks. Eri's jaw drops, which is one of those things that never happens. Of course, it's not
every day she's staring at a mostly naked guy.

He's wet, too, holding the towel around his waist with one hand, giving them a lazy, half-interested
stare. The aesthetic portion of her brain notices he's got a really excellent six-pack. The rest of her
is busy watching a little water droplet run down his chest toward his left nipple. It's pierced. Both
of them are, but she can't really ogle both at the same time. Maybe she shouldn't be ogling at all.
Eri is not keeping up her end of the bargain, to keep them from looking like idiots here. Then
again, they've never had a plan for this sort of thing.

Whatever this sort of thing is.

"Hey Neku!" The man leans back, yelling, just as Shiki is about to wave her hands around and
apologize for being at the wrong apartment. "I think you got company!"

He strolls away from the door without another glance, leaving it open behind him, his part of this
discussion obviously over.

"Hey, Eri." Shiki murmurs, wondering if her eyes are ever going to go back into the socket quite
correctly. "I'm think I'm breaking up with you."

"I saw him first, bitch." Eri murmurs back, and at least she has the decency to still sound surprised.

Neku tries to do the reports first, thinks of it like ripping a bandage off, no reason to hesitate, just
jump in and get it over with. Mr. H said it helped to write it out in the crisply professional language
preferred by those in charge, a way to disconnect a little bit from what has happened - but Neku's
not sure he can even do, that he should do what a part of him really wants to do. Put this all in a
little box, and pretend he's got a handle on it now. One week, this was all just one week, and just
because it didn't go well doesn't mean he's a damn expert on what else might go wrong. Hell,
maybe next time someone will try to kill him for his job, that's got to be just around the corner.

It's not exactly a surprise that his hands keep moving for his sketchbook, and finally Neku tosses
responsibility to the side, tries to see if he can process any of this through pictures, the bizarre
push-and-pull with terrible things happening and then the good and Shibuya contentedly
whispering away and it all comes from the same place, somehow. He'd ask Josh, but there's no
doubt the Composer would just say he was thinking too much.
"Hey Neku! I think you got company!" 777's voice breaks him out of his contemplation - two pages or so of sketches, poses, some building stuff, the bare lines of figure studies. Nothing of any great or startling importance, although there's a pose here and a curve there that he circles, to go back to later. It's kind of weird, to open his door and have absolutely no idea who he's going to see, although Shiki's Music sweeps across the space between them just before he steps out into view.

Neku glances back, a bare calf and a glimpse of steamed-up mirror glass all he gets of 777 before he shuts the door again, and that's probably why both Shiki and Eri are staring at him, and then at each other, and Shiki's got her hands half-up in that embarrassed waving thing she does and Eri looks like she's really really proud of him and boy, that's not good. That's not good at all.

"Can we come in, or are you busy?" Eri says, too cheerfully. Shiki squeaks, tries to cover it up with more flailing.

"Sure. Come in."

"Save me, Neku." Eri's smiling still, but shaking her head in obvious dismay as she steps inside. "What in god's name are you wearing? Bondage pants and a mint green shirt… and purple boots? For the sake of my sanity, tell me you were mugged at gunpoint and they forced you to dress like this."

"What's wrong with my boots?" Except that he's still got them on inside, but no one's around to tell him not to, and Neku thinks it'll take at least one more day before he's sure he won't have to dash out the door with no notice and put out another fire - literally. He's seen some of the Wall Reapers get bored enough to start playing with their pins.

"Well, at least you're going lighter on the product." Eri reaches out, gently wuffling his hair - he didn't have a chance to do much with it, and isn't ready to even think about actually leaving things over at Joshua's - hair-care or otherwise. "How do you even do it? Three hours on the hair care, and five seconds on the wardrobe."

"I think it looks… um…" Shiki says, coming to his aid only to realize halfway that it's not any sort of defensible position. "I do like your hair."

"Thanks." Neku says flatly, enough to make them both laugh.

They settle in around the kitchen table, and Neku opens the fridge before he remembers there's nothing in it. Shocked to find himself grabbing some little bottled milk teas anyway. One of the Def Marchers must have stopped off at a convenience store, left a few bags for 777, even though the end result is still not much better than slovenly bachelor paradise. Not that either Shiki or Eri are paying any attention, glancing at the bathroom door when they think he's not watching.

"I was going to give you a call later." He calls over his shoulder. "I've been, uh, a little busy."

"Of course!" Shiki says, maybe a little louder than she intended to, sinking back in her chair, interested all of a sudden with the label on her bottle. "I mean, yeah, we've been really busy too, working on everything for the show."

"If you want to come over sometime, we can show you all the final designs before they gets boxed up." Eri says.

"You mean so you can use me as a dress form before you have to pack it all away." Neku corrects her. "You do go to a girls' school, right? You have to have options."

"Yeah, but you're patient, cheap, and a sucker for Shiki's puppy eyes."
Shiki pretends to be offended, and Eri smiles, and it's about then that 777 steps out of the
bathroom. Wearing clothes this time, thank god, but as barely interested as ever, stepping around
them to rummage through the fridge. Neku's vaguely aware he should probably say something, but
he really has no idea what. Nothing in his life to date has provided the right context for talking to a
formerly-dead-still-sort-of-dead-up-and-coming-rock-star currently unwrapping a rice ball with the
refrigerator door still open.

"Hey Neku, I borrowed some of your hair stuff." 777 mutters, running a hand through his now-
spiky hair. "I didn't think you'd mind. You had like nine bottles in there."

"Oh just shut up." Neku says, listening to Eri snicker. Shiki looks up, and makes a strange little
choking sound. Obviously she hadn't recognized him without pants on, but she knows him now.

"OH MY GOD YOU'RE DATING 777?!?!" She shrieks, loud enough for the entire building to
hear, and just as quickly slapping her hands over her mouth, going from carmine to crimson to what
might actually be fire-engine red.

"So." Eri steeples her fingers together in the moment of silence that follows, and her eyes are
sparkling merrily. "Just how did you two meet?"

Neku takes a moment to let it process that yes, this is actually happening, that they think - and he
whips around, staring up at 777, who blinks once, and helpfully takes a bite of his onigiri, leaving
the explanation entirely up to him. Asshole. Stupid typical Reaper asshole!

"Wait, what? Him?! No. No, we're not. I mean, we're just… friends. Sort of. Not really. I'm not,
there's no-" Neku's waiting for 777 to say something, but the other man's still content to keep
chewing, an odd, thoughtful look on his face, as if he's never thought about having sex with Neku
before but hey, now that you mention it - and Neku can feel the heat rise in his cheeks. He's going
to kill 777 again and this time he'll make sure the Reaper comes back as one of those little yappy
dogs that always gets stepped on.

"Oh come on, Neku." Eri punches him on the shoulder. Shiki is trying to disappear under the table,
hands still over her face. "I'd be proud. I didn't think you had it in you to bag a rock star."

"I wouldn't say I'm a rock star, not yet anyway" 777 says, glancing down with calculated humility,
a carefully careless tone of voice guaranteed to drop all panties within a five-mile radius. Yes, it's
certainly wonderful to have him back.

"Are you kidding? Of course you are! I mean… um…” Shiki stammers, looking nearly as
embarrassed as Neku feels. "Eri, we didn't come here to get into his love life. Not that it's… not
that it's a love life, or if it is then... I mean…” She pulls the emergency brake on that train of
thought, and 777 snorts and Neku is glaring at him, Imprinting with everything he's got - I am
going. To murder. You. - but if it even works, it's clear the other man thinks this is all quite worth
it.

"Listen, Neku, I gotta step out for a while. I'll see you later, ok?" He makes a slight gesture of
goodbye to Shiki and Eri, but somehow, between just that and those simple words he's managed to
make it sound like he's got to resupply for the next all-night gay orgy and Neku is going to kill
them he is going to kill them all and turn them into death metal koala bears.

777 shuts the door, and the silence is deafening. Shiki is still staring determinedly at her milk tea.
Eri looks as if she's already designing the wedding clothes. Neku slumps over the table, grinding
his palms into his eyes and - sweet and crispy, deep fried deity-of-choice - this is somehow still his
actual life.
"So when should I come over and put on dresses?"

It's quiet, in the world above the world. Very calm, and white, and bright. Joshua assumes it's supposed to inspire some sort of awe, like the hush of a great cathedral, but ever since they invented waiting rooms in the RG, he can't get the comparison out of his thoughts. He lets them hear that.

Of course, he's still censured, even here, and so what should be clear as day is hazy and indistinct, shapes like clouds in the distance, a substantial, illuminated mist filling most of the room. The only other figure with any distinction is Sanae next to him, wings out, though if they're not going to give him his powers back Joshua sees no point in dressing up, and has kept to his youthful, human form. He lets them hear that too.

"We've been monitoring the difficulties within your Game, Composer." The booming voice, from somewhere up above him. They absolutely love that Great and Terrible Oz routine, and since most of them haven't been out of their clouds for ages, they have absolutely no concept of self-parody. Or situational irony. Or how he hasn't been intimidated by them for a single day in the entirety of his rule over Shibuya.

"Oh? I thought it all finished rather well."

They're never going to get Neku. Joshua really could just give him to them, and they still couldn't keep him, and he's so proud of his Conductor for it. Neku would be bored with them and their cool, rational distance before lunchtime - even before he knew Joshua, Neku loved Hanekoma, loved CAT, and none of these all-knowing imbeciles understands that, or what it means, or that they lost before any of this ever started.

"The issue of Sakuraba's stability was a cause of some concern."

"Nothing out of the ordinary for a new Conductor." As if Tokyo wasn't capable of absorbing the hit, even if something had gone wrong. Vulnerable, yes, but not as fragile as they loved to pretend that it was.

"If we were dealing with an ordinary Conductor, yes. If Neku Sakuraba had no greater power, or value." Maybe it was a mistake not to pay at least a little bit of attention, Joshua can glance here and there among the haze and pretend that he's looking at them, but none of the voices are familiar. Of course, who knows if he'd have any more luck if they were in plain sight.

"He was very nearly Erased!" A shout of protest, maybe Hanekoma knows who it is. Joshua can see the Angel out of the corner of his eye, white wings rising up behind him. It reminds him, for the moment, of Neku. His Conductor, who has Reaper's wings with an Angel's form, and how interesting that is. Not that Joshua will ever say a damn thing about it, to anyone. It hadn't been his intent to keep Neku from Ascending when he'd shot him - as much as anything had been his intent - but let them continue to think it, if it annoyed them so much.

"Yet here he is. As you said, my Conductor is valuable, and now stronger than ever, in a Shibuya that, I believe, is yet again one of the leading Games?" Joshua loves to remind them of that, every chance he gets.

The problem with the levels above the Realground is that, once an Angel has proven themselves, the chances for Erasure dramatically decrease. So even though he's not certain just who is here,
Joshua can be fairly sure he's insulted all of them, directly, at least once. Even the newer ones. So the silence he's listening to now is them trying to maintain their dignity and not jump across their dais and strangle him. Maybe he likes it here more than he thought.

"Kiryu, you may choose to believe that the boy succeeded because of your methods, and not in spite of them, if you wish."

"… and you can certainly keep thinking a Game without risk is anything but running in place."

He hears the reaction of that, rippling through the mist like sunshine, all the old, hissed grievances - his impertinence, his gall, to act as if he were faultless when he ought to be on his knees. Hanekoma's wings shift - he seems a bit more nervous than usual, than the situation demands. Twitchy, when he's seen this play out countless times before, and Joshua's never given them a reason to expect him to be respectful. Like now, when he ought to be quiet and try not to enrage them further.

"You really think once Neku gets tired of me, he's going to do what you want, and take over Shibuya?" He hears Sanae suck in a breath, the rumble shaking the assembled heavens a little bit like thunder on a clear day.

"The matter of your… impulsive decision, with your Conductor…" The voice trails off, rather irate muttering all around. Joshua can't keep track of who's the most angry, though past precedent says they all hate him about the same, just for different reasons.

"What could have possessed you," a second voice rises above the crowd, "to begin this ridiculous liaison."

"Actually, if you check the record, you'll find he kissed me first."

They're not amused.

"It shows a gross disinterest, for the good of your entire district and your Game," A third voice, now from the right. Quite a packed house today. He's ruffled all the right feathers. "As well as a rather shocking abuse of your power - shocking even for you, Kiryu."

It's not the angle he expected them to attack from, usually they don't give a damn what goes on in the ranks, and he bristles, the words coming out tight and clipped.

"If you're suggesting that I manipulated my Conductor-"

"Is there any doubt you've manipulated your Conductor? Your 'proxy,' hand-picked and dragged into the Game in clear violation of every possible tenet. Groomed solely for your… convenience?" Disgust drips from the disembodied voice. "Forgive us if we have trouble accepting this situation as proof of your Conductor's free will in action."

Leave it to them, the grandiloquent guardians of the status quo, to make it all seem small, and ugly, and wrong. Before Joshua can say something he won't regret, Hanekoma steps forward.

"I have been observing the situation, as always, and I don't believe-"

"Your opinion has no meaning here." Practically a roar, the unspoken curse at the end still easy enough to hear - *Fallen*. Even if he still has his wings. Hanekmoma stops talking, but at least he still stands tall, whatever shame he still feels not because he's failed them.

"You've long since let your feelings for the Composer you were supposed to educate blind you to
the reality of your situation."

"What reality is that, exactly?" Joshua says, because they've been over some version of this all before, back with their original censure, if not before. "According to the official records, the facts stand with us. Shibuya has not only recovered from any supposed ill effects of the Long Game, it has in fact flourished, along with my Conductor. That this has all taken place with both the Composer and Producer of Shibuya working under handicaps should be a reason for praise, if anything. And for the record, if I ever do need a dose of self-righteous accusation, I've got my Conductor on speed-dial, and he's more than happy to indulge me."

Hanekoma doesn't say anything, but Joshua hears the slight laugh he's hiding - and there's nothing they're going to do, nothing they can do, really. He's been dragged up here so they can lord it over him that he's still censured - as if not seeing them is any real punishment - and because they don't have his Conductor and they don't have his Shibuya and it's much, much more difficult to act ethereal and untouchable when you don't automatically get what you want.

Neku's taught him that.

"If you're not going to destroy me today, I do need some time to prepare for the next Game. Unless you'd like to return my powers, and then by all means, I'd be happy to do this all day."

Joshua ends up showing himself out, with Hanekoma following a few steps behind. For all the grandness in this place, he's fairly sure they regret not Imagining a door to slam in his face.

The air is… clearer now, with Kiryu gone, and the Angels shift in their seats and half of them are glad that it's over while the other half, the half that haven't learned yet, are seething, imagining all the ways to make Shibuya's Composer choke on his pride. The older ones know better - he'd Erase himself first, and take his entire realm with him. There's three weeks of proof, if anyone ever doubts it.

"The poor boy." A murmur of agreement. Sakuraba is hardly at fault, who can blame him? The Composer's will is a tangible thing even here, and it should have been obvious, anticipated that he would seek to undo any threat his Conductor might pose, by going after his heart. Convincing the kind, naive boy he was somehow 'misunderstood,' perhaps even persecuted.

It's certainly a fast end to the Angelic hopes for nothing more than a grudging partnership, based solely on the desire for Sakuraba to get his revenge. No chance of that now, if it was ever more than half a possibility. Yes, the boy is certainly special. Inconveniently so.

"It isn't Kiryu, though. Our… concern."

"No."

Grudgingly admitted, but they would have felt it, the Composer would have betrayed himself somehow, if there had been the suggestion of what has been discovered. A curious danger, that even the most Refined among them is uncertain of exactly what it is. Or even where it is, in more than the most general estimation. It exists for moments, no more - how do you measure something by where it isn't? So far, all that is clear is the damage it has left in its wake, and that it has now appeared, flickered for a moment, in Shibuya.

With all the chaos there, with such leadership, it does not seem all that surprising.

"Much easier to resolve, if it were all Hanekoma's doing."
An execution then would be clearly justified, considering his earlier transgressions, and there had been those calling for his blood at this very meeting. But it's clear that the Producer of Shibuya and the Composer, stripped of much of their powers, have no knowledge of what has seeped into their domain, or that it is there at all.

"What if he caused it? It could still be an accident. If the bastard created all this, a side-effect of what he's done?"

A disdainful snort. Hanekoma's friends, if he ever had any, are difficult to identify now, and not at all interested in speaking up.

"Let it take him then. And be done with it."

So much they don't know, though, and each is aware that the rest are equally without answers, despite searching, and studying, and walking through the remains of the two UGs it has already destroyed. Reapers erased, Conductors eliminated, and even the Composers gone as if they had never been. Very small Games, so far, with young leaders no one knew, but if it has spread to Shibuya this is no longer a matter of studying and hypothesizing and containing the damage.

"The Fallen?"

A few Angels here police that border, ever wary, alert to rumors, any signs of movement, but there is no suggestion that this is their weapon.

"I've heard rumors that at least one of them attempted to deal with it. And lost."

Some of the Angels are amused by the thought. But there are others who know what it means. Anything out there that could eliminate a Fallen may just as quickly turn its eyes to higher planes.

"Do we warn them?"

A laugh.

"You saw it. Even if Kiryu's not involved, he'll feed himself to it before he admits to listening to us."

"What about the Crane?"

The slight, uncomfortable shift, even the speaker pitching his voice down, not quite a whisper. The existence alone of such a creature is an unfortunate necessity, and a quiet reminder to each of them, that even they are not untouchable. The assassin sent to quietly take care of their problem has also, inexplicably, failed.

"He has not chosen to act. Not yet. We all know the rules. It is by his discretion, in his time. In the end, we may offer our suggestions, but he truly answers to none of us."

Only a few of them would even know where to begin, to try and appeal to that realm. A safeguard, that the Crane believes he answers to this plane, but a lie.

"And if Sanae convinces him that he might do better by killing us?"

"Unlikely. Of anyone, Hanekoma understands why we've acted as we did." Or else he would have called them on it, instead of just standing there, looking uncomfortable.

"It still doesn't solve our problem."
"The Conductor will be vulnerable."

Of course, they'd expected that problem would solve itself. No one in their right mind could deal with Kiryu for a week - Game or no - and *not* want to kill him by the end of it. That Sakuraba would eventually snap was nothing but inevitable. If there was anything that didn't sit right with the Angelic temperament, it was when the inevitable did not come to pass.

"It seems unlikely that it will reveal itself before the next Game. Which gives us time to plan. For all eventualities."

Negligence and overestimation had allowed the entire district to slip once already, and nearly over the edge. It will not happen again - and with enough study, with careful planning and consideration, every outstanding issue might be resolved in one grand sweep of the board. Kiryu must be made an example of, and the more memorable the better. It is all a matter of finding opportunity and potential in the challenges ahead. It may not be a bad thing, this sudden darkness in Shibuya.
"Hey, Neku!"

He's been holding out this tiny, naive hope that at least the weeks of his life that he's not in the Game will maybe not be quite so weird. So far it's been a whole lot of watching that hope get crushed into a twitching, whimpering paste.

"Hey, uh. Man." Neku says. Wild Boar hasn't ever been one of his favorite brands but Beat was a big fan and that last week, they'd been scrambling for any help they could get. So he must have spent some time here, for the clerk to be grinning at him like that.

Right?

Shiki and Eri had taken off shortly after arriving, still giggling and giving him weird looks, with a promise to meet up later in the week and the demand that he'd keep his phone on this time. Neku had no idea how discreet Eri usually was - but really, nobody was going to believe her, if she started spreading it around that he - ok, so Shiki and Eri had obviously thought, but that was just… and 777 had-

No. Everyone is just teasing him, and he doesn't have the experience to know better. There is no way that anyone is hitting on him, except of course Joshua, who is crazy-

"So how's it going?" The Wild Boar clerk says brightly. The kind of brightly that just shouldn't come from a guy wearing chains. "Man, I ain't seen you around in a while."

"Uhhhh… yeah. I've been… uh, super busy." Neku's scrambling through his memories, trying to think of just when this guy figured out his name, or if there was anything he'd done during that last Game week - god, all of it had just been a panicked blur. "Listen, I was supposed to ask you - BJ, from Def March? He says you've got some kind of practice room key." Running wild-goose-chase errands for Def March, that just never stops being fun.

He'd finished the Reports after Shiki and Eri left, and had been grinding down on his pile of homework - most of it just tedious rather than difficult - when he'd heard the stomp of boots outside and a chaos he'd probably grow accustomed to, the sound of an entire band of Reapers taking over his front room. At least BJ and Tenho had the decency to look chagrined, actively avoiding his eyes as Neku had stared, the equipment they'd brought with them - an amplifier, a guitar and two cymbals, so far - already taking up a good portion of the wall.

"The hell?"

777's long-legged slouch left him nearly touching both walls, pressing a bottle of water against his forehead, tiny drops of condensation leaking onto his fingers. What was it with this guy and being wet?

"Don't worry. We're not gonna set up a studio here. Crap acoustics, for one." He grinned. Neku
didn't. "We just needed somewhere to drop the stuff - I thought our usual practice room was still open," and here a pause, and a glare at the rest of the band. BJ cringes. "-but it seems someone gave up the key so he could get some cash for a date."

So he needed someone to go get it, while he and the band kept moving their stuff around. Neku didn't even consider asking 777 why he couldn't do it himself - he looked pale, even now, a stiffness and caution in his movements that belonged to a man three times his age, and a strange transparency that Neku didn't like at all, his Music thready, still missing the occasional note.

So here he is, standing at the register as the guy from Wild Boar ignores another customer entirely to disappear in the back room, and he hears the sound of rattling boxes and a curse as a few heavy things hit the floor all at once.

"Sorry, man" He steps back out, actually looking as if he really means it. "You know Iwata, one of the clerks over at Towa? I think he borrowed it for a friend, but he should have it back now." He grins. "Hey man, are they getting the band back together?"

Neku plays stupid, not quite sure how these things work in the world of rock and roll, what secrets to keep and what to reveal. "No idea. Thanks for looking."

"Anytime, Neku. Hey, come back in a coupla weeks, we got some limited edition decks coming in. I'll hold one for ya!"

"Yeah, uh. Sure. Thanks."

Neku sort of half-runs down the street, pretending he's not. Because nothing happened. The guy is just being a store clerk. Trying to make a sale. Neku's just nervous, and reading too much into it. He's being oversensitive, because of… well, because of Josh, and because, yes it seems like the Composer was lying when he said everyone would be able to tell, but sometimes Neku still feels like anyone can look at him and see everything they've already done together, right there on his skin. He knows he's still getting out of the responsibility, or what it should be, because Shiki doesn't remember and Beat doesn't remember and if they did they would never forgive him for what he's become, for the fact that Joshua whistles and he just comes running.

"Hey, Neku!"

Neku very nearly does a header into the street, freezing in the way that anime characters do just before the impossibly large hammer drops.

"Oh wow, it's great to see you! How've you been? Wow, I am loving that outfit. How crazy are you?"

Now Neku knows this guy - well no, doesn't know him, not really, but even waist-deep in the shit in the Game weeks, he remembers this particular clerk was always a little… friendly.

"It's HT. Masuoka? You don't remember me, huh?" One hand slides through his shaggy dark hair. Neku remembers a science show he saw once - why people mess with their hair, it's a body language thing, when they're trying to impress a potential mate. And is there a reason he needs to remember that right now?

"No." Neku says, politeness overruling the urge to scream and run. "You're HT, from Cadoi City. You… uh… you play soccer right?"

"You do remember!" Annnnd he's hugged. Great.
"Hey, uh… listen." Neku says, finally disentangling himself. "I'd like to hang out and chat, but I've got this errand I've got to go run."

"You wanna get lunch first? On me."

Neku gets ready to say no exactly as his stomach reminds him that his all-new, extra-fast metabolism hasn't eaten anything in at least three hours, which is two hours and forty minutes overdue.

"Awwww." HT says. "You shouldn't starve yourself like that. Come on, I'll buy you some fries."

"Neku, hey!"

The girl with the pigtails beams at him from behind the fast-food counter, and at this point Neku's checking to make sure it isn't a pin. One of those altered Player pins that makes everyone think only about smiling and being really nice to him. Really, really nice. Neku smiles back at her and lets her load them down with an extra order of onion rings and two doubles instead of the singles they ordered. HT gives him a look that has Neku halfway to running to the top of some mountain temple where he will spend the next fifty years ringing a bell in strict celibacy.

It's not happening. It's all in his imagination, and not the Imagination type either, or else he would have put the brakes on it already.

"Wow, somebody's hungry." The boy laughs, and passes over the rest of his fries, as Neku's devoured his own plus the burger in record time. "You been busy?"

Neku laughs. What else could he possibly do? "Yeah. You could say that."

So HT talks about soccer, and Neku pulls out his sketchbook, and no matter what the situation it's always gratifying to watch someone flip the pages slow enough that he knows they're looking, lingering on the illustrations in more than just politeness, and HT stops, flips the page over.

"I bet this is someone special."

It's a sketch of Joshua, reading, caught in a sunbeam in a moment of quiet contemplation, one hand up near his face, fingers delicately curled. It doesn't really do him justice, but Neku couldn't believe he got even the short amount of time to catch the Composer so unguarded, and he almost manages to capture that inner illumination in a few graphite lines, the quicksilver essence that Neku has never seen in any other person, ever.

"He's a friend of mine."

"I ought to have you draw me sometime. In my cleats. I'll get you a picture."

"Um." Neku's not blushing. He's not. He's not. Even when HT laughs.

The other boy walks him nearly to Towa, in for a closing shift at his store, and it's almost normal or enough to pretend but then Neku goes and reads his thoughts, just to prove to himself that he's overreacting and also insane, and just because people are nice to him - well, now. Isn't that sweaty.

"You ok, Neku? You look a little pale."

Ok, so it's just completely the biggest mistake he's ever made, besides that particular trip to CAT's
mural. Is it at least partially a win, that he wants Neku to top?

He escapes at the door, silently thanking the co-worker who distracts HT for those few seconds it takes to sneak away. At this point, he's scanning every face that passes, dreading the next friendly greeting, and kind of thinking that a shark Noise might just be a mercy unless it decides to hit on him too - but nothing happens, and he gets through the door without further injury or a single marriage proposal.

"Hey, Neku! Great to see you!" The clerk waves from the other side of the store. "I made you a mixtape!"

Of course he has.

It's a bit more difficult adjusting his vibe in a censured state - Joshua's certain the powers that be like it that way - so there's no stopping or rewinding of time and they're dumped out unceremoniously with the sun going down, in front of Hanekoma's cafe. He's feeling mildly triumphant, but Hanekoma is a bit less so, and Joshua snags a cucumber soda from the small display he keeps for cold drinks, rather than pushing him for anything special.

"Oh come on, can't I interest you in the world's worst caramel iced mocha?"

"Still no luck?"

Hanekoma snorts, and sighs, sliding his hands into his back pockets and stretching. Joshua hasn't seen his wings since that initial meeting, since the censure. It feels a little strange for him, a twisting sort of vertigo to move between levels, but Sanae moves even more oddly afterward, as if the wings that aren't there are aching.

"You should have never let them have that kind of power over you." Enough between them, that Hanekoma smiles, knows it's intended as kindness.

"It's a bit too late to regret it now." Only one way to Ascend, only one path. Anything else, no matter how well-intentioned, how innocuous… you don't have to brew up a batch of Taboo Noise, to be on the Ascended shit-list. It can take a lot less than that. The reason Joshua prefers his power to come from the district. Even now, if he really wanted, really wanted to take it back… well, maybe.

"You going to let your Conductor know you're painting a target on him?"

Joshua makes a face. "Please. It's me they hate. They're lining up to join his fan club."

"You got that phone to him? The one he's going to stomp flat when he realizes he can't stop you from calling?"

"It's one of your limiteds. He'd have it surgically attached to his hand before he'd think of scratching it. And speaking of-"

Joshua knows his phone is going to ring twenty seconds before it does, and he already knows how the first minute of this conversation is going to go, and smiles.

"Hello, dear. Keeping busy?"

The voice is irate, out of breath. His Conductor's been having a good day.
"So I go to the OTHER Stationside, and she gives me two burgers! Two! And a large fry!"

"Neku, if you keep eating like that, you'll break out. All the oil." Joshua says patiently, and listens to his Conductor try to figure out how to throw cars at him through the phone. "Where are you?"

"ME? I'm hiding behind a shrub because I think the guy from the other OTHER record store wants to have my babies! What did you do, Josh? Hand out pervert pins? Imprint the entire goddamn city?"

"It's not me they're noticing, Neku. You did spend three weeks becoming a familiar face - and you're practically Shibuya's spokesperson now. As you grow stronger, people will notice. It's moths to a flame - except you don't even have to burn them, if you don't want to."

Neku's afraid of his power, which is another one of those things Joshua's not used to. Not with all the Reapers who can't wait to run wild, as if smashing everything in their paths is the only reason to be strong - even Kitaniji, usually so focused, so meticulous, but willing to save the district by razing it to the ground, the moment he was pushed into action.

Neku sighs. "Yeah, well, when I start getting candy from Reapers on Valentine's Day."

"Reapers? Anyone in particular?" Joshua hears Neku's breath catch, just slightly, because his Conductor is too kind and thinks Joshua is really that possessive, that he'd actually consider a Reaper as any sort of competition, let alone bother with the indignity of Erasing them.

"It looks like someone never read the chapter on Conductor harems."

Hanekoma is shaking his head in amused disbelief, or possibly amused horror, and Joshua pivots in his chair.

"There is no chapter on harems." Neku doesn't quite believe that, more like desperately hoping.

"Well, I told them to put it in. You don't think everyone wants to be in the upper ranks just for the fun of it? And are you still behind that shrub?"

"No." Neku says, snorting. "No to both of your stupid questions. And I'm not… I mean, you don't actually… Not that, not ever…" The phone really ought to be blushing. Joshua wonders if Hanekoma can add something. A mortally embarrassed emoticon, at least.

"In the French, ménage à trois."

"I hate you."

"Goodbye, dear." Joshua says to the sound of a dial tone. Tempting to call back, he's flipped the ringtone on Neku's phone to a French song, inspired by the Shibuya of a little while ago, all about a very stylish girl. But this was already a satisfying conversation that washed the taste of the meeting with the Angels out of his mouth. Unfortunately, he can't do the same for Hanekoma's mood, the man busy adjusting one of the machines as if he's actually paying any real attention to it.

"I don't remember that being blue. Is that new?"

It startles Hanekoma out of his thoughts, and Joshua is a little surprised he's still this dour. The meeting hadn't been that bad, nothing either of them weren't expecting. Hanekoma shrugs, wearing the facade of his usual calm charm, stretched far too thin.

"The old one busted. Wasn't even that old. So how's Neku holding up?"
Ah, so that’s it.

"He's avoiding you right now because of me. Because of us. It's really rather adorable. So you can stop making that kicked puppy face." Hanekoma scowls at him, though they both know he was. After a moment, he sighs, scratching at a little bit of baked-on residue at the very edge of a pot.

Joshua loves it here, so late at night, the cafe lights so bright that even the city street outside seems black and empty, and Shibuya spirals out in a thousand million stars, and this is as distant as he needs to get, as if the whole universe is visible from here and all of it in the palm of his hand.

"If you want, I can-"

"No." Hanekoma says, shaking his head slightly. "I'll tell him."

"If you wait much longer, it won't matter anymore."

It's not a suggestion to hurry so much as a full pardon, if Hanekoma chooses. As if Joshua would have ever done anything less, for the only person in how many years and how many planes who's ever actually called him on his shit? Willing to put his entire existence on the line, out of all of them the one with the most to lose. Joshua will say nothing, and Hanekoma can say nothing, and CAT will remain forever and always be utterly blameless in Neku's eyes, completely unconnected with the Taboo Noise.

"I'll tell him. I will."

Joshua shrugs and lets it go, doesn't care if it's a lie or not.

It's not a Game week in most of the surrounding districts, so there's way less of a problem. Technically, it's open season once Uzuki leaves Shibuya but it would get insanely tedious to barter back and forth across the damn borders of every single UG, and everyone has something that everyone else wants, so Tokyo's rules are pretty lax, nearly all the way out. As long as she doesn't cause any trouble, she's free to do whatever she likes.

The bag she's carrying is a season out of fashion, but it's the only one big enough to hold everything she's going to need, and maybe she can trade it too, if anything goes wrong. Uzuki packs up most of the trinkets she's gotten from her job that she never wears: some cute D.I.B. sandals that didn't quite fit, one tacky 'unisex' Wild Boar bracelet that only a guy would wear, and a pair of gloves that are actually Pegaso knockoffs, but pretty nice ones.

She could leave. She could run for it, it might be worth trying. Kariya might not like it much, but then that's only because she wouldn't have time to explain. If he understood… well, not that it matters, because running is stupid. Saika might very well be able to follow her anywhere, even if she was brave enough to leave… hell, she'd have to leave Japan, and if - when - something happens in Shibuya, they'll know it was her because she's the one who ran. She'll be hunted by every Reaper in every Game, no matter where she tries to hide. Look at her, it took all her wits and cunning just to find a place out of the rain. It really isn't going to be much of a fight at all, when it comes down to it.

Uzuki fights down the frustrated, bitter little laugh and forces herself to move. It's just motion, she doesn't even know why she's doing it, but if there's anyone who doesn't deserve to get hurt by this, it's Mayu, and Uzuki has to see for herself that she's all right, just from a distance, just to know. Seeing her will blunt the edges of the gnawing terror that is always there now, just waiting to eat
her alive, from the moment Saika did the impossible, and came back. Uzuki remembers the feeling, the week that she played the Game, those hours where a part of her wanted to throw herself to the Noise just to get it over with. At times like this, she would usually console herself with thoughts of the Iron Maiden, how she would do things, scoff at the danger and refuse to yield - but now?

Uzuki had thought it was progress, her determination to be stronger, but is it anything other than how much Konishi reminded her of Saika? The story of her whole life, isn't it? Idolizing the people who can do her the most amount of harm with the least amount of interest.

The line she intends to take is on delay, something about a suicide, some idiot who might just end up back right where he started, like she did. So she grabs the Hanzōmon Line, ignores being jostled and poked. It takes a while, a few stops before the first Reaper shows up. It's a quiet, subtle transaction, Uzuki pulling what she's got out of the bag, smirking when the rather soberly dressed girl's eyes light up at the sight of the gloves. Enough of a bribe to get her to the end of her ride, and in the short transfer to the Mita Line, no one shows up at all. She still feels open, and vulnerable, this is further than she usually bothered to travel back when she'd been alive.

Before the Game. Before she got Mayu killed. And Saika, who promised them all paradise, and then disappeared, with everyone but the two of them. Uzuki chews on her thumbnail, a habit when she's stressed that never disappeared, even when she went trendy. Saika always knew about the Game - Uzuki's sure of that now - even if she never played, even if she did… something else, went somewhere else. Saika hadn't been lying that night, when Uzuki would have been happy then, just to die. Just to let it all end. Sick of it.

And a week later, at the end of the Game, they'd won, and Mayu was smiling, and Uzuki realized she was still sick of it. The world waiting for her wasn't anything she regretted losing, and Mayu had tried to hold on, pleading - she remembers the sound of her voice, so desperate for no good reason - but Uzuki had let her go. Always letting go.

So Mayu went back to living, and Uzuki became a Reaper, and the only regret she had for a good, long time was the loss of her Entry Fee. A leather jacket, one slight shade darker than butter yellow, the most amazing high-fashion bargain find she'd ever made in her life, and two years later she still hasn't found its equal. The fact that it would have looked like crap with pink hair doesn't make her feel any better.

"Hey."

Uzuki looks up, dangerous to let herself get distracted, though at this moment getting Erased by some nameless Reaper might actually be a kindness. A little annoying that it's a boy, she's still got the bracelet but girls are much easier to buy off. The guys can get territorial, at times, though Uzuki thinks it's all just stupid. As if the UG actually belongs to anyone besides the Composers.

"Yeah?"

The Reaper smirks at her challenging tone. If he thinks he's going to intimidate her in those grimy sneakers, he's got a ways to go. Not even a Harrier, not that it always stops them. "You're a long way from home."

"Yeah." People, even Reapers, usually get the point, if she uses enough monosyllables.

Uzuki followed Mayu, up through graduation, up through the year after, the relocation, the marriage announcement. A lot of the Reapers kept tabs on bits and pieces of their old lives, even the ones who didn't pick up right where they left off. It was an option, go back the same as before, just with an extra after-school job. Uzuki didn't have to make things as hard as she had. Why had it
been so damn important at the time, to make a clean break? To leave Mayu as the sole survivor of a tragic suicide pact, all their pictures in the paper, Saika's just a little bigger than the others. A headline on Monday. Forgotten by that Thursday. Uzuki's parents had left Tokyo, but they hadn't been close, and there had never been a reason to seek them out. But she hadn't lost track of Mayu, that one little piece of who she had been.

"What brings you all the way out here?" Is he coming on to her? Or does he want to fight? Maybe get himself a promotion? Uzuki fights the urge to roll her eyes.

"Visiting a friend."

He doesn't believe her. The train slows, and stops. Uzuki braces herself, hand flexing for a gun she already knows she doesn't have - if his friends show up, this could get interesting. She wonders if it's a Game week here. Not that she thinks anyone out here plays half as hard as they do in Shibuya. The doors shut. She tries not to show any relief.

"A little dangerous, don't you think?"

"It's a good friend." Uzuki says, with a little more ice in her tone. Either go for her throat or stop jerking her around, seriously. He smirks again, and gets off at the next stop. Uzuki ignores the pins-and-needles urgency on the back of her neck, that this is really happening, that she is so screwed no matter what she does or doesn't do.

It's not much like Shibuya, the place Mayu lives now. It seems greener in Itabashi, a little more space to breathe, with the buildings in less-pronounced verticals. If she had to judge for herself, Uzuki would call it 'boring,' and 'quiet,' but then again, Mayu was always so soft-spoken, blending into the background. Always at the edge of whatever they were doing, always happy to follow along. No matter where. Even when she never should have been there.

She could ask, why Mayu followed her so closely, so devotedly - but then why had Uzuki always been there, at Saika's heels? It would be better to say it was a childhood thing, cruel half-friendships and strange days, all of it in the past - and maybe Uzuki had believed that once, but not now. Not anymore. It's still strange and cold and cruel, but it's as much a part of her now as it ever was.

The address she has is for a little salon, on a quiet side street. Mayu was the one who always did everyone's hair, for fancy parties, for dates, for fun - and always got so upset, when Uzuki would ruthlessly cut hers up into a bob, or something even more dramatic. So it's not really a surprise that she owns her own place now. Nothing too fancy, but there are no few customers inside even at this odd hour of the day. Uzuki sneaks up, across the street, far enough away that she won't be noticed, but close enough to see the people inside without a glare on the glass.

Mayu is there, small and gentle, so little changed as she carefully trims a woman's wispy bangs, chatting amicably, that it's like no time has passed at all. Until she steps to the side to continue her work, and the Mayu Uzuki knew transforms into an entirely new person, though she doesn't seem to have any real problems doing her work around the extra roundness of her belly. Uzuki can't for the life of her remember if Mayu wanted a boy or a girl. Probably a girl, more opportunities for trying hairstyles that way.

Was it that much of a surprise? What did she expect? Time passes, people grow up and get on with it. Love, marriage, baby - one of those processions Uzuki hates for its blithering conformity, but there's a difference between loathing the abstract and seeing it in person, in someone she knows. Seeing the shy, nervous girl who'd followed her through the halls now happy, and successful, and no longer following. Uzuki feels suddenly very stupid, and really did have some ridiculous,
nostalgic desire to actually go up, walk into the shop, introduce herself as someone else, lie about any resemblance she had to some girl long ago. Try to reconnect, as if that was in any way possible, as if Mayu deserves that sort of crap now, in this new life of hers. As if it wasn't Uzuki's choice to leave, to end things irrevocably. To do it alone.

It wasn't really about coming all this way out here, to make sure she was all right, was it? Of course Mayu's all right, she chose to get out of the Game, and it's not her world anymore. Usually Uzuki feels so much better than the stupid shadows she passes through in the UG, the herd of idiots with their cares and woes and completely unaware of everything they're missing. Usually, there's nothing the RG can give her, besides a cool trend or a new band to follow. Nothing else that she's lacking, that she could even think of to want. It's not that she wants Mayu's life, or anything like it. It's not that she wishes time would stop. It's not any feeling Uzuki can name, but it presses down on her, harder than she can ignore.

Uzuki sighs, and turns back, grimacing as the wind picks up a little, colder than she thought it would get today. Oh well, she's still got a bag full of enough bribes to get her safely back to Shibuya, and this got her out for a while, didn't it? And Mayu... well, she's fine. Better than fine. Uzuki pays for her return ticket, makes a face at the price - maybe it would have been better to stay in the UG for all of this, even with the ridiculous risk. Disheartened, aware she's solved nothing, she slumps into a corner seat and hopes no one will sit next to her.

"Didn't go well, huh?"

Really, is she all that surprised? Maybe this is what she's been hoping for, maybe this is the whole reason's she's here. Maybe she wants this, even as the shock hits, thrown her down into a lake of ice, the fear that stops everything, absolute zero. Saika is sitting across from her, one long leg stretched out, leaning lazily on her hand, smiling at Uzuki between pale fingers.

"You know what? I would just kill right now for an ice cream."
"Strawberry ice cream. It's like the only thing I really miss." Saika drops her hand, tilts her head to the opposite side, never moving her gaze from Uzuki's eyes. "How are you doing, Uzu-chan? You look tired."

Static, where the UG should be, where the feel of that other plane should be, and the only reason Uzuki notices it at all is because it's completely gone. Saika always had her own gravity, and this is just more of the same, drawing all the light in, a bend in the world. Uzuki nearly shivers, half-expects to see her breath on the exhale, and the train car shouldn't be this empty, not at this time of day. Maybe they can feel it, even in the RG, even if they can't see what she can.

"You're always so pretty when you're upset, and you take everything so seriously." Saika clucks her tongue, bites down for a moment on her bottom lip. It's like Uzuki's the only person in the world. It's thrilling, it always is, when someone as beautiful as Saika singles her out for attention, and even if she's being used Saika still has to be there there to do it. "You should have been a martyr. Like Joan of Arc."

"I don't… I…" Uzuki swallows, not that it steadies a damn thing. Her hands fist against her skirt. She can't even feel the sway of the car, or the clack of the rails.

"Hey, hey. Remember that time that guy tried to feel you up?"

On a train not much different than this, going home one day, a middle-aged man with a briefcase and damp hands, and she'd been too shocked, too embarrassed to do anything but go red and stand where she was, looking for help from the people seated in front of her - but they'd looked away. Cowards. Uzuki smiles, despite herself.

"You broke his hand." It was the first time they'd met, with her watching over Uzuki's shoulder as the man went stark white, cradling his arm against his body, lurching and staggering off the train. No chance to see her gaze then, but Uzuki had gotten many opportunities afterward, Saika's cool, bored triumph. The one who had saved her when no one else cared.

"You thought I was amazing."

"I thought you were in a gang." What a surprise, to be introduced to the new student the next day, the wide-eyed innocent lie. Saika with the perfect grades, Saika with the perfect life. A gang. As if she needed one. Uzuki's heart feels as if it's curling in on itself, folding up into some new shape. She can't move. Can barely breathe.

Saika stretches out one long leg, playfully nudging at Uzuki's boot with her toe. "You don't have to be scared, idiot. It's just me, here. Come on. Talk to me. It's been a while."

"Why-" It's very nearly a sob. Uzuki shuts her eyes, trying to collect herself. The train passes under a bridge, or the sun goes behind a cloud, or the world ends, the darkness rushing up pure and
absolute behind closed eyes, and she opens them with a gasp. Saika hasn't moved, still watching.

"You knew. You knew about the Game, you knew that night that we- back when we were-"

"Alive? Of course. I could see it. I always saw it, my whole life. You really think I would have been like that, if I thought this stupid waste of time was the whole world?" Saika laughs, amused and deadly serious, all at once. "I love that you give me so much credit."

"You didn't... you didn't play."

A slight frown, just a flicker in her eyes, but that is a new kind of frightening. Saika does not like disappointment, does not like to stop smiling. Tends to scorch the earth. The young teacher who took a nasty fall down the back stairs, and broke her leg. Sows the ground with salt. The accident in science class, two boys very nearly blinded.

"Most of the time, I forgot that girl was even alive. Except that she kept messing with your hair."

"Mayu?" She never should have gone today. Never should have led Saika right to her.

"You were never supposed to play, Uzu-chan. You were supposed to be with me. She wasn't supposed to be there, and it shouldn't have mattered anyway." Saika sighs, and makes a slight gesture with one hand. "Her one moment of mild significance, not that it matters now. I found my way back to you."

Mayu had pulled her into the Game. The only one of them who hadn't followed Saika completely, who hadn't been so ready to die. It would have been nice, wouldn't it, if their friendship had been Uzuki's fee? What a wonderful story, that she'd sacrificed some great feeling for such a noble and selfless friend, that Uzuki was actually worthy of such adoration, such salvation. But her fee was a jacket, and here's Saika. Mayu just bought her a little time. It really doesn't matter now.

"I don't understand."

"I'm keeping a low profile." Saika says, tucking a few strands of hair behind one ear, and this is the way she's always watched Uzuki, as if waiting for her to get the joke, waiting while she struggles and fights and tries to catch up. It's like fighting through ocean waves, pummeling her numb and stupid and Uzuki will drown before she ever gets through the breakers. "It's more fun this way."

"You can't be here. You didn't play the Game."

Saika tips her head back, magnanimous and pitying. "The Game doesn't matter, Uzu-chan. It's all the same bullshit, no different than graduating or kissing the boss's ass or letting the guy get his hands in your panties because he treated you to omakase at the sushi bar."

Always playing by the rules. Two years in the Game and still just a Harrier and always jumping to attention when Konishi walked by and never making the Conductor upset on the rare occasions she'd even seen him. As if she could have bothered him, as if he knew she existed. Now Uzuki's dealing with some punkass little boy who's just walked in and made himself at home, and it was never her chance, and it will never be her chance - and at least for a moment, the shame replaces the fear, and she doesn't even give a damn that Saika's leaning closer. Saika, who never played by anyone's rules and always won everything anyway, and Uzuki loved watching her, even when she hurt people, even when it made her cringe and shiver and look away, satisfying even when she was scared.

"What do you want, Uzuki? What's your dream? You want to be the Conductor? You want to overthrow the Composer? What do you think happens then? You get to be free? Finally?" A soft
"They don't tell you who the Composer answers to, do they? You don't even know why this sad, little Game exists, but they've still got you all here, to play it for them, for the rest of eternity."

"I don't… what do you mean?"

"You'd never be allowed to be Composer, Uzuki. No matter how hard you fought, no matter how much you deserved it. You know how it works, it's all planned out in advance, who gets to sit on that throne. This world is no different than any other."

"That's not true."

Except Uzuki's voice is shaking and it isn't really that much of a surprise, and she feels stupid for never asking, never even thinking about it before. The dumbass Conductor kid should have tipped her off, if nothing else, no way he scored the job all on his own…

It's always the reason she played along - obeyed, there's no denying it, following Saika's lead. It's what brought her into this and kept her, and everyone else, so devoted. Saika doesn't lie, and she always calls out bullshit, knows every lie every parent and teacher could ever tell, to keep them all in their place. Uzuki thought that once she was older, she'd be able to see it too, be able to live a life that actually belonged to her.

Right.

"So what, the Composer just… he just does what he's told?"

"At least you get your choice of sushi. And the color of the panties."

The Game she thought was nothing like the RG, wild and free and ruthless - but it really is just another procession, and even if she's… what does 'strong enough' even mean, if this is all there is? The chance at Composer was a pipe dream, she'd barely even let herself imagine it - but it's all just another grind. Another chance to follow instructions and all the rules and do as she's bid. Despair presses against her, the old, familiar feeling - and what, it's not like she can kill herself /more/.

"I want to show you, Uzuki." Saika leans forward on the seat, her eyes glittering, pyrite and quartz dust, the fire at the center of the world. "I want you to know what I know. This isn't what you want - playing in the margins of someone else's world and calling it a life. I want you to see what it's like, where there are no rules."

Before Uzuki can think to answer, Saika has crossed the aisle, her lips on Uzuki's, the long-fingered hand over hers on the train pole, icy and leaden. She gasps, and feels Saika take control - always - and slip inside, a dark current sliding down her throat, like water, like drowning, pulling her down even as she is filled, the chill surging through her. Uzuki knows this, a brief moment of some distant memory, what it was to feel another's thoughts replace her own, but before she can remember where or when - a red pin? - she slips beneath the waves, and disappears.

__________________________________________

The light is different, brighter in the RG. More substance, it all has more definition and… weight. Saika blinks, wiping away a tear from the corner of her eye, and breathes in and out, slowly. Uzuki wears her hair way too short, pink tips bouncing distractingly against her cheek as the train gently sways, and Saika looks up, inspecting the bare ghost of her new reflection in the window.

Alive again, back in the RG after all this time. She laughs to herself, can't help it. It's not, perhaps, the most useful place to be, unless she wishes to go back and kill Mayu. She's got a gun, after all.
A whimper, very quiet, from Uzuki, deep inside, and Saika gently pets the space over her heart, looks down at Uzuki's nails, a bit of the polish starting to strip away. No, no reason to go after Mayu, and so dull to have to go back the way she'd come, and boring to have to wait for the train afterward and - oh yes, living. She forgot how just how tedious it was, how quickly it turned into a chore.

The world suddenly swims, buckling at the edges, and Saika puts a hand out for the bar, steadying herself, the heart beneath her hand thudding hard, a melody badly out of sync. It's a lot to ask of Uzuki's vibe, a heavy burden that keeps wanting to pull them both down, especially here with it so quiet, only a few people at the other end of the car. So tempting, the gun is so tempting but that will certainly end her game of hide-and-seek, and she reaches for Uzuki's phone instead, the list of contacts sadly small. Uzuki's trying to be quiet anyway, trying not to let the echo of a thought ripple out about who these people are or how she knows them. The way she does let a thought slip free, when the doors open, and three Reapers pile on, one of them the one Uzuki met on the trip out, and Saika feels the echo of that tension and calculation, self-loathing and fear - and smiles.

"I told you, you'll never be afraid again." she murmurs, as the three boys approach, and she'd guess the one in front is actually the Game Master of this UG for the power shining through him from that other world. All slouch and swagger, smiling malevolently at her as he takes the seat she'd been sitting in. The Reaper Uzuki had spoken to looks very pleased of himself, hanging most of his weight against the overhead bar. He has blond streaks in his hair, haphazard, like he's let them grow out when he ought to have redyed. Uzuki whimpers again, twisting away - which is a lie, she's as bloodthirsty as anyone Saika's ever known. They're the same, like sisters - Uzuki just needs a bit of encouragement.

"You'll learn. It's not like it matters. I mean, look at them. You can't possibly care what happens to them." It isn't loud enough, or addressed to anyone in particular, and the Game Master frowns in confusion, not quite sure if it's an insult. He's got a very square head, and his skin seems so likely go pockmarked with age that it might as well be there now. He leans forward a little, as do the Reapers, this is obviously a familiar intimidation scheme.

"So, one of my Harriers tells me he caught you passing through. It's not very smart, a little girl out here all by herself. What district are you from?"

"You have three stops."

"Hm?" A second moment of confusion. A smarter man would start to have questions, at this point. "Ah. Your connection home? No, I don't think this will take that long."

It had been fun, when Saika had first started, to lead them on. Let them talk, just to see how long it would take for them to run out of script, to get annoyed or frustrated and just come at her. It stopped being interesting a while ago, but she hopes Uzuki's enjoying the moment - this is for her, after all.

"You threatened my friend." Saika says, and the Reaper looks confused. The Game Master glances up at him.

"There were two of them?"

"No. No way, just this one."

A smarter man would consider his options, when his prey started acting oddly, a little foamy-at-the-mouth. He might second-guess the need for the kill.
"We don't much appreciate other Reapers sneaking around our UG. Whatever the reason."

Saika blinks, and drops her vibe to the UG, what they were going to force her to do eventually, where they want her to be. It's dangerous, a Reaper will rarely go willingly into another Game's UG, without the home advantage. The train slows. The Game Master is clearly unsettled, now attempting to hide it with a scowl.

"Two stops."

A few people get on, now that all of them are in the UG, with Saika contained for now in Uzuki's skin.

"Well, that wasn't very smart, now was it?" The Game Master says, still feigning an irritated nonchalance, but the Reapers flanking him are tense, like dogs on the leash, waiting for him to snap his fingers and tear into her. "Just what do you think that was supposed to accomplish?"

"Nothing, really." Saika says, and feels a sharp heat, a pain against her cheek, as if she'd been slashed. The Game Master flips something back into his palm, a pin, and the tiny bird he summoned, the one that has just attacked her, vanishes in midair.

Well, this is as good as any time.

"Do you know what happens on the levels beneath the UG?" She asks, but like most of anything she ever says these days, it's rhetorical. No, of course they don't, because they don't know what happens anywhere. Uzuki didn't, simply traded one known element for another, and never considered that she really knew nothing about either world.

"It's a rather inhospitable place, beneath the Underground. A lot of people find that they feel very slow, or numb." Uzuki is crying now, Saika can feel it, that little pulse of life quivering in time with her heartbeat. The building anticipation is even better with a body to feel it. She should have tried this ages ago.

"Dude, let's just off her and go." One of the Reapers mutters, a little nervously. Finally the smarter man, though it's far too late.

"A lot of times, people find that their pins stop working, or stop following orders." Saika leans back in her chair, and crosses her arms. "So a Game Master who, say, tends to turn his enemies into summon pins, might suddenly find himself in a rather uncomfortable place."

It's right about then that three of the Game Master's fingers hit the floor, a soft patter, gnawed clean through by one of the aforementioned summons, the rather impressive winged rat quickly turning his attention to the rest of the arm. No blood, never any blood in the UG, though the look on the Reaper's face almost makes up for it.

Saika lowered his vibe well past where he thought he was, from the moment he'd crossed over. He hasn't felt a thing, all this time. Not until she raises it again, and he stops staring down at his own mangled hand in dumb confusion, and starts screaming, flailing, more movement beneath his clothes as the rest of the now-freed pins quickly follow suit, even the Noise intelligent enough to exact revenge when they can.

The other two Reapers are frozen where they stand, watching the Game Master claw at himself with his remaining hand, trying to throw the pins away, sliding off the seat and onto his knees in the aisle - and just about then, they remember to attack.
"Kill her! Fucking shit, fuck her up!"

Saika is up from her seat before either of them move, and steps back, gracefully avoiding the knife that comes up for her throat. It would be funny to see if she could get the Reapers to Erase each other in such narrow quarters, but the other Reaper is too busy trying to pull himself out of the grip of the pale hands that have emerged from the floor, the walls, the windows. It's really only courteous, to give the girls a taste of the action, and his shouting has replaced the screams of the Game Master, who is now no more than a pile of clothes and a scattering of pins across the train floor.

The Reaper continues to slice at her, the silver edge of his knife passing through commuters reading papers or playing games on their phones or just staring off into space, until he's got Saika pushed against the far end of the train. She sees his triumphant smile, bringing the blade back for the final strike, only to jerk forward, caught by the dark and dripping shadows she's been leaving in her wake all this time, a web that entangles him further as he lurches back, trying to cut himself free.

"You bitch! You fucking bitch!"

Saika steps forward, close enough to smell his sweat, to watch the pulse swimming in him, the Music that is his and his alone, to hear him breathe in and then she draws her hand into a fist and pulls on the shadows, listens to the scream as his arm snaps backwards, shattering as it drives the knife deep between his shoulder blades. He hangs for a moment, his Music disassembling itself, plinking down in random notes around her, much more satisfying than blood, and he blurs and fades. The woman on Saika's right shivers suddenly, pulls out a sweater from her bag, and it would be so satisfying to switch to the RG, so, so satisfying to give them all a taste -

The train slows. What's happened isn't enough to drive anyone out, but the people standing at the doors hesitate, and more than a few of them, the ones who aren't completely deaf to the world, choose other cars. No one sits where the Reaper is still standing, caught like a fox in a trap, and he'd likely chew off a leg to escape but he can't move, struggling feebly against the hands that clutch at him, flickering a little - the girls are always so hungry - and his eyes roll back in terror, straining away from her every centimeter that he can as Saika crosses her way back to him, the darkness melting back into her, disappearing like water burned away by the sun.

"Fuck. Please. I'm sorry. I'm fucking sorry. Please."

He's a little boy now, confused and terrified, everything yielding. So many of them end like this, even though she never asks. Saika reaches up, brushes her fingertips against his lips, more for Uzuki's benefit than her own, so that she can know what it is to feel him tremble, to understand how complete the victory always is. Giving her a taste of it, flicking a piece of blond hair away from his face, and even with idiots like this, it's fairly satisfying.

"Do you see?" She murmurs, knows Uzuki's watching because she can't really stop watching, can she? "How is this not better than what you have?"

"Please, don't. Please. Don't. Please." He whimpers, the words a litany now, and it wouldn't be bad, to keep this one with her. A shame that she can't, not without losing Uzuki, too much of a strain - and so she reaches out instead, the hands withdrawing, frightened echoes only Saika can hear replaced by the Reaper's scream as she puts her own hand against his chest, and pushes inside.

Uzuki's arm is black to the elbow as the darkness spikes through him, spreading over his body, and Saika twists and drops and plunges the poor bastard down, through the levels beneath the Underground, places not meant for such weak and powerless creatures. It's rather amazing he
survives as long as he does, dissolving from both ends - but the dividing line of his UG is just before the changeover, the train still going full speed when they hit, and he's in a bad place to smack up against that boundary, not at all able to handle the transition, and what's left of him explodes into a thousand screaming pieces.

Saika sighs, blows pink bangs out of her eyes, and amuses herself with picking up the Game Master's pins, crushing them to ash one by one between her fingers, as the train slows, and stops, and she walks away.

It takes three large bowls of ice cream - good ones, with chunks of frozen strawberry she has to bite through - before Saika feels at all sated, and this is totally and completely worth not killing everybody. Uzuki's not going to thank her for the calorie overload, but no doubt she's burning this off pretty steadily, given the extra strain - she's quiet now, when Saika looks for her, whimpers and tucks herself further away when she realizes she's the center of attention. Easy enough to take her now, forever - but that's not what she wants, not why she's here. Why is she here? The ice cream. Curiosity.

It's been a while since she walked the streets of Shibuya, and other than an unimpressive new ramen shop down in Dogenzaka, it's really kind of pathetic how little she's missed by being dead. Same old stores, same old statues, same old trends, just like the new ones. Saika has never been much for fashion, nothing like Uzuki, happy to let the store clerks offer suggestions - and oh she was hated for it, for always looking so good. Over half the girls she's devoured take a certain, special satisfaction when Saika takes down a beautiful opponent, their bitter, vicious jealousy washing over her in a wave, and they'll tear the poor girl apart if she lets them. Which she does, sometimes.

Uzuki's not exactly heavy in the wallet, and this is a little bit Saika's fault, forcing her to take shelter in a crappy hotel when all other avenues were blocked. Still, there's plenty of things she can do without spending money - like try and find that little Conductor that annoys Uzuki so. No fashion sense at all, the little brat - Uzuki's main and most damaging opinion - and Saika chuckles to herself.

The boy, the boy who'd skipped across the surface of her world, and left ripples in his wake. It wasn't supposed to work like that, and she skims through Uzuki's memories, or what's left of them, what the Angels have allowed to remain of this so-called 'Long Game'. Rather sad of them, to pretend the failure never happened if no one can remember it. Everyone always tries to dodge responsibility, or feeling stupid, or ashamed, and that's usually all Saika ever needs, the crack in the wall. This UG, still shaking off a near-cataclysm, and the Conductor so new in his powers…

It's difficult to be patient, especially with her appetite piqued by the train ride, but Saika forces herself to walk the streets, window-shopping of a kind - maybe he'll come, a moment of chance, divine intervention. Maybe she'll end this all tonight.

A familiar face does appear, but it's not the Conductor. A few thoughts, mostly hostile, dismissive, rise up as Saika moves closer, follows him down an alley - his name is Minamimoto, formerly a Game Master and eternally a freak, but Saika likes freaks. At least she can depend on them to be entertaining, if only for a few minutes, and there's shadows on his skin, remnants of power that match up to nothing Uzuki knows. It's rather clear what he was, what he's forgotten, and she watches the flickering haze of it - they call it Taboo, because the Angels like to impress themselves by making little rules and little punishments.

"What are you doing here?" Minamimoto nearly falls over from where he's crouching, standing up
quick. It's getting dark, and they're mostly hidden from view, but he still looks around, as if afraid of being caught. The can of spray paint in his hand might have something to do with that, although he shifts uncomfortably where he stands when she looks down on the blob against the wall, the paint-stained stencil in his hand.

"The hell do you want? I ain't seen your factor in my set, semiprime. Dunno where he is."

"Math." Saika giggles, and crouches. "Very cute. So what is it?"

He's staring at her, trying to tell if she's making fun of him, but Saika holds his gaze, keeps her own eyes wide and honest. It's so easy to make people obey, to follow - just pretend to care, just give them a few moments of importance, and the hook is set.

"Mandelbrot set. But the stupid can's no good." He says, staring down at it. A total lie, his failed technique the likely culprit, but again, all she has to do is ignore it.

"You should try a Fibonacci sequence."

"I didn't…" Saika can see the moment he realizes she's down on her knees, and she watches him shift, suddenly uncomfortable, and she wonders what the equation is, to describe the space between them now. "I didn't think you were into numbers."

"I'm into a lot of things." Saika says, laughing at herself for such a line. Apologizing to Uzuki for using her lips to say it - but he doesn't move, and she rises up in one slow motion, and steps closer. It's the echo of the Taboo Noise on him, like the pull of gravity, and she's going to have to take this one too, she can't stop herself, wanting to pull him to pieces even if it means spoiling the surprise.

"Uh…" Minamimoto's Adam's apple bobs in a way that lets her know just how much luck he's had with girls. Sadly, Uzuki doesn't take advantage of what she's got - never believed that yes, she's cute enough to play around with whoever she wants. Saika bores way too easily to do anything less. "I…"

"Don't move." He doesn't. It's almost embarrassing, how easy…

"Hey, Uzuki."

Footsteps behind her, moving briskly, and Saika checks herself, pulls back the shadows that had just begun to bleed. A little irritated, until she turns to face the intruder and feels Uzuki leap up from inside, a blinding, fluttering panic, the images coming fast and intense - and Kariya slouches in that familiar way Saika now knows so well.

"If you're done shaking him down, you still owe me dinner."

It feels as if Uzuki is beating against the inside of her chest - this Harrier is important - her Partner, she trusts him, when the number of people Uzuki trusts could always be counted on one hand with fingers left over. Saika smiles, one of Uzuki's smiles, the one that's meant for him.

"You're going to have to wait until the next Game. I'm on break."

He shakes his head, a small smile on his face. Saika's trying to see it, but he's really not that attractive and there's nothing in his lazy appearance - or maybe that's it. Opposites attract - and she can have her pick of conversations, memories of Uzuki fussing while this Reaper is content to stand by silently, like a deaf-mute, like a - like a solid place to anchor, no matter what might happen. A very detailed memory pushes through, that this Kariya can handle himself in a fight. Uzuki quails instantly, the false bravado crumbling - Saika didn't come here to do this silently,
wants very much to make it a melee.

"Technically it's still a Game day, whether we play or not." Kariya yawns widely. "So unless you want to wait 'til midnight…"

It's not like she can't eat, try some of her play-acting with the closest thing Uzuki has to a friend. Kariya leans against the wall, waiting for her to pass - he does slump rather well, maybe there is something to that. She doesn't turn back, to see if Minimimoto is still staring after her - most likely, but she'll have him soon enough, let him doodle in the corners until then.

Uzuki knows a back route to their favorite shop - sad, Uzu-chan, when swapping ramen with this boy is something to look forward to - but then all is forgiven, all accounted for and given new value, when she feels the slightest prick of a blade against her back, and Kariya's voice no longer as it was in memory, now low and very, very angry.

"What are you… and where the hell is Uzuki?"
do angels and devils deal from one deck of cards?

Chapter Notes

Opening lyrics: Guggenheim Grotto - Koan

Small reference to the 'Lady of Shalott' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

For the first couple of seconds, Kariya thinks that Minamimoto has somehow managed to start refining Taboo Noise again, and there's not much else to do but find him and beat him. Beat him into every shape in the geometry book. Beat him until decimal points start coming out his ears.

It's then that he realizes what he's feeling, the strange, hollow echo and the way the hairs on the backs of his arms stand on end - it's not Taboo full of rage, it's not coming from Minamimoto, who might just be the luckiest bastard in the entire universe, completely unaware of how close he's come to being Erased twice. The horrible, empty howl is coming from Uzuki - but that's not her, not her smile, or the glint in her eyes as she turns around - it's not her, even when she looks at him the way Uzuki would, all impatience and disinterest. Or when she says the right things and plays along and so now here he is alone, with a sword to her back - to its back - and no idea who is trying to take him down, to get to him through Uzuki. A Fallen? It sure the hell feels like a Fallen, feels wrong like a Fallen, but the echo of it goes down further than anything he's heard before, like he's thrown a stone and will wait until the end of forever for it to hit bottom.

"What do you want?"

"Me? Nothing. Everything." The thing looks back at him, smiling over Uzuki's shoulder. Is she still in there somewhere? Does this thing just look like her, or is Uzuki already lost, eaten up from the inside? Kariya watches it study him, eyes flicking from his face to the sword and back. It knows what he is.

"Ohhhh. You're something new." She tips her head. Kariya is waiting, every muscle tense - when it comes the strike will be fast and she won't give him a second's warning. "And brave. Are they all as brave as you are, here?"

So it wants Shibuya. Not much of a surprise, there. None of this is really going to be a surprise, it's just going to suck. A lot. Kariya's hunted Angels, and stalked the Fallen to their lairs. It's never easy, he never has the advantage, no matter how good he might be with a sword, or how much experience he's had, or how old he is.

Did the Angels send this thing, because he didn't jump when they snapped their fingers? God, but they're stupid enough for it - and the possibility of that betrayal falls on him, heavy and numbing. He's been doing this a long, long time. An endless grind, really, and none of it for himself. Any pretense at honor was gone the moment he took this absurd position. Abandoning his lord's final request at the first chance to take revenge, bowing down to the very bastards who'd let him die. All the righteousness and nobility he'd strove for, replaced by endless, stupid slap-fights, the dull machinations of those he'd never respected, and this modern world a screeching, ugly mess-

Kariya blinks, forcibly shakes off the weight of that thought before it can drag him further down, a vivid, nihilistic despair. It belongs to him, all of the emotions still his, but coaxed to rise up and
burn and consume. Honed into razor points by the thing in front of him, and it doesn't even look like it's trying. He smirks, all teeth, at the creature behind Uzuki's eyes, tightening his grip on his sword.

"Oh, you're good."

"I'd like to think so." She smiles back, chin tipped up, playful and proud, and suddenly they're down in the UG and her arm is a black scythe coming up to take his head off.

It's his own best trick, playing the Frequencies, not that it helps to realize what's happened a moment after the fact - this thing is as fast as any Angel and fully aware of its powers, laughing as he ducks the strike and brings his sword around, leaping back fast as the whiplike darkness twists in midair, nearly snatching the blade from his grip. It has the distinct advantage here, Kariya realizes, as he sweeps the blade down only to watch the shadows melt away, and he pulls the strike an instant before he takes Uzuki's arm off at the elbow. A mistake, he knows that instantly, throwing him off-balance for the split-second it takes the creature to lash out and throw him hard against the opposite wall.

Kariya flips in the air, lands hard but on his feet, the reverberations up through his legs to the knee. He's crouching sideways against the wall, and leaps away as it strikes again, jumping diagonals back and forth across the alley, one desperate step ahead of every strike. He feels the UG shiver around him, feels the drag - it's trying to catch him, to drop this even further down, into whatever domain it inhabits. He's strong enough to keep that from happening, even if it has all the weight of a Fallen, and not the ones who fuck up and not the ones who regret but the ones who choose to go down. The ones who see no sacrifice.

He flips his sword, dull edge out - the slightest awkwardness in it, and even that might be more of a handicap than he can afford, but this thing will gladly put Uzuki's body in the way of his blade, he's certain of that. Get him to Erase her purely for the fun of it. The shadows tremble and pool around Uzuki's body, swaying gently as if being pulled by some unknown tide. Always smiling, always with her eyes on him. Uzuki's wings are nowhere to be seen. Maybe it is too late. Kariya readies himself, sword up, watches her eyes flutter for half a second, one hand against her breastbone, and the smile changes, something like surprise.

"Wow, she really likes you. Usually, she doesn't like anyone." An amused eyeroll, as if they're sharing this moment. "I really wouldn't get my hopes up, though. Uzu-chan's always been a bit of a tease."

It knows Uzuki. This isn't about him. Except that it has to be, it has to, because one of them is a former high-school student with two years of experience in the Game, and the other has been doing this since Edo was a single-Composer town. He's made enemies, has come to expect these attacks even when he doesn't know the why or who behind them. It isn't a Fallen and it knows Uzuki, flipping a piece of her hair behind her ear, staring at him as if it is listening in on his train of thought, amused by his confusion.

No warning, when it strikes again. No real rhythm in the way it fights, no sense of anger or calculation or demand - nothing but the brutal strength of the blows and that emptiness, murmurs of static where any sense of Uzuki ought to be and his feet slip just a little bit now and then, his balance suddenly tilted. It can do this, affect the UG and his own thoughts without much trying. How does this have anything to do with Uzuki? This isn't Taboo refinement, this is far beyond that - what in the hell did she do, and where the hell was he when it happened?

The darkness sweeps in again, flowing over his hands, pooling at his feet, the thing turning Uzuki's face feral, a vicious, pleased snarl. It thinks this is the end, and maybe it has grown used to easy
victories. But Kariya is just a little better than the average Harrier, especially with sword in hand. In his time, combat was an art equal to any other, one of the better ways to prove worthiness in the Game. He can go up just as fast as it can go down, and at least for a few moments, drag it along for the ride.

It screams, or Uzuki screams, as Kariya jerks his vibe up violently, a movement that feels like trying to haul a mountain up onto his back, every muscle screaming as all his joints pop - but it works. A single whisper, the flicker of Uzuki blinks into view within the twisting darkness and Kariya takes the risk, reaches down for her in one swift, sharp motion and yanks them both back into the Realground. The sound of that scream is still hanging in the air, when Kariya finally gets to see just what kind of monster it is he's been fighting.

The girl is taller than Uzuki, taller than he is, and he can't tell where her long, dark hair starts and the shadows begin, no longer so well defined without a living body to contain her. Wearing a school uniform, no way to say if that's a clue or simply for fun, some kind of irony factor. She is poised in a way that suggests ballet lessons, years of them. Statue-pale and imperious and angry, watching him from the other side - eyes flashing, surrounded by that terrible silence that seems to mute everything, even into the Realground. The only thing he can hear is the sound of Uzuki on her hands and knees, puking up strawberry ice cream all over his shoes. Kariya's still got his sword up, even though he's pretty sure the gamble paid off - whatever she is and whatever damage she can do in the UG, she can't follow them here on her own.

"It's probably for the best." She says softly, now only casual, almost disinterested. As if they're acquaintances who've met in passing. "I always get so impatient, you know? Better to savor the moment."

"I'm not going to let you do this. Whatever it is you think you can get, you picked the wrong place."

Provoking her may not be the right idea, but there's a real good chance there is no right idea. Kariya already hates that knowing smile, her eyes never leaving his even though Uzuki has stopped hacking and coughing and is now leaning weakly against him, her head pressed against the side of his knee, and he waits and dreads that he will feel her flicker, braces himself for the feel of cold, empty space where she is now.

"What do you think you can stop? I'm already winning. I've already won."

It's almost gentle, almost pity in her eyes as she watches him. The power in her isn't what it should be, not at all what he's used to hearing. It isn't twisted, isn't some refined Taboo noise and some random grab at power, isn't even the broken fragments of a Fallen still clutching for some shred of power, or divinity - this is worse, this is something wearing the girl like she'd worn Uzuki, something she's become a part of without losing herself.

The Fallen are immersed in it, and the Angels fear it, but in the end this darkness is simply an opposite. His lord, his Composer explained it to him once - tried to - but Kariya didn't understand then and he still can only explain it in borrowed words, only trust that his beloved master was right because he was always right. In order to create a world, the Underground that fuels creativity, and creation, and life - there is a natural opposite to that world, there will always be, and now it seems to have found a Composer of its own.

"Tell Uzuki I had fun today. I'll see you around."

She wiggles the fingers on one hand, a girlish goodbye. Kariya can feel her leave, her power ebbing like a tide, flowing back out of the Underground, down into those Frequencies that he can
barely see and hardly touch. The memory of her quiet smile still hangs in the air, difficult to dispel, even as Kariya sheathes his sword and it vanishes, and he reaches down to lift Uzuki into his arms.

"Hey."

777's been awake for a while, just laying on the floor and staring up, watching a little trickle of dawn sweep across the ceiling, listening to their tech snore, asleep in one of the kitchen chairs. It's dumb luck, that's all - 777 knows how lucky he is. Name the last Reaper to come back, the last one to get a second chance? It just doesn't happen - he's nowhere near that popular, can't kid himself that Shibuya suffered much in his absence - but it's still damn good to be alive. To have a future, and lay here in the dark and watch the world fill with light.

"Hey."

Gratitude. A stupid, giddy kind of awe. It's like being wasted, except that everything is clear, and sharp and bright. He's tried to get it down, in lyrics, or a chord progression, but nothing is really doing it justice.

"Hey, 777. Hey. You awake?"

"I am now." He mutters, rubbing at his eyes. BJ is watching him with that same careful expression he and Tenho have had since he woke up on the street outside of their venue, aching all over and feeling the world spin dizzily around him. He still hasn't tried to raise his vibe, happy to leave all matters of the UG alone until next week.

"Are we really gonna get the band back together?"

He snorts. His stupid, stupid friends. Who risked their stupid lives to bring him back.

"We are together." He can practically reach out and grab onto all of them, although he'd have to throw something to reach the tech.

"Oh."

His stupid friends. His stupid band. The stupid Conductor, who just keeps glaring and bitching and grabbing stuff out of the fridge as his due, as if daring them to complain, when he could demand so much more. Does he not know, the kind of debt he could call in? 777 kept pushing him, well after it was sane, just to make him give up the act. Force his hand - but there's nothing there. Just a kid. He hardly acts like a Conductor at all.

"I think Rika's cousin's sister might have a place. It's not really big enough, but it's got a shower."

All of BJ's contacts are at least three-deep, the friend of a friend of someone he met at a show, but he usually comes through. Crashing at the rehearsal space isn't too bad, although 777 plans on dropping in on a few people, once he's got his strength back. His sudden reappearance should be worth at least a few hot meals.

"No rush."

"We can't keep staying here." Tenho says from the couch, rolling over to join in on the conversation. "Dude, you saw him with the instruments. If we move in, he'll kill us."

"I'd be less worried about that, than what you're going to do next week." The silence is not unexpected, no surprise they hadn't thought it all the way through. "You're both still Harriers, you
know."

"Oh." From the floor.

"Oh." From the couch. "Oh, crap."

The both of them are still so nervous, treating the Conductor with their version of the utmost respect, which mostly means a lot of stammering and scurrying out of his way. Luckily, there's not much for them to knock off the walls, though Neku's already moved one picture to a closet, before BJ could send it to the floor for a third time.

"I'll ask him to give you your old jobs back, if you two insist on wussing out." 777 finally says, just to break the silence.

"Man, you weren't there, but he was pissed when he found out about the last two Players." Tenho says, nearly a whisper. "I thought he was going to Erase us right there, we didn't know he knew about - you know, everything. It was like… dude, you want to talk to him, I'll gladly wuss out."

From what 777 remembers of the Game, Neku's sympathies were never with the Reapers. He was just a Player, out to protect himself and maybe the other Players but not nearly enlightened enough to feel much pity for the people trying to Erase him. What changed? Things hadn't been going especially well that last week - as much as he was surprised not to be Noise, it was just as surprising to see Shibuya mostly unchanged, and from rumor and speculation and the simple fact of his new position as Conductor, it seemed much of it had been Neku's doing.

"I don't think he minds so much, that we're here." BJ says quietly. "I mean, you can feel it, right?"

The difference between home and house, a place to crash and a place that's actually lived in - this place has three doors, one for the bathroom, one for his room - and the third hasn't been opened once, the entire time he's been here. 777's a musician, he's got a slightly better ear than some when it comes to judging a place - and this is just quiet and sad. A sad feeling that their Conductor's obviously grown to live with.

"You think somebody died?" BJ says, throwing out possibilities. "Or you think, like, his dad hits him?"

"It isn't that." Tenho says quietly. "That feels different." He would know. For a few people in the world, the Game is almost safer than being alive.

As if their conversation has summoned him, the door opens, Neku with his backpack already slung over his shoulder, rushing into the bathroom - he must have slept in, even though it's hardly light out. 777 is intensely grateful, as he is whenever he remembers it, that he's old and dead and never has to worry about school ever again.

The kid is loud when he's awake, all but visible through the door, and compared to Kitaniji - well, the old Conductor never bothered playing much with the plebes. Impossible to imagine him doing anything like this, for any reason, and if he'd had the sort of power Neku does, he hardly shared any of it with them. Neku - he doesn't even give a crap what they call him - is open in a way he's never seen from the upper ranks, like the sun, even a little bit like one of his songs - something that shares with everyone, and only gets stronger because of it.

After a couple of minutes, he's out of the bathroom, hair properly spiky, shoving random items in the fridge into his mouth or his bag - and 777 hears him pause when he finally notices the tech sacked out in the chair. He'd shown up late, well after Neku had returned from running their
errands, had thrown the key at 777's head and threatening horrible fates for anyone who woke him up before morning.

All of them are still laying down, BJ and Tenho feigning sleep rather than facing the Conductor's wrath, but 777's watching, and grinning when Neku notices he's awake, engaging in a moment of rather violent, silent kabuki dance, gesturing from the tech to 777 in a manner that suggests he'd love to introduce parts of the Reaper's anatomy to other parts - forcefully - but it's too early and he's got school, and for god's sake, what's next, groupies?

777 shrugs, badly concealing a smile, and Neku throws his gaze and hands heavenward before storming out. The tech jerks awake as the door slams behind him, rubbing a hand over his face, blinking blearily, not really awake.

"What? What'd I miss?"

He needs to get the proofs from Mr. H, and the cash, before he can buy Shiki's present for her big show. He also needs to never see the man again, until he can safely go and die of embarrassment, somewhere the Game can't reach him. If he wanted to kill two birds with one stone, Neku could go to the WildKat before school started. Unfortunately, one of those birds was the hope that Mr. H would ever, ever take him seriously again, and given that Joshua had almost certainly spoken with him - it's already a dead bird, just waiting for him to show up. It's Schrodinger's Humiliation, a strange state of being both boned and unboned that the son-of-a-bitch Composer carries around with him, a kind of bastard black hole.

At least Def March hadn't totally trashed his house - they were actually being fairly tidy about the whole thing, for punk rockers, although he was going to have to set a serious cap on the number of people who could crash there, since he doubted they'd stop when they ran out of floorspace.

Neku's actually had the time, even with running around, to get all of his homework done, and even get a head start - if he can do what he can in advance, it will make the Game weeks a hell of a lot easier.

"Neku! Over here!"

He's switched to energy drinks, to see if it gives him any more of a boost. If nothing else, it cuts down on the chance of someone finding him with an onigiri in each hand. Instead he finishes chugging the remaining third of the tiny can as he reaches the edge of school property, Tsuyoshi obviously waiting for him. Shit, he didn't call. Neku smiles as best he can - doesn't feel too out-of-place, really. Who knew it could be like a vacation, just living a normal life? A normal life with three semi-dead guys now camping out on his floor. Neku's not going to think about it too hard.

"How's it going?"

"Not bad. Great. Sorry I couldn't get back to you, I had some... uh, unexpected company." He is just going to be a walking excuse machine for the rest of his life, isn't he?

"It's cool."

So Neku's managed - blessedly - to turn off the thought-o-matic, but Tsuyoshi's Music's all but humming, a soft but definitely audible sound. Happy to be here, to hang out with Neku before school. So it's still new, this friendship thing, but he really kind of likes it. "Hey, uh, Neku. About
what happened, with the principal…"

"You mean the part where I'll be working at a gas station, and it's all your fault?" He needs to remember that not everyone is Joshua, that his sarcasm may be honed just a bit too sharp for everyday use - Tsuyoshi looks more than a little uncomfortable at the thought. Neku stops himself from peering a little closer, looking through his friend's thoughts, to find out what sort of things are said when he goes home at night.

"It's fine, man. He just wanted to scare me into being a good little tuition payment."

"Cool." Tsuyoshi relaxes. "Anyway, I wanted to make it up to you. Got another concert tonight. I know it's Monday and everything, but if you wanted to leave early and-"

"Sure. I'm there." Neku grins, actually able to return the favor this time. "Hey, speaking of concerts, I have some inside information I think you're going to like. There's this band that I know of, they're back together after a little hiatus, and going to do a couple of shows pretty soon. I don't think they've got anyone lined up for publicity stills."

Neku watches the other boy frown, obviously going through his mental file for insider information and coming up blank. About three seconds after Neku says Def March, Tsuyoshi completely misses the school door, and walks right into the wall instead. He'd apologize, but it seems unlikely the other boy can actually hear him, alternately shaking Neku in delight and looking around as if afraid some other photographer is just waiting to pounce and drag him off.

The rest of the day is blessedly, peacefully boring. Neku's postponed all worrying or even thinking about the Game until at least Wednesday, and paying attention to the teachers is a cake walk in comparison. No messages on his phone, even, though the moment he checks it a text pops up - unknown number, but only because Joshua didn't bother porting Vancouver over. Neku rolls his eyes at the petty slight - maybe he can get her to make him another bracelet, something with beads, or little bells. Bells would drive Joshua nuts for sure.

- only thing worse than the last Game is the next one.

He snorts at the unorthodox greeting, glancing up, but the teacher's gone off into one of his tangents, something about a recent baseball game, most of the boys happy to encourage his distraction.


- No deal. Had to fill out Erasure form in triplicate.

Neku snickers again, realizes he's talking about what's practically murder and getting a laugh out of it - ok, so maybe he'll forgive one-quarter of one of those times Joshua shot him. God, he's going to be so warped before he even gets to the end of the school year.

- Composer?

He likes talking to Vancouver, feels like he can talk to her, kind of like Mr. H. It's strange, for only meeting her just the once, but maybe it has to do with that distance, with there being no logical reason he can think of that she'd want to hurt the Shibuya Game. She seems to know what sorts of things he's finding difficult, or impossibly strange, or complicated. Things he can't talk about with anyone, not with Joshua - hell, Joshua is most of those things.

- Long pause, Neku. Ask about weather in Tokyo instead?
He types back, but pauses again anyway. Like there's anything Joshua ever says that doesn't just scatter more questions, like blowing the head off a dandelion and trying to chase down all the seeds. It would help if he knew what to ask, if he's making too big a deal about nothing, only so nervous because he doesn't know better.

- Angels?

Maybe she won't talk to him about them. He's not supposed to-

- You talked to them?

Is he supposed to? Neku swallows hard, suddenly regretting he asked, hating the sudden pall that only he can feel, falling over the normal room and the teacher now pretending to swing an invisible bat, criticizing a player's stance as the students argue back. He wants to be normal again, just for a moment - but that's the same desperate, ugly panic that nearly made him kill Shiki, and Neku pushes it away, hard.

- No. How -

Neku pauses mid-tap, wonders if the question is about to get him in trouble. The stronger he gets, the more noticeable it is, though. The way they've struck Joshua of his powers, all his Music in pianissimo, as present as ever but turned down far too low. Neku doesn't like it, has to keep from reaching in to try and raise it himself - and yes, yes it was louder when they were… together. Neku really isn't sorry about that, he hopes it helps. Joshua is a total bastard, but it feels… petty. What they did to him, and to Mr. H. It's clipping the wings of something that should be flying - what actual *good* does it do?

- How dangerous are they?

It's pretty clear, after what happened with Manhattan, that he's too much of a blithering idiot not to step in between Joshua and certain doom, but he'd rather *not* face the wrath of the heavenly host if it's at all possible to avoid it.

- About half as dangerous as he is for himself.

Again, after all that went down at the Composer party, the answer's not really a surprise. Joshua's obviously got a reputation for courting danger with the biggest red flag he can find. The whole Shibuya business, Joshua's little theatre within the game, being his Partner - Neku's still trying to wrap his head around what it all means. Or he's trying to pretend it's more complicated than it is, because it's scary to remember how Joshua looked at him, looked at *him* and said that Shibuya had been saved.

… and he's a teenager, and that's *it*, that's all. Sitting here glancing up at the teacher every now and then to keep from getting caught, reading the Conductor handbook that doesn't actually tell him how to handle the life he's living, or the death he's - whatever. Good god, he doesn't even have the right set of *nouns* to explain this. All that the first Game has taught him, really, is that he's so far out of his depth that he can give himself goosebumps if he thinks about it too hard.

And now he's supposed to be good for Joshua. For freaking *Joshua*. He's supposed to do the right thing, be the right person for a being of arguably limitless power, who's already executed him twice without flinching. Anytime Neku's feeling confident, he can just remind himself of that.

- Don't be afraid.
He's half regretting that they're not talking out loud, but half glad, really doesn't need Vancouver to hear his voice shake.

- I think I can't do this. Like, all the time. Then I do it anyway. That's not exactly a plan.

- It's all the same Game, Neku. 'Like, all the time'. Wherever you are, all you can do is make opportunities.

Neku sighs, as heavily as he can without drawing any extra attention. She's not making this easy, when he'd prefer it if she held his hand to keep him from screwing up - with a map and a compass and a GPS navigator packed away just in case.

- Anything else, o wise mystic?

- Stop giving Hanekoma the runarounds, and don't be afraid to call your father.

Neku's eyes widen, halfway to asking how she knows about his dad - did he say something? Probably, even though he's been determined to keep those worlds as far apart as possible - but she's already gone.

Joshua hates working on deadlines, and does not procrastinate. He may revel in moments of intense inspiration and artistic passion, but the Game has a cycle, and he's not going to be the jackass who bitches about its demands spoiling his 'vision' only to whine when the entire Underground fizzles out like a dying firecracker.

He's also not going to get distracted with thoughts of his Conductor. It wasn't like Joshua paid much attention to him, all that time when Neku wasn't even formally connected to the Game, or the moment when he could have chosen not to take up the position. Not that he didn't have contingency plans for that - threats, Neku would have called them threats, but Joshua thought it all would have turned out much the same in the end.

Why is he so good at anticipating all the ways Neku could betray him, or disappoint him, but his remarkable clairvoyance is so remarkably blind when it comes to the actual surprises?

Joshua rolls his eyes, dragging his attention back to his work. Again. He has deliberately kept from checking his phone - Neku has his own life, at his school, hanging out with his friends. Maybe getting an unfortunate tattoo in an embarrassing place. Joshua smirks, probably not, his Conductor oddly restrained for the quality of his Imagination and really, really is this going to be the train of his thought for the rest of the night?

Shibuya is not at all helping. Arguably, he's the absolute ruler of this domain, but Joshua could argue a lot of things, all of which make sense, and none of those are true either. His district is vibrant and alive and mooning shamelessly, quite happy to be foolishly infatuated and not at all concerned with what it means or the potential danger or anything even remotely sensible. It is not a entity that sees much value in reserve or restraint, and the fact that its good mood makes his job fundamentally easier, like entertaining a bar full of cheery, drunken karaoke singers - Joshua rubs at his temples, irritated. The music of Shibuya curls around him adoringly, oblivious to his mood.

Joshua attempts to weave together the melodies that will fuel the creativity of a district, and spark new fires of Imagination. Shibuya doodles little spiky-headed hearts in the margins, and composes bad poetry.

He tries to get a feel for what sorts of Souls will be in the next Game, his clairvoyance a natural
advantage in such matters, but damned if his thoughts don't lock to a certain boy in a certain crowd in some crowded corner of his district. Neku at some club, and his Music is loud enough that Joshua could anchor all of Shibuya on him and just walk away.

Most of the time, it's just quartz and pyrite passing through his fingers, and Joshua's left panning the river for the slightest traces of gold. He's used to small victories, has seen a few of the Game's winners through to great successes, a small number even internationally known. Other times, he's satisfied himself with what seem like less-important wins, people who influence nothing directly, but cause a cascade of reactions, that mythical beating of the butterfly wing. Neku, though, Neku Sakuraba is a damn diamond that dropped out of the sky - and to think, to think that he was ever so jaded, to think of the boy as nothing more than a solution to his 'problem' - and even then, he hadn't understood the problem or the solution.

Joshua snaps his laptop closed, pushing it to the side. The stupid preoccupation hasn't been this bad since he was on that rooftop, watching Neku safe and sound in the RG, living out the first days of the rest of his life. The cold and quiet realization, that he might have lost more than he'd won, that watching didn't seem to be the great victory it had once been.

Half sick of shadows.

"Are we happy now?" He mutters, and Shibuya burbles and trills and sings, and he finally relents, lets it carry him away for a bit - it really is beautiful. He enjoys this part of the job more than he ever thought he would, so much subtlety and nuance, infinite possibility from the lightest touch. Hanekoma always understood - Megumi tried, right until the end he'd tried - and Joshua pushes himself off the couch and goes to raid the fridge because he's thirsty because he's stayed here, in this Frequency and in this form, because he's gone ridiculous. Old and maudlin, and all of it is just absurd, from this body to the way he keeps clicking over to the pages of art supply stores, glancing at brushes and inks and stamps - as if his being Composer ever had anything to do with his rather stolid, uninspired 'art.'

Or the way his breath gives the smallest noticeable catch, when he feels Neku step into the elevator, sounding like a full chorus of carillon bells. Joshua smirks because the only other option is surprise, or something even less worth his time, and opens the door just as Neku reaches for the handle from the other side.

"So, what have you been up t-" Joshua starts, but where crabby Partner Neku would have given him free rein to be snide, new and improved Conductor Neku doesn't let him finish the sentence before crushing their mouths together. All but tackling him, the Music pouring over and through him, sweeping his irritation away. In a moment of uncharacteristic Joshua-ness, he doesn't fight back, doesn't keep his distance. It's a long kiss. The door goes from open to shut without ever swinging closed. Benefits of a slightly altered reality.

"Hi." Neku says, finally leaning back, eyes flicking over him as if studying Joshua is all he's ever wanted to do. It takes every ounce of restraint Joshua has not to drag them both onto the floor then and there, but he's - there's supposed to be restraint involved in this somewhere, and regrettably, it's supposed to be coming from him.

"You smell like a herd of something with questionable taste in music."

Neku laughs. "My friend… Tsuyoshi - we went out and, uh…" He makes a nonsense gesture with one hand, not at all explaining what Joshua doesn't really care about anyway. "Hey, can I kiss you again?"

Joshua knows what this is about - the show, Neku went to a show and mainlined pure creativity,
the art of youth, so determined and driven that it borders on desperation. It's been a long time since Joshua bothered with anything but the talent of experts - there's something to be said for slumming it.

"I have decided I like your new friend."

He tries to make a promise, to himself, to stay focused, but the promise changes as Neku's tongue slides against his own, as he hears two buttons on his shirt pop and skitter across the tile. He's never going to miss out on this again, not for... whatever he thinks he's doing with the rest of his time. Neku grins, sheepish and bold and so beautiful, staring down at the damage done, Joshua's wrinkled shirt, his skin visible where the buttons had been.

"I wasn't sure you'd let me do that."

Joshua considers some dry, sarcastic response, but it seems more important not to discourage Neku from ripping the rest of his clothes off. He's not going to interrupt a second of this, especially as he's nudged back onto the couch, and it seems the tactical stalemate is over, his entire apartment now friendly territory. The next time they get a really good band in town, maybe he can even try for the elevator.

"... elevator? Really?" Neku leans back, studying him. His eyes are soft, and open, concealing nothing. Amused and warm and welcome and every other good thing the world tends to parcel out in teaspoons, if that. "Why would - man, Josh, you can't ever just live in the moment."

He can't give this up. Maybe there was some chance once, but that's done with forever, and at the moment he doesn't even care, whatever the cost. Shibuya's Music is so bright and so clear - it doesn't know how to be afraid.

"Nothing at all wrong with this moment."

Trying to sound unruffled, but Joshua bites his lip as Neku's hand slides down, stroking him through the thin material of his pants. Playing him, nothing of much importance between the Conductor's Music and the district's at this moment, one more thing Neku shouldn't know how to do. He's right there, in the middle of everything that doesn't belong to him, and Joshua's just letting it happen. His hands beneath the back of Neku's shirt, pressed against warm skin, warm breath against the hollow of his collarbone. The whole world enticing and wild and intoxicating, the Music of a perfect Shibuya - unsustainable and fleeting, but here with him, in this moment, and infinitely better than anything he can find on his own.
I was born, I was born to sing for you

Chapter Notes

Title lyrics: U2 - Magnificent

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's not his room. His sheets don't have nearly this high of a thread count. Neku makes a face into the pillow, doesn't bother opening his eyes. All right, of course he's here - so how did he get here? It takes a minute to trace the day back: School, then Tsuyoshi, then the concert, which was just as incredible as the first time, like a high-speed washing machine of awesome that dumped him back out onto the street, dizzy and slightly damp and Neku even kept checking, every few moments, to make sure he was still in the proper plane. It had seemed like the most spectacular evening, a perfect moment - and he wanted to share that, wanted someone - and hey, he had a boyfriend! Sort of. All the reasons now for thinking twice hadn't even crossed his mind. That he maybe ought to take this slow. Make Joshua work for at least some of it. Maybe not immediately go from World's Most Uncomfortable Virgin to the Gigantic Man-Whore of Tokyo?

A soft, damp something touches his shoulder, and Neku is pretty sure he doesn't want to know what it is even as he lifts his head to try and see, without moving too much.

"Good morning." Joshua says, calm and implacable as ever, chopsticks expertly laying a second plank of raw salmon next to the first.

"... the hell?"

"Careful. You'll ruin the presentation." Neku could and should do a great many things, including wind back the clock and never show up here. Instead he shoves the pillow away and drops his face against his crossed arms, feeling Joshua pile a little bit of what might be ginger in the small of his back.

"You are a freak. You are a freak beyond freaks."

A soft snort of disdain. All of Joshua's responses are some form of diluted superiority.

"If I were going for authenticity, I would have made you shave. And take a cold shower. I mean, ideally, you should be a virgin. But I suppose I can't complain about that."

Neku rolls his eyes. "How many hours a day do you work at being so damn creepy?"

No answer, just the feel of another piece of sushi being carefully added to his back. This one might be a roll. Neku's a little sore, in a really wonderful kind of way, remembering what happened after he pounced on Joshua at the front door. It had taken a while to make it off the couch, just to do it all over again when they'd reached the bed. Joshua had as many tactics in the bedroom as he did anywhere else - one of those things Neku was just starting to understand, impossible to notice at the time with the Composer thoroughly and carefully having his way, and Neku had let him - begged for it, yes, there had been some rather undignified pleading and moaning and anything else Joshua had wanted to hear. Still, all of it was not without a different sort of purpose, Joshua not getting off himself until Neku had nothing left to give and could barely see straight. As if even that,
allowing Neku the slightest glimpse of vulnerability was more than he could bear.

Well, it wasn't like he ever thought this would be easy.

"What time is it?"

"What time do you want it to be?" Definitely superiority there. Wouldn't be so superior if he had a math test coming up - Neku thinks, deliberately loud, and Joshua sighs. "Early, Neku. It's very early."

"Is that egg?" He says, and at least one piece of food makes it to his mouth instead - Joshua's really good with those chopsticks. "Tell me you don't have any cod roe. This is gross enough."

"You know, if you didn't complain so much, I bet you could get paid for this."

So much for the tender blush of first love. Neku continues to not move, and refuses to comment as a few more pieces of sushi are lined up along his back. He shouldn't be this awake, if it's so early, but Neku doesn't feel tired at all. Maybe this is an unexpected benefit, he'll need to keep eating like a sumo but he'll gain a couple extra hours in the day. It's not like Joshua sleeps. Neku curls his hand back, trying to grab for whatever's close, just past the edge of his waist, but he's rapped sharply on the knuckles for his efforts. Neku makes a disgruntled noise, tucks his arms under his chest. It doesn't, unfortunately, dislodge any of Joshua's fishy artistic display.

"Hanekoma thinks you're avoiding him."

"That would be because I am." Neku replies, but smiles a little. If Mr. H has talked with Joshua then he already knows everything - and hell, he's been doing this, playing Producer to Joshua's Composer for so long, he must understand something about going along with a pale-haired lunatic despite all the better judgment and intelligent arguments in the universe.

"I felt you, at the club. Watching me." No answer, and since he's a table now, Neku can't look back or turn over to see the Composer's expression. "You should have come out. You might have had fun."

Instead of answering, Neku feels a piece of sushi lifted off his back, and then another. One more question he's never asked, because it seemed unlikely he'd get an answer - why did Joshua never show up, never meet them in the Realground? He must have heard, must have known Neku wanted him there - had been teasing him so long that he must have known it would end up like this, or at least guessed.

"I think your body temperature's affecting the taste. I need to go find an ice pin."

"You'll be chipping me out for like, an hour." Neku chuckles. "I hit Beat once by accident." In the last week, exhausted, the both of them more than a little panicked. Back when Joshua was dead and the Composer was some all-powerful unknown, full of dread. Neku stretches, tries to look again, but Joshua's got his head tipped down and his hair is hiding his expression. The all-powerful unknown.

"We're getting together tomorrow… well, today, actually. Shiki and Eri are making some last-minute adjustments before their big debut. Beat said he'd even bring Rhyme over."

A piece of tuna, lifted off his right shoulder. Neku sighs.

"Maybe when they're all done, we'll go see a movie. Something loud and stupid. You can bitch about it for hours."
"Are you sure you want to do this?" The Composer's voice is soft. If it were any time but now, Neku would think he's imagining the edge there, nervousness or warning or both.

"A little bit late for that, don't you think?" Here in Joshua's bed, shouldn't that already be his answer? Neku muses for a moment, on the point of no return. In the Throne Room? At the end of that second week? Maybe from the first moment he stumbled to the statue, frantic and confused and desperate for a way to save Shiki. "You know I trust you."

The last piece of sushi disappears off his back, and Neku rolls onto his side. It's not fair how good Joshua looks when he's rumpled, wearing his usual shirt, now wrinkled, unbuttoned, a few dangling threads where buttons should be. "You don't have to... worry, about being out there, Josh. I can protect you."

Joshua chuckles, an indulgent little sound, even though he's the one playing the recluse, and Neku doesn't think it has to do with whether his powers are censured or not.

"Neku," A high-and-mighty Composer sigh, as if he's being purposely obtuse. "You have to admit, there's not much of a point. It's not like they'll remember it."

"Is that all?" Neku says, catches a flicker of what might be real surprise at his disdainful tone. "Josh, do you think you're the first forgettable person in history? Half my class might be cardboard cutouts, for all I can tell. People forget who people are dating all the time."

"So you're going to tell them."

Neku can't help but laugh. "About this? Trust me, they'll figure it out. And even if they don't remember you well, maybe they'll stop thinking I'm dating everyone else in Shibuya. Just... try to act..."

"Yes?" Joshua cocks an extremely unhelpful eyebrow, trailing the tip of a chopstick along the curve inside Neku's knee. Neku scowls. The Composer pretends to be suddenly concerned with the far wall of his apartment.

"Good behavior. You know, if you were a normal person and not you. Just do whatever the opposite is you think about doing."

Joshua leans back in haughty mock-offense, but his eyes are flashing, amused.

"So what's my reward for all this unnecessary good behavior?"

Neku, to his credit, does not blush, even as he drags the blankets up a little further, although he's half-convinced that Joshua's just not telling him about the super sekret Composer x-ray powers.

"I mean, if I keep saving up my points-"

Neku rolls his eyes. "You don't get points for not being a jackass. Jackass."

Joshua isn't listening. "I think you were right about the elevator. It seems a bit tame."

Neku doesn't ask but then again he doesn't have to, because Joshua's Imprinting a thought - no, pulling out a memory, of Shiki and that horrible time when the button was loose on his pants and -

"You're not serious. Hell no."

"Why not? One good reason."
He really ought to be standing up for this, or like, going or not entirely completely, y'know naked and Joshua's all rumpled but it doesn't make him look any less imperious and dammit, why not? At least that ought to be some sort of… equity. Something. Joshua is still looking at him.

"I am not having sex with you in Scramble Crossing!" He yanks the sheet out and wraps it around himself in an awkward sort of pile that covers surprisingly little while threatening to trip him every half-second. "I'm taking a shower. I'm sticky and disgusting and it's all your fault and I don't need a reason - normal people don't need a reason for not having sex in the middle of the city!"

"It's the UG, Neku. No one could see us." He's rational and calm and Neku shouldn't have gotten up because now there's nothing to throw at him. "We'd hardly be the first."

That observation makes him pause, thinking back on all those years of his life with no idea the Game existed, all those Reapers who could have been doing god knows what while he was eating a burger or shopping or just walking down the street or - god, Minamimoto's O-Face. Neku gives an involuntary, full-body shudder, pretty sure that's the feeling of his brain trying to vomit inside of his skull.

"Oh god, ohhhh I can't ever unthink that."

Joshua gets up, following him at a lazy pace - and yep. Neku immediately trips on his incredibly lame makeshift toga, feels his heel slide against the floor and he stumbles back half a step against the wall, and Joshua's there, one arm up, hand pressed against the wall next to his ear and this, this is going to be a trend, he can tell.

"You still haven't given me a good reason."

Neku keeps forgetting to ask Josh what color his eyes should be, what they were before he became the Composer because there's no way they're supposed to look like they do now; his gaze electric and piercing, carrying a confidence that borders on cruelty and this is when it gets scary. It's frightening, when Joshua looks at him this way, with that sort of desire, that kind of disdain for everything Neku thought of as the real world - and he wants this, wants to share in this secret, wants to be the person Joshua wants him to be. Let the Composer have him anywhere, whenever, and he'll laugh about it, and give everything over to this life he can't possibly be living.

"We're having sex in the shower," Neku murmurs, sliding toward the bathroom door, every inch of his body locked up, suddenly wanting Joshua so badly he can barely move, "not the UG."

"Well," Joshua says, shrugging, barely able to get the words out before Neku yanks him inside, "if you insist."

"Are you still obsessing over that coat?" Shiki calls out from inside the club room. "I can fix it, if you want me to. We can try something else."

Eri doesn't bother responding. She's dragged this one out into the hall, dress form and all, just to try and get a new look at it. To convince herself the profile isn't all wrong with the dress underneath and she'll need to do something entirely different to make it work right. Maybe it's just the fabric, puckering ever so slightly where the sleeves meet the body - it's not Shiki's fault, but when Eri had it down on paper, it all looked right. She's the one who's been pushing this particular jacket ever since the first sketch, and at the moment she's trying to cultivate some patience for it, to treat it like a fun-loving but troublesome problem child instead of something to be set on fire.
So she pats the fabric, and straightens it, and takes it off the form and flips it inside out and repins it in a dozen different places and flips it back and pats it some more. Or maybe there's nothing at all wrong with the coat and she's just finally having a few moments of the pre-show jitters. The fact that been standing here picking invisible lint off of it for the last ten minutes might be a good sign. It's not even like it's that big a deal, this stupid show - Eri's still not sure whether they were invited to join in because someone dropped out or just because it's cute having a couple of kids who think they can - no. No, she's not going to let herself think like that. Shiki's depending on her, and Eri believes in them, and so things always work out.

… maybe if she added a scarf?

"The shoulders look a little boxy, don't you think?"

The voice isn't loud, but it seems to be following exactly her train of thought and Eri nearly jumps out of her skin, turning sharply, scowling before she can stop herself. The boy doesn't seem to mind, leaning slightly against the doorway like he's trying to be a lot older than he is. Eri lets out a little sigh of irritation, forcing her expression to stay neutral.

"It might make a more delicate profile with a wrap." If there's anything Eri can't stand, it's people who try to interrupt her in the middle of a problem. It doesn't do anything except throw her off when she's searching for a solution - and Eri clenches her jaw for a moment, when she realizes he might actually have a point.

"Are you looking for… someone?" I think the rest of the school is pretty much empty by now…” Eri has managed to sweet-talk a teacher for the larger club space, they can and have stayed until all hours trying to get things ready.

The boy doesn't answer her, just steps away from the wall and toward her design, to take a closer look at what he's already judged wanting, and Eri cringes for a moment and then hates herself for caring what he thinks. Whoever he is. Dressed a little dandy, really, but tidy without being fussy. White's a risky color for how pale he is, but it works. Simple and elegant, and if it's not quite making a statement it's far better than the people she's seen who seem to be following Neku's trend of walking into a closet and having a mild seizure.

"Have we met?" Eri knows she knows everyone, and the slightest smile appears in the corner of his mouth, as if he's aware of it too. He's got a watch on his wrist - and it's… holy crap, it's a Pegaso, and Eri has to look at it twice to prove to herself it's not a fake, before giving the rest of his outfit extra attention. His shoes are Dragon Couture, limited edition from last fall, and that means she has to take a closer look at the shirt and pants too and… all right, yep, he's dressing down at the cost of her entire summer wardrobe.

"I doubt it." And she believes him. He glances toward the open door. "Do you mind if I look at the rest of the collection?"

It's all in the way that he says it. He's amused at some joke she's not getting, but it's not at all about their work. It's not a lack of respect for what they're doing - and he's right about the coat, damn it - and Eri nods, pretending to go back to studying what might end up having to be scrapped, even if Shiki might murder her for all the wasted work. They have a backup piece, an earlier school project just in case this happened, just needing to be hemmed a little.

Eri hears it when Shiki realizes they've got company, the high-pitched sound of her surprise, and she smiles to herself, imagining Shiki caught off guard and blushing, the extra few seconds it takes her to change gears from intently working to dealing with surprise guests. It's difficult not to go into the room, just hover at the door and make sure he doesn't say anything or do anything, no matter
what he drops on his accessories. Eri is overprotective of her friends, always has been, and Shiki is way more than just a friend, or a girlfriend, or even her co-creator. What they have together is way more than the sum of its parts. The way to respect that is to trust Shiki to take care of herself - she's strong, but Eri has to give her the chance to be strong. Even when she'd rather be there, just to make sure.

"Hey."

Eri jumps out of her skin for the second time in fifteen minutes, and on top of her already frazzled nerves it's a good thing that Shiki hid the shears an hour ago. Neku shies away regardless, holding up his hands in mock surrender, and she instantly does a swift and vicious head-to-toe of his wardrobe. Nothing is immediately offensive, so she settles for an all-purpose glare and a growl that makes him cringe again.

"The salesguy said this shirt goes with these pants!" He blurts out, and finally smiles when she laughs. Neku really doesn't look half-bad. Obviously he's had help, and she's starting to guess from where. "So, how's it going?"

Eri sighs, takes a deep breath, not even sure at this point if her nervousness actually matches up to reality or if it's just random anxiety. Everyone thinks she's bulletproof, but Eri is as worried and self-conscious as anyone else, she just ignores it as much as she can.

"I know Shiki's been waiting for you - and don't worry, I think she actually has boy clothes this time. I'm…" Eri rolls her eyes, accepting defeat as gracefully as she can, pulling the jacket free and resisting the urge to wad it up in both hands. "Damn it, it really might look better with a wrap."

Neku glances toward the door, eyes narrowing slightly, listening in on the bare murmur of conversation, the stranger's comments and Shiki's replies.

"There's some boy with a Pegaso watch in there, if you'll believe that - so…" Eri trails off, because Neku's already walking to the door, and she sees it when he must see whoever it is inside. He just lights up, a smile Eri's seen him give to Shiki every now and again, but even then it's reserved for special occasions.

So, this is the boyfriend.

Eri likes Neku. He sees Shiki for who she really is, the person she wants to be - the person Shiki believes she is, a lot of the time now. She's changed, more confident in herself. Happier, when Eri didn't know what else to try or how to change things to make it better. At first, it was a surprise, some new boy out of nowhere, and a little part of her couldn't help but worry - but if she was jealous it didn't last long, not with Shiki so happy and their work suddenly in a new place, better than what they'd done before. So she has Neku to thank for that, and he's a pretty cool guy, and he makes Shiki smile, and… well, he has no fashion sense, inexplicably, a total blind spot - especially with boyfriend showing up and bringing all his designer tags along.

Shiki's going to be a little disappointed about the 777 thing. Eri would have liked some free backstage passes herself.

She drags the dress form with her, to the door. Shiki is hemming the bottom of a skirt, Neku handing her the pins - the other boy is leaning back against a desk, apparently in some sort of grudge match with gravity, not quite slouching, not quite *posing*, but…

Neku says something low that makes the other boy chuckle slightly, responding with a short comment that has Shiki yelping and turning red, though her hands are steady and never miss a
Eri's good at people, maybe that's why everyone thinks she's so confident and secure, that she just has a slight knack for reading body language or little expressions and it's just as clear to her that Neku's crushing hard as it is that the other boy isn't giving her anything he doesn't want to, a calm, collected manner that borders right up on indifference. Maybe that's the reason she's on edge. Neku doesn't need indifference, doesn't need to get hurt by some stupid rich boy - and this is the point where Shiki would tell her not to worry so much, not to get so involved, but Shiki's busy working and the boy is watching her, gaze steady. As if he knows everything she's thinking, and he smiles.

"I don't think we were properly introduced."

Neku sighs. "You could have told them your name, at least." He turns to Shiki and Eri. "Just ignore anything he says. We think it's a chemical imbalance."

"What is?"

"Pretty much the whole… him… thing." A slight, wry look between them - it's definitely serious, this. At least Neku isn't acting very different around Boyfriend McFancy Pants, isn't being too nice. With what she'd heard about his last friendship crashing and burning, it wasn't impossible to think he might be a little deferential, just in case. Eri hates it when people are less than they should be, just to keep someone else around. Wouldn't want - no, probably wouldn't let it happen to Neku.

"Eri, Shiki - this is Josh. Joshua."

"It's a nickname." He says, all ease and charm but still laughing at her, behind his eyes. Or she's overreacting. Or maybe this is how he is with everyone, and she needs to stop taking it personally. "Nice to meet you, again. I must say, you did an excellent job with that suit. Neku hardly looked like himself."

"Wait, so that was you with the suit and…?" Shiki says, and now she's turned away from her work and is in the process of catching up, staring between Neku and Joshua with a slight blush just starting to rise on her cheeks. "Um…"

"You were right, dear," Joshua says, his innocent expression carrying a pronounced smirk, "We didn't have to say anything at all."

Neku grumbles into his hand as Shiki stammers, and Eri can feel the tension in the room pop, just like a soap bubble, the first and most awkward minutes of this meeting passing, already fading into a more easy feeling, although when Joshua's eyes meet hers, she holds his gaze for a long moment before looking away. Just so he knows she's watching.

Okay, since no one's asking, Neku can admit that he was just slightly worried about how it would all work out, whether Joshua would have any fun at all or fit in with their groove - but he's forgetting that this is the Composer, who knows a thing or two about grooves, and that the rest of the world gets polite, normal Joshua, while bitchy and irritating Joshua is all his own. Lucky.

Eri's thrown in a movie, the retrospective of some fashion designer, images of Italy and Paris flashing by, old fashions from the sixties and seventies interspersed with more modern designs. Neither Eri and Shiki are paying much attention, probably have seen it a dozen times by now, though they both look up when a naked model walks into the room, and the designer sweeps a mass of sheer, red fabric around her, a team of seamstresses descending on her like bees on a
flower, and Shiki's eyes are gleaming, that's her dream right there.

Neku doesn't watch the movie near as much as he watches her, Shiki stitching the edge of a blouse, alternating between a row of silk ribbon flowers in pale white, and a row of the tiniest crystal beads he's ever seen, glancing at the book propped up by one knee every time she switches back to the flowers. It's amazing to watch, the tiny stitches in near-invisible thread - and she glances up, sees him watching her and smiles shyly. She doesn't remember anything, not about the Game, not that Neku thought she would even with Joshua around, but it's still a relief.

"You're going to go blind," he teases, watching her expertly tip another bead onto the hair-thin needle.

"I got lucky. I almost couldn't find enough of the right beads."

"There are wrong beads?"

The question earns him a quick crash course in the perils of using inferior seed beads, between bits of the movie where the same team of seamstresses are now attaching thousands of tiny sequins to the fringe of a dress, and Shiki glances from the screen to him.

"I'm not that good yet. I don't even know where I can learn some of that, these days."

"I think you're amazing." She blushes, and smacks him lightly with the edge of the now-sparkling fabric. Joshua's voice comes from the other corner of the room, where he's talking with Eri. It seems like they've hit it off, for whatever reason, and Neku's pretty confident Eri can handle herself.

"… maybe something that doesn't show off his knees like he's five."

"My clothes are fine, guys!" He yells back, and it is decidedly unnerving to have three pairs of eyes suddenly looking at him with indulgent pity. Neku sulks, pulling out his sketchbook just as the door opens, and Rhyme steps in.

"Finally, you're here!" Eri says, moving toward the carefully hanging rows of mostly finished clothes. "Where's your brother?"

"Bringing the food up." Eri is shuffling through the hangers, and Shiki is pointing out something in the movie and Neku turns, and so he doesn't see the moment that Rhyme sees Joshua, and the way she stops, eyes wide for a moment in nothing less than sheer terror. His eyes widen slightly, surprised, and then he smiles, so by the time Neku looks back, it just looks like Rhyme is vaguely shy of strangers, and given the stranger it's not like he can blame her.

"Rhyme, this is my friend Joshua." You remember Rhyme, right? Eaten by a shark and turned into a squirrel? Safely returned to the land of the living by a Composer's endless grace and virtue? I remember. The thought comes back to him, with Joshua's dry wit dripping off every word.

"Very nice to meet you." He says, and Rhyme nods, and finally smiles weakly. By that point Beat is coming through the door, boxes piled high in his hands, and no one notices if she still looks a little pale, or the way she keeps a bit of space between herself and Joshua, doesn't let him get too close.
"You should have just boxed up the whole kitchen." Neku says, as Beat gingerly transfers the containers to a table. It smells very good, and Beat grins, proud and tired.

"I told him I was meetin' with my friends, so he had me take a whole bunch of stuff. A few… uh, attempts. Some of the tempura fell apart. Think it's still good, though."

Beat seems… different. A little more relaxed, although that could be because he's just exhausted, and Neku has to take a step to the side when he moves suddenly, smelling overwhelmingly like sweat and dashi stock. Beat just laughs.

"Yah, I know. Hell of a night. Back room was roasting, an' the boss had this big guy in there, some part-time… I dunno. I guess I'm spost'a help him teach a class or whatever. Guy was huge, kept talkin' about food like, the entire time. Didn't matter if I said a thing."

No, no his life will not converge like this without his permission. "… Higashizawa?"

Beat nods. "Yeah. Maybe, yeah. You know him?"

"Not really." And even that is more than he wants to.

"We had to do this eel thing, that's in the bottom box there, the leftovers - 'cept it was still, yanno - alive?" Beat makes the same sort of face as when people call him by his full first name, and then laughs. "Yah. Mr. Iron Chef Higashi-whatever, he didn't like that too much."

It's a very satisfying image, the jerk who put them through the first week of Game hell freaking out over an eel. Beat passes out the boxes, deliberately setting two aside for Neku, and glances over at Joshua, speaking in what he probably thinks is a quiet voice. "So what's with the prissy kid? Eri's friend?"

"No… he's, uh. He's mine. My friend, I mean. Joshua."

And even though Shiki and Eri both giggle, Neku is safely confident in the knowledge that any and all innuendo will all go well over Beat's head. Beat nods, though his eyes narrow for a moment, Joshua looking back, mild and complacent because, save for Eri, he's already held all of their lives in his hand.

"You look familiar." Beat says, jerking Neku out of one disturbing thought right into another. "I ever roll over you on my board?"

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure." Joshua says, and Beat shrugs and starts passing out boxes. Neku sees Shiki creep up on Rhyme, setting something on her shoulder. It's a little amigurumi doll, in the shape of the sketch he did of Rhyme's Noise form. He didn't even know Shiki could crochet, though it's not surprising and this… the sight of it now perched on her is the sort of weirdness he should really be accustomed to by now. Rhyme giggles, and Neku is nudged, a box put in his hands. He wonders if Josh will need two as well, but when he opens it up there's enough food there - fried pork, vegetables, rice, some fish dumplings - that he wonders if even he'll need the second box.

"The boss says there's a guy that can teach me noodles. Like, super noodles. He says he thinks I'm serious enough, to try for a, I dunno, apprenticeship."

"You don't sound very happy about that," Eri replies, naturally interested in perfection and just assuming that everyone feels the same.

"I dunno," Beat shrugs, "I jus' wanna make food for people, yanno? So they're not hungry."

"Is that why my sushi rolls look like little panda bears?" Joshua says mildly.
In the silence that follows, Beat quietly switches Joshua's box with his sister's, and everyone pretends that he's not beet red.

"Neku, if you move your arm again I'm sewing you into this."

"You look perfect, Rhyme. Try it on with the hat!"

"Why does she get to look more manly than I do?" Neku sighs, the high-waisted gown crinkling a little as he turns to watch Rhyme dart behind him. She's wearing a young boy's outfit, and it does look adorable even before she puts the hat on, looking over her shoulder in the mirror, posing with one heel up. A few feet away, Beat is sacked out under a table, one hand on the cookbook flattened out across his chest. Rhyme had been so proud, when she said how hard he'd been working.

"Eyes front, princess! Eyes front!" Eri barks, and Neku does as he's told, looking to where Joshua is watching all this as if it's been set up just for him. All right, so when Neku asked him to come along he really didn't think it would involve the Composer watching him get buttoned into a glittery blue ballgown, complete with matching satin gloves that, for some reason, he had to wear.

It's not a part of the show - those outfits are all hanging against the far wall, and now Shiki and Neku are doing some mending and fitting on costumes for the school play, since they're both insane to take on double projects, and have convenient models that they say are about the right dimensions. Neku feels a little sorry for the girl who has his chest, or he would if he thought this was anything but an excuse for them to put him in a dress and giggle about it. Still, Shiki and Eri both look a little more relaxed, and it has been nothing but fun just hanging out with his friends, goofing off probably the best part of a normal life.

"No tiara." He growls, and Eri sticks her tongue out at him, before holding it out to Joshua. "Can you convince him for me?"

"You have to admit, Neku - you look rather regal in blue."

Okay, so maybe introducing Eri to Joshua is not one of his all-time smart moves, especially after she'd got him the closest Neku's ever seen to an actual Composer spit-take, some side remark about trying to figure out the particulars of Neku's love life, and the pre-Joshua, post-777 speculation that his sugar daddy was that guy who ran that weird coffee shop nearby.

Neku's pretty sure the "mention it to Mr. H and I'll kill you" Imprint got through loud and clear, the question not so much if Joshua heard him as if he cared. The answer is probably not in his favor, not as Rhyme calls his name from the other corner of the room, and Neku turns in time just to realize he's being played, feels the tiara fall into place. Everyone's laughing, and Neku feels… stupidly grateful, even as he grumbles and glares. He remembers when he used to watch moments like these between friends, passing by in the hallway, or on the other side of a window, looking in. It wasn't even this good, back when he thought he had the best friend in the world, and did he ever, ever think he would be able to say that?

He wonders if Joshua ever feels the same, if this is fun for him or if even this is just for Neku's benefit, Joshua indulging him by slumming it. He's perfect at hiding in plain sight, whatever he's really feeling all tucked behind an impenetrable, polite smile, a gracious distance. If he's good enough to fake that, then maybe all the rest of it, maybe everything...

Maybe he has to be brave enough, to love Joshua without ever being sure.
It's a lot easier for Beat to walk out, empty-handed, than it had been to walk in, even if he's groggy and only half-awake now, not realizing he'd fallen asleep until Rhyme was shaking his shoulder. Neku's friend might look uptight, but he eats like a garbage compactor - Beat never even saw the last box disappear. Rhyme is yawning by the time they leave everyone else, and maybe it's just him but… there's something up between Neku and his… prissy friend. He'll have to talk to Shiki sometime, alone, just to make sure he's not missing something, before he blurts out something stupid. Which he does. A lot. Especially when he's got other stuff to think about.

If he's going to do that internship, he'll need to talk to his parents. And they don't. Talk. Not really interested in seeing their son waste his life behind a kitchen sink or a pot of noodles. Even though it's the first time Beat's thought he might be actually good at something, that he understands it coming right out of the gate, and doesn't even need Rhyme to explain it to him. It's not like he hasn't done stuff before that they don't approve of, and don't like - and if it's a good thing this time, maybe if he does it, they'll get it. He's no good with words, but if they can see it for themselves, that he's got a plan. Hey, at least he wouldn't starve, right?

"You have fun, Rhyme?"

"Yeah!" His sister is carefully carrying the little toy Shiki made for her, and every now and again she looks at it like she's thinking hard about something, though compared to him she's never not thinking hard. Rhyme's always so serious, and though things have been better lately with their parents and all, Beat still doesn't like to see her have to get involved in his fights, put herself between him and his problems.

"The food was really good tonight!"

"Nah. It wasn't much. But thanks." Maybe other people don't think as much of compliments from their family, but really, as long as Rhyme's happy, Beat figures he's doing pretty damn good.

"So, what'd you think of that new guy? Neku's friend?" He's not seriously, just not trying to get Rhyme to tell him if he's actually getting the vibe he thinks he's getting, because she's his kid sister, come on - and yeah, so she is a lot more perceptive, and just plain smarter than he is when it comes to things like this - but Rhyme's stopped all of a sudden, looking down at the ground, arms hugged against her chest.

"Oi. Rhyme?"

He hates this. The not knowing what he's done or what to do about it. All Beat can feel is vague anxiety, and frustration. If it doesn't involve punching something, or yelling, he's almost always at a loss.

"Hey, did that guy say something to you?" Not that Shiki or Eri or Neku would have let that happen, or kept it from him if it did, but then why…

"No." Rhyme looks up, and gives him a bright smile, and Beat hates it, that he can't tell if she's faking. "No. Of course not. He was… nice."

"'Cause you know, if you want me to kick his ass-"

"NO!" It was supposed to be a joke, but there's a fierce fear on Rhyme's face, staring up at him, and he can't tell, from the light, but she might even be trembling.

"I don't want you to fight, ok, Beat? I don't want you to fight anybody for me."
"Okay. Okay, I promise."

He feels like the jerk of the world, for upsetting her, but after a few more steps her hand slips up, into his, and it's a quiet walk the rest of the way home.

Chapter End Notes

1. The bit with Beat, Higashizawa and the eel was inspired by this clip of the British show "Supersizers." : http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQFj-at1_0k

2. The movie they're watching is 'Valentino: The Last Emperor.' A really good look at both the design end and the business end of fashion.
if I only could make a deal with God, and get him to swap our places

Chapter Notes

chapter title: "Running Up that Hill" - Kate Bush (Placebo cover)

The air echoes, trembles - someone was laughing, just a moment ago, but they've stopped now. It's difficult to move. Uzuki is laying on a bed that is too hard to be hers, in a room where the curtains are mostly drawn. Everything spins, and she shuts her eyes, the inside of her mouth hot and sour. Her heart is a chilled, smooth stone, adrift in a still sea. If Uzuki had the energy to care, it might actually worry her, that it seems someone tried to kill her and didn't quite succeed. She's not all that grateful, but she always had a bit of a problem with gratitude.

A slight sound, from the other side of the room - she's not alone. A subtle panic bubbles up, still not quite touching the sadness. What could possibly matter, weighed against this bleak eternity? Uzuki turns her head, tries to move, but it's awkward and at odds with gravity and mostly just fires off protests all across her skin, down her back and along her wings - she can feel them, even here in the Realground. She blinks, looking at Kariya, and he stares back. He's sitting against the wall, with a sword leaning on his shoulder, posed like an extra in some low-budget historical movie.

It hits her then, all that's happened. The cause of that clinging despair, the flash-frozen simple nature of her fate, and Uzuki draws her hands up close against her face, and shuts her eyes.

"You stopped her." It hurts to speak. Kariya doesn't move.

"I don't even think I touched her." He shakes his head, as if amazed. "It was luck that I got you out."

"Luck." A laugh that isn't a laugh. Uzuki rolls over on her back. "Is this a love hotel?"

"It's someplace safe." Uzuki was really counting on Kariya to not be this guy, as much as she'd ever imagined this impossibility. Not to give a shit. Not to be involved at all, if she could have been luckier, and she wasn't even sure what she felt now - trapped, ashamed, angry? The two worlds of who she is and who she wanted to be, who she'd tricked herself into believing she'd become. If he doesn't already know the truth, it won't take long.

As if waiting for her to regret surviving, the murky memories spill backward through her. The darkness. What it was, to be naked and alone, at the very edge of eternity. Screams and whispers that had scratched her all up inside like she'd inhaled shards of glass, and she knew those voices, even though they smeared together in her memories. Really, the last damn thing Uzuki wants is memory.

"You wanna skip the part where I have to ask?"

"Hand me my bag." Uzuki says, before she notices it on the table beside her. Did he go through it? The sudden moment of irritated paranoia almost makes her laugh. What the hell is he going to see that's worse than what he already knows? Uzuki sits up, curled over, palms pressed against her face. Saika was there, inside of her - and the power, there. The infinite horizon of it, just the thought terrifies her. The things Saika had done with her hands, purely on a whim, and she looks
down but even when she shifts her fingers, they seem pale strangers. Uzuki always thought she wanted power.

The bag hits her hip, Kariya taking a step away but still watching her, and it's strange to see him like this. The laziness that is, in fact, nothing less than perfect calm in the face of a threat. Uzuki really just wants to hide in a corner and rock back and forth for a couple of years, but it's him who hasn't flinched, and keeps her from freaking out completely. It was like that then, even when she'd been a Player. He'd been the one to show up and drop clues, to be carelessly helpful - hell, he'd been the one to mention that she could choose, if she wanted, to join the Reapers. Uzuki'd promptly forgotten it all afterward, preferred the story where he was the one who kept slowing her down.

She didn't go to Kariya, when there was nowhere else to go. Didn't want to get him involved. Has she ever really had a friend other than him?

"You're an idiot." She mutters, and shuffles through the bag. No gun. Big surprise.

This isn't going to stop. God, she has to keep going, and pretend like it will make any difference. Uzuki shudders, hates herself for it. It feels like she's made out of nothing but thick knots, with plenty of empty space in between.

"Talk to me."

Uzuki snaps upright, glaring at him even though it's stupid, and she knows its stupid. Always pretending her helplessness is ruthlessness. Always proving how little control she has over anything. "What do you care? You're not my fucking father or my boyfriend. I can take care of myself."

At least she's not stupid enough to try to storm out of the room, knows she wouldn't make it more than two steps. She can still feel the bed wobbling underneath her, the entire world a soap bubble threatening to pop. Kariya sighs, patiently, like he's had a while to plan out what he's going to say, and will wait until she wants to hear it. The hilt of his blade has marks on it, little scratches and chips all across its length. It looks very old.

"How long have I been out?"

"It's Wednesday." He's kind enough to ignore her gasp. "And I'm not your father, but I am your friend, and if you're going to make me sound like a shitty afterschool special, you can at least tell me what the hell is going on."

A few breaths that steady absolutely nothing. She'd try to lie to him, if she could remember how.

"I don't - I don't know. I don't know, and you don't want to get involved, even if-" Uzuki scowls, gestures toward his strange new weapon. It's not like she remembers much, but he was there. Kariya fought Saika and - pulled her out, got her free. "It's not like I'm the only one bullshitting here, am I?"

Kariya shrugs, and drops the secret like a bag of lukewarm fast food, like he didn't even mean to be carrying it. "I'm older than anyone else in the Shibuya Game. Even the Composer."

Uzuki looks at him for a moment. Really looks. "God, and I thought you were lazy before."

It makes him laugh a little, and Uzuki kicks her feet out over the side of the bed - fully clothed, only missing her shoes. If Saika were here, she'd say… and the thought has her head back in her hands. She can't do this, she just can't.
"It's a girl from my class, back when I was in school and alive. We all died together. A suicide… thing." Her hands fist a little in the blankets. Kariya doesn't say anything. "Her name is Saika. She was… it was her idea. Everything was always her idea."

Uzuki can't help but mutter the back half of the sentence, knowing it's probably disgust in his eyes, but Kariya isn't looking at her, staring out the window instead. Older than he looks, way older now, although nothing's really changed, maybe just some angle of the light. "This is your place, isn't it? God, I knew you had to get your money somewhere, but I figured you were drug-dealing, or cheating at mahjong."

"The mahjong is more of a hobby." Kariya says, sounding preoccupied, and if she had any sense, Uzuki figures she would be too.

"I don't know why she's here now." Better not to mention all the time that's passed, that she knew Saika was here and hadn't acted and… damn it. "I didn't know she was like that. I didn't… I didn't think, when she didn't play the game, when it was only me and Mayu, I figured maybe something went… wrong. Maybe we got lucky or unlucky or-"

"It was the Long Game that brought her back here. If I had to guess." Kariya cuts her off, and Uzuki remembers something Saika said, before - something that hurt just a little bit more than the rest.

"The Composer doesn't control everything, does he? He's not even the one at the top." She can tell, just by the look on Kariya's face, that Saika was right. Of course she was. She never lies, she doesn't have to. Uzuki bows her head again, exhausted.

"It was bad, wasn't it?"

It's confusing for a moment, the words and the grim look on Kariya's face, and then she realizes just why he's sorry for her, and laughs.

"Are you kidding? She was the best thing that ever happened to me." Helpless awe, at the fact that it's true, that she can remember just how lucky she felt then. "I was so bored. I would have killed myself a dozen times but I was too bored to bother. With her… everything was actually worth doing."

Uzuki can remember the lightness, the world in fast-forward. Feeling like she was actually living, the first time they'd gotten into a club, when she never would have made it in by herself, even if she'd wanted to try. Dancing with Saika, and seeing more than one gaze fixed on her, on them, and being half-afraid she'd be ditched for something better at any moment. But Saika was there the whole night, making her feel safe at the same time she felt breathlessly daring - kissed her, in front of everyone, like it was nothing at all. Now it seems utterly ridiculous, how little it took to make her feel so special.

Laying next to Saika, with the girl's pale arm across her waist, Saika's long hair spread out around her like something from a fairy-tale, a life too much like a movie, too good to be real. Saika would whisper to her, quietly, warm breath curling at her ear. She couldn't remember what was said, only that when she smiled, Uzuki felt like a princess. Worthy, and needed. The sort of feeling that people laughed about, pretended to scorn, because deep down everyone knew how good it would feel if it ever happened to them.

Most of the rules they broke, at least at the start, it wasn't even enough to get into any trouble. It was play-acting. So now that Uzuki is a Reaper, Saika… well, Saika is still there to remind her how small she still is, and how little she knows. Even Erasing Players is just some silly child's
version of what it's really like, she knows that now, what it is to be in that darkness. None of this is surprising, really. It's love, it's the kind from one of those epic tragedies where everyone dies at the end.

"Don't." It isn't until Kariya's hand is around her wrist, that Uzuki notices how pale she is. No, not pale. Transparent. Kariya never touches her, has never done it before, and she can feel the power pouring from him, into her. He doesn't let go, until she can't see the edge of the blanket through her arm anymore. He's no Reaper. Older than the Composer?

…and he didn't hurt Saika. He didn't really do anything, he just said so. The rocking-in-a-fetal-ball plan still seems like a really great idea.

"It's Shibuya she wants." Kariya says, like he's actually making a strategy, and Uzuki hides a smile behind her hand. Silly boy. She was half-ready to give up the moment Saika appeared, and now, feeling what she's felt, knowing it, until it takes focus to keep breathing and she has to put a hand against her heart, as if to press it into place.

"The Conductor." Saika's breath in the dark, sighing over her thoughts, affectionate and pitying. Oh Uzuki, to lock up and bite back and kiss ass for a child. The teasing mock-sympathy stings against tattered nerves. "He has to know."

"Which is why you told him. Or me. Or anyone. Oh wait, no you didn't." Kariya says harshly, glaring at her. "You didn't even know anything existed above the Composer until five minutes ago, and you still didn't want to - they'll kill you. You know if they find out about her, they'll Erase you on principle, just to give themselves something to do."

"You could just let me be the goddamn hero, you know." Uzuki says, but her voice is trembling, and she tucks her knees up against her chest, as if she might fold up and disappear. She doesn't want it, doesn't want to disappear in the dark, but there's really no choice. "It's not like it matters."

"Fuck that. Fuck that. That's her talking, not you." He says sharply, and the part of her that isn't going completely insane realizes this might actually be a real fight. Her first fight with Kariya, and if only she'd known, she could have put a little more planning into it. Really, Uzuki had always thought it would be about his choice in clothes, as if putting his hood down and unzipping his jacket totally turned the Reaper uniform into casual wear.

"Saika never does anything she doesn't want to do. Never. If she's here… and you felt her. Her power. It doesn't matter why…" Why does she even have to say this? If Kariya's as smart as he says he is, it's pretty damn obvious. "What if I'm not who you think I am, huh?" It hurts to meet his eyes and she's pretty sure her voice just cracked like an idiot, but Uzuki glares at him, daring the truth. "I'm not… who the hell do you think you're going to fight? For what? For me? What if I disappoint you? What happens when I disappoint you?"

"I guess I'll get twice as much ramen out of you every week."

The instant response, the dry tone breaks apart inside of her, it would have hurt less if he'd just slapped her. Kariya's not afraid, or at least not afraid enough, even after what he's seen. Still wants to protect her, even though she's weak and useless and he's seen all the proof. Uzuki shuts her eyes, biting back on the sound that wants to escape. Bad enough, bad enough that she has to face this and go mad and lose everything, but now she gets to watch him die, before Saika takes her away.

"You asshole. Don't do this. Don't." Crazy fuck. Why does she have to care, when it's obvious he's out of his goddamn mind? "Why the hell can't you just walk away?"
Kariya doesn't answer, just the steady warmth of his hand on her head as she hugs her knees tightly, and refuses to cry for him or for herself or for the stupid, stupid flicker of hope she needs to be smart enough not to feel.

Neku would be a little more annoyed with how tired he is - the whole Conductor insomnia powers working really great until the moment they just stop - but he's got this song half-stuck in his head, half a chorus that just repeats itself, something beautiful in minor keys. It could be anything, some song he's heard and forgotten about, or one of the things Shiki had on that she'd made him listen to - or maybe it's something from Shibuya itself. It doesn't feel urgent, or even particularly sad - just beautiful, like catching a glimpse of someone else's daydream. He'll have to ask Mr. H more about Shibuya's Music, since he's forcing himself to finally make that trip after school, and being embarrassed is at least going to be easier when he's half-dead.

His eyes itch. Pretending he won't suffer the consequences of staying up all night by just turning his alarm clock toward the wall - nope, not really a viable solution. Neku's distracted from those thoughts, the melody fading as he opens the door to the smell of something warm and maybe mildly burning coming from his kitchen, and a surprising lack of Reapers or their rapidly-multiplying associates on his floor.

"Yo." From the kitchen. Neku blinks, rubs his hand over bleary eyes, but it really is 777 standing there over a pile of… food, maybe, steaming in a pan as he flips it lightly over the heat, and there's even coffee brewing. "You said we all needed to be out of here today, right?"

Yes, because of his father. Neku can't imagine what that will do to the bizarre equation of his life that is already not equaling anything on either side. Oh dear god, not math metaphors. No. Absolutely not.

"Are you all right?" He says, and gets a snort that says 'stupid kid', but 777 is smiling a little, and splits the cooked thing across two plates as Neku goes for the coffee. It's his father's beverage of choice, really, but at this point Neku would happily take a bath in it if it might help wake him up. He hasn't had any more trouble from school, but he's not Joshua, and Neku very much doubts it's going to be as easy as one conversation where he only - hey - threatened the head of the entire school. He keeps battling with himself over some sort of apology, though there's no way to do it now and not make things worse, and no, it's not like he likes the guy or thinks he didn't have it coming but - damn, Neku doesn't want to be that guy. He doesn't know what he wants to be or what his options are, but just not that guy.

"Lighten up, kid. Nobody likes a downer."

Neku glares but 777's not looking and he is absolutely starving and the - well, it sort of looks like an okonomiyaki with a somewhat negotiable ingredients list, but it doesn't really taste that bad. His thoughts must show on his face, because 777 sighs and rolls his eyes.

"I do actually do other things besides look really good in leather pants."

"Can't always get the groupies to cook for you in the morning?" Neku says, and pretty much immediately regrets it and hopes to god the tips of his ears aren't the color it feels like they are because the way it came out almost sounded alarmingly like some kind of flirting. Yes, really, a stupid inexplicably flirty tone with the much older rock star guy and hey - a Reaper - and he even tried to kill Neku once although really at this point who hasn't? 777 doesn't seem to notice, which means he's forgotten all about the whole Shiki and Eri business, even if Neku's certain neither of them will, not for decades.
"I have a friend." Neku says around mouthfuls, glad that he doesn't have to give a crap about manners. "He's interested in doing some… uh, publicity stills, I guess? He's a photographer. I told him you might be looking for one."

"Any good?"

"I think so." It's not like he knows the kinds of things to look for, just that he thinks the pictures capture the spirit of the moment, and Tsuyoshi's sure serious about it, seems to always be talking, always scouting and picking up new leads. If Neku can give him this chance…

Opportunities. It's Vancouver's voice, reminding him how much he hates it, that she might be right. That keeping distance between his UG and RG lives isn't possible because that distance was an illusion to begin with.

"Sure. Why not? Send him over." 777 says, with this weird expression on his face, like maybe Neku's said something wrong but he can't imagine what it could be. Or maybe he's just thinking about something. "You don't…"

"Huh?"

"Well…" 777 leans back in his chair, poking at what's left of his food. "It's such a pain in the ass, on top of everything else, but I'm kind of supposed to ask, when there's a new Conductor… they usually pick and choose who can stay and go. Or the Composer says something to you, I guess, but given the way it all turned out, I think you're going to have to tell me."

He's nervous. Whatever it was he's asking - and at this point Neku has absolutely no idea - 777's nervous, which still takes him forever to figure out. Neku keeps forgetting that he's not just him, he's a position, he's the Conductor, and the people who used to be where he is now were not the kind of people who ate slapdash okonomiyaki with squatting Reapers.

"Can you be a little… more specific? Just what it is I'm supposed to be doing?"

777 looks at him for another moment, and there goes any remaining trace of nervousness, replaced with something like incredulity, a sort of 'My Conductor is Broken' look. Maybe he should be more worried about appearances, but Neku can barely keep track of everything that is exactly what it looks like. Any processing power left over, well that's all taken up by Joshua.

"It's a little… different, being a band with UG ties."

Neku tips his head, thinking. "You have to keep playing the Game, so you have to stay here, you mean."

"Well, not really." 777 shrugs. "I mean, with the music - that'll keep us going a bit longer than your standard Reaper."

"You can survive off that?"

777 shakes his head, grinning, and Neku feels stupid that there was any sort of hopeful note in his voice. "It isn't enough to live on, not by a long shot, but it can be useful." He seems to be sizing Neku up, staring at him again, and it's better to pretend not to notice, and keep chewing. "You really don't know, do you? I thought the Composer is supposed to… I dunno, tell you shit."

Neku snorts. "Maybe. It's more of a sink-or-swim. Or kind of point and laugh, and bounce things off my head."
777's quiet for another moment, and Neku wonders if he's really, really not supposed to be talking about this - but how the hell else is he supposed to learn anything?

"It's a bit of a power play. Every district likes to keep the attention flowing toward their own - or if they can't do that, then at least for their home city. It's a little more complicated, being a Reaper and all - I can go places. Some places, but if I get too popular, it tips the balance in Shibuya's favor, and since they can make things difficult for me in the UG…"

"So you're stuck here?" Neku hadn't even considered it, that other bands, other trends, even art styles - it was kind of like an invasion force, wasn't it? If some big new thing from some other country came over and set up shop, anything it inspired, all that - whatever it was, Imagination or creative energy - a good portion of it would probably go back to the UG that started everything, and give them even more power to push the advantage further. The Internet must have seemed like the end of days for at least a few of the bigger Composers out there, putting the smaller venues on semi-level ground. No doubt Joshua would act as though he'd welcomed it wholeheartedly, but Neku would have loved to have seen him on that first day, faced with a big-ass door to the world that he couldn't close.

"I can travel around Tokyo. A little further than that, maybe - anything more, we'd have to build up a hell of a fanbase. Really kick things over, before they'd be forced to let us in. If we even could - there aren't exactly a lot of UG bands out there testing the waters. But for us to even stay here… well, you sort of have the final say, on whether we're a good fit with your plan for the Composer's plans… for Shibuya."

Neku resists the initial impulse to ask if he's heard anything about U2, but what comes out instead, "Maybe I…"

He shakes his head, cuts himself off from whatever dumbass thing he was about to blindly offer. Because he's not just a Conductor, Neku knows more than he should, but that doesn't mean he can just start breaking rules. And maybe 777 wouldn't want him to, anyway. It's his band, his life, his dream, and maybe trying to get involved with that is no better than one UG trying to take over another.

"Nevermind. Just rambling…" He's too exhausted to pretend to be competent, and it's starting to get kind of light, and Neku glances back at the clock and it's really time to go. "Yeah. The band? Go kick ass. That sounds like a great idea. If I had a plan I'm sure you'd be a part of it."

777 doesn't say anything, and the sound of his plate and glass clinking against each other as he clears the table is surprisingly loud. Neku fights the urge to roll his eyes - how did Kitaniji manage to seem so damn cool all the time? Calm and collected, in control. Of course, there was the possibility he caught Joshua at the other end of his bipolar management strategy, and got his explanation before the summary execution, instead of the other way around. Except Neku's already had his Special Bonus Bullet, and there still hasn't been much in the way of background info.

"You know, kid, you're kind of a crap Conductor."

Neku sighs, drops his dishes in the sink with more force than is absolutely necessary. "You were kind of Noise last week, but believe me, everyone's pretty much got the memo. I'm not exactly picking up where the last guy left off."

"Hn, probably a good thing. Not that I'd ever wanted to-" 777 says from just off his left, and Neku turns, takes a half-step to the side in case he's putting his dishes away, trying to figure out what he meant, if he's just stupid or if that sentence didn't make any actual sense. The answer hits him a minute later, with the Reaper moving right into his personal space and Neku thinks that he could
have been paying a little more attention to the conversation even if he is tired because all this is obviously the prelude for 777 trying to Erase him and wow this is going to end up on some list of Stupidest Conductor Erasures ever and wherever he disappears to it will not be oblivion enough to avoid Joshua bitching him out -

777's mouth is hot against his, just about as hot as the hand he's got wrapped around Neku's wrist. A light touch, Neku had raised his hand in some effort to defend, to avoid the attack that this most certainly is not. The Reaper's a pretty good kisser. Probably had a lot of practice. With groupies. Neku knows he has morning breath, on top of the coffee. Morning coffee breath. No one can possibly find that attractive. A hand slides against the side of his face, a thumb under his chin tipping his head gently back - very good kisser, and when they come up for air it only lasts for a moment. 777's got some height on him, but he doesn't seem to mind crouching down and is it the age difference or the Reaper thing that is really the weirdest - he's not that much older, really…

It's 777 who draws back first. Which is good, as all of Neku's motor functions have pretty much thrown up their hands and abandoned ship.

"So, yeah. See you around."

Neku's still frozen in place, blinking and watching 777 leave and blinking and staring at the closed door of this alternate apartment on some alternate world where bisexual undead rock stars french-kiss him in his kitchen before school.

"Bye."

"You don't get to decide!" Neku had shouted, and then Joshua had killed him in what was really a very childish display. All because he'd chosen the Misaki girl instead. Or there was the universe where Joshua had - believe it or not - gotten Neku burned at the stake, although the only sentiment there seemed to be an overwhelming boredom. That universe had certainly been a change from the general trend toward technological advancement. It's funny, the fairly even split, either killing Neku for leaving or because he won't go away fast enough. Not counting all the universes where Neku is smart enough not to do anything like confront him, or attract his attention, and just gets the hell out, either by choice or circumstance.

Joshua's been seeing dead Nekus all through the morning, mostly out of the corner of his eye, little flashes of orange hair and occasionally that limp fall he recognizes well enough, a more vivid picture than his clairvoyance can do on its own. It's Joshua's own fault, trying to reach a Frequency just a little bit higher than he knew he was allowed, but at times being censured is like trying to compose with his hands bound behind him. He's not going to let a little Angelic snit knock Shibuya down a peg, and this sort of thing was bound to happen sooner or later, still constantly doing too much of things he shouldn't be doing in the first place.

Really, he thinks, stepping over the body of another Neku that vanishes before his foot returns to the pavement, his Conductor is a bit more durable than this, was even before Joshua chose him for a partner and proxy. It's rather cute, this expansible view of what has admittedly been intruding on his thoughts, but the battlefield of Shibuya strewn with Nekus is absurd, gratuitous, and like all gauche attempts at a meaningful statement, the further it goes the more easy it is to ignore.

He's stabilizing, anyway, by the time he reaches CAT street. Neku's gone to finally talk to Hanekoma and even if he had anything to do, Joshua's not giving up the opportunity to watch Neku fidget and glare under his triumphant smirking, while Hanekoma no doubt rolls his eyes. It's adorable, really, his Conductor's little hero worship, and he has no interest or desire in taking that
away from either of them. He steps into the coffee shop, waiting for the customary greeting - and waiting, nothing at all from Hanekoma, leaning over one side of the counter, Neku leaning from the other, and blocking the view of whatever it is they're engrossed in. Joshua takes a moment to enjoy the view, half-hoping Neku will catch him leering, but his Conductor never even looks up.

"So, I see I've been replaced."

Nothing. Well, Hanekoma does lift his hand in what Joshua graciously allows as a wave, but both of them are fixed on the table, and so there's nothing left to do but pull up a chair on his own, elbow his way in, and find out what's so fascinating.

"Yeah, it does all that," Neku is explaining excitedly, "sweet Wi-fi too, hooks up to the phone and everything. He even sent me some cash, said he wasn't sure about all the different programs so I should just buy myself something nice." Neku and Hanekoma are passing a plastic pen back and forth over a computer screen. It's a tablet PC, top-of-the-line by the looks of it. Neku grins at him.

"My dad decided since my grades were slipping, I needed a reward." He shrugs. "The last time he thought I was retreating into my own little world, he bought me the best headphones in the store. Benefits of being an only child."

"Your father's home then?" It was going to come up, sooner or later. Joshua can probably have half the arguments on his own, the problems Neku will run into, being a Conductor and also a son. It's mostly just annoying, although Neku's father is already making things easy, if he thinks the best way to be a father is to not be around.

"He sent this to me at school, because they called him on something else, and it was easier to fly out from where he was. He'll be gone another week or so. I didn't even think he noticed I was doodling, but hey," he gestures toward the machine, "check it out. Proof you can buy love."

Neither one of them are all that skilled with the pen yet, even Hanekoma just goofing off as they pass it back and forth. Neku saves the file, incapable of tossing away one of CAT's scribbles, no matter how random. Hell, just having him hold the pen must be like breaking champagne across the bow of a ship. He's surprised then, when Neku taps a few different buttons, and then flips the pen around toward him.

"There. Go ahead."

Joshua frowns, not seeing much potential in a flimsy plastic stick, but he takes it from Neku's hand anyway, laying down one smooth, elegant line in the center of the screen, surprised when it comes out nearly as what he intended, almost familiar.

"It's got settings for sumi-e brushes. You can do all the thicknesses, nibs, pressure-"

"-and yet, still just a pale imitation of the real thing." Joshua says, but there's no venom in it, just the old master bitching about the student's new tricks. He flips the pen over, erasing the mark he's made before handing it back to his Conductor. "Cute."

Neku rolls his eyes. "I don't get why you don't do... more. Art stuff. You said you used to, once. Mr. H, he..." Neku's kept from saying much about Hanekoma's other life, his business as CAT, obviously to keep from making a total fanboy mess of himself. "I mean, you're the Composer and all. You'd be pretty good, right?"

"Well, 'Mr. H' has the benefit of not having to do two jobs at once." Joshua says, smirking, and Hanekoma raises an eyebrow.
"I try to do all my jobs. But I've got this one employee who never listens to me."

Joshua matches the Angel's withering look. "Who's fault is it I'm here?"

Finally, something interesting enough to get Neku to stop fiddling with his new toy. His Conductor glances between them, and looks at Hanekoma, voice dropping conspiratorially. "So, just how did he… you know?"

Hanekoma crosses his arms, looking at him. Until recently, Joshua would have said he knew everything that was worth knowing about the Angel. Yet another thing it's actually satisfying to be wrong about.

"Tripped over his own parasol and fell down some stairs."

"The lacy one?" Neku says, looking at Joshua now, pretending to hide a smile. "So young. Even if Joshua destroys him, surely it will take years, a long time from this moment to that. However it is he might disappear, dead or running, there's still time, there's still the now."

"Rheumatoid apathy." He replies. "A fatal case."

"Complications from inflammation of the ego." Hanekoma adds.

Joshua rolls his eyes. "Unfortunately the virulent sarcasm was infectious."

So his presence alone is not enough to distract his Conductor, but Neku's trading off now between fiddling with buttons and watching the the two of them exchange meaningful glares. Hanekoma backs off first - he always does, and Joshua has always had the suspicion that it's a coffee shop - it's always been some version of the same, never serious enough for real food, just a space for drinks and conversation - because he can always clean a glass or wipe down a counter to fill up any unwanted time. It's impossible to impose a silence on him, Hanekoma a master of dodging the awkward moment.

"So really… you don't draw anything at all, not ever?" Neku's watching him closely, and Joshua sighs, wonders why he thinks it's so important.

"It takes a substantial amount of focus, to be the Composer. Usually by the time I burn through all that has to be done, there's not much left for art." Hanekoma glances up at him, but says nothing. Neku shrugs, goes back to scrolling and clicking and smudging wild colors across his digital canvas. Except that Neku can be casually relentless, Joshua has seen it in action, and if he's decided that Joshua should get back in the game, it might be time to dust off the brushes and just do it.

"Oh. I almost forgot. I don't know if either of you-" Neku rummages around in his bag for a moment, finally pulling out a somewhat wrinkled package with some fancy writing on one side. He doesn't look happy. "I did this thing for a guy…"

"… and you didn't get half-payment in advance." Hanekoma finishes the sentence. It's funny, that when the Angel says exactly what Joshua would have, and even in the same tone of voice, all he gets is a generous nod, as if it's sage wisdom. Joshua's tempted to keep count, just to annoy Neku later. His Conductor shoves the small container across the counter, gingerly, with the end of his stylus.

"Well, it wasn't a big project, and I figured, I dunno. I finished it, so I might as well take what he was offering." He glances over at Joshua. "You like weird food anyway. There's no expiration date, but I don't think this stuff can go bad. That's like the point, right?"
Narezushi. Traditional packed sushi, with a consistency kind of like... well, it's like fish cheese, and this looks like it came from some speciality shop, probably a re-regifted present still searching for a home. Joshua's interested, but it's Hanekoma he can hear salivating from here, and he's about to make a pointed comment about sharing when, from the corner of his eye, he sees something leap onto Neku's shoulder. He's actually mildly surprised, surely Hanekoma's hold on his shop is a little more solid than this.

"You seem to have an infestation."

"Oh, hey! There you are!" Neku says excitedly, and pushes his computer out of the way, scooping up the tiny rabbit Noise and setting it on the counter for a better look. "I was worried about you. Where have you been?"

Of course Neku has a mascot. Why not? The tiny creature only sits on the counter for a moment, blatantly frightened by Joshua's interest, leaping back onto Neku's arm and then his shoulder, burrowing its head against his neck.

"Awwww." Neku says, smirking over the top of her ears at Joshua, reaching up a hand that pretty much hides her from view. "Is the mean old Composer being himself? It's ok. I won't let him hurt you."

"Funny."

The Conductor's eyes are sparkling. Joshua's never going to allow him to start wearing sunglasses, not ever.

"Maybe it's that nasal twang in your voice, Josh. Maybe she doesn't like that. Wait." Neku looks up, and Joshua's not half as surprised to see that the narezushi and the owner of this particular establishment have both vanished. "Did Mr. H just-?"

Yes, yes he did. "You found his weakness. I have to keep it out of the Game shops, otherwise there'd be Players bribing their way out on Day Two." Joshua blinks, wondering for a moment if he's gone a bit unstable again - but no, there's actually another rabbit noise sitting on the counter, a slightly darker brown than the other, and not nearly as high in Frequency, content to just sit and stare blankly back at him.

"Hey, you have a friend." Neku holds out his hand to the twitching nose for a moment, before stroking it gently between the ears. The golden-colored bunny uses the opportunity to jump back down his arm, and the two small Noise sit together like salt and pepper shakers, a matched set. Joshua rolls his eyes.

"You know, other Games have collapsed far more severely than this one, and no one felt obligated to go back and gather up every single Player that was affected. What I did was above and beyond what was required." He realizes he's explaining this to two pair of unblinking beady eyes who don't understand any of what he's saying, and that Hanekoma may have stepped out for more than one reason at this particular moment. The bastard.

Neku doesn't know what he's talking about, looking at him in honest confusion and that little expression that means he's trying to pretend he's not completely baffled.

"Oh, stop. You know perfectly well who she is. You've practically dragged her back up the Frequencies on your own." Still the confused look on his Conductor's face, although now Neku's got some sarcasm preloaded, ready to fire. "Listen to her, Neku. Carefully, and she'll tell you who she is."
It doesn't take all that long, although Joshua nudges his Conductor's attention once or twice - even when Neku thinks he's floundering, he's still got a natural talent for it, eyes closed in more concentration than the situation really requires - and after a few moments, Neku's eyes snap open as he gasps and stares.

"Nao? Nao Nao? Ganguro bunny girl?!"

"Awesome job, Nekky." Joshua smirks, but his Conductor doesn't seem to hear him - there's an alarming amount of what looks like relief on his face as he gives the tiny bunny a sort of hug-squeeze, bafflingly close to happiness over a girl he barely knew, whose entry fee was - no joke - a cup size. Maybe Hanekoma overdid it with the inspiring messages during the Game.

"… and here I thought you loved me for my wit."

"Huh?" Still not paying attention to him. "I mean... I didn't think - I thought they were just gone, forever. Erased. What did you mean about Frequencies? Are they going to be ok?" Neku's tripping over his own questions, trying to get them all out at once. "I didn't hurt her, did I? Why are they here, what's Mr. H going to do with them?"

Joshua reaches out, and even a minor Noise knows better than to refuse him long, the small creature fitting neatly in the palm of his hand, and he can feel her tremble. Only capable of a few emotions at this level, hunger and fear, although the fact that there are two of them and they haven't tried to devour each other suggests another emotion, slightly less expected.

Neku is watching him warily and pretending not to, and he wonders what would happen if he issued an ultimatum here and now, if he closed his hand and squeezed. It's obviously some sort of repentance on Hanekoma's part, keeping them around, and while it's true they were victims of the same Taboo Noise clusterfuck that allowed Joshua to bring back all of Neku's little friends, it's also true he doesn't really care, and is no longer in the position to help them, regardless. Neku's still watching him anxiously, and Joshua smiles, because it's not actually his problem.

"I'm sure Mr. H was keeping track of them for you. Since you're doing your best to turn her back into a person. Except it looks like she doesn't want to go anywhere without her little friend."

"I didn't… she doesn't look any different. I can't hear anything." Joshua puts her back down next to her partner, and the two small Noise hop off into Hanekoma's back room. "I really didn't mean to do anything for them."

He tries to hide the triumphant smile, and Joshua sighs.

"You'll notice the strain of two more than one, Neku, if you decide to help them both. Plus you'll have to deal with your Reapers never respecting you ever again. But if you insist..."

"So you won't... stop me." The other words - you won't try to stop me - aren't there, but implicit, and this is the way it's going to happen, isn't it? Joshua hardly needs to see the future, to know that it will come to this eventually, some situation just like this one, and he wants to say as much, just throw down the gauntlet. No, no he's not going to and never will trade his Conductor for fuzzy bunnies or cute friends or any combination of stupid, helpless creatures. He is not a god - demigod or semi-god - of generous habits, and has no intention of changing. Joshua could just as easily have brought Neku back without letting any of his friends follow, but doing so had simply been the best way of pissing off the Angels as much as he could.

"Just don't come over covered in Noise fur."
He is rewarded with an enthusiastic kiss on the cheek, and with watching Neku scramble back into his RG life as his phone rings, and he carefully puts his new computer in his bag. Within moments, he's deep in conversation with his first-week partner, who along with her designer friend holds the potential for bringing Shibuya no small amount of attention. The inarticulate skateboarder is no less a possibility, Michelin stars as good a measurement of Shibuya power as anything. With Neku's friendship taken into account, he might even be able to keep them from running off to Milan or New York the second they achieve success. His Conductor is halfway to the door, shouting something over his shoulder about Hanekoma and the bunnies - and he's gone.

Joshua's never had a Conductor who dared to turn their back to him - it simply wasn't done, and poor Megumi had stood in the Throne Room for hours when Joshua had refused to dismiss him, out of some petty, spiteful impulse long since forgotten. This feels like a good change, even purely for tactical reasons. Neku is forcing him, bit by bit, to live by a different design, the sort of fast life, deeply invested in the moment, that most artists lived in, the ones who made Shibuya sing.

"Enjoy your snack?" He says, as Hanekoma reappears, and he catches a glimpse of a now-empty container before it disappears in the garbage can behind the counter.

"I skipped lunch." Hanekoma says, and grins when Joshua snorts. "Hey, this whole censure business isn't any easier on me, thanks. Did Neku leave?"

"He said he'd come back later, to talk to you about the Noise bunnies you conveniently forgot to mention to me."

"Ah, those." Hanekoma scratched the back of his head. "I-"

"He might as well keep them. It'll be a good lesson in patience, and learning his limits. I suppose I can even turn them back, if he actually manages to get them to the proper Frequency on his own." Joshua is staring down at his phone, fiddling, and misses the look of surprise that flits across the Angel's face. "I'd appreciate it, though, if you'd let me know before you start up any more acts of penance."

"Gotcha, boss. Just trying to fix some of what I broke."

"I don't think your 'fix' worked on the Bito girl."

"What?"

Joshua shrugs slightly. "I was with Neku, and she was there, and she could see me. The other me."

Hanekoma exhales slowly, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. What he did wasn't strictly within the rules - he doesn't play by the rules any more than Joshua does - but his lesser violations tend to disappear beneath the Composer's more flagrant offenses, and the Long Game was such a failure on so many levels that the Angels had simply chosen to punish Hanekoma for the Taboo Noise and Joshua for being himself, and ignore the specifics.

"If you say anything now, who knows what they'll do." Joshua says, and Hanekoma lets out a soft, unamused bark of laughter, nodding. The little girl means something to him, a part of his varied theories and opinions on how Shibuya was saved. Joshua's not sure if he believes a word of it, but that's hardly important at the moment.

"Does Neku know?"

"No. I doubt she's said a word to anyone, and if she's been seeing me, she's been seeing everything else as well. Who knows, perhaps I'll have a contender for the throne in another decade or so."
"We might clean up this mess by then." Hankeoma is biting at his thumbnail, thoughts turned inward, and none of them look good. Joshua had expected some reaction, but nothing quite so personal, as if failing a Player has some new ability to wound.

"I don't know what you're worried about. I turned out fine."

A small, wry grin breaks through the Angel's gloomy expression. "For certain values of fine."

"Who's fault is it I'm here?"

"Yeah." Hanekoma sighs. "Yeah, I know."
so i give up waiting for someone waiting

Chapter Notes

Chapter title: Anna Ternheim - "Girl Laying Down"

It isn't lying, what Saika told Uzuki's little friend about winning, that this is already over. It isn't arrogance, or self-congratulation. Sure, Saika can feel when and where things are going to go bad, before anyone makes a choice. Occasionally she can tip the balance - the Angels call it Imprinting like it's an actual skill - but it's just forcing the inevitable, if she doesn't do it today it will happen on its own by the end of the week. In the interests of full disclosure, she's never even been responsible for anyone going completely mental and shooting up a mall, or driving their car into a crowd, or any other piece of inspired mass lunacy.

Does she need to be there, for artists to fall in and out of love? Does she make them stand on their canvases and drench them in turpentine and light the match? All right, so maybe she'd given that one the particular idea, but he was he was headed that direction anyway. His very first thought in the darkness, in the breathless silence beyond, was to wonder whether the Buddhists were wrong, or if he'd accidentally missed a step.

He's quiet, now. Most of them are, though they'll stir sometimes when she's hunting. Hook their hands on her ribcage and howl until she trembles. One of them, he jumped off a parking garage, and Saika held out her hand and snapped him out of his body as he fell, and he's still walking now, wandering aimlessly through the endless black, searching for a way out. Occasionally, she'll rub a thumb against her index finger - it's a gesture that belongs to him, for when he was thoughtful.

The truth of it is, Saika can just stand back and watch all the time if she wants to. Watch the very worst happen every day, because with everything she's seen so far, life means either hitting on the Jumbo Draw of luck and pretending it's well deserved, or spending your entire life trying to endure what doesn't make any fucking sense, or for the most fortunate, being born too stupid and boring to care.

… and the Angels are going to fix that with a pretty picture and a song?

Saika is right there for all those people the Angels don't care about, the ones who aren't winners, and there are a hell of a lot more people on her team than on theirs. It's even fair to argue that she gets most of them in the end, even the ones who win. So Shibuya is hers already, it drew her here all by itself, as much as any Taboo Noise, any stupid slap fight. Funny, to go so far from home and find what she was looking for, right back at the start. Saika wants to find him, find and end this little Conductor that's causing Uzuki so much trouble, and then knock on the Composer's door. The ones she's devoured so far are useless, boxed-in sad little things, with sad little dreams, but this one might actually see the bigger picture.

The Angels live off the power of all futile dreams, leeching from imagination and ambitions they know will never be fulfilled. All that effort just to play a siren's song, a con game that feeds on itself. It's pathetic, not to admit to what they are, and what they do, but if anyone knew how far the game was rigged no one would ever bother playing.

Tokyo flickers by like a spread of washed-out photographs, and if there's Music - the Composers
all seem to think so - Saika can't hear it, only millions of thousand-yard stares, the great mass of humanity going nowhere at incredible speeds. If the world needs anything, it's less stimulus, not more. An anesthetic, to keep the patient asleep, where they're less likely to do any damage. It makes sense then, she thinks, to treat creativity as a disease. At the first sign of inspiration, they ought to strap them to a table and put them on watch. Except that artists are so disposable that it doesn't even matter, like eating a chocolate cone. Bite the end off, suck out the good stuff, discard the bland tasting bits. Saika has seen some fucked-up relationships as a ghost in the darkness, laughing her way through the life of an Onryo - Jorogumo? Tentacle monster? - but the way the world ignores and destroys the people who provide all their pretty distractions is really impressive.

Crying babies are probably only worth half-points, if she wants to keep score. A lot of things are probably only half-points, drugs and insomnia and post-partum depression, drunkenness in the Realground and arrogance in the Underground. The world swirls around her, coalescing from the shadow into a nice, upscale apartment as Saika falls backward into a chair in the corner of the room.

"Whoever told you that was a good look was lying to you," she calls out. The woman in the ugly dress doesn't hear her, not completely, but she drops the glass she's washing. It rattles around the sink but doesn't break. Okay, so maybe Saika's not exactly telling the truth about being able to affect things, although she likes to think she just brings out the best in people. She dips her hand in the flow of the woman's thoughts, like sliding her hand into a muddy river and watching the swirls and eddies curl around her fingertips. Unseen currents, in a river like that, places just waiting to drag a person down. It's been a bad day, in a bad week, and now it's time to play shoulder devil.

"You ever notice, when people stop lying to themselves, when the truth comes out, that nobody ever gets nicer?"

The kid is still shrieking away. Saika's hardly ever had a use for infants, little mewling copies of already useless adults, practically destined to grow up tedious and only make more dull versions of themselves. What are the odds this one will be any different, really? A dull, clumsy idiot this woman will have to watch over for years, pat it on the head and smile at every stupid thing it does, encourage it. It will grow up just as stupid as the father - and then what? What's the reward for all her hard work? It not even like the boy will stick around. No one respects their elders. Hell, hasn't she moved here to get as far away from her parents as possible?

"Respect? Now? As if your husband isn't already out banging his secretary at every possible opportunity."

Oh yes, Saika thinks, smiling as the woman's thoughts clatter around her like dropped piano keys, there it is.

"Just imagine, when he walks out and leaves you alone with it? You're not getting any younger."

Saika killed herself for a lot of reasons, none of which had much to do with getting older, though there's no lying, it ought to be on the list. Really, she can kind of forgive the Angels for all being a bunch of talent-sucking, lying bastards willing to do anything to keep their own immortality. Look at this stupid girl, giving up on her art, throwing away everything for the sake of a man and his paycheck, a baby and several tedious friendships with women who just happen to have children of their own. Slowly going mad, counting down the days until she won't even be pretty enough for anyone to care.

It took her so long to get her figure back after the baby.

It's a nice chair she's sitting on, some kind of wine-colored faux leather, and the window's pretty
big and the view isn't bad. The woman, however, is still slamming dishes into the sink, her back to the view and the nice apartment. It wasn't always like this. She's not sure what's changed, how it all went wrong and she ended up with this life, instead of the one she'd been aiming for.

"Oh, you would have starved anyway. Screwing your way into his wallet was much smarter."

Saika can see the woman flinch, knows she isn't saying anything new. Follows the thoughts that crash and tumble down - It shouldn't be this hard, to let go of what didn't work - so why did she do it? Why did she fall for such a boring, useless man? He was safe. And she's a coward. She'd tried to get into the business, sell her canvases - but no one was buying. A bad market, and she doesn't like digital, doesn't - didn't - work small. Flip a coin, whether it was the art that sucked or the marketing, unless she just failed at both. She has other friends, long gone now but successful, with kids and work, who don't sit around all day feeling sorry for themselves. She's doing better than many of them, even, with a rich husband and a nice place to live. It was practically a miracle that he picked her - saved her - so why can't she just be happy?

"Does it matter, what you did wrong? Maybe you did everything wrong."

It's kind of a lie, that people who feel sorry for themselves pretend they're the victim. The self-loathing in this woman's thoughts is practically impenetrable, matched by the sickening realization that she is, indeed, all alone, and there's no way out. No one will be on her side - her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law both hate her like it's an obligation, and every time she tries, every word she says seems to come out brittle and wrong, digging an already inescapable hole. It's not her, not the real her, but if that person ever existed, she's gone now.

It would be easy to put the baby underwater. The sink could be a little bigger, but she can manage.

The thought is not Saika's doing, she's just there to provide a little space, a chance to consider it. The woman is really just searching for permission, that it's all right to let go, to get on with it already. Her thoughts have been gnawing at themselves like mad animals, running in exhausted circles, and she's all too aware that this fight that costs all of her energy, all of her sanity, that no one else can see it.

It's too hard. She swears she did her best, she tried and she's trying, but it's just too hard and no one will let her give up, or even let her breathe.

The baby screams again, and Saika watches a bowl sail across the kitchen, smashing against the far wall. The woman pants through clenched teeth, braced against the countertop as if she will explode if she so much as twitches a finger. Loathes the child, not a tenth as promising as her worst painting ever was. It's like a chain, holding her here, eating up all her time and all her life and leaving her with nothing. The husband wants her to get a part-time job, as soon as it is older. He thinks it will be good for her. Being sociable, so that the rest of her day is consumed by even more people who need and want and give her nothing in return.

"Kill the fucking thing," Saika says, and can see the woman's hands clench. She pushes herself up on the heels of her hands, out of the chair, and the arguments line up before her like trained pets. "You know you're a miserable waste. You hurt everyone. He'll just replace you with someone smarter, someone better anyway - make him hurt for it today, while you still can. You really think that kid wants to grow up with you for a mother?"

It's kind of amazing, the arsenal that's always at Saika's disposal, the sheer array of ammunition. So many options, so much shame and hate and pain - that other people can live like this. Other people can do it with a smile, and aren't so stupid they can't make the simple things work.
"Kill it", Saika says again, watching the woman's mouth forms what might be a prayer or a curse, and the darkness she can't see is moving in now, long tendrils curling up around her, almost tender in their anticipation, blocking out the world she doesn't want to see anyway. "Throw it out the damn window. Jump after it. You're going to get caught, no matter what you do. You don't have to be suicidal to realize you're fucked."

The woman lets out a weak sob, shaking her head, but it's not denial. Saika wouldn't be here if it was.

"Shake the fuck out of it, then. Maybe they won't notice. What does it matter? It won't even notice, and no one else in the world gives a shit. Can you really do this for the rest of your life?"

Such a simple choice. Two minutes at the most, and at least then it will be over and it will be different - and Saika can feel the slide, the inexorable pull of that surrender, and she smiles. An intimate moment, as she reaches out, puts her hands on the woman's shoulders - not really, but more than close enough. So gentle, steadying her. It is the reason to bother with any of this, to see inside a person when they finally find the truth.

"You know, I bet they'll even let you paint in prison, eventually. Imagine, all that time to yourself."

The woman's hands are curved, and tense, and strong. Five steps and she's there. The kid's actually, finally shut up, not that it will make any difference.

"Honey? Are you home?"

No way. No fucking way. Saika's actually surprised for a moment, and then all but laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of it, as the briefcase comes down and the husband - the idiot husband - comes around the corner and ruins everything.

"I had to run an errand, and I thought-" He blinks, staring at the scene, the frozen moment, not at all getting it but at least smart enough to understand that there's something happening he doesn't understand. "You dropped a bowl."

"Well, shit." Saika sighs, tonguing her back teeth, slouching as the shadows slither back, as the woman slumps where she was standing, her head pressed against the floor, hands in tight fists, crying so loud it's almost a scream. The kid burbles away on the counter, completely unaware.

She rolls her eyes as the husband moves forward, kneeling down for his wife, and steps around him, out the open door. It doesn't really matter what he says, there is no possible way he can understand the problem, let alone have any idea how to fix it. The woman will swallow this down, will make some excuse, and try to keep going, and it'll join the rest of the things she pretends not to feel. Saika lets the lingering feeling of annoyance burn away. If not today, tomorrow. If not tomorrow, next week, next month.

Leaning back, she stretches her arms wide, casting herself out, and no matter how she reaches, dark little tendrils find their way into every crack, every quiet regret, every disappointment in Shibuya, and she has her choice of who and how and when - this world ends with her.

Neku's slacking off on finishing up a miraculously small amount of homework, and hasn't started working on the sketches he should be, isn't even fiddling around with his new computer, trying to set up accounts for art sites and looking for webhosting and Twitter - really? Is that in any way a good idea? Tsuyoshi pestered him before he even had the tablet, to get in on his social networking,
make sure he was 'in control of his brand' - and it's too good, isn't it? All of it, this scares him, and it's a nervousness that's been gnawing at him in degrees for a while but now that he's become the Conductor it's so much worse. He's happy, and it's more than a little terrifying, suddenly finding all these people he can relate to, and talk to, and a life he's got a little bit of control over, not always waiting, not always so sure, the way he had been, that betrayal was right around the corner. It's been gone long enough - months now - and this new life seems all but a divine mandate, of a kind, but Neku can't stop holding his breath. Waiting to wake up and find himself alone.

It isn't just that, of course. He's had a newspaper in his hand twice so far, and hasn't been able to open it up, let alone check the obituaries, afraid of who he might see. The second Game week is coming up, and though Neku thinks he's tougher, thinks he can take it if anything happens the way it's already happened - god, he's never going to get used to seeing people die, even if they're already dead. Call it naiveté, the benefit of living in a first-world nation not currently at war, but it's never going to get easier, and he knows, he hopes he'll never stop looking for an easy out, some way to save everyone even if it goes against all the rules.

So he's set himself up with a little side project, a distraction, something amusing he found on the web, and between the money his father sent and Hanekoma's pay there's just enough left over to do something stupid and petty. It took him a while to construct the first one, but now Neku's got a rhythm to it, little bundles of LED lights and magnets and he laughs to himself a couple of times, putting them together, petty and childish and utterly unrepentant. It's a good feeling.

Nao Nao and her boyfriend are alive. Or they will be, soon enough. He can save them, even if they're ridiculous. Neku can make it right. Mr. H is holding onto them for now, for safekeeping, at least until the Game week, and it doesn't matter if he has to drag himself through all of it, he's so damn grateful for the chance.

The phone rings, and Neku sighs, as Joshua's once again managed to change his ringtone to something weird and annoying. It seems like anyone he's been in a room with has managed to get their hands on it - Shiki's got a ringtone in there, and so does Eri, and Beat and his sister. Tsuyoshi does, and so does a guy Neku doesn't know who just happened to sit down at lunch to ogle Neku's computer - this is networking, being overly optimistic with total strangers. Even 777 hijacked his phone, the Def March ringtone pretty much the only thank-you Neku figured he was going to get for being a free hotel - well, not counting other things he was just not going to think about, ever again.

The fluttery ghost of panic rises up, as he reaches for the phone. It's too good, too exciting, too much fun. What is he supposed to do, if things go back to the way they were? It's happened before. In a way, this has all happened before.

"That took a while," Joshua says, when he answers, "so I'm guessing you're not alone."

"You didn't get my text about the orgy?" Neku says dryly, cradling the phone a bit awkwardly between his ear and shoulder, fiddling with one of the little LED contraptions. Minamimoto is going to be really pissed, and that's going to be really satisfying. "What do you need?"

"I have to have a reason to talk to my Conductor?"

Neku rolls his eyes. He can think of half a dozen reasons, all of them ending in his humiliation. "You're bored, aren't you?"

"You're not? What are you doing? Homework?" He makes it sound like a skin disease.

"Josh, occasionally doing things I don't want to do doesn't actually make me a moron." Neku
ignores the pointed snort. He's still got a future to think about, apart from being the Conductor. If nothing else, it'll keep things the same, or close to the same with his dad, whenever he comes back. Neku's a good student, which makes him a good son, and that makes his father a good parent. A little boredom is hardly a huge price to pay.

"So, your dad's not around." As if reading his mind, though Neku thinks he's getting pretty good at noticing, even though - and he will never, ever tell Joshua this - the only difference is that everything seems clearer, when the Composer's mind touches his. He doesn't feel the same worries, the same anxious dread, though those feelings are probably just his sense of self-preservation, trying to remind him this is all quite insane. He knows he desperately needs to set, like, boundaries. Right? That's what rational adults do.

"I can come over, Neku. Tutor you."

His mental image of Joshua has him tangling a phone cord in his fingers like a girl talking about her first date. Maybe Neku needs to buy him a really girly charm for his phone. Hello Kitty?

"No."

"So you do have someone over there. Cuter than me?"

"I just like telling you no." Neku says, keeping his voice light and wry, but he's a little tense, waiting for Joshua to push the issue. Neku's gone to his place, and that's how it's been, and there's been no discussion because Joshua lives in a penthouse palace and Neku just doesn't. But it's more than that, something about having the Composer here in his house, in his room that's even more invasive than 777 and the other Reapers being here. The stupid thing is, Neku knows Joshua can be here as much as he can be anywhere, there's absolutely nothing stopping him.

"So what do I win, if I pass this test?" Joshua's voice is suddenly low, not quite menacing, but all too aware. He drops the magnet he's fiddling with. He nearly drops the phone. So, maybe not as good at knowing the Composer as he thought.

"Can you please not do that." He scowls at the slight giggle. "I get it, ok? You win. You know everything already, and you're gonna keep stalking me until I say yes." The next time he's over at Wildkat, he's going to talk to Hanekoma, find some counterstrike measures. Now that he knows they're dating, he has to take at least some pity on Neku. Maybe install some sort of Joshua-to-Sanity interpreter in his phone, at the very least.

"Neku."

"I just..." It's the last thing he wants, to talk to Joshua about things he's not even finished figuring out for himself. "It's always been my space, ok? It's the only thing I have that's just for me." Neku pauses, and sighs, "... and I can hear you trying not to say whatever it is you want to say, jerk."

Laughter, Joshua amused at his many, many failings, and it might be intensely irritating but it's also honest, and warm.

"I could say something about boundaries here," Neku sighs, the giving-up sigh, and there's no way Joshua doesn't know it, "but I'll just turn the light on for you outside, instead."

It shouldn't be any kind of surprise when he opens his bedroom door just as Joshua's flipping his phone down, but Neku does indeed stumble back and yelp and pretty much fall over on his ass. Neku looks up at his ceiling, deliberately missing Joshua's first impression of the room.

"Would have been a little awkward if I'd said no, huh?" He mutters, ignoring the pale hand that
doesn't really have any intention of helping him up.

Having Joshua around is an incentive, at least, to finish the rest of his homework, the boringness completely mitigated by the Composer's irritation with him doing it in the first place. He nudges the tablet over, but Joshua digs in Neku's bag for his sketchbook instead, and Neku pointedly refuses to say anything as the Composer makes comments here and there. Mostly because he has the most perfect penmanship Neku's ever seen, and he likes to structure his comments like poems, doing some beautiful things with negative space. The fact that they're usually trivial, nitpicky complaints leave Neku once again uncomfortable with what is really their entire relationship, being simultaneously turned on and pissed off.

"If you were with someone else, some normal person, you'd just have to be nice to them all the time." Joshua obviously considers it a fate worse than death or Erasure or censure or being forced to wear Ugg boots. "Imagine, you'd make them cry and then you'd have to feel bad about it. With me, zero guilt!"

Neku doesn't even think Joshua can cry. He's, like, lizard based.

"You going to spend the rest of the night up in my head?" Not what he meant to say, because Joshua isn't even supposed to be here, let alone staying the night, and it doesn't help the way that the Composer looks at him. So beautiful, just looking at him feels good, and he's right. Neku doesn't have to think about what to say, no small talk, no awkwardness, no rejection that won't be right up front - Joshua's pretty much maligned every inch of his nonexistent technique - so Neku can be himself, whoever that is.

"I enjoy the view." Joshua says, and any hope for this being a short visit goes right out the window.

Amazingly, Neku manages to negotiate some terms around the flurry of first-round kisses - shirts off but pants on, and nothing below the belt. It probably helps that his bed is so narrow anything past second base might result in permanent damage or a foot through the wall. Joshua, surprisingly, doesn't argue or even pout, though it's not until he's straddling the Composer's legs and Joshua's hands are on his back that he remembers his wings, that the Composer can almost certainly reach them wherever they are, and then Joshua slides his hands up the base of them, where they merge into his back, his Music, and Neku moans into Joshua's mouth, breaking away, trembling.

"It's not you," he pants, lying, all but giggling like an idiot. "I'm a teenager. You have nothing to do with this. I have hormones."

"… and blue balls." Joshua notes, almost clinically, though Neku can feel that he's not the only one getting hard.

"I'd rather have blue balls than have to wash these pants." Neku says, no longer quite so winded, and adamantly refusing to go full-on porno in his bedroom. The Composer reaches for him again, and Neku lets himself be guided down, loves the feel of Joshua's hand in his hair, the way his fingers dig in a little as their tongues slide against each other. Other than the wing business - just to throw him off-balance, he's sure of that - Joshua isn't messing around with the Music. He could just be some boy from school, sneaking over for a little fun, and maybe that's what this is about.

"If you wanted to do cosplay, I could have borrowed another uniform." He murmurs, running the backs of two fingers along Joshua's cheek because what the hell, it's something people do on TV and why not. The Composer smirks, violet eyes glinting like hidden riches.

"I have five." He tips his head back, resting it against the wall. "… and I don't consider this
slumming it, if you must know."

A flicker of what might be weariness passes across his face, fast enough that Neku can ignore it if he wants to.

"Is it… is it the Angels? Are they still after you?" It's probably not a great idea, really not sexy, but Neku finds it easier to talk about the Game here, with Joshua warm and close, and god, that probably makes him such a girl, not even Shiki is this much of a girl, but when Joshua reaches out, pulls him down so that they're side by side, even in the small space, it's nice. Why the hell did he think bringing Joshua here, in this room, in his bed would be anything but better than before?

"You shouldn't worry about them. Leave it to those of us who don't have a choice."

It was obvious that Joshua meant to challenge the integrity and necessity of the pants rule. It was also obvious that fooling around on a bed half the size of Joshua's was eventually going to send the pile of books, a lamp, and everything else on his side table crashing to the floor. Thank God the laptop is still safely on the other side of the room.

"Just leave it." He mutters, as Joshua leans over the bed, pretending to tidy up for the chance to go through more of Neku's belongings.

"Architecture?" Joshua says, with what sounds like honest curiosity.

"A little bit. It's about how cities work, planning and stuff. I thought I… I mean it is pretty interesting. The setup of a city itself, that affects how people interact with it, and that can change the vibe, right? Even the way people move through a district, it has an impact in the UG." It's Vancouver who mentioned it, suggested he take a look, and though Joshua hasn't said a whole lot, Neku's pretty sure getting advice from other cities is not a thing he ought to be doing. The Composer isn't looking at him, so there's no telling exactly what he thinks, and he hears when Joshua switches from books to loose paper, and pulls himself back up with a dangerously interested look, and a small blue box in his other hand.

"Oh Neku, it's lovely, but I prefer cash," he mock-simpers, most of his attention on the sketches, some first-round tests at fashion illustration. Neku didn't have any time to do anything for this thing Eri and Shiki are doing this week, but when he'd suggested he might be able to do some sketch-ups Eri was immediately intrigued, and Shiki - well, she looked absurdly happy. Delighted, like he'd given her a gift she wasn't ever expecting to get.

"Not exactly. She'd been thinking about asking you for your help for a while now, but she wasn't sure how." Joshua says, opening the box, a gift for Shiki for her first big show. It's not quite a diamond, but the dangling crystals sparkle even in his room's lighting, and no Pegaso item is ever anything approaching cheap, or even sensible. It took Neku a good chunk of his savings and nearly everything he'd earned from Hanekoma, but it's worth it. The look on Shiki's face will be worth it.

"We could make their brand a challenge, once they have one." Joshua says, spreading the chain with his hand, dangling the pendant in the light. "Increase their popularity."

"No."

Joshua snickers. "It's what we do, Neku. You can't hardly keep her out of what she's already an integral part of."

"It's…" He watches the Composer replace the necklace, placing it carefully on the side table. "Being nice is not a competitive sport."
"Everything is a competitive sport. Anything worth doing, at least." Joshua says, and flops back on the bed, slightly rumpled and warm and perfect. "So, now you owe me a gift."

It's weird, how much he enjoys the teasing, the strange disassociation, that Neku can't tell whether they're just play-acting at being the fussy couple, or if this is actually real. Maybe one is the other. "What can I get you that you don't have already?"

"Well," He hates that he asked. Very little in this world is worse than watching Joshua ponder his options. "I did get Konishi to dress like a Victorian schoolgirl for ages."

The Composer stretches, turns away, on his side for just a moment, and Neku watches the way the light and shadow curve across his back.

"Wait. Don't move." He says, and knows Joshua's going to flinch and then pretend he didn't, but he ignores it, reaches over the bed for the markers that now seem to be within arms' reach no matter where he is.

"What are you-"

"You're going to smudge your gift if you don't hold still." Neku says, and he's a little surprised that Joshua actually listens to him, can see him weigh his options just for a moment, before sighing, and staying where he is.

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"What are you-"

The pattern is simple, the long arch, curling feathers. What else is he going to do? It isn't quite a wing, though, because as little as Neku knows, he seriously doubts Joshua is ever going to be a regular Angel. He draws some sharp edges, the points Joshua said he didn't have, but there are elegant curves too, subtle lines. It's the best sort of work, where he's as much a conduit as providing any actual talent, and when it's done Neku flexes his slightly cramped hand, breathing just a little hard.

"Tell me you didn't just sign it."

He laughs, lightly. "Force of habit." Amazed at what he's just done on a moment of crazy impulse, let alone that the Composer allowed it.

"I remember when they used to do this." Joshua says quietly, musing. It's rare that he talks about his past, or gives any clue as to how long he's talking about, when he says he remembers things.

"I bet you'd be great at it." He would be, too, although perhaps a human canvas wouldn't be enough for his meticulous nature. Joshua looks at him, and it isn't that his expression is strange, just quiet. What it looks like when Joshua isn't playing to any audience.

"I never.. I never did." The Composer's hand is on his, the violet eyes suddenly sharp, almost urgent. "I want to give you something. It's only fair."

"Oh, please don't." Neku says with a breathless laugh, and means it, much more comfortable with the Composer's indifference than his interest.

"I could find out where your mother is, Neku. It wouldn't be hard."

"My mom? Josh.." It throws him, because Neku's so used to Joshua knowing everything about everything, reading his thoughts and knowing his past and aware of his future before he even wakes up, and two realizations hit him at the same moment. The Composer is not actually omniscient, and Joshua is old enough that divorce still isn't quite a given in his view of the world.
"My mom isn't... she isn't dead, Josh." He says, carefully. Not because he doesn't want anyone knowing, it's just not something they talk about, him and his dad, because there's not anything to say. "She's in Europe somewhere now, I think. She sends me birthday cards, sometimes." He doesn't like the look on Joshua's face, the confusion there, that this is any sort of issue at all. "It's not... there's no story. She just didn't want me."

Neku says it with a shrug. He's said it before, and forces himself to say it that way every time, free of any kind of drama or explanation or unnecessary sentiment. He's not angry at her, and never was, and doesn't think his parents were ever even angry with each other. It just didn't work out, wasn't the future that either of them wanted and he was an unintended consequence. It's life, things like that happen. Hell, look at his own life, look at where he is now and try to pretend that it's where he expected to be, or planned to be. His parents made sure he was fed, and clothed, and nobody ever hit him - compared to a lot of people, he has it pretty damn good.

It's still really, really nice, when Joshua reaches for him, and pulls him down, with the blanket on top. Flicks his hand and the lights go out, and they're just lying there, and he's breathing in air already warmed by another person's breath, and looking at Joshua instead of the wall of his bedroom, and this is where he's supposed to be.

"I want to see it, when the Players show up. I want to be there."

Joshua smiles, the usual wry grin blunted a little at the edges by some unfamiliar emotion, reaching up to brush his hair out of his eyes but it's really just to touch him, and Neku leans his head up, lands a kiss in the heel of Joshua's palm as it passes by.

"You make this much harder than it has to be, Neku."

"Yeah, I know. I still want to do it."

The Composer doesn't answer, and Neku knows that's his permission, and he falls asleep with a smile on his face.

Joshua watches him thoughtfully, for a long time, contemplative and appreciative in equal parts. Neku, who thinks this little room is all that belongs to him.

He can slip out of bed without disturbing his Conductor, and does so, moving to a small mirror next to the door. It's difficult to see in the low light, the mark Neku's left on him, craning his head over his shoulder to study the curves and angles. Feathers. Wings. It makes him laugh. An insanely foolish gesture, in anyone else Joshua would have called it presumptuous, dangerously so, demanding an instant response. But acting on crazy impulse is all Neku ever does, and against his better judgment, Joshua finds it charming.

More than charming. Idiot.

He smiles at his own foolishness, a much more pleasant form of self-destruction, and shivers slightly, this room not as comfortable as his own, even the slight discomfort rare enough to be a novelty, and throws one more glance behind him before returning to bed, and his Conductor.
He's making useless plans, with tactics out of date by hundreds of years. Kariya can feel the old, old wariness settling into his muscles, thinks of nights spent kneeling outside his master's door, waiting for the slightest creak in the floor, the near-silent hiss of a blade being drawn. It's not going to be that easy, not this time. No codes of honor, no shared vulnerabilities - Neku doesn't even know he's in danger, and Kariya can't tell him, or anyone.

Uzuki was sleeping again by the time he'd left. Kariya had made her swear she wasn't going to feed herself to Saika, or go searching for the Composer or anyone else that might get her Erased, or even shift into the UG again if he wasn't around. He's never seen her this openly scared, not even during the Long Game, but it's the resignation that worries him more. It's like she's humorizing him, like she's already given up and is just waiting for him to get smart and do the same, to give up on her.

Kariya can feel his wings ache with tension even here in the RG, faking his usual lazy slouch against the wall. He's got no castle, no loyal guards, and there is no doubt Uzuki is right. This thing, this Saika that used to be a girl, she's going to go after Neku. He's the Conductor, all but first in the line of fire, whether it's an ambitious Reaper or a Player entirely out of their depth or an Angel or a Fallen or anything at all.

Kariya takes the faintest cold comfort in the fact that the Angels won't listen, not really, even if he tries to tell them what they're up against. Insulated by their power, not even realizing how they consider themselves untouchable, while they bitch at the Composers for being arrogant. Kariya shuts his eyes, letting his breath out in a long, hissing sigh. He can see it happening, see everything going straight to hell in a thousand different ways, and that's if they're lucky. This thing? This girl? She'll take everything she can get, there's no reason for her not to try. The only saving grace is that he doesn't think Saika can change her vibe, can't get into the RG easily at all. Maybe not even through anyone but Uzuki, and that's only if his partner's in the UG first.

Who knows what else she can do, though? Whisper in the ear of some lunatic bastard, maybe. Coax him into Neku's way, here in the RG where he's just a kid with no idea what's at stake. Calm and contented, thinking he can leave all that danger behind him when he eats breakfast, hangs out with his friends, goes to school.

So Kariya's been here for an hour, watching the sky grow brighter, staring at nothing in particular until the light goes on in a window of Neku's apartment, maybe a dim silhouette in front of the window, just for a moment, passing by.

Less than useless, to tell Sanae Hanekoma. If anything, it would only hurt Kariya's credibility with the Angels - no way they wouldn't see a warning from that half-Fallen mess as anything but a pathetic attempt to regain his position. No reason Hanekoma would be any different than the rest of them, Erasing Uzuki just to be sure, because a single Reaper has less than no value to any of them. Not compared to someone like Neku, and Kariya gets it, he really does, a simple cost-benefit of ability and power and what the Angels would consider useful potential. He can feel it, has been feeling it, as Neku steps out his front door, swinging his bookbag over a shoulder as he turns to
lock up.

He's just so bright, so pure. And Saika knows what he is, Kariya's sure of it, the nightmare bitch knows or she will the second she sees him. Not just his own power either, this morning, there's another melody there playing backbeat, and Kariya bites down hard on the side of his tongue because it is in no way surprising the Composer's decided to make his Conductor a regular snack, but there it is, right? Even if the relationship's all one-way, even the most bastard Composer... shit, this is how it happens, isn't it. This is how Shibuya dies.

"Hey."

Neku's stopped at the bottom of the stairs, has noticed him. Wary, his first impulse around any Reaper is always caution, though Kariya thinks it passes more quickly than it should. It looks like Neku's trying to decide whether a smile might be right or not.

"Hey." Kariya finally replies, knowing he doesn't have anything even remotely resembling a plan, and just starts walking instead. Neku steps in beside him, after a moment. The kid must think this is weird, but he doesn't say anything. It's another thing to like about him - Reapers, in general, never shut up. Either talking about kills they made or ones they're going to make, and every single one of them has a super-secret plan about how to take the Conductor, or the Composer, or both, and most of them will explain it in detail after a ridiculously small amount of beer and even less encouragement.

Neku, on the other hand, stays quiet, even though Kariya can see him giving darting, curious little looks whenever he thinks the Harrier isn't looking back.

"What?"

"Nothing. You just... you look a little tense. Preoccupied."

One day. One day before the Game starts up, and Uzuki will have to be there. He can't watch them both, not all the time, not when all it will take is a single moment of inattention.

"I thought I might be able to teach you a couple things. Before the next Game." The words surprise him as much as they do Neku.

"Like... sparring?"

Kariya smirks. "What, you think 'cause you took me down once and you've been Conductor for all of a week."

"No. No. I didn't mean - it's cool." Neku puts his hands up in a placating gesture, an odd look on his face, not quite sure he's awake enough to get what Kariya's saying. "Just... this isn't some kind of plot to try and kill me or something, is it?"

"The last thing I want in this world is your job, kid." How true is that, and on how many levels. "It'd be a pain in my ass, too, if you get Erased and I have to deal with some new guy. I like you. You're a pushover."

"Yeah, thanks for that. So this 'kid' business? I thought I was the boss."

"Only during Game weeks, kid."

"Right." Neku mutters, though the slight smile seems genuine. So open, so utterly unprepared. Kariya really doesn't feel as old as he is, for the amount of responsibility he's dodged. But he is old,
and after a while everything sort of turns to pattern recognition, women who look and act like ones he used to know, two hundred years ago, and men getting into all the same fights. It's just the clothes that change, and he doesn't understand any more than he did back then. His Composer is gone, has been gone forever, and even living as long as Kariya has brings nothing he can use.

"He hasn't told you much, has he? The Composer. About how to keep yourself safe."

"What, during the Game? It… they have to go after the Games Master first, right? I mean, I try to be careful…"

"Do you spend time in the UG, when you're not busy getting in our way during a Game?" Neku cuts his eyes away for a second, and Kariya has his answer.


"Other things can come into the UG, you know. Just because your Composer's not thinking about them doesn't mean they're not there."

"You mean… like Angels." Neku's watching him very closely, and Kariya doesn't even ask. Of course Neku knows about Angels, why the hell not, though he's obviously surprised that Kariya does too. "How do you know?"

For so long, they'd all known, back when there hadn't been as many Reapers, as many Players as there are today. No divide between the Producers and the rest. Kariya can't remember exactly when it changed, a gradual thing, or why. The same reason as anything else, probably, the Angels mostly cowards behind a thin illusion of grace. Protected, because hardly anyone knows they exist.

"I told you, I been at this for a while now. You last out here long enough, you realize it's the things you're not supposed to know that keep you alive." Kariya frowns. "Yeah, Angels, that's some of it. More specifically, what happens to Angels who decide they don't really want to be Angels anymore."

As if on cue, a cloud passes in front of the just-risen sun, and Kariya nearly rolls his eyes. Hates the way Neku is watching him, more than a little anxious, and there's a stupid moment where he wishes he'd just kept his yap shut.

"They're called Fallen. Even if they were in your little Conductor book, they wouldn't be. Angels don't like to talk about them much."

"Fallen." Neku says quietly. "Bet I can guess how that happens."

And he knows they're both thinking about the last Game, and what Neku did to himself - and how bad it could have been - and what are the odds Saika didn't feel all of that? Whatever the reason she came, it seems like everyone's hell bent on giving her a reason to stay.

"All kinds of reasons, really. Sometimes the Angel does it to themselves - maybe even on purpose, or sometimes the other Angels get together, make a decision to boot one of them out. It's mostly if they're evil or they're power-hungry or just stupid: destabilizing the UG, using Taboo Noise, that sort of thing."

He's talking without really thinking, thoughts shuffling a little as he speaks, still trying to find solutions where none exist, and at the way Neku jerks, Kariya curses himself instantly. He has to search back through what he's just said, to even find out what he - shit. Idiot.
Neku's eyes are dark, his gaze turned far inward. So that answers the question of whether Hanekoma ever had the balls to come clean about that particular point.

"Minamimoto's not… not an Angel."

"No. Not hardly." The point of this little conversation was not to end up here, at all. It's not that he gives a shit for the shreds of Hanekoma's reputation, but the last thing Neku needs to be is more off-balance. He's glad the kid's as fast, as perceptive as he is, but this would have been a real good moment for him to flake out.

"So if... I mean, the Taboo Noise, that's not something... He would have needed... help." The way the kid's voice catches, practically quavers on the word nearly makes Kariya flinch. Stupid, stupid stupid fool, and Kariya can't let it hang there, whatever his own feelings. It isn't for the Angel's sake anyway.

"He really didn't do it to hurt you, kid."

Neku laughs, a short, sharp little thing, and rubs the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Yeah, that's kind of a theme around here."

"Listen, you don't need to worry about that anyway. Past is past. You just gotta know, the UG isn't any safer for you, just 'cause you're not a Player anymore. The threats get bigger, is all. The nice thing is, you'll feel them coming, anything as strong as a Fallen. No way they'll get into Shibuya without you noticing. Cold and dark, and if you feel that you shift to the RG right away, before they can do you any damage. Let the Angels handle that shit." He's rambling, but at least Neku doesn't look quite as much like a kicked puppy. "The Fallen, they can't shift their Frequency so high, and wouldn't dare try something out in the open anyway. I know a few tricks, maybe I can get you to shift a little higher, in case... anything happens, and you need a better place to hide."

It's the only thing Kariya knows for sure will work against Saika, if it comes to the worst. She didn't like it at all when he went up, and even if she isn't a Fallen, doesn't quite feel like one, Neku doesn't really need to worry about the specifics. So yeah, maybe Kariya's teaching him mostly how to run like hell, but if he gets away, maybe the Angels will swoop down, shoot first and not ask questions, ever. Maybe Kariya can catch her off guard, get another chance, find a way to finish this fast.

"If I do it during a Game week, isn't that kind of like cheating?"

Kariya looks him straight in the eye. Remembers a long, long time ago, helping shift the grip on a sword for a brother barely old enough to hold the blade. The irony of what happens to honor, in the face of losing what's most precious.

"You played the Game, kid. You know the rules. No such thing as cheating when you're trying not to die."

All right, so it was a fantastically stupid assumption on Neku's part, to think that the ugly revelation portion of his new life might actually be over. It's stupid to think it's over now. Who knows just how long it takes for the average Conductor to learn all the things they'd rather not know?

*Surprise! Hankeoma tried to kill you too. Now get to class.*

Past is past. Why is it so easy for everyone else to say? How can Kariya shrug it off, how can the Wall Reapers not even blink at an Erasure, and even Joshua-
He's rocked back on his heels for what feels like the hundredth time in so many minutes, and Neku's glad he's at least at school and Kariya is long gone. Kind of strange for the Reaper to follow him practically to the door, but hell, Neku is probably missing another convoluted attempt at his job or his life or both, no matter what the Reaper said and - Joshua knew. Joshua *knows* that Hankeoma tried to destroy them both, that he'd given Minamimoto the Taboo Noise. How long has he known? Why doesn't anyone think it's in Neku's best interest to ever tell him a damn thing?

He pauses in the stairwell, empty except for him and the morning sunlight. Takes a deep breath, listens to the city. Tries to calm down, so he won't accidentally destroy himself with self-pity, another thing either one of them could have, like, mentioned.

Neku's trying to roll with it, trying to make those allowances. Joshua's not so much a person as a fancy orchid, and Neku knows he's never going to get a proportional response to any of his careful attempts at special handling. Joshua's just high maintenance, like particle-accelerator-mated-with-F-1-racecar high, and it's not like Neku doesn't get that. The benefits far outweigh the cost, even now.

He'd thought Mr. H was the sane one, is all.

*Of course he's the sane one. He tried to stop Joshua from destroying Shibuya. It's what all of it was about, right? Even if it meant making a monster to do it.*

A monster who didn't even realize his purpose. If Taboo Noise was that bad, certainly the Angels would have stepped in right away, afterward, even if Minamimoto had succeeded. Poor bastard never even knew he was being played by everyone.

Neku realizes he never gave much thought, to just who was behind those Red Pins, but that's not really something a Conductor can do, either, is it? Neku can manage a few, if he takes his time, but they're all simple, physical type stuff. Nothing on that scope or scale. He's never seen Joshua - the Composer doesn't even *need* pins. So maybe Kitaniji was just way better than Neku is now. Maybe he'd been Conductor for an impossibly long time, and he could make all the pins he wanted, and it's not like he'd even be able to talk to Hanekoma, right?

Unless Joshua, unless he somehow… and Neku puts his head in his hands and hopes very much that nothing the first-period teacher is discussing is going to be on the test, because he hasn't heard a word of it.

He's afraid, which is something he doesn't ever want Joshua or Mr. H to know. His second Game coming up and Neku can't help but be a little afraid of the both of them, not so much for himself but for what they're obviously capable of doing to each other. It's not like this changes things between him and Mr. H - his respect for CAT pretty much transcends petty things like sanity - but it's yet another reminder of how small he is, how little he knows in this game between gods. They've fought, they've obviously forgiven, and he was never aware of any of it.

At the end of the day, Neku's a liability. He doesn't even know what he doesn't know, and it really seems like they're both happier with him that way.

It would be kind of nice to know why.

"Eri!!! I'm just… I just want to go in my dress pants. Ok? Please?"  
Neku comes in to the room just as Shiki's finished shouting, her voice muffled behind the door,
and this is because Eri's got her hand on the knob, holding it firmly shut. She turns, gives Neku a grin as she shouts back.

"I didn't work that hard on that dress and lie to you about who it was for so you could not wear it to the show. It's perfect. You said so yourself."

"Perfect for some really pretty girl with boobs, Eri!" Neku nearly laughs at her openly irate tone. It's rare to see this side of Shiki, or at least rare for him. Definitely not the shy girl who spends all her time trying to please everyone else.

"A girl with boobs couldn't fit into the top." Eri's trying not to laugh, too. "Besides, I like your boobs, pretty girl. You like her boobs too, right Neku?"

The silence stretches. He can pretty much see Shiki's expression through the door.

"Ha ha. Very funny, Eri." Shiki says, maybe just a little shaky.

"Hi, Shiki." Neku says, as gently as he can while speaking loud enough to be heard, barely able to hear the muted 'eep' in reply. "Uh... so, it looks like you two are having... fun?"

"It's an intervention." Eri says, matter of fact, and would probably cross her arms if she wasn't still keeping the door firmly closed. "Shiki seems to think I'd go through all the trouble of making a beautiful dress for someone who didn't deserve it on the night we've both worked so hard for."

"So you... locked her in the bathroom."

"With the dress. Yep." Eri herself is wearing a dress that's mostly covered with spiraling patterns of little clear sequins, her hair up and pinned in place with matching beaded sticks. It's beautiful. Neku wonders how long it took Shiki to sew them on, if she actually did them all by hand.

"Eri, please. We're going to be late."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure we would have done great. It's gonna be a shame to miss it." It isn't just a smile on Eri's face, but a tenderness too, a hope, and she glances back at Neku again, and then to the door, a silent plea.

"I'd really like to see this dress of yours, Shiki." Neku says, and means it. "Also, it's gonna be hard to draw for you if you're stuck in a bathroom forever. I suppose I'll have to slide the pics under the door."

After a moment, they hear a sound, maybe a small laugh or just a sigh, and Eri gives him a combination eye roll-victory sign-grateful look, and finally lets go of the door, flexing her hand.

"Thanks." Neku says quietly, knows that Eri understands what he means, that she's not jealous that he's there in Shiki's life, even when he's the deciding vote in moments like these.

"She thinks I'm not objective enough, because of how much I love her," Eri says back, just as quietly, her smile so bright and her Music sparkling to match her ensemble. "It's true, of course, but it's still a kickass dress."

A knock on the wood, a few moments later. The door opens just a crack, and Neku catches a glimpse of Shiki's shoulder blade, the pale skin just above the curve of her waist as Eri slides the zipper up. Then the door is open and Shiki's there with her hair pulled up and feathery in the back, decorated with a little spangly ornament and for the first time Neku really gets the whole little black dress thing.
"Stop looking." Shiki mutters, blushing, not quite meeting his eyes. She has her arms down, holding onto a small purse, the delicate effect betrayed by the way she's throttling the life out of it.

Neku hasn't had the best day, school was kind of a total wash and he probably didn't spend more than five minutes combined not thinking about what Mr. H had done. Everything's so much better now, it feels, as always, like he's thawing out - it's Mr. H who told him that, isn't it, that he can't do it alone. Neku only feels better because he's here, with his friends - what would be left of him, if he tried to do it all by himself?

"I'm glad you decided to join us. I would have felt kind of stupid, trying to figure out what to wear this with." Neku says, and lets the necklace drop out of his hand, dangling in the light. He realizes, in the split-second before her reaction, that he'd just assumed all this time she'd be happy. He hasn't done this sort of thing before with a friend - Joshua doesn't count, he's insane - at least not for a really long time, and it's honestly a bit of a relief to see her smile.

"Oh my God, Neku. Oh my God. I can't just... I mean, this is a Pegaso? God, it is. How much did you spend!!"

"Please breathe." Neku says, smiling, and gently moves her flustered, protesting hands out of the way, Shiki finally letting him. Blushing again, and standing stock still as he gets the clasp in place. He should have asked about the neckline on the dress before this, but he's lucky. The chain is just the right length, and the way it sparkles, he thinks, compliments Eri's dress rather nicely. The two of them already look professional, already successful, as if they've been doing this for years.

"Ok, so I'm feeling underdressed." Neku mutters after a moment, when no one says anything.

"Of course you are, you're wearing Hip Snake pants with a Sheep top because obviously no one loved you as a child." Eri says, taking a theatrical step back. "Don't get too close, Shiki, it might be contagious."

Shiki ignores her, practically tackling Neku with a delighted giggle, as he does his best to hug her back without wrinkling anything. Before anyone can say more, a car horn blares, and then he's helping to load what they've got in the back, Shiki moving carefully to avoid creasing her dress and Eri blowing him a dramatic kiss from behind the window and then they're gone, Neku watching the tail lights flash red for a moment, before they zip around a corner. He wishes he was a better Conductor, that he could give them maybe something a little bit more than just his own hopes for the best, but Neku's pretty sure they've already got everything they need.

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"So, you without a bowl in your hand? This is new."

It's not that Kariya's not paying attention to his surroundings, but the things he's waiting for, that threat level is just a little higher than anything Def March is going to bring to the table. So he doesn't notice 777 until the other Reaper is practically standing on his feet, and even then he doesn't care, keeping his gaze on the other side of the street. Whatever his original errand, Neku's been waylaid by some shop clerk he seems to know, so Kariya's taken up a good position in view of the shop door, and so it might even look as if he's actually out here just to enjoy the night, do a little people watching.

"I didn't think you had, you know, a life."

Of all the Reapers, 777's usually pretty low on the list of people Kariya wants to actively throw into traffic. After what he did in the Long Game, well, that's worth at least some respect. If Def March
really has something else going on besides blindly dicking around in the Game, more power to them. It would be better, at the moment, if they'd do it somewhere else, though as a Reaper 777's pretty much obligated to be unhelpful. Kariya hasn't taken his eyes off the door, and he sees Mr. Rock Star follow his gaze, his little entourage not quite as perceptive.

"Congratulations on getting your ass back in the Game." He says, when it's obvious they aren't leaving. "I don't think anyone saw it coming."

"I sure as hell didn't." 777 takes a drag of his cigarette, taps the pack to offer Kariya one, shrugging when he declines. One of the real perks for some of the Reapers, all the enjoyment with none of the consequences. "I can't wait to see this Game of his. Did he really send three Players back home?"

"Italy, I think." He still hasn't looked away, and to hell with what 777 or the others are wondering. Neku finally reappears, though he's not alone, chatting with a group of kids who are only kids, and Kariya shifts his attention back to the surrounding block of space, just keeping an eye on everyone coming and going. It's a little tiring, and probably all useless, but he needs to do something, anything, or he'll just go nuts. 777 glances between them again, and the slightest grin flits across his face.

"Huh." So much summed up in a grunt. Maybe because he's a musician.

Kariya finally glances at him, just long enough to make it a glare. "You're stupider than you used to be. Might want to look into that."

The grin becomes a smile. "So you're not calling dibs on him, then?"

"I'd take that up with the Composer, first, if I were you." He says it all for the pleasure of watching 777 freeze up, and no shit, really? 777 actually made a pass at the kid? Kariya can't help but wonder how far he got. It makes sense, with the sort of Music the kid's throwing out, even a mid-level Reaper in close proximity would be doomed before long. Even as a Player, Neku was rocking that wide-eyed, out-of-his-depth, "hello my name is bait" thing pretty hard.

"He's too young for you." Kariya says, laughing a little despite himself, kind of glad it comes out sounding normal because he's really not in control of it. He'd regroup, but how and why bother when he still doesn't have anything remotely resembling a plan of attack. Neku's a prodigy but what can Kariya show him in a day or two? What can he possibly teach before she strikes? He knows, Kariya knows Saika will strike during the game when he's not looking and he has to be looking, he has to be.

He's managed, apart from the morning, to stay unnoticed, following Neku through his daily grind. It's a little bit harder to do with a rock band in tow, 777 not exactly the kind of guy that blends, and so it's not really a surprise when Neku looks up while crossing the street, and sees them. At least he doesn't look angry, or even annoyed, just that wary hesitance that never seems to leave and Kariya wonders if it's because they're Reapers or because it's four of them and Neku doesn't want to intrude if he's not wanted. Stupid kid, so skittish when he ought to be a tyrant.

"Hey." 777 says, and Kariya's looking so he sees the way Neku reacts, the split-second drop of the eyes and it's too dark to see if he goes red at all, but he recovers pretty fast.

"Hey."

The two other members of Def March make little noises that work for greetings, obviously nervous. Kariya doesn't bother saying anything, the glance Neku throws him already curious,
wondering why he's here again, but the kid doesn't say anything, glancing back at 777 instead.

"You guys got a show tonight?"

"Next week. Ought to be fun. Game week shows are always interesting." Maybe Kariya can get Def March in on this, somehow. Come up with some bullshit version of the truth. 777 isn't a real talkative person, there's little to worry about him keeping a secret. He also has some selfish interest in having Neku around, if only for how the kid improves the scenery. It might be worth the risk, if only to get the Reaper to call him, if he's there when it all finally goes down.

"You guys, uh… want to help me with something?" Neku says, and fuck but the kid's stupid, hopeful smile actually makes him feel better. Steadier, like it's all going to be okay if he just does his best - and yeah, that was why everything worked out so well with the Red Pins, wasn't it? Kariya the amazing Angel assassin, doing his best on the sinking ship Shibuya.

If he doesn't figure out how to do a lot better than that, and shore up the goddamn defenses, the Long Game's going to look like a paid holiday.

"What's the deal?" 777 says - apparently neither of his band mates have the balls to talk to the Conductor anymore, BJ and Tenho shifting from foot to foot, not quite hiding behind their leader. "You need me to ruin your homework or something?"

"It's more… artistic expression." Neku shrugs his bag off his shoulder, reaches inside. Kariya can't figure out what the little bundle of wire and plastic is supposed to be, even after Neku tweaks something and it explodes into color, a miniature ball of twinkling lights. One of Minamimoto's ridiculous sculptures is nearby, but he hasn't thought anything of it, until Neku leans back and throws the little gadget nearly to the top of the sculpture, where it sticks, flickering brightly.

"Magnets - and the batteries should last for a long time." Neku says, examining his efforts with a hand on his hip, looking satisfied. One of the Def Marchers lets out a little snicker.

"Well, that's immature." Kariya says, impressed.

"Yep."

"S'gonna piss off Minamimoto." BJ says, his one sentence worth of courage. 777 only shakes his head.

"Yep." Neku pulls a few more bags of flickering lights out of his pack. "So, you wanna help?"

Of course they all take a bag. Kariya's kind of surprised the kid had time to make so many, but Minamimoto does tend to inspire that sort of industrious enmity. It's not nearly enough to go after every one of his junk piles, of course, but they focus on the larger ones in the more popular places, making sure to throw high enough that the 'decorations' won't be easily removed.

Kariya could leave, he knows that. Just walk away and let whatever happens just play itself out. What's stopping him? What combination it is of Uzuki and this rookie Conductor that doesn't even have him looking for the door? Hell, he'd do it just for Uzuki, even if he knows she'd never believe him.

Kariya hates running, hated it from the very beginning, and maybe he's kept himself to himself all this time because it was always going to be like this, once he had to stop and get involved. Stupid samurai bullshit, codes of conduct and sworn duties that nobody in the world believes in anymore. Kariya glances over, watches Neku as he throws another bundle of lights, just happy, and so perfect when he's fully in the moment, so much what a true lord of the Underground ought to be. The
nostalgia is sweet and sharp, like he's full of bits of colored, broken glass. He might end up dying for this kid. After all this time, it could be his end. Is it nobility or misguided honor or just that self-destructive impulse finally kicking in?

Or is it that nothing was supposed to feel the same for him, not ever again. Nothing in this world should exist, to remind him of what was lost, of that perfect clarity, of home.

They're pelting the last statue with what remains of their stash, even 777 getting into it, with a little bit of a height advantage and a long arm. Kariya's already out, and Neku tosses his last a few seconds later, cocking his head slightly in appreciation at the riot of color making merry with what is probably supposed to be a serious artistic statement.

It's just quiet enough that they all hear the scream of outrage, somewhere up the block, and it's like the signal to scatter, 777 and his posse cutting at a slacker's pace in one direction while Neku takes off in the other, practically giggling. Kariya waits a moment, and falls into place, a shadow again, invisible. He hopes the Composer will be wherever Neku's going, he needs to check on Uzuki and maybe catch some sleep himself.

One more day, and it's Game on. Kariya knows he ought to be happy, at least this time he can see it all coming, but what's settling in his gut is anything but confidence.
"Ow!" Neku says, and then 'ow' again just for the hell of it, though he's sure Kariya didn't care about the first time. "You know there's a reason I never joined any club spor- OW!"

Kariya is practically a blur, if not less, flickering back into view on the far edge of the soccer pitch. When he'd said he wanted to train, Neku at least thought he'd get the chance to drop his bag off at home.

"Can't talk me to death, kid. Or you think you can get lazy just 'cause you're a big-shot Conductor now?"

It is supremely satisfying to answer with lightning. Neku can call it up practically on instinct, and he doesn't think his reflexes are any worse than they were in the Long Game, so somehow Kariya's gotten way faster. The Reaper's not even bothering with any special attacks, using a damn bokken of all things. It would seem like a handicap, nothing compared to Neku getting his ass exploded, but did he mention Kariya is really fast and - "OW! FUCK!"

Neku turns, throws his hand out, lightning striking the spot the Harrier was just in, before dropping his arm to rub at his side, just below his ribs. He's going to be black and blue by the time this is over - at least the Harrier has been nice enough so far not to bruise anything that will show. Kariya's not moving, but poised on the balls of his feet, ready to dodge whatever he can throw, and Neku's covered in sweat but if the Reaper is even breathing hard he can't see it. What the hell.

"You're just doing this because I told you it was Beat's idea to save you and not mine."

"I'm just getting you used to getting hit. It's useless if you're flinching."

"You know, I did spend the better part of three weeks-" Pretty much getting his ass handed to him and barely surviving, which is what's going to happen again if he doesn't shut up right now. Neku darts back, matching the Harrier speed for speed, dodging every lunge Kariya makes but just barely, and he'd do ice but he can't freeze anything moving this fast. Neku throws a bike instead, wishing there were a car anywhere in sight. It misses the Harrier by inches, and he hears the whack of the wooden sword against his stomach a second before the sting hits, and stumbles, and doesn't hear the next at all, a crack across his back that sends him crashing to the ground.

Neku lays where he is, panting, waiting for the world to catch up with him and for everything to stop spinning. He probably ought to try his Noise form, if they're going to go this fast, but he doesn't quite trust himself against the bokken - Kariya would just end up using him for baseball practice.

A shadow towers over him, Kariya prodding him in the shoulder slightly with the practice weapon. "We should move this to somewhere crowded. You need more distractions."

"Oh yeah," Neku mutters, though the Reaper is immune to sarcasm, "yeah, obviously that's what I
Once again, he can't help but ask himself why he agreed to this, and then Neku remembers it's nearly Day One and tomorrow morning all the Players, all those kids just like him - like he was - they're going to be out there, and all teasing aside Neku will not be in any real danger. He hates watching the minutes tick down and he really hates feeling sheltered from the worst of it, not to be afraid when everyone else is, so the solution, of course, is to let Kariya beat him up, sort of like penance for things he hasn't done yet.

The question of what the Harrier's getting out of this - well, something's pissed Kariya off, that much is obvious. Nothing lazy or laid-back about the guy who's been trying to take his head off for the past hour. Neku's considered asking if he's had a fight with Uzuki or something, but he's having enough fun with eerily focused Kariya, dealing with rage mode Kariya he can save for another day.

So Neku drags himself up off the ground and they go to Scramble Crossing and Kariya beats him up and down the 104 and then back again, all the way to Cadoi City and practically to Molco and it's not that much more distracting with people wandering through their battlefield but that doesn't mean Neku doesn't end up with what feels like a dozen new bruises, even though he's pretty sure Kariya's being pretty casual and could probably be breaking bones if he wanted to. By the time they reach the phone booth Neku's getting a little bit better at fighting back, a combination of Telekenesis and Lightning that's at least making Kariya have to work a bit harder to get to him, and there's a very satisfying clang when the Reaper thinks Neku's left an opening, only to have a dumpster slide into his angle of attack, at a satisfying speed.

"Please tell me I at least broke your nose." Neku pants, staggering, hands against his knees until he finally just lets himself collapse on his ass on the street. He hasn't been pushed this hard since the third week with the Taboo Noise - Mr. H's Taboo Noise - and no matter how hard he tries to get over it, there's no chance of that thought not hurting, not anytime soon. The image of the dumpster is wavering, losing its solidity, and Kariya is not bleeding, but the bokken is a good foot shorter than it was before. Neku can't help but feel a moment of petty triumph, the Reaper slouching down next to him, and maybe he looks a little winded. Maybe.

"You've got good speed. Fast reflexes. You need to change up your power set, though. Lightning's too easy to dodge."

"It wasn't so easy the last time I fought you." Neku says, can't help but glare a little. Kariya shrugs, careless as ever, though his eyes are still hard and focused. He seems almost distracted, as if those Fallen he was talking about might show up at any minute, but Neku'd like to think he's a little better than being bounced around Shibuya like a pachinko ball by a Reaper that's not actually paying attention.

"Red Pin put me off my game."

Neku still doesn't want to piss Kariya off even if he's only holding half a bokken, so he lets it drop, leaning back on his palms instead. "This is one of those old-school training things, isn't it. Ten years of kicking my ass before you teach me how to attack anything."

"From what I hear, you have a problem attacking in general, so…"

"I told you, it was Beat that said we should try to save you."

"And not taking out the Composer? Was that his genius idea too?"

"… shit." Neku kind of likes this chatting-with-the-sempai moment, but could he maybe be a little
less pathetic while doing it? "Is there anything about my life that isn't common knowledge?"

Kariya smirks, though it disappears fast. "It was random chatter. I wouldn't worry. Most of the Reapers have a very short attention span. The Long Game? Never even happened. Past is past, remember? Only the next Game counts." Kariya lets go of what's left of the bokken, and Neku watches as it fades, not unlike the dumpster. It's a cool trick, he'll have to focus on getting it down right. The potential for conjuring up random things to throw at Joshua is too tempting to ignore. "Still, an opening on the Composer? Not a lot of Players who'd choke at that kind of chance."

"I'm special that way," Neku says, dryly. Just imagine if he had taken the shot. If Joshua had let him. Learning how to fight would have been the least of his problems. Could he have ever, ever managed Composer the way he was then, even at the end of the Long Game?

He would have been alone - again - and this time it would have been a lot more like forever.

Shibuya is always with him, even as the Conductor. All he has to do is think and it's there, bright and loud and eager. Eternally new and always changing - and when he's in this moment, when it's just him and Shibuya, Neku can understand why Josh did what he did, why Mr. H did it, because it's worth the sacrifice. It's like some perfect, eternal garden, but no matter how effortless all that beauty seems, it's an illusion. The truth is constant care, and tending, and hard work, even if the Players don't understand their role and the Reapers think they're playing outside of the rules - all of that, maybe all of that is factored in, to keep it moving, and sacrifice is also built right into the Game.

Kariya's kind of right about practicing. If something happens, if Shibuya's in danger, Neku won't even be able to fake pretending it's not his problem. No bullshit excuses that he's just a kid or it's not his fault or he doesn't understand what's at stake. He'll have to fight. All this running and hiding stuff isn't a bad idea, but Kariya doesn't know that Joshua's been censured, that Mr. H - Neku doesn't think he's a Fallen, but really, how the hell is he supposed to know?

"Why exactly are we doing this?" Neku asks, not really wanting an answer, not wanting to give an inch more reality to the thought that's just hit him.

"Like I said, kid. I thought I could teach you a few things." Except Kariya knows about the Angels, and the Reaper's been real tense, this whole time, and was all that business about Taboo Noise an actual mistake, or on purpose? Neku feels a flicker of real anger. He's never on solid ground anymore.

"I'm not going to kill Shibuya's Producer. Not for anybody."

Kariya just stares at him, and for a moment Neku knows he's right, and then the Harrier continues to stare, and Neku thinks maybe he needs to leave the conspiracy theories to other, smarter people, and he's so glad Joshua isn't here right now.

"You're too loyal, kid. They won't know how to do anything but punish you for it. Trust me." It's just surprise after surprise with the Harrier, first offering to train him and now this. The reason, maybe, for his laid-back attitude, for his lazy half-interest. Kariya knows better than to get involved, because getting involved means getting hurt. Neku can sure as hell relate to that, doesn't even have to ask about the 'they' - Angels, classmates, strangers. Anyone who can, whenever they can.

Neku knows how it works, and it shouldn't be so different now, being the Conductor. He shouldn't be any more interested in taking risks, putting himself out there, but then there's the Music, and it tells him there's nothing to really be afraid of, that there's so much out there that's better than 'safe.'
"I think maybe… it's worth it, to take the hit? Better to get hurt, when you know it can't stop you for long, and just keep fighting for what you want?" Yet again, it's not trusting that Joshua won't hurt him, but trusting that it's going to be worth it, that Shibuya's important enough that Neku can take the crap and work it out somehow. So now he knows Mr. H did some stuff, and yeah it still hurts but he's gonna keep going and get through it. He's gonna roll with whatever happens, and try to be the bigger man and so yeah now Kariya's looking at him like he just declared himself the Fairy Princess of the Moon People.

"Yeah, okay. Optimism is for stupid people, I know. So now what?" It isn't so much that he's rested, but if he stops moving any longer his whole body's going to lock up into one enormous ache. Neku's gonna need one hell of a hot shower later, and hope it solves enough of the problem. Does Kariya want to do this through the Game Week? He can't imagine it, he'll end up doing all his Conducting in traction.

"Let's see how you do going up the Frequencies." The Harrier says, getting to his feet, and Neku follows, trying to be smooth and forcibly ignoring every whine of protest from pretty much every muscle he has. Kariya walks them down a side street, a nice, quiet empty place with brick walls and no windows, and of course Neku yelps when the bokken whacks him in the arm.

"Can you warn a guy?! I didn't even see you turn-" Neku jumps back, as the weapon sweeps around to take a crack at his other arm, and Neku does as he's told and shifts, and he's standing in the RG and the bokken passes harmlessly through him, Kariya grinning a little from the other side.

"Good. Now get back here, and we'll try for further up."

"Or I could just stay here." Neku grimaces, trying to rub the feeling back into his arm. "Are you like, only a master of martial arts for bastards?"

"The Fallen can't get you in the RG, Neku, but I can." Kariya's grin turns a little evil, and Neku has the vague suspicion the Reaper had a little brother, once upon a time. "I don't even need the stick."

"Black belt in asshole," he mutters, but focuses, shifting back to the UG.

"It's not going to be as easy, going higher, but I'm sure you can do it if you try. Just shut your eyes, and think about what you're trying to do, feel for it. Listen to the Music, the quiet notes right at the edges. Follow them, let them help pull you up."

Neku frowns. "If you could do this, why didn't you do it before, like with the Taboo Noise?"

"Yeah, thanks for pointing that out."

"Sorry."

Neku's pretty sure Kariya's going to whack him a good one the second he stops looking, but he'll definitely get hit if he doesn't follow orders, so he shuts his eyes, and after a moment of not getting hit for it, lets the world around him fade. He knows what it feels like, sliding down to the UG, and though Neku wished he didn't, he still has some memory of going even further down. Up is new territory, not really a physical direction but it's as good a thought to focus on as any. He hears the Music rise around him, and Neku lets it flow through him, and it's just like standing in the middle of a rushing river, buffeted on all sides, half wanting to let himself be carried along - and there, at the very edge, a soft sound, a few notes nowhere near as fast as the center of the torrent that he's in. Neku thinks of a line, of the edge of a cliff or the lip of a pool and reaches out, yanks himself up - he's tumbling, unexpectedly, flailing and gasping -
- and Neku opens his eyes, the sound of his breath as he exhales the only thing there is to hear. The world is bright, so incredibly bright… but he's wrong, it isn't silent at all. There's a strange sort of beautiful humming that grows louder as he listens, a massive chorus of voices all hitting the same perfect note, rising and falling in a harmony that thrums through the whole world. It's Shibuya, but it's not Shibuya, the edges of the buildings kind of sketchy, hazy and semi-transparent, and everything's sorta… glowing from the inside. No Noise that he can see, though the air seems to sparkle, a hazy mist that clings to him. It feels like a good place to be, warm and very peaceful, though it's kind of weird to be the only one here, especially for how he doesn't really feel quite… alone. Shouldn't Kariya be here by now to hit him with something?

He takes a deep breath, impossible not to relax in such a strange, beautiful place, and if Neku shuts his eyes and concentrates, there's another distant melody, yet another tease at the edge of his senses. The suggestion that he could go even higher if he wanted, that he might find whoever it is singing that beautiful song. Maybe not a good idea, though, since he doesn't even know where he is now.

Neku walks to the edge of the alley, glancing out curiously. No cars. The streets look like they're paved with crushed diamonds, all the leaves on the trees made of crystal. As much fun as it is, it seems like maybe he's gone to the wrong place, maybe not anywhere near high enough, and so Neku focuses, concentrates on lowering himself back to the UG, trying to edge his way down to keep from doing anything stupid. He'll just have to get Kariya to tell him what he did wrong, and try again.

"Neku! Holy shit!"

He blinks, rather surprised to find he's flat on his face, laying against the bricks outside the alley. Everything's back to its normal colors and opacity, except that Neku's head pounding and his whole body's being flattened into the earth by a giant, invisible hand, like gravity's gotten really pissed off at him all of a sudden.

"Talk to me, kid. C'mon, Neku." Hands on his shoulders, rolling him onto his back. Disoriented, it takes him a minute to place the face and the voice because he's never heard Kariya sound even remotely worried and he can't imagine why he would be now. Why the hell is he on the ground?

"Neku!"

The sharp shout makes no sense at all, until he realizes somewhere along the way his eyes have slid shut. Neku drags them open again, and then Kariya's got an arm around his, pulling on him, forcing him to sit up. It's kind of annoying, and Neku's not sure why he's so tired, and he wants to apologize for ever thinking the Reaper was trying to kill him when he's suddenly being so nice, but he can't quite remember how words work. Neku licks his lips, his whole mouth feeling numb and rubbery, like he went from that crystal world to here with a long pause at the dentist.

"Huh?"

It's the best he can do, but Kariya doesn't say anything, doesn't crack a joke or get impatient, just stays there with a hand against his back, even after Neku can keep himself from falling over, and his head clears, and his body starts feeling like it's actually his again. At least he doesn't feel like he's going to throw up on anybody's shoes - Kariya's really aren't that nice, but the Reaper would probably still be less than pleased.

"I don't think I did it right."

Kariya laughs, which is really strange, and helps him to his feet, which is still the regular sort of
strange, except he's also hovering, as if ready to catch him while Neku decides if he's going to be able to keep his balance. It's the UG, filtering back in, as normal as it ever gets, and Neku sort of paces in a slow circle until he stops shuffling and everything that was kind of wobbly or spinning decides to stop.

"Okay, maybe next time you should just come and hit me until I go where I'm supposed to." He glances over, expecting at best a roll of the eyes, but the Reaper's still giving him that strange look that could mean just about anything. "What? What's wrong? And where were you anyway?"

"Neku, I don't even know where you went." He says, his voice quiet, with what almost sounds like awe. "You were just… gone. Higher than I could follow."

It's about then that Neku notices the sun is nearly down. How the hell long was he… up there? Wherever it was? It only felt like a couple of minutes, if that.

"It wasn't… bad. Kinda pretty. Everything sparkled."

Kariya says something under his breath, too quiet for Neku to hear, and then they're sitting on a bench, Neku still a little shaky but recovering fast. If anything, he feels better than the Reaper looks, glancing over every time Neku so much as shifts in his seat, otherwise looking away, obviously rattled.

"It wasn't bad." He says again, not quite as certain this time. If there's some sort of danger or penalty he's gonna have to pay for slipping up, it's probably better to know now. Kariya only shakes his head.

"It wouldn't be. Just… aim lower next time, ok? A lot lower."

"Or what?"

Kariya lets out a little huff of a laugh. "Or you might just decide to stay up there."

It's late, by the time Neku's no longer unsteady on his feet, and Kariya keeps giving him worried little glances and kind of hovering, which is way more unnerving than just getting smacked around. So he's glad when the Reaper's phone finally beeps and he drops back without a word, disappearing into the night. Neku's still not sure what to make of what he did, how he went… well, up, especially when he didn't mean to do it, but it's probably better if he keeps it to himself. Kariya said he didn't see where Neku went, but he is just a Reaper - and can Joshua go there? Probably. Maybe not now, but after he gets his powers back, maybe they could go there together - and Neku can't help blushing, imagining all the ways Joshua has to know of getting them booted out of paradise.

It really was beautiful. The memory of it is fading, but the warmth lingers. Which is good, considering everything else he has to think about tonight.

Shiki sent him a text some time between Kariya throwing him into a bank of vending machines and Neku throwing the vending machines back at him. Nothing but exclamation points and yen symbols and then a long string of snoring noises, so he figures there's no point calling her back until she and Eri have recovered enough to talk. At least he can assume it all went well.

He pretends he's just strolling for a little while, but he knows exactly where his feet are taking him, even if he's not quite sure why he's going to the WildKat, why now is a good time. Except that there won't be time later, the Game starts tomorrow, and maybe he should just wait until there isn't
time. Is he really - does he really need to do this? Confront Mr. H - about what? It's not like Neku didn't know about the Red Pins during the damn Game, it's not like he didn't have suspicions - hell, *Beat* had suspicions - but it didn't matter. Once Josh was alive and then they weren't dead and Rhyme was back and the happy ending was enough, wasn't it?

Okay, so it hurts. Why did Mr. H lie to him like that? Why smile at him and offer up all that advice while doing everything he could to put them in a situation he knew they wouldn't survive? It's one thing for Joshua to make everything a puzzle, and he's trying, Neku's really trying not to keep score: the Red Pins and Mr. H saying nothing - nothing - when he knew Josh was alive. That whole third week when absolutely everything was going wrong and Taboo Noise were chomping at their asses around every single corner and he did that. Mr. H did all of that. Here Neku thought what had happened to them, the whole censure thing was some kind of overreaction, that the Angels weren't being fair.

… and Minamimoto? *Him?* Really? Mr. H overcharging on the coffee in the front while building weapons-grade lunatics in the back and Pi-Face was somehow the best possible option? The thought hits him, that Konishi would have been his obvious choice, and it hits him just as fast and twice as hard that if it had gone down that way, they'd all have been dead for sure.

Neku feels more than a little sick as he gets closer to Cat Street, because he's trying to be outraged and angry instead of being scared. Afraid that he does know why they picked Minamimoto - because he was disposable - and in the end they're not telling Neku anything because he's really just the same. Maybe a little bit shinier, a little more useful. Who knows, Kariya might even feel sorry for him, for being too stupid to see it.

Is it stupidity or insanity, that Neku only hopes he won't see it coming, if that's really the way the end is gonna be? If he'd prefer Josh shooting him a thousand times over having to know the truth, over being dumped on his ass again, abandoned and left alone? It's pathetic, but Neku can't help it - knows that maybe the only reason they're so good at lying to him is because he'd rather not see the truth.

"Bye bye, Sensei!"

A chorus of young voices spills out as a door opens a half a block down the street, and Higashizawa turns to wave with a weary smile, yanking the strings from an apron around his waist, liberally covered with sauce stains and a few stray noodles. A decent dusting of flour leaves a silhouette of the apron visible even after he's got it wadded in one large hand, and Neku awkwardly joins the tail end of a crowd of people moving the other direction, just enough cover to keep from being noticed. Higashizawa still doesn't like him - that's probably never going to change - but he looks absolutely wiped out at the moment. There's no reason for Neku to have to hide but there's no reason to make the guy's night any worse either.

He can't help slowing down for a moment, peeking in the window of the building the Reaper walked out of, a long hall and a stairwell, what must be a junior cooking class upstairs if the kids being fussed over by their mothers now are any indication, and - kids. Really. The Games Master, their week one nemesis spends his free time teaching kids how to - well, dump flour on each other, by the look of it.

Little kids have bright, unfaceted Souls, all their Music so very loud. Less complicated, but also more… excited is the only word Neku can think of that comes close. Up tempo. It's an amazing thing to watch them with their parents, the similarities in Music between family members. Neku can hear the melodies entwining, playing off each other as shoes are tied up, bags helped on to small shoulders - and he backs off as the first of them come out the door, shaking his head, forcing
his attention fully back into the Realground before he does something stupid like vanishing midstep.

Neku still feels it - hears it - the moment he's on Cat Street, enough to make him stop dead, and the girl who nearly runs into him manages to jump to the side instead, glaring at him and saying something to her friend as they pass. Neku doesn't notice, still listening, trying to figure out what Shibuya wants to tell him as he moves closer. All his half-formed plans, any lingering, resentful feelings are shoved to the side as Neku tries to make sense of what he's hearing. It doesn't sound dangerous, exactly, just… complex, very intricate and extremely powerful. More than anything he's heard before.

An Angel, then. What else could it be? No one's fighting, Neku's sure he'd hear that, but his heart is pounding a little anyway, and he hopes he won't have to try to remember what Kariya just beat into him.

Whoever it is, if Neku can hear them there's no doubt they know he's coming, and he takes a deep breath, steeling himself as he steps into view, and through the door.

Just for a second, Neku thinks the Angel's all made of light, the way Joshua is when he's in his Composer form. The image only lasts for a second, and then Neku realizes the man is simply so pale he's practically clear under the cafe lights. Definitely foreign, with light blonde hair and eyes that hover in some impossible shade between blue and green, easily as ridiculous as Joshua's violet hue. Of course, they're all looking at him, and Neku can see that Joshua's tense, and Mr. H is tense and maybe some of that off-key Music is Shibuya grumbling, crabby and complaining because Joshua is definitely in a bad mood. Neku starts to tense up too - ow, bruises - and he knows he's going to have a headache by the end of this, or more like the middle of it, and he could just run away screaming, right now. He could.

"Hey there, Neku!" Neku wonders if Joshua learned how to shoot with a smile from his Producer, or if it's simply a common point of interest. Mr H's good cheer does sound a little forced, at least, though Neku's surprised he can notice over the roar of the uncensured Angel, his Music ringing out like the world's largest handbell orchestra at a jam session. Neku's trying not to wince, but of course Joshua notices, the Composer wearing an expression a little more like 'wet cat' than the unflappable calm he's probably aiming for.

"Could you turn it down a little? My Conductor's not quite used to your… magnificence."

It's the first time Neku's heard the word 'magnificence' pronounced like something to be prodded with a stick, although the angel doesn't seem to notice, still looking at Neku, studying him. A few moments later he stops flinching, as the chorus of bells recedes to pleasant background noise.

"My apologies, Conductor." He says, and when the angel says 'Conductor' there's a promise there, something smug and serene, and Neku can see Joshua's eyes flash and if Mr. H starts in with this subtle insult bullshit Neku's just going to boil his head in the espresso machine and be done with it.

"Neku, I'd like to introduce Brede, one of our many expatriates. He also invented comic sans."

Okay, so Mr. H isn't going to be subtle with the insults, a gleefully malicious undertone to his words that's way more, well, Joshua than anything Neku's heard from him before. It probably doesn't matter if he has any idea what's going on. The Angel rolls his eyes slightly, taking a sip of his coffee and what passes for the high road in perhaps the world's worst conversation, and they're barely through the introductions.
"All this time, Sanae, and you're still not funny. How sad." The angel shakes his head, and gives Neku a bright smile. "No, nothing quite so… impressive on my resume, I'm afraid. As for my tourist status, I suppose that hardly means much these days."

"Because you're an Angel?" Neku says it, just to see if the man will admit it, just so they're all aware he's - for once - on the same goddamn page. If Brede's surprised, it doesn't show. His smile doesn't change. Did he mention the Angel is scary powerful?

A part of him's been listening to that chiming of bells on a whole different level, the Conductor level he's still learning how to use. Looking for openings that aren't there, cracks in the Angel's defenses that just don't exist. Manhattan was one thing, this is several more of those things plus a few that Neku can't even measure, notes that seem to come from nowhere and resonate in endless echoes. It's difficult not to get caught up, just listening to them.

"Well, that's true. It helps that the world is much smaller than it used to be." His eyes flick over to Joshua, for the barest second, and Angel and Composer share a glare like two dogs over the same piece of meat. "It's nice to finally meet you, Mr. Sakuraba."

"You don't need to call me, I mean… Neku's fine."

Here's something else kind of screwed up about him - Neku doesn't really like friendly people, at least not right away. It always feels like they're all selling something. Yeah, so it's not exactly the world's smartest instinct - Joshua was a jerkwad at first sight and look how that turned out - but even with everything he knows and what he sort of came here to do, Neku can't help but feel a little suspicious. Also this Angel could probably take him apart to his component atoms without trying very hard. Yeah, there's that.

"So… yeah, I hope I didn't, uh… interrupt anything."

He's grateful to take the cup Mr. H hands him, just for something to do. Neku takes a long sip before he remembers the man is still pretending he can salvage the Drink That Should Not Be - but this one's not bad. A little too sweet, slightly more caramel than average, but not bad. Neku's mouth snaps shut, just as he's about to make a wry crack about not using Nao Nao or her boyfriend for animal testing. Maybe that's what the Angel's here for. Or Rhyme. Or, hell, all of them. Maybe the Angels are always this relaxed, this friendly no matter what the mission - Mr. H sure was, and look at what he was up to.

"Sanae was just showing me some of your work." Talk about the last thing he needs, already trying to figure out what's going on and if he's going to have to fight and what sort of millesecound's worth of warning he'll get, and now the Angel's looking at the sketchups he did for Mr. H.

Mr. H, who got him his first real job, and the cash for Shiki's necklace, and saved Rhyme.

Mr. H, who created the Red Pins, and the Taboo Noise, and helped Minamimoto and tried to kill them all.

It's hard to stay angry at him, to not give him the benefit of every doubt, and Neku wonders if that's just another part of being an Angel, or if he's the world's most massive asshole for even thinking it.

"Oh." He finally says, a little too burnt out at the moment to come up with more, and finally takes a seat in the middle of the counter, pretty much directly between Joshua and the Angel. At least he's comforted by the fact that Josh would have used him for a human shield no matter where he sat, telekenesis 'inspiring' self-sacrifice. Neku had threatened to try it on Beat once or twice those last couple of days.
"You're quite good, not that that's any real surprise. I'm not the best judge, not particularly fond of the more modern art styles. An Angelic flaw, I suppose. We can get a bit… niche. Stuck in our ways."

Joshua lets out a little, disdainful snort. The fact that it's only in Neku's head doesn't mean it didn't happen.

"So… where's your UG?" He asks, even though saying anything feels just a little bit like a betrayal, and he can definitely feel his Composer's Music against his back, like he's standing in front of a blazing fireplace. A blazing, disdainful, irritated-and-trying-not-to-show-it fireplace.

"I'm originally from Sweden, but I've never been a Producer, if that's what you're asking."

"A lot of Angels can't handle the job." Mr. H says mildly, though Neku still sucks in a soft breath, trying not to wince, the words meant to leave marks.

"It's a confining position, for some. Quite limiting." Brede fires back, just as placidly. "If I'd had such an obligation, I'd miss out on opportunities like this."

"Being an unwelcome guest? No, I imagine there aren't many openings even with your obvious talents." Joshua observes, and Neku just barely keeps from dropping his head into his hands, considers yet again the benefits of just walking away and leaving them to it.

The Angel sighs. "Well, since we're done being subtle, I should tell you that I am here with orders to observe and oversee the Games for the foreseeable future, as this is the second time in as many months that the entire ward's existence has been put into jeopardy, and seeing as Shibuya is operating without an acting Composer or Producer-"

"Threatened?" Neku murmurs, but Joshua's speaking right over him.

"I am Shibuya's Composer, unless I'm missing the part where anyone actually succeeded-"

"What do you mean, threatened?" Neku says, louder, because he has some idea of what might have happened in the last Game that would have threatened Shibuya, and why maybe the Angel waited for him to show up to say as much. Brede's looking sympathetic and his stomach sinks even lower.

"Obviously, with a regular Conductor, the Game would process their loss the same as any other Player, whatever the circumstances. Considering your unique situation, however, and the events of the most recent Game…"

The Angel trails off, because Neku knows he's staring blankly, and here's the way things always end up balancing out for him, between fear of inevitable doom and the realization that he's - yet again - the only one in the room who doesn't know what's going on. He misses the moment of amusement - the triumph that flickers in the Angel's eyes as he glances at Hanekoma.

"Oh, Sanae, and I thought your reports were shameless." The Angel turns his attention back to Neku. "Did he tell you how long the debate lasted, on whether or not to just rip his wings out right away? I can tell you think we're all a bunch of useless bastards, so I'm guessing not. He didn't tell you why we punished him, did he? Exactly what he did to Shibuya, to you, and-"

"No." Neku says, and the Angel pauses, momentarily surprised. "It's cool. Don't say anything. If Mr. H has something that I need to know about, he'll tell me." Neku looks up, across the counter, sees the moment that Hanekoma realizes that he already knows.

"Well," Brede lifts his hands, as if to dissipate the tension that doesn't budge an inch. "Let's just
say, then, that I'll do my best to stay quietly out of your way, and let the Game proceed as the Composer wills it, unless a situation arises that threatens Shibuya and requires my intervention. I do hope you'll take some time to consider your options, though, Neku. Whatever you think of me, you're capable of far more than this."

"I'm kind of an underachiever." Neku mutters. The Angel only nods.

"It seems to be Shibuya's common malady."

About the only thing today that hasn't caught Hanekoma by surprise is how quickly Neku leaves the cafe, battered by Music from all sides even with everyone pretending they're being polite. Brede's presence has left Joshua not-so-subtly pulling everything he can from Shibuya to make up for what the censure's costing him, the Composer far more interested in presenting a position of strength than whether or not it rattles the hell out of his Conductor.

Hanekoma has been scripting it in the back of his head for at least the last week, how to tell Neku about the Taboo Noise, about Minamimoto and all of it. He'd considered just giving over a copy of his final report, had even counted on his reputation and Neku's hero worship to act as a bit of a buffer, smoothing out the worst of it. Obviously, there was probably not a worse way he could have done it than the way it had just happened, Neku's expression gone frighteningly distant, all emotion replaced with a sort of disappointed acceptance. Acknowledging the truth about Hanekoma, and lowering his standards accordingly. It sucked, it hurt, and Hanekoma knew he deserved it.

The absolute least he could have done was tell Neku the truth. After all the boy had done for Shibuya, all he was still doing - but it had been easier to treat him like a Player, safer and less complicated and a magnificently terrible idea.

He can't even have a proper sulk about it, because there's still an Angel in his shop, volleying a half-hearted game of insult tennis with Joshua.


"You tell me."

Hanekoma sighs, fixing himself a double espresso for the lack of anything better to do. "You know, this is why I never go to the office parties. Well, that, and I never have the right shirt."

"Well, I'll leave you two to the boring part. Text me with the highlights."

Joshua doesn't even bother waving goodbye, just disappears from his seat. No threats, no warnings or promises from any of them. All of that is implicit, practically a part of the Music, just like knowing why the Angel was here the moment he walked through the door, the way no one had to say Neku's name to know who they were waiting for.

It's not like Hanekoma wasn't expecting it, ever since the end of the Long Game it seemed likely, but Brede's an… odd choice. Obviously not here to try and garner his approval, no love lost between them, no common ground over the years. The Angel's not as old as he is - few are - but he's not new at this, either, and he's not stupid. Hanekoma wonders if this is the start of the real plan, for getting rid of them. A way to depose both Composer and Producer without officially having to give the order. It looks so much tidier in the records that way, so much more pleasant.
"So, how's the girl doing?" Brede says, guilelessly. "The little Noise one?"

Hanekoma can feel his wings bristling, all the way to the tips, not anger or worry but annoyance, which really is the best thing to feel. "You're going to start off by threatening a child?"

The angel shrugs, as if baffled at how he could cause such a reaction. Mild as milk, sipping at his drink. Hanekoma regrets the missed opportunity to at least try to poison him.

"At least you've figured out how to brew a decent pot of coffee. Finally."

"I make scones, too. With blueberries."

Brede's not his enemy for any specific reason, just a little bit more interested in all the parts of being an Angel that Hanekoma never could quite bring himself to care about. It had been a meandering road to becoming Shibuya's Producer, with some years spent getting in the way, never on the right side with whomever was in charge. Brede, on the other hand, had always found some opportunity to be useful. Never quite reaching a position of power - an unexceptional Angel, which Hanekoma found far more disturbing than anything he'd done, though he was mostly alone in that opinion.

"You know, if I'd tried to attack either of you, your Conductor would have given me quite a show."

Hanekoma can't help but smile at the thought. How wary Neku had been, how he'd positioned himself near Joshua, probably without even noticing. Certainly hadn't noticed the way his Music had changed, twining with the Composer's, ready for orders, to protect him at the first sign of any danger. Maybe ready to fight at his side too, Hanekoma thinks. Even angry at him, Neku might very well have jumped in, outgunned and knowing it but he still would have tried.

"It's only Neku's second Game. Disrupting him now is a bad idea."

Brede tilts his head. "That's funny, I thought we were operating with our ends justifying our means."

Hanekoma knows he's managed to alienate or piss off a good portion of the assembled higher powers, and a lot of that long before Joshua had ever come along to give them an easy way to sum up all of his failings at once. Brede's just the mouthpiece for everyone who wished they could pluck him for sport, who always thought his spectacular failure was an inevitability.

"If you're trying to punish me, there are easier ways. Fusion cuisine. Fanny packs."

"Punish you? We're working for the same goal, Sanae. I'm not your enemy, even if we'd happily dance on each others graves."

"We wouldn't get graves."

"I'd buy you one. Out of respect."

Hanekoma downs the espresso way too fast, needing the distraction of the sour burn in the back of his throat. In a sick way it's probably better the Angel showed up when he did, to keep him and especially to keep Joshua from doing something drastic and stupid, when Neku - just for a moment - had vanished from Shibuya.

Ascended.

Joshua had snapped open his phone, looking bored, pretending they all hadn't felt it, but Hanekoma
had seen him pause halfway through the numbers. No real way to call him back, they both knew it. Nothing to do but wait and pretend they weren't waiting and there's no way it wasn't anything but a coincidence, and Hanekoma doesn't believe in omens but it's still not a good one.

"You can keep holding on to him for as long as you like, but you're just making it harder on yourself." Brede says calmly, the kind of tone that makes Hanekoma want to hit him with a coffeepot. "That Composer of yours already has a problem with not getting his way."

He's tried to explain it to them. Out of earshot, where Joshua couldn't make faces, and Hanekoma tried to go through how the Long Game had worked, how the whole UG had nearly fell in on itself, just to teach the last person in the world who would willingly take a Partner that he couldn't go it alone. So Joshua had called Neku a Proxy instead, and Hanekoma had gone along with the charade, and none of the Angels understood what it meant or what had changed. It spooked them too much, they couldn't believe that the risk had been worth the gain.

So many things he can't get them to see. The way all the Players, anyone who actually runs through the Game are new Souls, fresh and full of potential, and yet the Angels... most of them don't even bother living in the world they oversee, that they think they know so well. Hanekoma likes to think he manages to avoid going stale, keeps from getting old by staying so close, by always listening. Maybe that's the reason so many of them don't like him.

"You know they make medication for people like you." Brede says, shaking his head, as if he's following Hanekoma's thoughts but coming up with far different conclusions. "... and if you're planning on telling me how a bunch of half-assed ideas and coincidences look like a plan in retrospect, you can skip it. I've heard the highlights."

Hanekoma shakes his head. "Neku isn't going to be what any of them want him to be. You looked at his sketches. I know you can see it."

It's all over the kid's art, still awkward and unfocused, but it's there, his statement. Even the simple images imprinted with bravery and individuality in an incredibly chaotic mix. "Be brave. Do.," if Hanekoma had to put words to it, and it's not exactly a sentiment the upper echelon will be pleased with. It's far too open, no boundaries and no guidelines - and he's pretty sure that's deliberate, given Neku's past experience with other people's rules. It's Shibuya, and more importantly it's Joshua's Shibuya, giving everything without a sure conclusion, and Hanekoma's well aware of the depth and scope of Angelic willful ignorance, but surely they're not this unaware.

"Is that what you were trying to prove? Of course I can see it. Am I supposed to care? The boy's young. He'll change. You remember what change is, right?"

Hanekoma might as well be talking to his own back wall. At least that one has a funny cartoon on it, cut from an old magazine.

"Neku belongs in Shibuya."

"Spare me." The angel snorts. "They've given Kiryuu every chance to be something other than a mercurial, insufferable prima-donna, and you know it. You know you're in too deep, Sanae, too invested - but it ends here, you have to see that. Five minutes with Sakuraba and I can see it - this boy is far, far too valuable to waste on what's left of that Composer. If Kiryuu decides he'd rather self-destruct than see reason, well, that's not exactly a threat anymore."

"You think you can win Neku by promising him, what, exactly? Power?"

"No. I'm going to win him by telling him the truth, because unlike you, I have nothing to hide. I
will tell him exactly what he can do, what he can be, and how determined you and your Composer are to keep him from finding out. I figure sooner or later - and I'm betting on sooner - Kiryuu's going to do something idiotic and throw away what he never should have been given to begin with. It sure as hell won't be my fault, when Neku decides he'd rather go somewhere where he's appreciated, without so many mind games."

"At least not the kind he'll notice right away."

The Angel shakes his head. "You. Taking the high road. Like you'd even know what a good decision looks like anymore."

"Ah, arguing the slippery slope?" It's not like Hanekoma hasn't been having all these same arguments with himself, but there's no point in being reasonable, that much is obvious. Besides, the alternative is a lot more fun. "The last bastion of cowards and the dull."

"What slope?" Suddenly, Brede's eyes are sharp and hard, and the air around them trembles in a way that reminds Hanekoma that he still is very much censured, even here in his own shop. Oddly, it doesn't seem like Brede's trying to remind him - this anger is genuine. "As far as I can tell, you Fell straight down, and I don't care how many friends showed up to give you a half-assed pass, I don't care how much bullshit you piled up to get clear. I know what you are, and I know what your little Composer is."

A pause, and Brede relaxes, smiles, though it never gets close to his eyes.

"The whole Producer thing - this is just a day job to you, Sanae. We both know it. All convenience, the way you could find to keep yourself busy while you doodled your way across eternity. When they told me what you'd done, the Taboo Noise, I didn't think it could possibly be you. Except for the part where you failed, obviously. You're better off not taking things too seriously, we both know that. Just enjoy yourself, and leave the important business up to the real Angels."
On Sunday, Neku wakes up just a little past one in the afternoon with a rabbit on his face.

"You got sick of them too, huh?"

He murmurs, smiling, glad that she's safe, apparently not anything that new Angel cares about, and the Nao bun nudges him with her soft nose. It's probably not ok for her to be sitting on his pillow while he's in his pajama bottoms because she's actually a girl and like, older than him and stuff, but the sheer weirdness factor seems to completely cancel out his ability to care. He'd fallen into bed with the start of a wicked headache, but thankfully it looks like he's managed to outsleep it. Still goggly, Neku rolls onto his side and immediately regrets it, the results of Kariya's righteous ass-kicking making him grimace and shift and then groan. If the Reaper managed to miss a spot, he sure as hell can't feel it.

It seems like a good idea to just stay in bed for the rest of the day, until he hears a slight rustling sound, and ignores the ache in his shoulder enough to crane his head around. Most of his room is in the RG, well out of the realm of Noise interference, but the other bunny has discovered, quite happily, that his headphone cords exist in both realms at once.

Neku yelps, half-falls off the bed, and scrambles over to yank them out of its mouth. Best alarm clock ever.

The computer's pretty much become his first stop in the morning. He's set up an account with an art website Tsuyoshi suggested he sign up on, until he can come up with a good design for his own - and even for after, as it's apparently important to 'cross-market' as much as he can. Neku's even bought a book on building webpages, but if there's anything more confusing than the Conductor manual, it's cascading style sheets.

He's also gotten into the habit of checking and re-checking his mail - his Neku mail and his Conductor mail and his newly-created Artist mail, though he hasn't yet settled on a name. On the fly, he's gone with 'Space Bunny,' to match the few doodles he's put up of Nao Nao floating through the cosmos.

Pointy claws just dig into his shirt, a slight weight settling down as he clicks his way through this new, complicated version of his life. The Sota-bun seems happy to hop around his room, while Nao prefers her usual perch on his shoulder.

"See? You're the first thing I posted. You're my lucky rabbit."

He's even got three comments on his favorite sketch, with the bunny in her helmet and a smiling star in her paws. Okay, so it's not exactly high art - but hey, look at Hello Kitty, and ignore Joshua bitching that it's not so much a mascot as a mental illness. Yeah, admittedly two of the comments are one word - 'cool' and 'cute!!!' and so, ok, neither of those accounts are from people with any art in their own section, and the third one is spam in characters even his ultra-fancy computer
doesn't feel like translating - but still. It's something.

It's enough that he spends another half-hour mostly refreshing the page, just in case anyone else feels like adding a comment. As if his attention span isn't short enough already - this must be where Joshua gets it from.

He hasn't gotten much new mail from other Conductors beyond the occasional mass post, hardly anything from the Composers at all. Whether this is a measure of their attention span, the threat of his popularity drawing attention from their own Games - which he still believes is mostly bullshit - or that they've been Erased and a new person is in their place - well, no, there's a newsletter of sorts for that kind of thing, a once a week rundown of any interesting occurrences in various Games all over the world. Neku is sure Shibuya must have had one hell of an entry the weeks he played, but all his questions have been met with polite deferral, or silence. Joshua makes people nervous, it seems, anywhere his name is mentioned. As if that's any real surprise.

Or maybe the Angel's responsible for the sudden radio silence. Maybe Neku's been doing things really wrong all this time - the talking to Composers thing is probably not standard operating procedure - and now there are going to be consequences.

Joshua's not answering his phone - of course not - and over the next hour or so Neku switches from trying to call him to just texting madly, with increasingly annoying messages and, finally, inane pictures of whatever he happens to be looking at - his shoes, the toilet, a half-drunk container of milk in the fridge. Obviously, it's a horrible idea to leave Josh alone for too long, but Neku absolutely refuses to jump whenever his Composer happens to be in a sulk. If anything… bad happens, he'll feel it, he's sure of that, and if he could even find Josh, by the time he'd was finished letting the Composer pout or snap at him or feel superior - whatever he neeeded to do to get over having an unexpected Angel on his turf - it would certainly be the middle of the night and Neku'd be completely useless for the Game.

He doesn't really have the concentration to sketch up anything impressive, but he's also got a few commissions still hanging in space and this will probably be the last time he has to work on anything for a while, so Neku forces himself to sketch at least some concept art, while the Noise bunnies hop about. There's a bit of a scuffle, when Sota starts nibbling on Nao's hat, but things calm down before he's forced to intervene.

Long after Neku's given up on pestering Joshua, a truncated e-mail finally shows up in his inbox. Fairly uncomplicated directions for the week's Game, a list of Players and their prices and their lives and their deaths, and Neku swallows, glancing away from that last one. The week's vacation from the job is just about enough time to forget the way his stomach clenches, the way he can hear Shibuya gearing up if he wants to listen. A different rhythm to the Music in the district on Game weeks - everything changes, and then there's the Angel to think about.

Sure, right, it'll be an easy week, and Brede's just going to observe. Easy and by-the book, even though he has yet to be in a Game week where everything goes according to any kind of plan. Neku lets his head drop back with a heavy sigh because he's already too tired for this.

What did the Angel even mean - not about Hanekoma, but the rest of it? He lifts a hand up, over his head, staring blankly at the ceiling light between his fingers. Did he hurt Shibuya, when he'd been so angry? How? If he was more than a Conductor - well, obviously he's a Composer, then, at least with the potential. That's the implication, and somehow Brede thought he'd never considered it as a possibility. He smirks, imagining the look on the Angel's face when he hears the truth, how Neku had the opportunity that apparently everyone else forever of all time would have used to shoot Joshua and then reload and then throw the gun at him and then get a bigger gun, and he
hadn't pulled the trigger. That little revelation will get the Angel out of Shibuya without a backwards glance, giving Neku and all the rest of them up as a hopeless cause.

*Which you are. Freaking masochist.*

Neku drops his hand, rubbing his eyes, more worried for Mr. H now than angry, and even kind of sad that the man saw he was angry and - fuck, he is *so bad* at fighting with people. No wonder he cut and ran, the last time he was given the option. Ran himself right off the edge of the world, right into the Game - and there's a helpful thought.

He's been putting it off and putting it off, even skipped the Reaper meeting he probably should have organized yesterday, too easy to pretend he's not what he doesn't want to be. Neku frowns, closes out all his other programs, and scours the kitchen for anything edible before he goes back to his room and pulls up the list of new Players.

No one this time from outside of Shibuya, which is a relief. Neku makes a copy of the e-mail and cuts it down to the names and fees and... causes of death. He tries to go fast, aware he's undermining the entire point of the cheat sheet if he can't bear to *read* it but - god, there's a girl who got stabbed by her boyfriend, and a boy - who kills themselves at fourteen?

*Were you so far off? How happy were you to be in the Game? No one to deal with, no one to bother you. You thought you might be dead, and did you care?*

At least no one's as young as Rhyme, though Neku still dreads having to face them, can't quite bring himself to look at any pictures, and the thought that at least it will keep him from worrying about the Angel - yeah, real comforting.

Neku pushes the computer back, shuts his eyes and prays to anyone that might be listening, even as he feels stupid for doing it. Trying and failing to remember everything Vancouver told him about peace of mind. There's no reason to think this Game isn't going to gut him just as badly as the last, in some new way he can't even imagine yet. But if what the Angel said is true, this time he's just gonna have to learn to live with it.

________________________________________________________________________________________

Neku flips to the UG the moment he steps out the door Monday morning, two pairs of claws digging into each of his shoulders, like the world's most ridiculous epaulets.

"You're walking once we get there, ok? Hopping. Whatever."

No sign of understanding in Sota's beady eye, though Neku doesn't remember the guy being all that aware when he was still human. He can feel the strain of them now, fully in the UG, just as Josh said he would, like trying to carry an overstuffed bookbag, the weight dragging him down. Neku pauses, focuses on his own Music, tries to... add more instruments to his Song is the only way he can think about it, while keeping the bunnies well out of the way, their Music fixed apart from his own. The weight shifts, lessens somewhat, not so noticeable. It's worth it, worth any cost to know that he can fix this, and that they're going to be human again.

Maybe the Angel's pissed because of things like that, because he's taking such a hands-on approach to the Game. Neku can't help but glance up and around even with nothing to see. No doubt he's being watched from some other level, studied or graded. Maybe Josh even... or Mr. H... maybe this is still some sort of test. How would he know -

"Yeah, right there! That's him! Get him!"
Neku skids to a halt, just approaching Hachiko, and there's a Reaper girl he doesn't recognize with twitching wings, an irate expression, and pair of knee-high tan boots that Eri would either kill for or kill her for wearing. God only knows.

She's pointing right at him, and the Players behind her are staring like some sort of bewildered, half-panicked Hydra. All eyes on him, and Neku very nearly glances over his shoulder, like he's also looking for the idiot who's going to be wading into this mess. Before he can say anything, a girl at the edge of the crowd screams, a ripple of panic shifting across the group as a frog Noise flickers into view, and leaps for the nearest Player.

Neku has his arm up without thinking, and Nao and Sota lunge forward in a fluid, tandem attack, a zig-zag pattern the reduces the Noise to nothing in a single strike. It's pretty badass, so of course there's no one to see it but a bunch of Players who are too scared to care, and the Reaper in the boots who's striding toward him, looking anything but impressed.

"Man, they said you played a different kind of Game but I did not know I needed to show up stoned."

"What are you… I mean…” Maybe better not to splutter like an idiot. If he can help it. Neku glances around, but can't see a single Shibuya Reaper anywhere. "I'm not… who the hell…” He forces himself to stop, and swallow. Like it's gonna help. "What's going on?"

"I… uh… wow, wait. You're the Conductor, aren't you?" The Reaper stops short, twisting a long braid around one finger, glancing away as if when she looks back, he'll somehow be whatever she was expecting, or at least slightly improved. Nervous - she must have thought he was the Games Master - and where the hell is Higashizawa anyway?

"Uh… that Game of yours a while back, you lost a bunch of guys? So some of us surplus Reapers from other Games, the ones they didn't like - I mean, they shipped us over here?" Nearly all her sentences are pitched like a question, though Neku can't tell if it's the way she normally talks or she thinks he's incredibly stupid and is trying really hard not to piss him off. "I was in the Shinjuku Game. We… uh… usually, over there, y'know… show up when there are Players? Get instructions or whatever? I mean, this is cool too, I guess?"

Neku grits his teeth, tries to pretend this is one of the things Joshua would have mentioned, if the Angel hadn't shown up to distract him.

"You said there were others? Like you?"

"Yeah. Couple of guys, and some Wall Reapers? They went to go get breakfast since… I mean, are we like, started?" The girl glances over her shoulder with a small, predatory smirk, and Neku remembers then exactly who - what - he's dealing with.

"No one plays until everyone has Partners."

"Really? No Reaper Smash and Dash?"

He's not even going to ask what that is. It's enough that she looks disappointed, and shrugs and steps to the side when he raises an eyebrow. He should probably make sure she doesn't try to Erase him while his back is turned, but Neku has the feeling the bunnies might actually make her regret it - who knew they were badasses, and where in hell is Higashizawa?

The Players are all still watching him. Neku can't quite remember who explains it all to them - the Games Master handles a fair share of the meet-and-greet, but a lot of it happens automatically, too,
when a Player enters the Game. Unless, of course, the Composer really really likes a Player - then they get shot through the heart and thrown naked to the wolves. Wolf Noise. Whatever.

"Everybody has a cell phone, right?" He wishes he were taller, can see a few people near the back actually standing on tiptoe to try and see him. At least one girl in the front is trying not to smile at the bunny on his shoulder. At least Sota seems content to stay at his feet.

"You're just a kid, like us." A murmur from further in the crowd, "... I know that uniform."

Actually, Neku's a few years younger than at least a third of them, and the uniform is a great example of why he shouldn't make last-minute decisions early in the morning. He makes a mental note to get Shiki and Eri to tell him which parts of his wardrobe are actually badass, and to figure out which shops are open early enough that he can duck into them and change before getting to class.

"Do you all have Partners? You need them."

"We're like... ghosts, aren't we?"

How many conversations has Neku had with the Players in his head? How many comforting words, encouraging words, playing it serious or trying to be aloof or whatever might work best for them, for him - it's all gone now, even before a girl pushes herself through to the front of the crowd. Around his age, and anything but wary. For a moment, he thinks she's going to punch him, but instead she puts her phone right in his face, a text message that isn't so much asking a question as telling him how far he can shove his head up his own ass and what he can do once he's up there. Neku has to admit she's impressively fast on the keys, unless she's been inexplicably saving the text up for this sort of moment and where the fuck is Higashizawa?

He looks around again, sees what might be one of his Wall Reapers, though the hooded figure jumps back when he's spotted, instantly out of sight. Man, you really have to love them for loyalty. Neku wishes his own reflexes were that good.

"Ok. Hi. Nice to meet you. Glad you have a phone."

The rest of the Players have gone quiet, apparently content to let this girl be their spokesperson. She frowns, still glaring at him, and Neku braces himself for a much more vocal barrage of insults, only to have her start typing wildly into her phone again.

A taller boy is standing next to her, sort of behind her - she'd dragged them up together, and Neku can only assume he's her Partner. He looks like he ought to be looming over them both, ought to be the threatening one, with wide shoulders and a fair amount of muscle, but when he notices Neku staring, he immediately drops his eyes, shuffling a half step backward. It reminds Neku a little of Shiki, of all people. Shy and awkward even though he's loosely holding a baseball bat, one end dragging against the ground, and that has to be his weapon, and the girl's probably the pin user - if, you know, Higashizawa ever shows up - and it's a good thing she's caught up typing instead of trying to use the bat on him. For the moment.

"What's your name?"

"A-ami." The boy murmurs, so low that Neku's sure he didn't hear it right, because he couldn't have heard it right. "... and she's Akane."

The girl shoves another text at him, but Neku barely notices, flicking through his own phone at half a memory from looking through the names and the prices from the night before. Akane, she's
texting violence at him because she can't speak, she's a singer and her entry fee was her voice, and Ami's got a girl's name because she - because she was one, back before she'd given it up to join the Game. Neku looks up, and she must see that he knows because she cringes back a little further, as if this is somehow her fault and Akane seems about two steps away from wasting any more time and just bludgeoning him with the phone.

"You're gonna have to fight. All of you. If you want to go back to the other world, the real world. If you want to get back what was taken from you. If you want to be alive again."

"... and what if we think you're full of it?" A boy shoulders his way through the crowd, older than Neku, and probably not a girl before this whole thing started. "What if we just-"

He reaches for Neku, and it isn't even an effort to flicker out from under his hand, Neku reappearing a few steps to the left, causing a few of the Players to jump back in alarm. Afraid of him, when he hardly did anything at all. His heart is pounding - it should be fun, he should be pleased to be the one in control but Neku hates this so much. The fear he can't take away, the way they're all looking at him and how he deserves it because he's the Conductor. He's a part of this, this Game that eats people.

"You died. All of you died, and you know it, but you're still here now, because you have a reason to stay. What you've got, what you are and whatever it is you gave up, it's worth fighting for."

Is the crappy inspirational speech having any effect? Neku fights the urge to look around again - his responsibility, if he hates the way the Game is played, to find a way to do it better. "If I could bring you all back, I would. I swear I would, but I can't."

Like he tried in the last Game, when no one was looking and there was a pair of Players in between battles, resting, and Neku had tried to pull one of them back into the RG but it was like trying to pick up a handful of dry sand, and he'd been afraid if he'd tried any harder it might just pull the boy apart, Erase him despite his good intentions.

"I wanna go home. Can't we please just go home?"

The girl could be Shiki, or Eri, and Neku can't, just cannot do another Game without sunglasses of his own, just so they don't see how rattled he is. What's he supposed to say? So many of them aren't even going to make it until Wednesday, he knows it, and this is their only chance. It's either this or no chance at all. It's a living thing, this UG, and Shibuya's so beautiful but even if he could explain it, Neku doubts they'd care. He sure as hell didn't when he was a Player. Even if they could hear-

Neku stops. It's a bad idea for so very many reasons, the Angel and the Game and the rules and not actually knowing which specific one he'll be breaking this time - but what's important is that he can, that's what matters. He has the power now, that when things are shitty and ugly and wrong, he can try to do something to make it better. Anything. He can be better, damn it.

Neku drops his bag and steps forward, toward the girl wiping uselessly at her tears.

"Come here."

It's obvious the girl regrets saying anything, the crowd shrinking back from her, and even she takes a step back but there's nowhere to go. Neku hears the Reaper girl chuckle a little, obviously used to a certain response to outspoken Players, and if he had a moment to spare from his dumbass idea he'd glare at her.
"It's okay. Take my hand."

He's holding his hand out, palm up, like making a Pact, and it's funny how he wouldn't even be afraid if it happened now, how he's not afraid - and Neku knows what that giddy, vibrant courage is because he's reached out for Shibuya and the district has answered back, laughing, excited, curious and bright. He tries to remember that first week, those first few days with all questions and no answers and feeling as if it was so unfair, so cruel and capricious - but it wasn't. It all had a purpose. Neku thinks about Mr. H - how his tips and suggestions had seemed to give him the best chance at survival, but it wasn't just a matter of survival, was it? The really important stuff hadn't been about that at all. If they went back, if the Players all kept living without figuring out why they got a second chance in the first place - it wouldn't be better.

The Game isn't about making it to the seventh day. It's about everything that happens afterward.

He wants to show them, needs them to see, and there's not a way to explain it - she has to feel it, and her fingers thread with his, just for a moment and Neku pulls. Turns up the volume - he's drowning in it, expected that, knew it wouldn't be easy to let them hear it but it matters, it matters so much. Neku hisses through clenched teeth, a conduit for the very heart of Shibuya, holding back what he knows he can handle, but this much power, this pure and strong a Song would Erase them all for sure.

It would Erase them, this beauty and this brightness. It would pull them in and they wouldn't even fight it and... and that's *what it means*, isn't it? Joining Shibuya. Keeping the Game going. It's being Erased, and yet, it's not being Erased at all.

Revelation is a kick in the chest, as staggering as the flicker of losing his grip on the Music, and Neku stumbles back half a step, letting go of the girl's hand, hands on his knees and trying to suck in a few deep breaths, shaky on his feet but that's nothing compared to what he feels like he's just figured out. An obvious epiphany, if there is such a thing, something he's been a part of all this time.

The Players look dazed, shaking it off slowly, and Neku thinks that maybe he might have overdone it a little. But at least no one looks afraid anymore. No one's crying, and the girl he'd reached out for smiles at him and it's like they're sharing some sort of inside joke, when Neku doesn't even know her name. He feels a little more solid by the moment, the surging joy of the Music fading, the sense of true understanding - and that might be a good thing, with him shivering just slightly, still a little winded. Whatever that was, touching it for too long would be like staring into the sun, and Neku's not sure if he'd come out the same as when he went in.

He turns to pick up his bag - and there's his team of Reapers, most of them staring at him in bewilderment, confused as to when their Game turned into a big hippie love-in and their Conductor became an agent provocateur. Except for Kariya, who seems to be trying to calculate just how much harder he has to hit Neku to beat some sense into him, and Higashizawa, who only just skids into view, breathing hard, already cringing as much as a man his size is capable of.

The Reaper from Shinjuku is standing next to 777, and Neku can just make out the end of her sentence, accompanied by a baffled shake of her head.

"... you guys are fucking weird."

It's a phone app. Not that it should be any real surprise, but Neku remembers the jagged tingle of the timer, remembers poking uneasily at the shifting, unreal numbers, and dreading it, and feeling
so small and lost and helpless, those first few days. So it's nearly a disappointment, watching Higashizawa just punch a few keys on his phone and press a button. Simple as that, the Players flinch, check their own phones and scatter.

Neku waits for the Reapers to follow - they'll shadow Players sometimes, he's seen them do it. Wait a few days, really take the time to study a partnership before annihilating it. Rhyme was one of those kills, and yet Neku can't help noticing that Uzuki looks a little... off. Arms crossed and as haughty as ever, but she's staring into the distance, barely looks at the Players at all.

The rest of the Reapers don't seem to be in any hurry either, even for the first shot at the easiest Erasures, and Neku can kind of guess why. Higashizawa is doing a bad job of hiding his discomfort - Neku doubts it's often that a Games Master is late, and the penalty is likely the same as anything else in this stupid place. Despite the fact that he probably just woke up, the big guy still looks really tired, probably pulling double shifts between teaching and his job at the ramen stand, and Neku's sure he could ask for and get an apology, can probably get whatever he wants and make Higashizawa hate himself for it. Gain himself an enemy for life, but one who wouldn't dare step out of place. It's damn scary, this job.

"Late night?"

No answer. Higashizawa shifts where he stands. Neku shrugs.

"You want to take a break?"

The Reaper's eyes widen, and Neku nearly gives up, because no way no how did that sound at all threatening.

"What the - nobody's getting Erased, okay?" Neku says, swears he can hear a few disappointed sighs. "Well, except maybe Minamimoto."

That particular Reaper's been leaning against a far wall giving him The Death Glare since he showed up - though Neku can't imagine why he even bothered coming around - he doesn't really have to be here, or stick around now that the Players have been loosed. As far as Neku knows, the little sticky lights are still all over the statues and hanging on - those little batteries are surprisingly resilient - and for a second it looks like Pi-face is going to go for his throat, but he doesn't, letting out a little disgusted sound instead.

"I... I don't think..." Higashizawa stammers, but Neku has the feeling if he really didn't want the time off, he wouldn't be as startled as he is, maybe even a little relieved.

"You're out, this Game. Uzuki, you take over from here."

"W-what?" It's really satisfying to see her so surprised, and even Neku's not sure if he's trying to give her an opportunity or if it's payback for the shit she pulled in his first week. To her credit, Pinky recovers quickly, although she seems more nervous than happy. "Of course. I... I won't let you down."

Neku can't help but laugh a little, not sure exactly what being disappointed would even mean, given the context. Maybe he needs to read a book, like some business book on how to be a good manager. Of troubled employees. Who are also insane. And then sometimes try to kill him.

Tenho actually has his hand up, trying and failing to pass it off as some sort of casual wave.

"Hey, uh... can we get demoted too?"
Neku almost walks right by him. He's feeling… well, exhausted, enough that when Nao Nao and Sota hop off he doesn't bother trying to call them back, despite the slight flicker of alarm. No reason the Players would bother attacking any Noise that didn't bother them, not this early, and the bunnies… well, it seems they're pretty capable of taking care of themselves.

He leaves the Reapers mostly chatting amongst themselves, the lazy jerks using his somewhat unorthodox behavior the same way they use anything else, as an excuse for kicking back and relaxing. Neku can almost see the sentiment hanging in the air - if he's going to get so pissy over his precious Players on the first day, they'll all happily chill, and just wait for day two to dig in.

The Reaper girl from Shinjuku is regaling a few of the Wall Reapers with the condensed story of her life, and Neku hears "homeless" and "whatever" and how "the entry fee's supposed to be your most important thing, right? Well, obviously mine was cash - but I didn't have any, so what the hell did they take?" and then she laughs. Neku hopes the Shibuya Reapers will clue the new ones in on how things work around here, or kick their asses - probably whatever's easiest at the time.

_You mean things work around here? Since when?_ He wonders if any of them might be spies, and feels pity for any Composer who tries to learn anything from this barely-controlled trainwreck of a Game.

The Angel didn't show up, not that it matters if he does or not, his presence still hanging over everything, even though Neku doesn't know exactly what he'll do or what it means or what he should do. All he can do as he walks away from Hachiko is flip through the schedule in his phone, the one he just sent to Uzuki, and it looks simple enough, even a Def March concert late in the week, just like the first time he played. If Joshua's making any plans or strategies based on their new, unwelcome visitor, it's far too subtle for Neku to see.

"Are you really in charge of all this?"

The question startles him, still in the UG, and far enough from the action and where the other Players scattered that he ought to be alone. So Neku turns with the thought of ice hovering at his fingertips, either to freeze or to crush, depending on who he finds. It falters, falls apart completely as the boy smiles.

"I'm sorry. That was rude, wasn't it? I just… you have to admit, it's kinda weird seeing that uniform here."

He has to be a Player, that quiet, barely audible Music beneath everything else, and Neku glances around, but they're alone, and the boy is wearing the same uniform, though he's an upperclassman, quite possibly a senior.

"It's really a shame I don't recognize you." He's eerily calm, leaning back to look at the sky as if it's any other beautiful morning and he's not, you know, facing a permanent case of dead.

"Where's your Partner?"

The boy shakes his head. "I didn't want to sink anyone's chances. It's kind of weird that I'm still even here, I guess. You're probably used to it though, right?"

No. He never gets used to anything these days. Neku knows all the Players paired off, he watched them do it, because he's been waiting for the day that there's an odd number and he'll have to step in - he will, obviously - but he's positive this guy wasn't on the list.
"If you don't have a Partner, if you don't play the Game, you're going to get..."

"Erased. You said that before." Neku is in no way prepared to see that smile again. It's strange, how many people he's passed in his life that never made him blink twice, how many of his classmates, the people who sit right next to him, that he can't even name. Is it the Game or the UG that sharpens everything, that makes him feel the whole, solid weight of the potential in the boy in front of him? He won't know it for long, but for one moment Neku can feel everything, past and present - but there's not a future, nothing but the faint echo of might-have-been. The Song just stops, incomplete.

"Hey. Since we're here, you wouldn't mind doing me a favor, would you?"

He has no idea how to answer, and the boy interprets that as at least tentative agreement, and before he knows it Neku's holding a notebook.

"... poetry?" He tries really hard, a few seconds too late, not to make a face. The boy laughs.

"God, no. It's some notes for history. My study partner needs them - his name's on the inside cover, so you don't have to write it down or anything. Can you give them to him tomorrow? I wasn't really thinking about it, and then I thought, you know, 'oops, too late'."

"... that's it?" It's too surreal, purely by being so completely unexciting. Neku shouldn't have to be here having this conversation, a final conversation. and it just shouldn't be like this.

"Yeah, well, he's working really hard to get into a good college, and I didn't want to screw up his chances if I could help it."

"I bet they'd let him re-test-" -since his study partner killed himself, Neku thinks, and winces, pretty sure stopping midway didn't make it any less tacky. "Sorry."

"It's all right." The boy says, and this time there's more meaning there, a terrible, final sort of kindness. He looks normal, and perfectly at ease, the sort of person it wouldn't seem so bad to be. If he saw the boy in the hall, Neku wouldn't think anything was wrong with him at all.

"You could try."

"You're nice." A look of what can't possibly be sympathy, as if Neku's the one with time running out, and it's taking everything he has not to grab for the older boy's hand, to force a Pact. The same way it had taken everything not to run out of the girl's hospital room, when she'd seen him as Death incarnate and had welcomed him in. The boy gestures out with a hand, lets it fall. "I was tired. All the bad stuff, it's out there in that world. This is nice, and... I think I'm done playing by everyone else's rules."

"I'm sorry."

The boy shakes his head, as if Neku's making too much out of nothing. "You should get going. You're going to be late for class."

"Yeah." Neku says, but he doesn't move, and the Noise doesn't come - it leaves the Conductor alone, and so it leaves the older boy alone. His Music is barely a whisper and then even less than that, Shibuya sweeping in like waves across a name written in the sand, and then he's hazy, a transparent image, a reflection in a window on a sunny day. Neku strains, listening, forcing himself not to move or look away until there's nothing left to see or hear, nothing for him to do but shift his bag on his shoulder and walk away.
you don't need a thing from me but I need something big from you

Chapter Notes

chapter title: Eels - Trouble with Dreams. Probably my ultimate Joshua and Neku song, especially because I'm not sure who's viewpoint it's from.

It's funny, how much Neku used to dread going to school, and now the unpopularity is practically a gift. He remembers the downside, but that isn't really his world anymore. It's relaxing now to be ignored, to be able to sit in class where it's quiet and nobody's going to bother him and he can just try to process everything that's happened so far. Half a melody in the back of his head, an earworm perched at the edge of his thoughts, and it's only when the boy sitting next to him glares that Neku realizes he's been humming it under his breath - it's from the Game, a piece of the boy's Song, the one who died.

If he'd bothered to learn how to read music like he's been meaning to, Neku could even write it down, and then it couldn't be lost, or forgotten. At least some small piece of him might remain in this world. The news of what Neku already knows slips past sometime later in the morning. No one in his class knew the older boy, so it's mostly just the bare fact of his death, a few words of speculation - that it was either a girl or his grades that caused the whole thing, but Neku still holds that piece of his melody, and knows it's nothing that simple even if he doesn't know what it is.

A melancholy day, and nothing in his classes distracts him at all from his pensive thoughts, and Neku doesn't realize how much he's looking forward to seeing Tsuyoshi at lunch until he's there, the other boy already at the table, though his expression is grim and distant as he stares at his laptop.

In that moment, it doesn't matter how much Neku learned all about friendship and feelings during the Game. It doesn't matter that two hours ago, he had touched the luminous and resonant core of Shibuya itself. He still feels a little tremble inside - and how hard would Joshua laugh at him - for being stupid enough to be happy to see a friend, forgetting that there's never the guarantee Tsuyoshi will be happy to see him.

At moments like this, Neku's really not sure if learning that truth was really any less painful than dying twice.

"Hey." He says, carefully, trying to keep it casual, to be weightless. "You okay?"

"Hm, what?" The other boy blinks, looking up at him, one hand rubbing at his eyes. His voice is a tired monotone, far different from his usual cheer. "Hey, Neku. Yeah, how's it going? I was just… putting some pictures together."

Neku can see a few of them on the screen, somewhat overlapped, catching all the different angles of a band rocking out. Stage lights flash off of instruments, motion blurs here and there, a little wild and exactly the kind of picture to show them at their most vibrant. The picture in the foreground has the drummer in full spotlight, drumsticks out, gesturing to the crowd, full of that shared energy Neku wishes he had even a little of right now.

"This is the band we saw last week." Tsuyoshi shakes his head, "God, it feels so weird to say that.
Now with this guy in school too - what the hell's going on?"

Neku knows exactly what's happened, then. Feels the listless, clammy numbness that's been on him since he got to school pressing even further down. A mix of exhaustion and vague helplessness, amplified by being stupid and forgetting to pack extra for lunch, the non-Game week portions devoured nearly an hour ago in the space between classes. It sounded easy, when Vancouver explained it, letting people make their own decisions, stepping back and letting life happen. Neku's not sure what he'll do, though, if he actually has enough time to get between the next person and their choice.

The thought that there are still six more Game days left is not helping.

"It wasn't... all of them, was it?"

Tsuyoshi shakes his head. "The drummer and the bassist. I guess they... they did it together, on Saturday. Nobody even knows why. I got a call from the manager. Everyone wanted to put up some pictures on the site. I'm shuffling through some backstage stuff - more personal, stuff like that. It's just... they seemed fine, you know, when I saw them? Happy. I guess everyone says that. It's not like I knew them real well, but.. I don't get it. I just don't understand"

"Yeah." Neku says absently, because he's got his phone in his hand, under the table, flicked to his Conductor's list. The weirdest damn thing in the world, knowing that maybe in a week, maybe, both of them could be back and this whole memorial, this whole conversation will only exist in his memory. It feels wrong, a secret he shouldn't be keeping, that shouldn't even exist. Neku asks for their names anyway. A little worried it sounds weird, but Tsuyoshi's too distracted to wonder why Neku's asking, and he scrolls through his cheat sheet once and then again because they're not there. Neither of them.

"This is the band we saw?" Neku says stupidly, because he's already said so, but it covers for the greater surprise, because he can't say that there's no way the members of a band that rocked that hard wouldn't get pulled into the Game, wouldn't at least have a chance. They should be there. At least one of them, surely.

Tsuyoshi's busy with his memorial, so Neku uses the rest of his lunch hour to pull out his own computer and do some quick checks in the news. He should have paid more attention to the obituaries, screw his misgivings - but they did die in Shibuya. Neku frowns, and his eyes catch a little further down the page. A suicide, this one in Akihabara, a design major, just out of college, unemployed, and Neku keeps looking, scouring the links. A lot of deaths due to natural causes, of course, the ages all past what he's looking for, but at least one more suicide in Chiyoda, a younger woman. Nothing about her job or background but there's a ballet recital in her honor at a local school, and Neku doesn't know, really doesn't know how many people usually decide to kill themselves in the city at any given time, but this... it feels wrong. All of them creative people - and these two musicians, full of potential, who didn't end up in his Game.

*Your Game?* Hell, if he's going to start taking responsibility, it might as well be now.

The bell rings, ending the most somber lunch ever, and Neku's on his feet just in time to realize that moving so fast might not be for the best.

The world closes around him fast, pulling away as he locks his knees to keep from falling. Neku studies the sensation with what's almost a detached amusement - *so this* is what fainting feels like. His ears are actually ringing - funny, he always thought that was just a figure of speech. The distant clatter a moment later must be from a chair, Tsuyoshi shoving it aside to prop him up before he hits the table or the floor face first, and Neku tries to smile reassuringly. He doesn't really feel
that bad, except that it actually hurts where the other boy has his arm, because he's holding up most of Neku's weight.


"You wanna go to the nurse's office?"

His little topple isn't enough to silence the entire lunchroom, but everyone at the nearby tables are watching him, and even curiosity is more than he wants to deal with, and yeah, Neku's kind of done for the moment.

A few weeks ago, being Games Master was all Uzuki could have asked for, they both know that. Kariya hates the timing for her sake, Uzuki nowhere near steady enough to even consider loathing the irony. She's still handling it pretty well, getting instructions from Higashizawa, giving out orders to the Wall Reapers, all with a frozen, empty sort of determination on her face, like a beauty queen who finds out she has two weeks to live just before she's presented with the crown.

He ought to be following Neku, but the kid's as safe as anything just being in the RG, and they've seen already that Uzuki's not. He'd almost considered pulling her out of the week altogether, not sure if she would even want to try playing the Game. But Uzuki hadn't given him the chance, slipping into the UG without the slightest hint of hesitation, though she was tense and pale and uncharacteristically silent, right until the moment Neku had made his unexpected, last-minute decision.

Everything Neku does comes with no warning, upending whatever expectations are placed in front of him, all of it unintentional. It's hard not to laugh, imagining what one little Conductor is doing to all the rules and assumptions and theories of the upper Frequencies. He'd been surprised just to learn that Neku knew about the Angels, and then the kid had Ascended, just like that. Not even a whisper in his wake and it was only when he'd come back that Kariya even realized fully what had happened, the hum rising from the kid's skin, the trembling of his Music. The echo of a place so high up Kariya didn't understand how Neku was still stable, or even how he'd managed to come back at all.

And for an encore, hell, why not have the kid grab an entire Game's worth of Players and pull them into his own Music? Who knew how he did it, the only real question was whether it was more dangerous or insane. Kariya's sure there's never been a rule against it, because no one he's ever seen has ever been that selfless or that stupid before. Certainly not for Players, weak and helpless strangers, prey - although the Players aren't as weak as they were before Neku's little power boost, the day's challenge over before Higashizawa and Uzuki have finished exchanging notes.

"Congratulations," he says, as the Reapers shuffle off in a dozen different directions, leaving them alone. Uzuki chuckles dully, her expression wry and bitter and frighteningly empty beneath that. Kariya smirks like he can't see it. "I suppose, just the once, I should be the gentleman and treat you to ramen."

"I'm not hungry." Whatever tiny sense of normalcy there is between them crumples and dies, as quick as a bird against a windowpane. Kariya can practically hear the impact. He ought to get them into the RG right away, but Uzuki's obviously in no hurry, and he can kind of understand why. It's easier for her to court danger than it is to wait for an attack - she'd rather be bait than cautious, not so much bravery as that waiting around for what she thinks is inevitable is a fantastic way to go crazy.
"He's special, isn't he?" She says, after a moment.

"Who?"

"I'm tired, don't make me beat you."

No use playing dumb then, and Kariya sighs.

"He doesn't need any of us, not really. You saw it. The kid doesn't need to threaten or trade favors or play favorites. He's too powerful to even know he should bother."

"Is that what all… that was about?"

Kariya lets out a little laugh. "No, that's what I mean. Neku doesn't plan like that. It wasn't to show us how strong he is, or to threaten anyone. It was just… what he wanted, at that moment. He wanted to help them."

"She's going to eat him alive."

Yeah, Kariya knows it. Has been knowing it, with every spare second spent thinking of things that might keep Neku alive, any dirty trick or half-assed strategy that might buy him even a few more minutes. It's not a matter of winning, that's just not going to happen, and with all the training in the world he still wouldn't count on it. All he needs is the time for Neku to get his ass to the RG, or in the case of some insane, unexpected disaster, to survive long enough for Kariya to get to him. A few minutes at the most, that's all he's asking for.

So why can't he help feeling he's not going to get it?

Uzuki glances at him, as she's been doing ever since she learned part of his secret, not really suspicion, just quiet and contemplative.

"Why do you like him?"

He shrugs. By far his most popular gesture, almost nostalgic now, and Uzuki smirks a little, the first honest humor he's seen from her in far too long.

"Why do I like anyone anymore? He's interesting."

Uzuki's eyes go a little wide, and he realizes the question might not just have been about Neku. Kariya can't exactly put it into words why she's his partner, hasn't ever felt the need and, until recently, didn't think she needed the explanation. He likes her bravery, in the face of her struggles, her self-doubt and how she refuses to let it rule her. Seeing the demons in Uzuki's past has only made Kariya like her more. He'd be testing Neku anyway, or something close to it, in a better world where they weren't facing one hell of a showdown, just to learn the new Conductor's weaknesses. Even if Neku wasn't the kind of person he's proving to be.

"There are things worth fighting for, Uzuki, but not as many as you'd think. I never believed-"

Even in the RG, Kariya can hear him perfectly, the Angel making no attempt to hide himself, leaning against the edge of an advertisement on the side of a building. As if he's one of the beautiful people there, carefree and grand, untouched by anything as random and untrustworthy as a human emotion. Maybe there is a world, somewhere among the endless iterations, with such creatures in it.

"Who is that?" Uzuki says, because he's blond and foreign and because Kariya's staring, not
because she can hear what he is. "Do you know him or something?"

"Just keep walking. Don't turn around, don't look at us. Just go."

He has to trust his partner, that Uzuki for all her stubbornness will hear the edge in his words, and then he's standing between them, still casual but ready to block the strike if it comes. Uzuki's in the Realground, there are rules - but all of that amounts to fuck all if the Angel really is here to throw down, if he knows about her, if he knows about what's going on. Kariya stays relaxed, taking his time to stroll over, not looking back once - no sound from Uzuki, and she didn't follow him, and he flickers down a level in mid-step, with a hand on the hilt of his sword because these pricks get no extra consideration.

Everyone stays young, even Hanekoma's grizzled mentor look is older than most Angels bother with. The only way to get even a hint of anyone's true age, with the world gaining speed by the decade, is by the tempo of their Music. The coffee-sucking bastard is the closest Kariya's heard to anyone of his own speed in a long damn time, and the Angel in front of him isn't anywhere near that, but not young, either. Foreign, and there's something else about him, a sense of familiarity or maybe kinship he can't quite place. Kariya looks the Angel up and down, doesn't have to feign his disdain.

"If I'd known you were coming, I wouldn't have bothered."

The Angel raises a pale eyebrow. "You bothered? Sanae Hanekoma's quite alive, for being the target of such a fabled assassin. Or am I missing something?"

Relief, the slightest prickle of it, though he's hardly on safe ground yet, just because the bastard wants to talk. Trying to keep a conversation simple with members of the Higher Planes is as useful as talking at the sea. "Hanekoma's not a Fallen, even if it'd sure make things more convenient for you."

"You were given your sword for a reason."

Kariya frowns, an expression he doesn't bother with in his usual life, no need for it when he's just a simple Reaper in a meaningless Game. It practically belongs to the blade. "I'm not here to please any of you. It's my decision - and as annoying as it is to leave him alive, if it's pissing you off more, let Hanekoma stay in Shibuya until it turns to dust."

The Angel tilts his head back slightly, still looking at him. "Interesting choice of words."

More than a few of the Angels have never wanted anything to do with Kariya, all but holding their noses at the sight of him, the few times he's been forced to cross their paths. He's too clear a reminder of the brutal reality of their business, nothing like way they choose to see the Game, all a rather distant hypothetical, the benefits clear and the costs swept tidily away - kind of like the way people can eat hamburgers, since they don't have to see where the meat comes from. Or maybe he's bringing mortality too close to their door, a reminder that it isn't just Players who can disappear. So it's strange, that this particular Angel seems to have no problem with him at all.

"Just what are you doing here?"

The man doesn't even blink. "Overseeing a Game in a state of flux, to ensure the stability of the greater Underground."

"All right, that's the bullshit answer."

A smile, and silence, asking him to come to his own conclusions. It's not that difficult to guess.
Kariya's position is unique, allowed to take down Angels even before they Fall, but he's hardly alone when it comes to dealing with the actual Fallen. He's run across fellow hunters before, over the ages, a sort of Angelic black-ops. Defenders of the cosmic order, who prefer to spend eternity quietly hunting down their former comrades. An irony there, no way to Fall without being an Angel first.

He wishes he could enjoy the schadenfreude, of just how much Shibuya's Producer has pissed off the Higher Planes. It's unlikely though, censured as he is, that Hanekoma even realizes things have gone so far, and as much as he hates doing anything to defend the bastard, Kariya can't give the Angels an inch either.

"Hanekoma isn't gonna deep-six the district, and you know it. If you fucknuts had maybe kept a better eye on the Composer…"

"A mistake we'd also thought you might see fit to rectify. Although it seems unlikely the Composer will be moved by anything more mature than taking his toys away."

Neku. He means Neku and Kariya feels a strange mix of emotions, a deep, powerful chill tempered by the certain knowledge that if the kid does Ascend, if he goes up and doesn't come back, he'll be permanently out of Saika's reach. Giving him to these pricks might not be a perfect answer, and it might make Shibuya uncomfortable for a while, but at least Neku will be safe. He can make it happen, right now, if he just tells them what he knows. Kariya swallows hard, pushing regret and past failure back down his throat, the thought that this is his redemption, this is his chance to save what he's supposed to save, though it means losing Uzuki for sure. The minute he tries to warn them, the minute he mentions Saika and where she comes from it's nothing from that to her and they'll Erase her. They might even take their time about it, just to be sure she's not holding anything back. Angels who hunt Fallen tend to prefer erring on the side of caution, anyone with the slightest connection considered tainted by association.

"You haven't noticed anything else out of place, by chance?" The bastard Angel can sense his hesitation, maybe, or possibly he's just fishing. "Hanekoma may not yet be a Fallen, but any piece of this city would be quite a prize for them. A perfect foothold, and we both know they would have no issue with… interfering."

Damn it, what do they know? Is he here for Hanekoma, a matter of petty overkill, or do they actually know about Saika? Kariya lets his eyes flick to the places he would hide, were he here observing - no sign of any other Angels but that doesn't mean anything. If they try to hunt her - she's not a Fallen, not remotely as human as even the worst of them - she'll hunt back, and he can't say anything. Can't risk Uzuki, if there was even a fair chance they'd believe him. The Angels will walk into this with their usual lack of humility, inherently too confident for their own damn good - it would be funny, if it wasn't Uzuki and Neku and Shibuya and possibly even Tokyo on the line.

Maybe Saika can do that much damage, maybe she can't, but she has nothing else to do but try.

"If there are any of them here, you need to keep watch on the kid. He's a target."

"The new Conductor? Is that so?" The false skepticism in the Angel's voice nearly has Kariya thumbing his blade out of the sheath.

"Don't dick with me. If you want him, so do they - and you want him. I bet you think he would have been yours already, but the Composer screwed you out of it."

"Is that what we think?"
"What do I know?" Kariya said, turning away from that amused, cutting look. Deliberately showing his back - if they want any more from him, it's going to be a fight. "I'm just a Reaper."

An itch on his nose. Neku scrunches his face up, and mercifully the horrible sensation goes away - for a moment. The brush of air, like a feather, tickling, and he rolls on his side, away from the unwanted intruder with a grumble that is actually an inarticulate curse.

"Oh dear, doctor. The patient isn't responding to treatment. We may have to resort to more drastic measures."

The giggle snaps Neku out of a sleep as solid as if he'd been encased in bricks. After a moment of blurred confusion, he lifts his head with a stupid, sleepy sound, trying to orient himself - this isn't his bedroom wall, where the hell... and he rolls over onto his side and remembers he's at school and then remembers there's absolutely no point in trying to make sense of anything.


Joshua only giggles again - of course - stretching his arms out at his sides and kicking a heel up on his nearly knee-length white boots, a bit of sheer, white stocking visible between that and the painfully short white dress. Delicate buttons. Gloves. A white nurse's cap with a little red cross. Neku groans, sinking back onto the bed with his hand over his eyes, as if that's in any way going to undo the damage of the past fifteen seconds.

"Who even lets you out unsupervised?"

"Candy striping is a community service, Neku. I take pride in my community. Don't you?"

"Candy… what? You know what, screw it. I'm not even here." He keeps his hand over his eyes, even with Joshua shuffling around the room. "You only get half points for being a total freak at my school, by the way. It's too easy. Quarter points."

The footsteps pause. If Neku had to guess, he'd imagine the Composer standing there with his head cocked at the exact angle for pondering optimum mayhem. "I'd heard you weren't feeling well, dear. Let's see if Dr. Joshua can give you something to make it all better."

"That's a nurse's outfit. You jackass."

"Well, someone's a fussy patient." A hand brushes his thigh, and even as Neku tries for a comeback, his sarcasm fails, falls to pieces in the face of what he wants, of Joshua being here. He should know better, he should.

"Where were you?" Neku tries for a professional tone, the Conductor to his boss, and it doesn't sound whiny or needy or at all worried, because he's not worried, because Joshua is a jerk who doesn't need him to worry, not even about Angels.

"Top or bottom?"

"What?!" Neku says, arm instantly away from his eyes, but Joshua's still standing there in that ridiculous getup, except now he's got a chocolate croissant in one hand. Usually Neku can take or leave sweet things, but his stomach clutches and grumbles, disinterested in his protests or his dignity at the prospect of a sugar rush.

"… bottom."
"You said it."

Neku chokes, as Joshua puts a knee up on the bed, the skirt hiking back as he moves forward, and before he can protest or move or even get a proper panic going, the Composer is sitting back on his legs, straddling his waist and lifting a graceful hand to make sure his hat isn't askew.

"What the - what are you-" Neku splutters, and then he's trying to do it around a mouthful of chocolate - dark chocolate, pleasantly bitter, and from a bakery of a higher caliber than he's usually bothers with. Joshua's watching him chew with far too much satisfaction.

"I hate you." Neku mutters, but doesn't hesitate to accept another bite, Joshua tearing off little pieces, and then there's a bit of chocolate cream on the Composer's fingers and Neku glares at him, before slowly licking them clean. Satisfied at the slight surprise in Joshua's eyes, though it quickly turns to satisfaction. He might have been caught off guard, but at the very least Neku can choose not to play the blushing innocent.

At least until he hears footsteps from outside the room, a hand on the doorknob - Neku's eyes go wide, prepared to fling himself out the window rather than have to face this. A hand presses against his chest, Joshua keeping him down, his attention on the door, eyes narrowing. Neku can almost see the Imprint flash across the room, wonders what sudden emergency or distant errand was suddenly remembered, as the steps retreat, and everything is silent again. Or hell, this is Joshua, maybe they've been inspired to join the circus, or take up mountain climbing.

Neku glares up at his stupid Composer's stupid unruffled expression, ignoring how good the warm weight of him feels, pressing against his hips. "You know, they might have actually been sick."

"They'll walk it off."

"If anyone finds us in here-"

"I thought you weren't breathing, and I was forced to resuscitate you."

Joshua murmurs, leaning forward to kiss him, slow and deep, the way he always does when he wants Neku to think of him and nothing else. So warm, no space between them, and the room is dim but there's light coming from the window, the ends of the cheap blinds and the cheaper, sheer curtains rustling a little in the breeze, and maybe this is what Neku had been waiting for, every time he lay in a room like this and felt lonely.

It lasts until Joshua presses down on a place Kariya managed to hit him, practically three times in a row, and Neku flinches, hissing. Joshua frowns, unbuttoning his shirt now that he's got an excuse, staring at the bruise and obviously waiting for an answer.

"I was training. Just… trying stuff out." He's hesitant to mention Kariya, even if he's not sure why. "Hey, Josh… have you ever had anyone not show up in the Game? I mean, if they die, and you think they should have been there, if they're an artist-"

"Lots of people say they're artists, Neku." Joshua chuckles, taking advantage of the now-open shirt to 'check him over' for more injuries, cool knuckles brushing across his suddenly hot skin. "If a person doesn't have any reason to go back, then they don't go back, and they don't play. Even if you might want them to."

It's not what he meant, at the moment Neku doesn't need consolation, but there's another kiss, and even the distraction of being at school in a room where the door isn't locked can't quite compare with the feel of the Composer's body against his own, the way he sighs when Neku runs a hand
down his side. Everything just makes sense, nothing is ugly or wrong. When he's touching Joshua, Neku's not bracing himself, for if things gets worse. It almost feels like maybe they won't.

"What are you doing this time?" He murmurs, can feel that steady, soothing presence behind his eyes, adjusting his Music again, even if he's only half interested, what with Joshua nibbling on his neck and grinding into him a little. The outfit's still ridiculous, but the bottom of the skirt hem gives him a good handhold to pull down on, Joshua letting out a pleased little yelp.

"Not distracting you enough, obviously."

The Composer stops for a moment, one hand sliding across Neku's chest - pulling him along into that other space, the complex, breathless symphony, giving him a glimpse of what he's doing. Or undoing, actually - Neku sucking in a breath - Joshua rewriting his Music, discarding a few notes that he realizes came from the boy in the Game, the melody disappearing from his mind even as he tries to reach for it.

"Oh no, absolutely not. He made his choice, and I'm not letting him hang around to do whatever he wants with you."

Neku goes still. "He's not… he's not here, Josh."

"The hell he's not. What did you think that was, then?" A soft laugh against his skin. "Here I thought you'd outgrow it. Megumi was nothing but locks and walls, and you…" A slight shake of his head, more bemused than anything. "You're incredibly bad at this, Neku."

"Good thing I have my looks." He murmurs, fingers digging into the Composer's shoulder, impossible to keep Joshua from doing whatever he wants - it feels too good - and yet…

"Don't take, not yet - I have… a book. It's important, I have to give it back."

"I took care of it." The Composer murmurs, power flowing through him, into Neku, like Shibuya distilled to pure ambrosia. He feels utterly relaxed, no tension at all as a few notes shift back into their proper pitch - tuning him - that's what Joshua's doing, and there's a weight, almost pain, that falls away, one Neku didn't even realize he was carrying.

"Did you… was that…?" He murmurs, a little dazed.

"… because I'm just the Composer. What do I know about doing my job?" Joshua murmurs, and pulls back with a sigh, tearing off a piece of pastry for himself, feeding Neku another mouthful with his fingertips. Neku feels… not sure exactly what he feels, except he can't really blame the Composer to reducing him to a puddle of semi-coherant notes if he really is flinging himself off unseen cliffs at every opportunity.

"You took my memories the same way, didn't you? Just… wrote over them, with your own Music."

"It wouldn't be quite so easy now, if that's what you're asking. Far more trouble than it's worth, especially now that there are more amusing ways of convincing you." Joshua looks down on him with one of those beautiful, wry, my-troublesome-Conductor smiles, and Neku's heart quivers, a plucked string. "You can't conduct the Game from so close up. If you keep giving so much of yourself away, you'll lose everything."

"You think so?" Neku says, as much to himself as anything. "I didn't mean to… I mean, any of it. I just…"

"You let the worst parts of their Music right into your own, without the slightest hesitation, without
protecting yourself at all. You reached for an entirely different, higher Frequency with a Game's worth of Players, putting them all in jeopardy - and then you let a suicidal Player infect your Music with part of his Song."

"Well when you say it like that…" Neku mutters, but Joshua obviously hasn't pinned him down so he can read him the riot act, scolding with mostly good-natured affection. "He didn't do anything. He didn't ask me to save him."

No reason to mention what Neku might have done, if he had. The Composer frowns, running light fingers through Neku's hair.

"I know that you noticed it. A distraction, a bit of a song you couldn't stop singing. You're strong enough that there's no permanent damage, it would have burned off on its own. But really, if you have this much energy to work off, I'd be glad to-"

"What do you mean, damage?" Neku frowns. "It wouldn't have, I mean, he didn't, like, attack me…"

Joshua eats the last bit of the croissant, leans down for a chocolate-laced kiss before answering.

"You read the reports. It was dangerous for me to take a Partner at all, because my Music is so strong. It's not always a choice, what I write over. He didn't need to want to hurt you, for it to happen anyway."

"I… you mean," and Neku pauses, thinking. "So right now, if you'd played your cards right… you could be making out with yourself?" He says it so innocently, it even takes the all-knowing Joshua a moment to realize Neku's making fun of him, and then he has to stifle a shriek as the Composer abandons all sense of propriety in favor of punishment tickling.

"Josh… no, stop - hee - stop," Neku says, trying and failing to grab the hands that have to be slipping into the UG to move that fast. "I'm going to get in trouble - somebody's going to hear - stop that - hee, stop!"

"You know, this is a pretty comfortable bed for a nurse's office." Joshua says, a momentary truce drawn as he sighs, leaning back against his legs once more. Glorious. "I'd look good in the uniform, too."

"You'd have to do things besides be inappropriate." Joshua fixes him with that perfect catlike stare, completely innocent and undeniably guilty at the same time. Neku looks back, feeling daring enough to push, just a little. "If you needed to see me, all you had to do is call. Last night-"

"I thought we could try it like normal people. You know, badly."

The urge to shift his hips and try to drop Josh onto the floor is pretty high. He'd make a decent noise, clunky boots on linoleum. "Normal. In my school. In that outfit. I mean… wait, what exactly are you wearing under there?"

"Ooh, Neku. So forceful." Another giggle. He missed the giggle. Without Joshua around for a just little over twenty-four hours, and Neku actually missed the giggle. He's doomed.

"Shut up."

"Be careful, I'm fragile."

"Shut up," Neku says, sliding his hands across the Composer's thighs and up, wondering as his
fingers move across fabric if the buttons are real or just for show, and then wondering what the hell it is he thinks he's doing. It's just... fun. He almost laughs, thinking about his empty chair in class, at how free he feels. "... and whatever you say, I am actually getting better at this. I don't care if you're numb from the waist down."

Joshua only laughs, kissing him again - and no, not quite numb, and the only thing that's keeping Neku even slightly in control is that they're in school and eventually he's going to have to get back to class. Maybe. Every moment is making it a little more difficult to remember why - and suddenly, all at once, Joshua's there again, Music twined in close to his, sharing notes.

A fantasy very much not his own, an Imprint, as the Composer kisses him and he kisses back but what's running through Joshua's thoughts is a vision of his throne room. Joshua, tall and regal and all smirking victory, with Neku sitting astride his knee, face buried against his shirt. Clutching the Composer's shoulder and pressed against him and shivering, helpless and enthralled by the pale fingers twined deeply into one wing. He can only gasp a little, trembling, all the release the Composer will allow, and it doesn't matter who's there, who's watching - Joshua is the world.

There is an audience, of course. The Angel, Brede, stoic and stern, knowing it all for mockery but refusing to call him on it, and satisfaction fills the Composer, spills over into his Conductor, all of Shibuya singing out, enough so that the Higher Planes will hear and know who is in control. Holding court, the true purpose of this little daydream, not even so much that Neku's there as that the Angel is. Joshua gets to be smug and Brede gets to watch, to pretend they're discussing business, as the Composer leaves no question where his Conductor's loyalty lies.

"Holy shit," Neku gasps, falling out of the moment and back into the real world, his heart thudding, about two seconds away from needing a spare pair of pants and he's not, not going to - oh hell, what was that? He probably ought to be angry, reduced to an object - not that simple... and incredibly hot in a kinky, disturbing sort of way - and he doesn't understand. Why does Joshua feel so threatened, why does he need the proof? Why more than the absolute surrender that Neku already gave?

Joshua is still and quiet, propped up against Neku's chest in feigned laziness, with that distant, closed-off look... as if maybe that was a thought he hadn't intended to share.

Neku sighs. "You don't have to worry about that Angel trying to be clever, or trick me. I'll believe anything bad I hear about you."

"Shibuya was fine, even when you almost erased yourself." Joshua sounds normal. Perfectly unconcerned. Neku wonders if he'd erase the memory if he could. "He's trying to get to you, Neku. It's what they do."

Neku blinks, and it hits him, and he feels incredibly stupid for not getting it sooner. Joshua came here to... do what he always did. Show his strength, his superiority - but it has nothing to do with reminding Neku who's in control.

"You're... worried, aren't you? You think he's going to... what's he going to tell me? You think he's going to change my mind?"

"Did Hanekoma change your mind?" Joshua doesn't look at him.

"Mr. H..." It hurts. Neku can't deny it. "That's the reason they hate him, isn't it? The Taboo Noise and Minamimoto. He did that."

"I forced his hand. If he'd just thrown me to them afterward, wiped his hands clean, they would
have welcomed him with open arms." Joshua attempts a blithe expression, but it never gets near his eyes. "He suffers on my account, because he always believes in me."

Neku's not brave enough to be this boy, not the one who reaches up, brushes the hair away from the Composer's face, more an excuse to touch him than anything, but he does it anyway. He has to be more than he is. He has to be.

"If it was hard for me, having you around - it must really suck to have an Angel in your realm while you're censured."

… and again, Neku pulls without thinking, Shibuya's Song just for the two of them here, because he's the Conductor and this is what he's supposed to do, and because he's Neku and Joshua looks tired, just for a moment. If they were normal people and his boyfriend needed help, Neku would help him, and that's simple enough, right? Surprise in the Composer's eyes, and he's sure he's gone too far - but then, just for a moment, Joshua relaxes against him, head against his shoulder and the whole of his Song suddenly in Neku's grasp.

It's like trying to balance the whole universe on a thimble. Neku sucks in a breath, barely able to think, fighting to stay calm, to keep from shifting even a single note out of place. Trying not to overbalance and lose it completely - so impossibly complex, so far beyond him - and there's a softer, less affected chuckle in his ear, and the feeling of having the sky falling down on him disappears. The silence is perfect, he can barely hear Joshua breathing, just the slightest inhalation.

"What do you want, Neku?"
"Chicken Katsu."

Violet eyes flash, like distant thunderclouds, studying him with a piercing gaze, and Neku doesn't know what expression he's supposed to have or what to say.

"What do you want?" Almost a whisper, almost pained, and Neku can only shake his head - Joshua actually thinks he's capable of a _plan, let alone a secret plan?

"Idiot. I'm getting what I want." Neku tips his head, a teasing smile. "I'm not afraid of you, Josh. Are you afraid of me?"

"Neku," Joshua says, a predatory look as he lifts off of his shoulder, crossing the distance to his Conductor's mouth once more, "you give yourself way too much credit."

The kiss is light, brief, and as Joshua turns his attentions for a moment to Neku's throat he turns his head, finds himself staring absently at the Composer's hand, locked with his own, fingers twined and arms flush together. A perfect image, as he studies the difference in tone - he's tanned even from the little time he spends in the sun, while Joshua is unblemished and pale, reminding Neku of the stone of statues, maybe Egyptian kings, unyielding against sun and stone as the eons pass.

"... who is the oldest, anyway?"

"Mm?" Joshua says, a slightly puzzled frown mostly tucked between his brows, "... the oldest Composer?" Thoughtful for a moment, eternity in contemplation of itself. "I really don't know. I don't suppose it's me, or they would have sent a card."

Neku giggles, which turns into a gasp, a strangled moan he fights to suppress as Joshua splays a hand on his crotch, warm and enticing even through the fabric.

"Josh, no." He hisses, effectiveness cut a little by the fact that he's almost laughing. "No way. I
have to get back to class eventually, and I need these pants." Neku's thought before about bringing a spare uniform along, in case of any unforeseen difficulties in the UG. Really, he has to admit, this was probably the more likely scenario, and he winces at the speed that the pout disappears from his Composer's face, the way his eyes sparkle, announcing oncoming doom.

"You cannot wreck the pants, Josh. I mean it."

"If you insist," a mock weary sigh, and then the Composer's lifting up and shifting down and Neku's heart lets out a sort of morse code - what-the-fuck - as baffled as the rest of him is, shocked into stillness. So he can't do anything but watch stupidly, his brain pretty much disconnected well before Joshua's easing his precious uniform down around his hips and taking him, without hesitation, into that sly, smirking mouth.

"Oh… huh… I…"

Whatever he's going to say ends instead in a really stupid sound, punched in the gut by his own hormones, but Neku can't bring himself to care. He is officially, in this moment, the Winner of All Things In the History of Ever - and then it's all he can do not to make any sort of incriminating noise, clenching his hands at his sides and then sinking his teeth into his knuckles as Joshua quickly proves his superior skills at this as well. The fleeting thought in the one part of him not preoccupied with writhing points out that Joshua's not exactly up against a lot of competition. No real reason to gold-medal the blowjob, Neku's perfectly happy with silver or bronze or the Pacific League or the minors or… weekend pick-up…

"Oh fuck. Fucking… fuck," He gasps, negative points for eloquence - Josh will call him on that later, to be sure. Vaguely aware it's not very manly to have so little control, or what's definitely going to be a lack of staying power. Not that there's anything he can do about it, arching up against that wet heat, the whimper wrung out of him but he's biting back the shout, fighting so hard he can hear his teeth grind. "Josh… you crazy, lunatic-

He comes hard, every muscle tight, a head-to-toe rush that leaves him panting, shaking, head flopped back on the pillow and actually seeing stars. Neku just stares at the ceiling for a while, fighting the impulse to raise his hands above his head in triumph, maybe give a little victory cheer. How in the hell does civilization even exist? After they'd figured it out, why would anyone bother doing anything but this, all of the time?

"Feeling better, then?"

Neku fights to keep from laughing. "Well, your bedside manner isn't bad, but I seem to have forgotten how to walk."

"It's overrated."

"Definitely."

He finally pulls enough of himself back together to lift his head, Joshua wiping the corner of his mouth with one thumb and looking nothing but smug and, in Neku's opinion, deserving every inch of that self-congratulation. He reaches down, pale, feathery hair tickling his hand, and Neku's heart cracks, he can feel it go, the moment too sweet to bear. So happy and so surprised and so damn lucky, as Joshua presses a kiss into his palm. It feels like forever.

"God, Josh… I love you."

The absolute worst thing he could say. Neku knows that instantly, in that horrible space between
moments, even before Joshua reacts. It isn't what he meant to say, had meant for some lesser compliment, "you're beautiful," "that was awesome," - anything appropriate and fleeting, anything simple and harmless and not, not-

Joshua's eyes widen, his expression frozen. So this is what it looks like to hurt him.

"I didn't mean it." It's a stupid lie, and it sounds like a stupid lie, but Neku tries anyway. Has to try. "I didn't. Don't… Josh, I didn't mean it!"

He's babbling, begging, scrambling up and reaching forward - already too late. Neku's hand closes around empty air. Joshua is gone.
but I would rather be alone than pretend I feel all right

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It isn’t fair.

It just isn’t fair, and has grown increasingly clear to Minamimoto that all his pure and rational laws, all the formulas and rules he’s come to believe in are describing some universe that will never be this one. Nobody’s life ever sucks as much as his is capable of sucking, he is absolutely sure of that. If he’d known how irredeemably stupid and futile the Game was going to be - for fuck’s sake, he would have just stayed alive.

… and his hat is missing again.

Minamimoto shoves his hands hard into his pockets, slouching a little further in silent protest against the world. It doesn’t even cheer him up to throw the Wall up just as the first Player reaches it, sending her crashing to the ground as her Partner skids to a stop. No shouting, not a single sound as she pulls herself up off the ground - it’s the Player who doesn’t talk, even though she can use her voice against the Noise in battle, hitting octaves that make Minamimoto’s wings tremble, shattering the lower-level enemies like so many wine glasses. She’s looking at him as if she might want to try it now, her partner twisting a baseball bat awkwardly between his hands, though he’s knocked Noise into next week with it, not a bad swing.

“Wall Reapers make walls, Zeroes.”

The Player’s smile is unnerving - it’s all that damned Conductor’s fault. He’d… done something to the Players, not a single one of them panicked or worried the way they were supposed to be. The stupid kid is a null function, a fuckup, but all the Reapers just think it’s hilarious. Acting like it’s a big joke, when the Conductor isn’t supposed to be here at all, isn’t supposed to be wandering around during the Game and sure as hell isn’t supposed to be helping Players. It’s not like Minamimoto likes his fellow Reapers any better, but at least there used to be some kind of pride among them, some standards. No argument with the Iron Maiden’s policy of Erase First and Ask Questions Never.

Now Neku has most of the Reapers talking about getting good seats to the pre-Game show, hilarious to watch him fumble with the n00bs, and the last time Minamimoto brought up taking the Conductor down, all it earned him was a row of dirty looks. Higashizawa didn’t even bitch about being demoted - demoted, not even Erased - just shrugged and grumbled something about ramen. It’s only been a week - what the hell’s happened to his Game?

The Player’s been typing furiously on her phone, and Minamimoto rolls his eyes.

“Ain’t worth beating me up. It won’t get you past the barrier.”

She holds it up to him, and Minamimoto leans forward slightly, reading aloud.

“Yeah, but we can… do it… for fun.”

Ten minutes later and with his ears and bones both ringing from an impossibly high C, Minamimoto is stomping away from his post, all his walls down and the Players free to do whatever the hell they want. If nobody else is going to work from a logical axiom, he sure the hell isn’t going to bother.
He hears the whir of wheels on pavement, and nearly gets run down by one of the stupid Reapers they’ve imported from out of the district. He doesn’t know and doesn’t care why she’s on roller skates, and the glare goes totally unnoticed as she blurs past, intent on some epically stupid task. Usually he’d assume brutal mayhem against Players, but for all he knows the Harrier’s going to treat them all to shaved ice. First the stupid Conductor ruins his artistic vision and then he goes for destroying the Game from the inside out - and nobody’s even trying to stop him. All the Reapers are acting crazy, he’s not even going to get into that flirting shit Uzuki was doing earlier, before her little empty set of a partner showed up, because apparently it never happened - and then she goes and gets promoted. *Promoted!*

Minamimoto’s the one who makes paradigm shifts. He’s the one who understands the linear transformations when everyone else is scratching their heads. That’s the way it works.

So where the hell is his hat?!

It’s still wrong, but not very surprising to find the Games Master and the Conductor just standing around in the middle of the Game. As if either of them have any intention of actually *helping*, doing anything to stop the farce the whole UG has become.

“Hey!”

The Conductor looks up, and Minamimoto has the vague recollection that it hadn’t always been this way. He can almost remember a time when the stupid kid had looked - if not frightened - than at least a little uneasy, a little intimidated. Now, he sort of looks *through* Minamimoto, as if he’s got his mind on a dozen other, more important things, like what he’s going to have for lunch.

“So, is today the day you Erase me and take over Shibuya?”

The dry, disinterested sarcasm practically cuts the tips off his wings, and Minamimoto finds himself spluttering through jargon that, this time, can’t quite get the job done. “Fuck you!”

“All right, maybe tomorrow.”

Minamimoto glares. Neku isn’t looking, but a pair of beady eyes at shoulder level looks back, the tiny nose twitching. It’s the stupid bunny with the hat. The other one is currently nibbling on the ends of the Conductor’s shoelaces. How in the hell is this allowed to go on?!

“I know you did it.” He points at the tiny Noise, since no one else seems to be paying attention. “I want my hat back, you little Fibonacci-spawning bast-”

The cute little bunny sinks its cute little teeth into his finger, so fast he doesn’t even see it move. Minamimoto howls, leaping back, though the tiny creature is nonplussed, scratching at its ear with one back paw. The Conductor and the Games Master aren’t paying any attention, and as he tries to shake some of the sting out of his hand, Minamimoto finally notices the dark circles under Uzuki’s eyes, how pale her skin is, and the way neither one of them look more than half-awake.

“Hey… you both… kinda look like shit.”

Neku blinks. Uzuki blinks.

“So I don’t know all about being Games Master,” Neku says mildly, “but is there any way to change the day’s objective so they can find a particular Wall Reaper and beat him until candy comes out?”

“Mm? Yeah.” Uzuki pulls her phone out, half-heartedly punching in numbers. “Yeah, I can do
“Wait, what?” Minamimoto turns. Sees a pair of familiar figures turn the corner, the baseball bat against the boy’s shoulder like an announcement of asskickings to come. Watches them look at their phones, and then up at him. The singer smiles, it’s that Reaper smile again, the one no Player is ever supposed to have.

Minamimoto takes a step back, and another.

“Oh, you guys just suck.”

Neku doesn’t go to the cafeteria, choosing the roof instead, grateful when there’s nobody up there to watch him wolf down a cold double lunch. He needs the time alone to try and… do something, think up some sort of… whatever. Stop seeing that horrible look on Josh’s face every time he closes his eyes. He’s already been called out once for not paying attention, the teacher not impressed when he was still able to give the right answer. Thankfully, the next period had the teacher looking at him only in concern, and though she didn’t say anything, it seemed like she was waiting for him to ask to be excused.

He’d go lie down - exhausted, what feels like twenty minutes’ sleep out of the whole of last night - but Neku can’t be in that nurse’s office, not ever again ever, and his hand slips into his pocket again and it takes a good deal of strength not to make the call, not to text _I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry_ until he is forgiven. He doesn’t even care how fucked up it is, to apologize for what he feels. If Joshua will just agree, he’s happy to put things back to how they were before.

*He doesn’t want you. He never did.* Yet another thought he’s had at least a thousand times, and Neku stares up at the clouds crossing the sky and banishes it yet again because it’s too easy, too obvious for the Composer. If Joshua was completely indifferent, he’d just be dead.

*He only wants you on his terms.* More likely, but exactly what that means or what he’s supposed to do about it now, Neku has zero clue.

_You’re a freak. Of course you don’t know, because there’s something wrong with_ - No. No, maybe… maybe the last time, but not now. Again, if Neku was as screwed up and worthless as all that, there is no doubt the Composer would be the first one to let him know, hell, in seven-foot letters at Udagawa. So whatever’s wrong… there’s nothing Neku can do about it. Except…

Neku curls up, a little ball of misery with his head against his knees, knows he’s overreacting, he has to be for it to hurt this bad, but _admit it, moron_ - he needs Joshua. Helplessly, and desperately, by whatever terms the Composer will allow, and that’s so stupid - Neku knows how reckless and dangerous it is, that he’ll just end up eating that carte blanche. Joshua’s hardly going to respect him, when he has all the cards and Neku holds none, but there it is.

The Composer is carrying the ultimate trump anyway - Neku already knows what it’s like to try and live without him. And hell, before that? The last time he did this whole ‘losing his best friend’ thing?

Neku can’t do it again. Doesn’t really care how pathetic that makes him.

He’s been trying to distract himself since yesterday’s utter disaster, not that it’s been working. Absolutely no use trying to do anything creative, not wanting to hang out even though Shiki had called. Absently surfing the web, clicking mindlessly, until he’d finally remembered what
Tsuyoshi had said. Two suicides, two dead musicians and no new Players, and Neku had started digging a little, just trying to count up the suicides in the last few weeks, cross-checking them against the list of Players from his last Game. It was hard, having to see all those faces again, people he couldn’t save - and then things started to get even more disturbing.

It wasn’t a lot of data, so new at being Conductor that he could have easily been missing the obvious, and Neku was kind of hoping he was wrong, searching for the perfect statistic that would prove he had no idea what he was talking about. Otherwise… there had been quite a few suicides in the past few weeks, while he was Conducting his first Game, and in the week that followed. Maybe it’s not more than normal, but still - a lot of younger people, and Neku’s saw words like ‘avid photographer’ or ‘talented musician’ more often than he thought was normal. All over Tokyo, and who knew, maybe everyone else’s numbers balanced out, maybe he was wrong - but for Shibuya, from what he could tell, there were a troubling number of people who should have been Players who hadn’t ended up as… anything at all.

His phone rings. Neku’s internal organs all shuffle themselves into a new arrangement and he nearly drops it, fingernails scratching at the case as he tries to get it open.

“Josh?” God, he sounds so needy. Stupid, stupid… “Josh, don’t hang up.”

“… what?”

Neku freezes. It’s a girl’s voice. His own damn fault for not checking the incoming number.

“Uh… sorry?” Neku grimaces. “I uh, I think you have-”

“Who is this? I just-”

“Wait, you called me and-”

“- oh Jesus, I’m going to kill her. I’m just going to kill her, this isn’t funny.”

They’re talking over each other, right up until the end, and even over the phone Neku can hear the girl’s voice crack on the last two words. Silence, for a minute, and he thinks maybe she’s hung up, and maybe he should hang up - but he can hear a soft noise, a kind of sniffling, like maybe somebody’s crying with their hand over their mouth to try and not make any sound.

“Hey. Uh… hello? Are you… are you ok?”

“Huh? Yeah.” More sounds, the phone being jostled, as if she’s trying to wipe away tears. “Oh yeah, I’m fine. I shouldn’t - why am I even - I should go. I shouldn’t be bothering you.” Except she doesn’t sound fine at all. It’s not Shiki or Eri, he’d already be out the door if it was, but who else has his number? He’s been networking some, more people with his number now than ever in his whole life - why does she sound familiar? It’s not Vancouver, Neku hasn’t talked to her since Joshua… yeah, and he’s sure she’d give him some good advice but he’s not actually sure he wants good advice right now, and doesn’t need to go around bothering near-immortal strangers with his teenage love angst.

“You’re not bothering me. I mean, I’m not doing anything,” Just eating lunch and going crazy. “You don’t have to - but I mean, if you want to talk…”

“God, you are the last person in the entire world who should be nice to me right now. I mean, really, the last…”

Neku’s not sure what’s tipped him off, he barely heard her speak the first time, but he hazards a
sudden guess. “Is this… Manhattan? You’re Manhattan’s Conductor, aren’t you?”

A very shaky sound, a little laugh of dismay, and he knows he’s right. Even more than that, he thinks he might know what’s wrong.

“I.. did you two… was it a fight?”

A repeat of the laugh, only louder and more painful, almost like a sob. Okay, so he’s not making this any better. For a moment, he’s sure she’s not going to answer, just going to hang up on him.

“It’s so hard.” The words seem as heavy as concrete, he can practically feel them pulling the phone down. “You know? It’s just… I’m not even talking about the job, that’s not even the worst.” A slight pause, he can hear her breathe. “You’re really the age you look, aren’t you? I asked, and they said that you were.”

“Yeah, I am.” Neku wonders if he should say any more, if it’s compromising Shibuya or - oh, hell with it. Just the hell with it. Just *the hell with it.* “I know, though. What you mean. I’m… with my Composer, too. We actually… we just had a fight ourselves.”

“Get used to it.” A real, soft chuckle this time, though her tone is gentle, knowing, and she sighs. “So, what did he do?”

Neku’s ears are burning. He’s stupidly glad that she can’t see him. “I… I told him that I… loved him.”

“Oh, god, that. That never works out well. You actually used the words?”

“Yeah.” Neku says, and there’s wry sympathy in her voice and he knows he’s not alone, then. Just being able to talk is lifting some of the crushing weight that’s been on his chest since last night, tossing and turning in bed and trying not to pick up the phone, not to go to Joshua’s apartment - the elevator wouldn’t work, even if he tried, he’s sure of it.

“You think it’s bad when you tell them you need them, try telling them you’re leaving.”

Neku laughs a little. “Go away, come back?”

An echo of amusement on the other end_. “Left turn only, no left turn,” she says, and sighs again, “My Composer… actually *reprogrammed* my phone to call you, because we got into our Thursday fight three days early and having me phone the Conductor that nearly Erased her is exactly the sort of overcomplicated passive-aggressive *bullshit* she likes to-” A pause, a hiss as she exhales. “Sorry. This can’t be worth listening to.”

“Would it piss you off, if I said it’s kind of helping?” Neku smiles, because he thinks she might be smiling too. “I heard about… I mean, your Game. I’m sorry. It’s got to be…” He cannot think of a way to end that without sounding like the kid he is, so Neku trails off instead.

“We have good days. It’s nothing like it used to be. I wish… but nobody gets to see that. It’s been a long time now, but everyone still *knows* we’re always one step away to deep-sixing the whole East Coast, so they don’t bother to look at what we’re actually doing. We’re not actually allowed to improve.”

“I… kind of know what you mean.” Is Joshua going to leave him to deal with the Angel all on his own? Oh, yeah, and Mr. H too, after Neku had made it pretty clear what he thought of him - and he can’t do this, not with all of them at once. It’s like a high-wire act, with his boyfriend on one end and his idol on the other and Neku’s in the middle and yeah, there’s no ground when he falls. “It’s
like everyone’s already agreed on what’s going to happen, and what they’re going to do, and what you’re supposed to do. You don’t even get a vote.”

“Sounds like my bad luck rubbed off on you, Shibuya. Sorry about that.”

“I’ll tag you back at the next party.” It would be all right, if this call went on for a couple of years. Otherwise Neku knows he’s going to go back into his voice mail and play the last call Joshua left, from two days ago, the same way he’s played it like twenty freaking times, even though it’s just a suggestion that he ought to learn how to improve on his Noise form a bit, so Joshua can ride him around town.

“… I miss hanging up on him.”

Manhattan chuckles gently. “He won’t stay away forever. They never do. Just…” It’s hard to tell over the phone, but he’s thinking maybe that was the thoughtful sound of someone older than him, trying to figure out just how much to tell a kid his age. “If he’s anything like mine… god, they really don’t think you know anything, about why they’re so damn self-destructive. That you don’t get exactly why you’re being punished.”

Neku’s stomach does a really unpleasant cold, lurchy thing, like it’s been tossed into the air and comes back down icy and ready to bruise. He hadn’t put it into words before now, but yeah, she’s got it about right. Funny that being punished for something he didn’t mean to do could still hurt this much.

“So what… what do I do now?” It comes out almost as a whisper, he’s surprised she can even hear him.

“Shibuya… I am really not someone you should be taking advice from. Anybody can tell you that. My relationship with Manhattan isn’t exactly healthy on the best days.”

“My Composer shot me. Twice.”

Is it sad that she’s laughs, or that Neku can actually see the humor in it?

“All right then, so you know that they’re not, that Composers… it’s never going to be exactly sane… and you’re still with him. You really want to be with him, right?”

It hurts, to think about why he’s so sure, to think about not being with him. Hurts, that he could very well never get a chance to see Joshua again, let alone touch him, or hear that sarcastic bastard tone that knows so very well how to tangle him up inside.

“Yeah. I am. I do.” Wasn’t lying, when he said he’d loved him, even if he didn’t mean to say it. Neku wants to be in this for the long haul - he’s strong enough. He’s lasted this far, hasn’t he?

“Ok just… promise me, ok? Don’t actually listen to anything I have to say.”

He’s glad it’s the middle of a busy day, and the sun is shining, that he can look over the edge of the building and see people walking around. If Neku had to do this at night, alone, he’d be totally screwed. “Yeah, well, I can promise, but nobody else is all that interested in talking to me, so I think I still owe you one.”

“You’re really a sweetheart, aren’t you?” It makes him blush, and this time he kind of thinks she knows it. “Okay, so don’t beg. You probably know that, right? It sucks, but there’s not much you can do but sit and wait until he comes to you.”
Neku shakes his head. Why he ever thought he’d somehow steer clear of relationship drama, that he’d somehow rise above - well, from a distance sometimes stupidity looks a lot like confidence. “I can’t believe I need a plan for this.”

“Think about investing in some spreadsheets.” Her tone is wry, like she’s only mostly joking. “You already knew it wasn’t going to be easy, or fair. I knew it, too. I just have to keep… reminding myself. You’re the Conductor, he’s the Composer, and your UG is there, between you. Composers are… well, they’re selfish little high-maintenance divas - they have to be, to do what they do. We’re… well, it’s the city, isn’t it, that really matters? If someone’s going to bend-”

It will be him. Just like it was with Kitaniji. Who did way more than just bend - he broke, for what ended up being no real reason at all.

“You’re tough. I guess I know that as well as anybody.” And Neku wonders then, what she had to deal with, after the party. What she had said to Manhattan, what the Composer might have said back, and if she’d felt like he does now. “So it sucks, but you dust yourself off, and you learn how to put your heart back together again, on your own. Which is… exactly no help at all, really.”

“Yeah, well,” Neku sighs, “that’s how you know it’s true.”

He half-expects to be ambushed by Kariya after school, more adventures in getting his ass beat across space and time, but of course when Neku could use the distraction there’s no sign of him. He’s the Conductor, he ought to be able to call up any of the Reapers at any time, but there’s no way he’d be comfortable with that, deeply uncool for the boss to go around phoning his employees like he’s got nothing better to do.

Neku doesn’t want to go home. Like, ever. The only thing that’s kept him together today is a steady, constant level of paying attention to anything but himself, and even that’s not working very well. He definitely doesn’t want to go into the UG, even if he’s off enough that it’s still bleeding into him, catching bits and pieces of other people’s feelings, and it should be reassuring but today it just reminds him how alone he is. A thousand people he doesn’t want to listen to, who don’t want to listen to him either, which would be fine if he had anything else to listen to, but he’s flicked through every song on his playlist and it all sounds the same and he can’t think of a place to be or a thing to do and the only thing Neku can think of is going up. Like he’d done with Kariya, when he’d freaked him out but it seems like the sort of thing that’s probably easier with a little practice, and it wasn’t bad, not really. At the very least, it’s quiet there. Peaceful, and if Joshua is censured maybe it means he can’t reach him there, which means Neku can stop pretending he’s not waiting around for the call that isn’t coming.

“Neku! Hey! Over here!”

It’s Shiki, with Rhyme a half step behind, and Neku is hit with a sickening combination of relief and dread, which makes no sense at all, and he barely keeps from dropping into the UG even though they’re staring right at him. He doesn’t want to be alone, but the thought of how much effort it’s going to take just to try and be normal seems completely overwhelming - and the Game’s only just started, and he has to go back to school, and Neku doesn’t want to touch anything he might break and that’s all of it. He didn’t do anything wrong and it doesn’t make any difference.

Neku finds a smile somewhere, for Shiki. At least she looks happy, and Rhyme too, and this will be a good chance to work on compartmentalizing this stuff, keeping his UG business separate from his Realground life, no matter how they keep threatening to collide.
“I thought you were busy this week.” So bright, her Music lifting him up even though he’s trying to keep himself in emo quarantine. “Did you manage to escape?”

“Oh… yeah. Yeah. Well, you know…” He can’t quite figure out how it’s supposed to go, can’t find the energy, and it’s not surprising when Shiki frowns, a little crease in between her brows. Looking at him, and it reminds him of the two of them, back in the Game, when he’d been a complete dick at every opportunity, and she’d stuck by him anyway. He won’t do it to her again.

“So, where are you two going?” He says, forcing brightness into the words, and Shiki smiles.

“Dragging Rhyme along to buy some craft stuff, since Beat has to work. I want to check out this store in Shinjuku, they have some sales. It was going to be a girl’s day out, but if you want, I mean…”

He should say no. He has homework to avoid and blank walls to stare at, and Neku doesn’t want to risk… he feels dangerous, somehow, like he’s covered in invisible spikes. He’ll say something, or do something…

*People leave. It’s what they do.*

So much for Manhattan’s pep talk.

“Neku?” Shiki’s hand presses lightly against his forehead, checking his temperature and just for a moment he shuts his eyes and leans into her touch. The last time he had to deal with this, he didn’t have anyone else to fall back on, to tell him he was still normal, still worth the time. This is better, so much better that the next smile he gives her doesn’t take any extra work.

“It’s fine. I’m just a little tired. It’s… already been a long week.”

“Will you come with us?” Rhyme says, her tone completely innocent, though her wide-eyed gaze has been professionally calibrated for maximum heartstring-tugging.

“You get everything you ask for on your birthday, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

__________________________________________

It’s all right at first, a good distraction. It’s the Realground, where everything is normal and he’s just a high-schooler and Shiki is happy to talk about the show, how things went really well and she even sold a few of the smaller pieces, and how Eri thinks they need to think about getting into shoes and handbags, which is apparently where the real money is. The train to Shinjuku is not as crowded as he’d expected, and they find three seats next to each other, with Neku in the middle.

“What do you know anything about websites?”

Neku shrugs. “A dozen ways not to build one?”

“I know a little.” Rhyme says shyly. “We had a class. I put up pictures of Beat at work, and a few recipes. The ones he’s learning, like those crepes he made you.”

The more they can talk about simple stuff, easy stuff, the less of a chance Shiki has to ask him about what he’s been up to lately. Neku can see she wants to, the worry never quite leaving her gaze, but luckily he’s got his computer with him and this thing seems to be able to get a signal from the center of the earth, so within a few moments he’s looking at the results of Rhyme’s first page
build and… yep, totally better than his.

“This is really great, Rhyme. I don’t suppose I could hire you?” It feels nice when she smiles, and then Shiki gives him a friendly nudge.

“Hey, who says you have dibs? Don’t listen to him, Rhyme. I’ll pay you in… hats. Super cute jackets.”

It makes Rhyme laugh a little, and Neku lets Shiki take the stylus from him, minimizing the browser, opening up his most recent pile of sketches, and it’s only been a day, just a day that he hasn’t been able to put down a line without closing out of the program, and it’s so stupid how bad he’s panicking. No reason to worry, just this one day that none of the sketches even feel familiar, that he can’t imagine trying to reproduce any of what he’s already done, that even the feel of the pen in his hand is off. It’s all tied up together, he knows that, screwing up with Josh and not being able to get hold of it, to get it out on the page, and he can’t say which one is worse - it’s all the same and it’s all horrible.

Neku’s trying really hard not to ask the question, if this is something Josh can do, if it’s more than just being upset, if it’s worse than that. If the art is all Neku’s or even if it is, and Joshua might still be able to lean on him, use that Composer power to… take it away. Joshua can be cruel, he knows it, he’s lived it, but Neku trusts him. Until now he thought it was enough, that Josh thought it was enough. So much of what they have is in everything they don’t say, and Neku thought that was right. Fun. The way it was supposed to be.

Now it seems all his unspoken agreements were just assumptions, deals between himself and nobody.

It’s been a while since he’s gone outside Shibuya. Neku’s never left during a Game week. So when the train crosses the divide into Shinjuku he’s not expecting to feel it, let alone to have it jolt him so hard it’s like he’s been hit with a train going the other way. It pulverizes, a shrieking harmony pelting him with discordant bricks of sound - he doesn’t belong here and he’s not welcome, get out get out get out!

Vaguely, Neku feels the computer slip off his lap and there’s just enough of him paying attention to be glad when Rhyme catches it. Shiki has a hand on his shoulder but that is all he can feel and he’s sure she’s talking but he can’t hear that at all. Only the screeching of Shinjuku’s UG all around him, as he’s pulled further and further away from anything he knows. Neku folds his head down, curling his arms tight to try and catch his breath, to keep himself centered and steady and visible - he’s screwed if they see anything, if he can’t control his vibe and suddenly vanishes. Still slipping despite his best efforts, losing himself to the furious pull, Shinjuku trying to peck him apart like a thousand angry gulls. The sudden inspiration strikes, not so much thought as not wanting to hurt anymore - not wanting to hurt the UG anymore - and Neku breathes out and just lets go, focuses on keeping himself together in the RG, but giving himself over completely to Shinjuku’s Song.

One moment, where Neku thinks he’s made a terrible mistake, chaos and panic and a sudden, overwhelming emptiness - and then he can hear it, the feel of something reweaving inside of him. The Music of Shinjuku rising up, steady and calm and almost apologetic, the notes like soothing hands, ruffling his hair, burbling softly. Happy to have him.

Was this what it was like, when Joshua left Shibuya? So much he doesn’t know, that Joshua must deal with and Neku has absolutely no idea - and he slowly sits back up, tipping his head back, taking a deep breath. Only a few moments have passed, Shiki and Rhyme looking at him in concern and panic, but even if he feels like he’s just been used as percussion in the World’s Most
Angry Speed Orchestra, no one else has even looked their way. Hooray for large, impersonal cities.

“Neku? Are you all right?”

It’s easy to nod, to reassure her. Now that Shinjuku wants to be friendly, he feels a little like he does at the end of a good concert, buzzed and happy and so flattened under the weight of being Conductor he might actually be two-dimensional.

“A little dizzy. It’s nothing, really.” Shiki doesn’t believe him. At all. “I promise, I’m okay.”

Just a few moments later, and the train pulls up to the platform, and they disembark. Neku’s been here plenty of times, but never like this, through the lens of Shinjuku’s Music - it feels vast, stretching out around him, and Neku doesn’t dare close his eyes, for fear he’ll get caught up in it, every detail, the thought of each person passing through the district. The Music is beautiful, an entirely different tempo from Shibuya’s, though not quite as complex - and Neku smirks, thinking Josh would approve of that, but it lands like a cold blow, right in his gut. At the moment, Joshua doesn’t want to hear anything from him at all.

Shiki leads the way, chatting mostly with Rhyme about what she’s looking for, although Neku offers up a fashion opinion whenever he’s sure it will make her glare at him in dismay and forget that she was ever worried. All of this, though, is just reminding him why he can’t see them on Game weeks, no way he can avoid seeming so spaced out. Even now, he can’t help but split his attention between the RG and the UG, though it doesn’t seem to be Game week here, no sign of any Reapers at all. It isn’t until his hand goes through the woman he thought would bump into him that Neku realizes he’s skipped over, though it lasts only an instant and neither Shiki or Rhyme seem to notice, the anonymous crowd too tightly packed and interested in their own business for anyone to pay much attention to a single disappearing, reappearing kid.

Despite the unexpectedly bumpy entry, and knowing he probably shouldn’t do it again, it’s not all bad, and after a little while Neku feels as comfortable as he has all day. At the very least, it’s keeping him from brooding alone - and then he catches sight of the rather enormous bird towering over the crowd, a silent shadow out of nowhere, and he tells his optimism to fuck right off. The Conductor’s claws click lightly against the sidewalk, surprisingly quiet even though each talon is the length of his arm. It follows alongside them in the crowd, remarkably graceful despite being the better part of two stories tall. He’d forgotten just how big Kitaniji had been, though the pheasant Noise is not quite so large. Neku still can’t see its tail feathers without looking over his shoulder, red fronds with thin black stripes hissing where they slide against the pavement. Deep brown feathers, with dark crescents of black at the tips, a white v-shape at the neck and wine red around its eyes. It would almost look normal - except for being the size of a city bus - but where the feathers are parted around its chest, the only ivory there is bone. Neku can count the ribs, and look right through them to where a shape twitches now and then in the shadows, what must be the Conductor’s heart.

It’s not fair. Neku’s supposed to be sulking over being dumped by the boyfriend he can’t actually leave because he’s got this stupid job sticking bits of the world back in place. He shouldn’t have to get used to shit like this. He really shouldn’t.

“Oh!” Rhyme says, and Shiki has an arm out as she stumbles slightly, making a shy, annoyed face at the sudden bout of clumsiness, moving to the other side of where Neku is. Maybe she thinks there’s less to trip over there - Neku certainly doesn’t mind having her away from the bird, even if neither of them can see it, and it isn’t doing anything. Yet.

Finally, they reach the store - more like a building, a really big building - and Shiki makes a little
face, excitement warring with the disappointment that she can’t just tear the whole thing off the foundation and drag it home.

“You two go inside. I’m going to stay out here for a little bit. Get some air.”

Shiki looks at him again, and Neku knows if he asked her to take him home, right now, she’d do it without thinking twice or complaining at all. It’s hard not to hug her, but that would definitely just freak her out more. Instead, he pulls out his cell phone - the one Josh gave him, and if he’s going to get all pathetic and start listing off things that remind him of the Composer that owns Shibuya, it’s going to be a really long list.

“I’ll text you if I need you. Promise.”

The temptation of discount fabric is too strong to ignore, and Shiki nods, and she and Rhyme disappear inside the store. It doesn’t take very long after that.

“Hey, asshole!”

It’s the tact and charm that makes the UG such a magical place, really. Between them the Composers and Conductors have endless eons of knowledge and wisdom and not a single etiquette book to pass around. Neku lets out a sigh, and turns, and at least now he’s looking at a girl instead of a giant skeleton bird… creature… thing.

Shinjuku’s Conductor is old enough to belong in college or her first real job or possibly a mental ward, wearing a deep blue kimono with white flowers along the rumpled edge, sloppily tied, with bare feet and a black leather jacket. It’s so aggressively anti-fashion it’s probably been on a runway just this week. Her eyes never look away from his, framed heavily with eyeliner, thin hands pushing blonde-tipped hair away from her face. Obviously trying to calculate just how hard to kick his ass so that he’d bounce once before he ended up back in Shibuya. Her wings stretch out wide and high behind her, and if Neku was having a better day he’d be impressed at the thought that she’s very unhappy to have him here.

“You can’t sound like that. Why do you sound like that?” Her right hand is flexed, poised, and though Neku can’t see a weapon he has the feeling that won’t matter. He looks down, which is stupid because he looks like himself, obviously, but Neku feels at least some need to try and placate her, even though there’s not much to work with. He’d be happy not to provoke her if he knew what the hell she was talking about.

“I… don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

It’s clear she doesn’t believe him, but there’s definitely a time limit on how long she can stand there about to cry havoc without actually diving in for the kill. Nobody’s ever waited for Neku to actually give them a reason before declaring war on his face, but when he doesn’t move, her wings finally fold down a bit, and a moment after that she’s got her arms crossed and is deliberately not looking at him, pretending she was never worried at all.

“We’re not taking her back, so don’t ask.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t like we had to send you anyone anyway, so you should be grateful.”

“What do you—” Neku finally catches up. “You gave me your reject Reapers. Yeah, okay, big surprise there.”
No answer. It occurs to him that she’s still waiting for him to attack, that he’s yet again making the rules up as he goes along, just by being here, and there’s probably some etiquette or laws but really he’s coming to appreciate the safe, protective layer of ignorance. Does he sound different, because of what he did coming in, making Shinjuku like him? As if Neku knows how to explain or apologize for any of it, so it’s better to just not mention it and pretend they’re thinking of anything else.

“Have you noticed anything odd happening here, in the past few weeks?”

“Liike… a Conductor showing up in my district unannounced, when I’m in the middle of my nap?”

It’s not even dark yet, but Neku figures it’s probably not a good idea to mention that.

“Like people dying, and not showing up in the UG. Players who ought to have been in the Game, but don’t show up.” A long pause. At least now Neku has a good idea of what the reaction shot will look like, if he should ever say the stupidest thing in the world. “Nevermind. I’m sorry I asked. Really, amazingly sorry.”

Neku’s been keeping his attention on the door, better to not have Shiki or Rhyme see him talking to invisible people, and Shinjuku’s Conductor follows his gaze with a puzzled frown.

“You’re alive, aren’t you? Like really alive.”

“Yes.”

“Wow. How lame is that.”

He used to make at least some effort at polite conversation. This was a thing that used to happen before he started hanging out with psychos with superpowers.

“Did you have a lot of time blocked on your schedule for telling me how much I suck? If you’re busy, we can just skip to the highlights.”

A weird expression on the Conductor’s face, one Neku doesn’t recognize, and she takes a step closer, and just about the time he’s thinking about what sort of weapon he’s going to want to have and if giant bird Noise feathers smell as bad as the real ones when they burn, she stops.

“So, how’d you do it?”

“I told you, I don’t know-”

“No no, not that. How’d you get so close to your Composer?”

As if he could answer that even before he’d ruined everything. Assuming this conversation means the same thing for both of them, that they’re using the same words in the same ways, which Neku has started thinking is very much not likely, he can’t even - why the hell does she need to ask that, now? Why does he have to do any of this?

“I heard you’re close, and you haven’t been Conductor, like, any time at all. So, how’d you do it so fast?”

“Why do you want to know?”

Okay, maybe he shouldn’t be that offended. Maybe that stupidest-person-of-ever look is just her
“So I can Erase my Composer. Why the hell else would I want to know?”

It shouldn’t be surprising. It shouldn’t bother him. Neku just knows what she doesn’t - though that thought is painfully funny - that he knows more about the UG, that the Composer is just another step, not the top, not even close. Entirely possible that she’d be completely disappointed to be the Composer, if the Producers - the Angels - would even let her have it. Why doesn’t anyone tell them? Is it all set up like this to keep them fighting each other - is that the whole point?

*It's not. You know it's not.*

It is and it’s not and why does nothing ever stay the way it’s supposed to? How can he learn a life-changing lesson on Thursday and have it disappear by the weekend? Show the Players on Monday how it’s all gonna be ok, and then have that feeling evaporate when he needs it the most. It’s one thing, to screw up in the UG but keep his Realground life mostly together, and even *that* hasn’t been easy, and now it’s pretty much all sunk. Neku doesn’t have the words for her. He doesn’t have the energy to try and make her understand, to even know that he should attempt it, and why does he feel disappointed? Maybe she really is the sensible one.

“Okay, you know… nevermind.”

The words are strangely soft, not annoyed or disgusted, so it takes Neku a moment to realize she’s said anything at all. Another to realize just why the Conductor sounds so breathless. Why she’s pale, and the look on her face is no longer contempt and now a lot more like fear. It’s a pretty new thing in his life, the look of terror. That she would really like to just be anywhere else - away from him - but she’s afraid to move because Shinjuku has gone silent. Completely and utterly still around them, and Neku is about to say that he didn’t do it, he doesn’t know what’s wrong but he didn’t do it, when he realizes it’s not that simple. He didn’t mean to do it, but even as his thoughts turn away from the worst of his bitter contemplation, Neku can hear the Music rising up around them, like the dial on a stereo slowly turning back up. It seems fine, undamaged, but what the hell could he have done, when he doesn’t know what he just did?

“… what *are* you?”

The Conductor whispers, and shudders, wings tucked back tight against her shoulders, and Neku doesn’t know what’s going on, how he can manage a reaction like *that* when Kitaniji nearly bit him in two. He feels like he should apologize, and then wonders if he’d care if she were still throwing attitude around, if he hadn’t made her more pitiable by scaring the hell out of her, by showing how easily he could crush her. Neku takes a deep, steady breath and does everything he can to stop thinking. It’s his stupid emotions that are causing this, and he needs to be very careful, he needs to get back to Shibuya without breaking half of Tokyo on the way and then…

He’ll have to talk to Mr. H, as soon as he can bring himself to do it. The rest of it doesn’t matter, how he lied or why or even if there’s more lies Neku doesn’t know about. Manhattan was right, Shibuya’s more important than anything else.

Shinjuku’s Conductor is still looking at him, waiting for some kind of answer, but Neku can’t give her what he doesn’t have.

“I’m going to go now.” It sounds stupid, Joshua would have something clever and cutting to back up his ridiculous abuses of power, but as unnerved as Neku feels the Conductor still looks rattled half out of her skin. “I’ll tell you before I show up, next time.”
A slight nod, and he’s aware that she might decide to attack him the moment he turns around, that making people afraid is just one small step from making them angry. Neku doesn’t want to start anything, doesn’t want this stupid accident to get back to Shinjuku’s Composer but it probably already has, and he doesn’t know what to do. Five days left in the Game and he can’t imagine another five minutes.

Despite his worries, nothing happens, and when he looks back from the door, Shinjuku’s Conductor is gone. Neku follows the happy peal of Shiki’s Music to where she’s staggering under the load of two large bags packed with fabric, Rhyme with what looks like a slightly more sensible starter kit, and he wants to make a joke about it being contagious, but then Shiki catches sight of him and her Music changes, suddenly sharp and pitched an octave higher and he can hear exactly what she’s thinking - *how can he look worse than when we left him?*

“Hey.”

“H-hey, Neku.” Shiki returns the smile, but it’s pure worry in her eyes, and he can’t tell her anything even if he wanted to explain, too tired to even think of a convincing story. “We were thinking… we might get dinner around here. Are you hungry?”

He is absolutely starving, but the thought of eating makes his stomach lurch.

“I’m gonna have to pass on that. I think I might be coming down with something.”

Nothing serious, just a flare-up on his chronic case of fail.

Shiki and Rhyme come back with him to Shibuya, but since Neku’s blamed it all on being sick it keeps her from asking any more questions, and instead she flips through a magazine she bought and points out skirts he would look good in, to try and cheer him up and make Rhyme giggle.

“Maybe later this week you can come over. I’m going to teach Rhyme how to knit, so she can make a scarf for Beat.”

“And some potholders.” Rhyme says. “Lots of potholders.”

Shiki laughs. “It’s not *that* hard. I bet even Neku could do it.” It’s a question, and an invitation and Neku does not look at her because he has to say no.

“Maybe next week, when I’m feeling better.”

He braces himself for the return trip, realizing when it’s way too late that Shibuya might be angry with him leaving, that if it hurt as bad as it did to leave he has no idea what will happen if, say, Joshua decides not to let him back in. At least in this, he’s given a reprieve, slipping back into Shibuya with the same quiet relief as coming home after a long and trying day. The district winds itself around him tightly and it’s nice to let it carry him for a while, the melody of the other district fading away. Hell, if he did do any damage, if Shinjuku’s Composer is pissed, at least it might mean Joshua has to talk to him again.

He checks his phone, again, and checks to make sure it’s set to ring, again, even though Joshua never seems to have a problem with getting past that when he wants to.

*Maybe he’s not avoiding you. Maybe it’s all just in your head, and he doesn’t really care either way, and you’re the only one sitting here worrying like a clingy, useless idiot.*
Neku makes up some half-assed excuse to say goodbye to Shiki and Rhyme, and feels desolate the moment they’ve left, and wanders, until he ends up buying takeout from a place that’s not half as good as Ramen Don just so he doesn’t have to risk running into Beat. Really, it would be in his best interest to actually *pick a mood* and stick with it, instead of wobbling constantly between lonely and not wanting to talk to anyone, so tense he can barely sit on the bench and so weary it’s hard to find the energy to chew his food. Still doesn’t want to go home.

He picked a spot at random to eat at, near one of Minamimoto’s ‘statues’. Only a few of the LED’s are still blinking, though the Reaper never acknowledged what he’d done. Neku wonders when they’ll remove the whole thing, if everyone just thinks it’s everyone else’s job, and if it annoys Minamimoto that they’ve stayed up as long as they have, that people have come to appreciate them. It’s nice sometimes, to be the outcast. Being accepted means facing the real flaws in your life for what they are - just flaws, nothing special at all.

He wonders what 777 is up to, figures he’s owed at least one night of bothering them, for all the time they spent at his house. Maybe… well, he’s not going to think about how many relationships 777’s been in, but he probably regrets *something*, and maybe Neku can figure out what the hell he should do, or say, or think.

“I kept meaning to ask you, if you knew the guy who did this.”

The voice strips every single thought out of Neku’s head, except - no. No, not now. Please, just not today.

“Hey, Neku.”

It isn’t fair he shouldn’t have to he can’t he shouldn’t have to.

Neku looks up at his best friend, or at least the boy who used to be, and can’t imagine what he’s doing here alone. Why this, now, will be the first they’ve spoken since he told Neku he didn’t want to hang out anymore. That they weren’t friends. Which meant maybe they never had been. Neku never had the chance to ask.

“… Hey.”

He doesn’t sit down. Neku still has the empty takeout box in his hands, but he doesn’t know what’s supposed to come next or what he’s supposed to do and he can’t really move anyway.

“Remember that guy you used to like so much? The one with that mural?”

“Yeah. You were the one who pointed it out to me.”

A slight grin, and for just one, short moment, Neku feels the pale echo of how it used to be.

“Really? I did? That’s cool.”

He’d gotten Neku into everything - they’d been friends so long he couldn’t even remember how they’d met, and at the time Neku thought CAT had been just as important for him, just as inspirational. He’d gone to the mural for himself, but not always just for himself. Maybe it was true that he’d lost his best friend forever but he thought that if they still looked at the mural, if they got the same thing out of it, even if they were apart - but Neku can hear his Music now and knows that was never true. It didn’t mean anything special for him, the boy’s Song is just a collection of notes, and if he died he wouldn’t play the Game and Neku waits to feel vindicated. Instead, it’s a lot like trying to remember a script, that he forgot to memorize his lines and now he’s been shoved onto the stage. Any minute now, if he just holds on, it’s going to start making sense.
“I heard you started doing some art, too. I’d like to see your work.”

“You shouldn’t say that if you don’t mean it.”

It surprises them both. So Neku won’t stand up for himself, but it’s another thing, to be expected to take his work just as lightly. Yeah, that’s fine, that’s fair. So many surprises today, too many - if he had a week to prepare maybe he’d be ready for this, but even then he wouldn’t want to do it, just like he wants to be anywhere else now.

“So… did you need something?”

He remembers that smile. When they’d traded off on homework, or listened to music in Neku’s room, or hung out in the city, walking around and talking about nothing. He’d been so happy then - and that was the Neku he’d come to hate so much, afterward. Stupid and trusting, and when he’d been told his memories would be his entry fee - he’d laughed. Take them. Keep them. He didn’t ever want to remember that smile again.

“Well, I just saw you sitting here eating dinner all alone…”

It’s supposed to sound friendly, teasing, just like before. Neku wants to punch him, really hard.

“Listen, Neku, I... I wanted to apologize. I know it’s been a while, but…”

“No.”

The second surprise. The anger washes over him, his throat is tight, he’s never needed to be calm before and it’s not coming now and Neku only hopes none of this is bleeding into the UG because he can’t stop it if it is.

“Neku, come on. Hear me out?”

“You threw me away for better people.”

He flinches. Neku hates it, that he’s trying, that he’s come back and he’s trying and he can’t be serious. Hates that he has to even ask, that a part of him still wants to believe, and he can’t deal with that any more than the realization that it doesn’t really matter. Neku has other problems and other people and this apology is just getting in the way. He doesn’t need it anymore.

“It wasn’t like that, Neku.” Shifting where he stands, looking down at the ground. “I mean… you know. It wasn’t… but I mean, you get it now, right? Why I had to… I mean, everybody knows that you and that boy, that strange one…”

“Tsuyoshi’s a good friend.” So that’s what this is about? He’s going to have to decide whether to crawl back to the edges of what’s acceptable, and be grateful, or stick it out with the freaks? Like Neku’s got a choice, even if he wanted to, and he sure as hell doesn’t want to. So sure that must be it, that he’s baffled when the other boy lets out a laugh, rolling his eyes, looking nothing like the friend he thought he knew.

“Yeah, I think it’s a little more than that.”

Only a select few moments in Neku’s life, that will ever measure up to seeing Joshua appear in the throne room, a week after Neku had barely managed to ignore the idea that he’d never see the annoying, fascinating bastard again. This might very well be one of them, as pieces he hadn’t even
known existed suddenly fall into place, and make the picture suddenly, staggeringly whole.

He’s the Conductor of Shibuya now, and spends way too much time in other people’s lives and difficulties. All too easy, to hear the way he stumbles over the words, and doesn’t quite look Neku in the eye.

It makes perfect sense, and Neku doesn’t understand at all.

“I’m not going out with Tsuyoshi. Whoever told you that was wrong.”

The boy backpedals instantly, hands up, trying to pretend it was some kind of joke. “Hey, okay. I didn’t mean, I just heard…”

“Joshua. His name is Joshua.” Even if Neku never sees him again.

“Oh.”

Neku stares at him, for a long, long moment. It doesn’t make sense except that it makes perfect sense.

“You were in love with me.”

The look on the other boy’s face is a flat, blank shock, and the answer is in his Music and Neku doesn’t have to even listen to it to know.

“I… I don’t know what you-”

“You loved me, but you couldn’t handle it. So you…” Abandoned him. Without warning or explanation. How many times had Neku had imagined them growing up together? Going to the same college, at the very least. Family had been a nebulous thing, happy wives and happy children in some distant future, but even then Neku had thought they would be neighbors, and get beers after work and always hang out together. The thought that he might find it, like Shiki’s other future, some record of a place where they’d never stopped being friends - he doesn’t want to have to be here, and do this. It hurts. He thought he’d buried this, a long time ago, but now he’s here and it’s still an open grave.

“You made me think I was wrong. That I did something wrong - that I was something... why didn’t you just tell me? We were friends. What did you think I’d do?”

The funny thing is, at the time Neku had never even thought about anyone like that. Not even him, not once.

The stranger who used to be his best friend glares at him, but his anger falters and fades when Neku just stares back, waiting.

“I didn’t have a choice, Neku. What was I supposed to do? I can’t… I can’t be like you. I’m not like you.”

Neku can hear the fear there, behind the words, the uncertainty and a hurt little different from his own, but he’s not particularly interested in understanding at the moment. The longer it all comes back to him, seeing this new vulnerability in the person who hurt him so badly, the more he really just wants to do some damage. He’s not the Neku Sakuraba he used to be, far more now what his friend was afraid of then, and it’s hard not to want to take something away from him, something beautiful and important. He can’t do anything to hurt Shibuya, but this boy? He doesn’t matter at
all, it doesn’t matter if Neku makes him a little smaller on the inside. Makes him walk around feeling like things aren’t quite right, that his life doesn’t quite fit together, that he’ll never really be as happy as he was before.

“So, what is it?” Neku says softly. “Is it one of your new friends, now? Did you think if you got me back, maybe you wouldn’t have to feel that way about him? That I’d be so happy to be your friend again that I’d give you whatever you want when no one else was looking, and you could just keep it all a secret?”

The other boy doesn’t answer, shocked past words. Scared. It isn’t going the way he expected - Neku’s not the person he expected to find, saying these things - he didn’t mean it, not like that. Except that he did, and he didn’t, all at once. Who says reading thoughts makes them any easier to understand?

He ought to feel bad, but all Neku can think of is all the things he can do, ways to make the boy’s life worse that he can’t possibly imagine. What would happen, if Neku kissed him right now? Just kissed him and walked away. He might not be as good with the mind games as his Composer but he’s also got nothing to lose and he doesn’t care. Neku’s pretty sure he could start something here, and string it along until the other boy snapped from the strain. Or he could even take those memories he hates so much, take all the memories of their friendship, since it’s so clear the other boy doesn’t want them. It wouldn’t even be difficult, to make him the outcast, twist his Music up until no one would be his friend and he wouldn’t know why, and it’s not fair but hell, what is, and he’s not going to dump it all on Neku again, not going to make him feel like this and just walk away clean and-

A strong hand clamps down on his shoulder, and instantly the anger, the ugly hurt just drains out of him. A little light-headed, Neku gladly accepts the support, leaning back, letting that strength shore him up. The relief is so stupid but Neku can’t help it, glad Josh is here even if the Composer hasn’t forgiven him, even if everything is still a hideous trainwreck. A little bit of Conductor possessiveness will feel really good right now.

He leans back. He looks up. Brede gives him him a small, but genuine smile.

“I’m sorry I was late. I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

The bottom pretty much goes out of the world at that point, Neku incapable of answering, surprise and hurt quickly translating into utter humiliation and shame. No, of course the Composer isn’t here, and so stupid - so stupid to want to be rescued like some fairy-tale princess from his own past failings, let alone that Joshua would have any interest in doing it. He doesn’t like weak people, not pathetic, stupid kids who can’t even handle making friends at school. So boring. So small.

Why would the Composer even care if Neku loves him?

“Who are you?” While he’s been busy having a nice nervous breakdown, his former friend has been staring at the Angel, then to him and back again, in a way that might have made Neku angry again had he had any room left over for it.

“I’m Neku’s agent.” Brede says, flicking a business card out of his pocket. “I represent his European interests.”

“… interests?”

“I’m an art dealer. We like to take care of our most promising talent, and it seems our Mr. Sakuraba is destined for particular greatness, above and beyond everyday ambitions.” He tips his
head slightly. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name.”

The politeness is just there to sharpen the words, the ice on them undeniable, and if Neku felt a little less hollow he’d say something. Maybe.

Joshua didn’t come. Joshua doesn’t care. Who says he has to? Stupid Neku, so damn stupid…

“Well, then.” The unspoken question -why are you still here?- hangs in the air between them, perfectly clear. Neku can’t help a small, smug satisfaction at the confused hurt on his former friend’s face - this will be the last time they ever talk, he realizes, and he can’t think of a single thing to say.

“I, uh… ok. Later, Neku.”

Neku didn’t think there was anything left to do to the remains of their friendship, but he’s pretty sure they just did it. Vancouver would probably say something about opportunity, and potential and forgiveness but he doesn’t want to think about it.

“Are you all right?”

Oh yes, what’s a humiliating moment without an audience?

“Just tired.” Neku says quietly, not really ready to lie and say he’s fine, but he can’t help the weak chuckle, after a moment. “So I’m destined for greatness now?”

Brede looks at him, dead on, with those eyes that have seen places Neku cannot even imagine. So much more powerful, his Music tangible enough that it can make anything fade, even the edges of Neku’s hurt feelings. “Of course. Why else would I be here?”

Neku can only meet the Angel’s eyes for a moment, but he’s not trying to make a joke. He sighs, knows where this is going all too well. “Because I’m the one who’s supposed to overthrow Shibuya’s Composer.”

“What?” Honest surprise on the Angel’s face, or at least a very good imitation of it, and then he laughs. It isn’t unkind. “Oh Neku, I just… let me show you something, ok? I think it might cheer you up.”

He knows better. The Angel’s just being nice to him because he wants something, the same reason all of them have been nice to him, and this is Brede trying to get in between him and Joshua - like there even is… oh, screw it. Screw being miserable while the rest of the world just takes what it wants. The all-powerful Composer can protect his own damn self.

“Yeah.” He says, and forces a smile, so the Angel thinks he’s maybe a little better than some broody stupid kid. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

“Good.” A rush of white and a soft, snapping sound, the tinkling of tiny glass bells as his wings stretch out. A sort of ridiculous, perfect beauty to them, wide and soft and gleaming, rising up high like the arches of gothic churches, spaces that echo even the softest whisper. If it makes him feel small, that they’re so magnificent, Neku finds he doesn’t much care.

“You think that’s something? Turn around.”

Neku does, though he can’t imagine what the Angel means - and then he forgets to think or
breathe. Given that he’s staring at the Earth, hanging in the darkness above a gray-white lunar plane, that’s kind of understandable.

It’s a painting. It’s an optical illusion or some kind of trick, but his legs give out from underneath him and Neku’s down on his butt with his hands clutching at powder-fine dust, watching as the pale particles rise, hanging effortlessly in the minimal gravity, and he has no idea at all how he’s still breathing. Neku’s sure he looks like an idiot, but it’s a little difficult to worry about it, even with Brede grinning down at him.

“How?”

“How?”

The Angel chuckles. “Now that’s a fair question.” He takes a step to the side, wings lowering as he gestures behind him. Neku blinks, and he’s seen enough movies and anime to recognize a lunar base when he sees one, not that it actually counts as an explanation.

“Walk with me a little, Neku. I want to explain a couple things to you.”

“Really, why start now?” He says shakily, trying to remember how to get back to his feet so he can go walking on the moon.

Chapter End Notes

chapter title: Arcade Fire - "Ready to Start"
the ever-living ghost of what once was

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He’s a city kid. Silence is rare. The silence on the surface of the moon is just a little bit more rare than that. Neku tries really hard not to keep looking over his shoulder, but doesn’t quite succeed. It’s still just as awesome every time, to see the Earth hanging there, blue and green and covered with gently spiraling clouds like every picture he’s ever seen of a place that is as unreal as the UG ever was. It’s a little annoying to have the Angel watching him with what’s probably a condescending smile, but it’s the moon and they’re on the moon and Neku thinks he has the right to get a little stupid over the moon.

A shame he didn’t think to bring Nao Nao and Sota. Rabbit in the moon, right?

“You can bounce, if you want to.” Brede says, and kicks off a good three feet in the air, coming down lightly, though it probably doesn’t mean as much to him with the wings and all. Neku holds back - barely - from skipping his way over the soft surface like an idiot, not quite sure how far this bubble of air or whatever it is they’re breathing might extend.

“Funny, isn’t it? A little change in perspective, and suddenly things aren’t quite so bad?”

His best friend was in love with him, all this time, and Neku never knew it. Joshua still hates him, or at least doesn’t want to see him or whatever, and the whole thing’s a mess - but yep, Neku’s here in space. It doesn’t just seem like all his troubles are far away - they are far away, and not a single one has had the chance to make lift-off and reach him here.

Until his stomach growls, embarrassingly loud in the silence.

“Here.” Brede tosses him a bag, a custard croissant inside, and Neku raises an eyebrow, though after dropping them on the moon it shouldn’t be a big surprise that he can summon snacks.

“So, do you have candy in a van somewhere?”

“And puppies.”

Brede grins and Neku finds himself smiling back and a little voice says that Mr. H and Joshua both would probably have something to say about this, that no duh the Angel is a thousand kinds of dangerous and Neku’s totally not smart enough to see this coming, whatever this is or what it’s going to be. But then, Mr. H could have taken him here first. He could have taken the time to say anything he wanted to, but he didn’t and Brede’s here and Neku might owe CAT a lot but he’s seen the consequences of unquestioning loyalty, and the croissant’s already half-eaten anyway.

“Are you really going to make me ask?” Neku says between bites, and the Angel shrugs.

“It takes a lot less time to explain parallel universes since everyone started reading sci-fi.” Brede says, and in the distance a small ship has appeared, pulling away from the lunar base, a tiny, gleaming scratch against the vast darkness. “I mean, you could argue that progress ends in homogenization, and innovation has its drawbacks. Well, you can argue. I like flush toilets.”

“Parallel… universes.”

“See?” Brede says, and Neku would say he sounds smug but he’s starting to think it’s just the
factory default. “You’re hardly surprised at all. This is an Earth, just not your Earth - and here they had reasons to advance their space race on a global scale far more aggressively, for a longer span of time than the world you know. It’ll be starships, soon enough, and then I suppose we’ll be playing Games across the galaxy.”

Neku nods, not that it’s quite connecting the way it should, or that it seems at all real, but that’s pretty much the way he feels most of the time these days, so there’s not much point in worrying about it.

“Just think of what we do as the next step up in management. Conductors observe the day-to-day reactions, Composers determine how their Games will work in regard to their neighbors, and the world - and Producers keep their attention on those worlds that all move together. Sets of fractal universes, all relatively similar - multiple variations on a theme.”

They’ve reached the side of the dome, Neku peering in - transparent, panels of what he assumes must be some kind of plastic, thick as cinderblocks, slightly warping his view of the inside. Hazy halos of light around what looks like a cross between a greenhouse and an airport lounge. Three floors that he can see, all metal and molded plastic. Functional if not a little worn down, with most of the people in heavy, tough looking clothes, like repairmen or dock workers. Definitely not the kind of robots-and-silver-jumpsuits he’d been kind of hoping to see. Shiki and Eri would have a fit - from what he can tell, it doesn’t seem like fashion’s got much of a hold in space.

In space. He’s in freaking space, whatever it looks like. A kind of underwhelming decorating job - those are some unfortunate landscapes on the far wall, fond memories of Earth via a significant head injury - but it’s still underwhelming on the moon, in space, seriously what the hell.

Neku braces himself, wishing he could play dumb a little longer. The mechanics of this situation are a lot less dangerous to talk about than the reasons why he’s here.

“So we’re supposed to… talk. Right?”

“What do you think we’re supposed to do?” Neku glares at the mild question, can’t help it. Funny, the way the Angel’s wings flare out to match his hands, raised in appeasement, though the amused look on Brede’s face is anything but. “Yeah, I know, psych textbook bullshit. I took a class once.

It’s just supposed to lull you into a false sense of security, so I can get you to do my evil bidding. Desert your Composer, and Hanekoma, of course - you know, all that good stuff.”

A lot harder to be defensive, when all his suspicions are thrown it all out in the open like that. When he’s being treated like an equal, even if he’s sure the Angel doesn’t really mean it. It still sounds stupid, to be so serious, like he’s being too suspicious, too defensive. “You cut his power down… my Composer’s. You censured him, so it would be easier for me to Erase him.”

Unruffled takes on an extra dimension, when the feathery wings don’t even twitch. “Technically, the decision wasn’t mine to make, but yes, we did. Since then, it has become rather apparent that we… misinterpreted your feelings. No one realized how close you and your Composer were.”

“Close. Close is the word I would use.” Neku mutters, can’t help it, and the slight grin Brede flashes is less pitying than knowing, not that it’s any less annoying for it.

“Stockholm Syndrome?”

“Bite me.” Neku shakes his head. “Listen, I’m not going to do whatever it is you want me to do. I won’t… I won’t betray them.”
“It’s not betrayal, if they’re the ones who don’t deserve your trust.”

Oh, let’s not go there. He very forcibly keeps himself from going anywhere near there, but the Angel is watching him do it.

“‘You know I don’t need to lie to you, Neku. Did Hanekoma ever tell you about this? Or your Composer?’

“I… it’s not important. I’m not supposed to know. I’m not even supposed to know about you. I’m just a Conductor. Even if I was the Composer, and you all are a lot more convinced than I am, about that, and—’ Neku stops, doesn’t want to say it but the words come out anyway. “Joshua knows about this too?”

“What did you think he was doing, when your second Game ended?” Dying, Neku thinks, *I thought he’d died for me.* So stupid. So, so stupid. “Technically, there’s not a specific rule against every single thing he did, just most of it. It’s rare enough for a Composer to be so spectacularly self-destructive as to participate in their own Game, let alone to abandon it completely.” The angel raises an eyebrow, a casual gesture in the way a loaded gun is a paperweight. “Would you like to see where he went?”

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Neku thinks there’s not going to be much chance of outdoing the moon, no matter where he ends up. Still, there’s something about being on a street that he knows, a Shibuya just like any other that pretty much even sounds like his Shibuya, watching a version of himself with slightly different headphones play Tin Pin against the Iron Maiden that is far more disturbing than a trip into outer space.

“I destroyed her. Erased her. In our world.” The explanation is as unnecessary as it is breathless, and Neku flinches, as he realizes the person standing nearest to Konishi, possibly even cheering her on, is Rhyme. He looks at himself, intent on the game - a stupid thought, to think that the other Neku looks so young, to feel the slight hint of contempt, or is it envy? - that he is so happy to be playing this game against a woman who scorned them to her very last breath.

“I know, Neku.” The Angel sounds so sincerely supportive it’s all Neku can do not to punch him. He knows what this is, what Brede’s trying to do. Even if Joshua didn’t tell him, even if the Composer’s a complete dick - well it’s not like that’s exactly news and it’s not like it makes any difference. Who cares if Josh had been here or in Milan or under the sea or getting a full massage and pedicure? Relaxing, while Neku was doing his best not to think about the fact that he was gone, that breathless third week of nearly getting killed every time he’d turned a corner… and it just doesn’t matter.

_You’ve forgiven him, because you’ll have to keep forgiving him, just like Manhattan said. You… don’t have a choice._

“Until he Erases you without meaning to.”

Neku jumps what feels like four feet straight up, rounding on the angel so furiously he thinks his wings might have popped out. “Don’t do that. Don’t get inside my head. You don’t have any right to do that.”

“You’re broadcasting so loud, it’s a little hard to ignore it.” Brede says, and Neku hates him for being so calm and hates himself for being so easily thrown. “You think you’re the first to underestimate your Composer? You think you’re his first?”
“If Josh kills me… again, trust me, he’ll mean it.” Wow, and isn’t that an argument winner. He turns away, sharply, before he can say or do anything else stupid, and feels his wings curling down toward his shoulders - yep, he popped them, and the Angel’s probably looking and hell, let him look. Joshua said they were different, not like anyone else’s - maybe the Angel will see that Neku’s not what he thought he was and go away.

Konishi is an easy way to keep himself distracted. Frighteningly similar - practically identical to who he remembers in his world. The economy of her movements, the arrogance in her expression, that even there in the RG she is moments away from some lethal strike. He’d never been so ready to take someone down, not just fight to defend himself or to defeat them like Higashizawa but utterly destroy her, do whatever it took so that she couldn’t ever hurt him or his friends again.

“Is she the same?” He doesn’t even want to ask the question - but they’re still here, and Neku realizes there’s no getting back on his own. Whatever this Angel wants from him, there’s not much Neku can do but wait and see.

“Universes that are clustered together share more similarities - this particular one is the closest to your Shibuya. So, while she isn’t identical, she does likely share more than a few personality traits with the Reaper you knew.”

The point is proved as he watches the other Neku raise both hands in an excited, horrifyingly embarrassing victory dance he hopes he has never, ever performed. Konishi’s eyes narrow, slits of cold fury peeking out behind the mask of haughty indifference. It’s so strange to see them all together, Beat snarling as he’s once again easily provoked by one of the Iron Maiden’s barbed comments - and Shiki is there too, her arms wrapped around one of Neku’s, and she kisses his cheek and he turns to kiss her back and… oh. Neku looks away, not quite sure how to feel about it - it’s not exactly surprise, not really, although he wonders about this world’s Eri - and then he stops thinking because Joshua is standing at the corner, looking back at him.

“…Josh?”

It’s like breathing, like listening to Shibuya - amazing and more than a little stupid, how important Joshua has become. Illuminated by the sunlight, as if he’s carried it in with him, and Neku’s almost happy for that voice in the back of his head, always irritated by how beautiful the Composer is, all effortless, self-aware grace. He sees those violet eyes narrow, sees surprise turn dangerous and knows Josh is looking over his shoulder, at the Angel now. Neku hears someone yell - hey, Rainbow! - Joshua’s eyes flick away, and Neku thinks clairvoyant, that he had powers before he was in the UG, and this Joshua does too, this one is a part of this world’s RG and this one isn’t his.

It doesn’t stop him from reaching, not taking a step forward but just that part of him, that Conductor part needing to hear him again, Joshua’s melody and even if it isn’t exactly right, he just needs–

“Neku!”

Three quick realizations in the same ugly collision - he did not hear any Music on the moon, just as he has not been listening to this Shibuya. It is the Angel’s Music around him, and that might just be for a good reason. Not only not his Shibuya, but not his world. Maybe it would be a good idea not to open himself up to this place, except that by the time Neku thinks it he already has.

Whatever crack he’s made in the Music, it’s wide enough to allow for the brick that he doesn’t see but that definitely clocks him in the head, for how bad he hurts and how loud the world is and the flash of white that engulfs him. Neku stumbles, topples over - and doesn’t hit the ground.
He hears birds. A lot of birds, like cartoon cats do after they get hit with anvils, or canned jungle sounds from some really cheap movie and hey, *that's probably not Shibuya*. Neku opens his eyes. He’s on a sort of catwalk, a span of pipes, all varying widths stuck together in parallel, fused together with larger pipes that twist around him, above him. Below, through the mesh he’s laying on, Neku can only see bits of green, a sort of steam rising up from somewhere. It’s like someone took the plumbing out of all of Tokyo, tipped it on its side and parked it in the middle of the Amazon. So odds are he’s really not anywhere he’s supposed to be, and there’s no sign of the Angel or anyone else.

Neku reaches without thinking, but this time he stops himself before he can go far, snatching his awareness back like a hand from the fire, the Music of… wherever this is. He’s already got a headache, not the worst thing in the world but it’s bleeding down through the rest of him and that’s just not helping at all. A fuzzy, indistinct ache in his whole body that reminds him of nothing more than what it was like playing the Long Game, not at first but as things progressed - and what he’s probably remembering most is when he was unknowingly partnered to a Composer who could have Erased him by sneezing.

“Brede?” He whispers, but there’s no answer except for the wind - a lot of it, up here, and Neku takes a second look down and realizes his depth perception is a bit off, the trees such a thick canopy that they look a lot closer than they are, and that isn’t steam but clouds. He lets out a little noise and shuffles off the grating to the slightly-more-but-not-really safe pipe floor.

Okay. Okay okay. Sure. Just take it slow. He’s probably in another one of those… universes. Judging by the look of it, he knocked himself quite a bit further than any neighboring… dimensions, and god it was weird to think that. He can’t just… this isn’t like working in Shibuya, playing it, well, playing it by ear. It’s too powerful, too strange. If he reaches out like that here, he’s likely just going to crater again, in some dimension even further from where he ought to be. The best thing to do, at least until he comes up with a sensible plan, is to stay where he is. The Angel will find him.

*Or not. Or he’ll leave you here because he knows you can’t get out. Leave you for the Noise. Maybe this was the plan all along.*

Neku clenches his jaw, refusing to panic. In twenty minutes he’ll panic. Right now, he’s only allowed to do something else, like walk around a bit in this strange, desolate place - and hey, if he doesn’t die, if he can figure out a way to get to a few more worlds, it sure would be a hell of a cheat for his inspiration. Neku walks to the edge, leaning out a little, the vertigo just distracting enough that he’s not going to panic, he’s not going-

“Hurry up, Beat!”

Neku turns sharply, leaning on the rail, the gray, open halls stretching out around him, no sound of footsteps - and that’s because Beat isn’t wearing shoes, bare feet tucking into the cracks between pipes and junctures as he appears from some higher floor, dropping down silently right next to Neku, looking right through him - still safe in the UG then, and at least that’s something, Neku thinks, and then - *Beat?*

A tiny, roundish machine whirs in a tight circle around them, halting to hover near Beat’s shoulder. It looks a little like a wad of stereo speakers, the inner rings glowing pale blue, flashing brightly when it speaks, and when it does the voice is Rhyme’s.

“I’m not picking up any readings, but you don’t have a lot of time. You’re going to need to-”
“I know how to crack a box, sis.”

The cocky smile is definitely Beat’s, and Neku finds himself smiling back, not all that surprised that, of anyone, he would be mostly himself, no matter where they are. Same height, maybe a bit more muscle - still no sleeves on the shirt, does he have some kind of cross-universe allergy? The only real difference between this Beat and the one he knows flutters softly in the breeze, to catch his attention. A little pair of… brightly colored wings, like a parrot, right up near his ears. At first, Neku thinks there must be a bird or something living in his hair, which makes no sense, but no less sense than the way they flip up, ruffling slightly as he crouches down near the bottom of a pipe, popping off a small panel with deft, careful movements.

Parrot… headwings. Sure, why not? He’s even got little slits cut in his hat, to let them poke through.

“Remember to switch the circuits or-”

A sharp flash, Beat jerking his hand back with a hiss, sucking for a moment on his fingertips. Quite a lot like the Beat he knows, preferring to face his problems head on - mostly by headbutting them. He can’t quite see what the other boy is doing, only that there’s a lot of it, his hands in constant motion, attaching some sort of small computer to the wires he’s pulled out, downloading or perhaps uploading data, or just draining power. The little Rhyme-bot never stops moving, what he’d thought were speakers seem to be optics as well, and possibly listening devices, perpetually scanning the area around them. It isn’t long before Beat finishes with whatever he’s come for, snapping the panel back in place, but reaching into his back pocket instead of standing up, unfolding some sort of paper Neku realizes is a stencil, and what must be this world’s version of a can of spray paint.

“Beat - we don’t have time for this!” Rhyme’s scolding voice, the little machine vibrating in the air, but Beat’s ignoring her, slapping the stencil over the box and covering it in white paint.

“No way. I’m gonna let that bastard know we’re still fighting.”

Neku can’t figure out what it’s supposed to be, more like one of those blot tests than anything. Which could be really meaningful, or it could just be what Beat’s work looks like, when he’s making the attempt at art. He’s just finishing, slipping the paint-stained stencil back in his pocket, when Neku catches a glimpse of motion from the corner of his eye. The little Rhyme-bot lets out a high-pitched whistle, almost like a scream, as a massive, dark blur lunges at them. Beat slams himself to the ground and Neku dives back, out of the way, before he remembers he’s invisible. It’s like a mountain lion, or close enough, but the skin gleams like metal as whatever it has for muscles shift and bunch beneath it. It has a lot of muscles, landing and turning in one fluid motion. Beat is on his feet but Rhyme’s machine is already darting forward, lighting up like an electrical transformer, electric bolts that force the beast back, yowling and pawing at the air, the little bot quickly darting out of the way of the swipes. Beat is watching it, but Neku is watching Beat, and sees the flickering gleam of another pair of feline eyes narrowing for the kill.

“Look out!”

He doesn’t think if he can do it, doesn’t think at all. Just lunges forward, hands fisting in Beat’s shirt and knocking him to the ground, the metal cat coming close enough that Neku swears he can feel the tips of its claws brush against his hair. He lands on top of Beat, the bright, little wings on his head splayed out in what would be a comic expression of shock, except for the look on his face.

“… Neku?”
A combination of disbelief and something a lot like hurt, and Beat says his name again, even more softly, and Neku knows then that whatever version of him there was in this world, he’s no longer here.

“Run! Go!”

Neku rolls to his feet, just in time to see the beast coming at him again - big fangs, crackling with power, like a taser that can rip his face off and who the hell ever thought that was a good idea?!
It’s instinct alone, he reaches and pulls for the UG but it’s different, the Music not… He can’t hold onto it, can’t get back in the UG, flickering just long enough for the giant cat to go right through him, and then Neku’s back in the world again, Beat still staring, frozen.

“Go, Beat! Go now!”

It shakes him out of his shock, two slow steps back and then he turns to run, Neku listening to fading footsteps ringing off the pipes - and the sound of claws like sharpened nails, digging into the paneling behind him.

_Oh, you have had better ideas._

Neku could make a pretty good guess, what might have finished him off here, backing up slowly as the cats prowl toward him, certain of their prey. Two now, like he needed the help, the second one with a sparking hole in place of a missing eye, and he wonders what happened to the little Rhyme-bot and this was a bad move. Bad, bad move, all the way around.

No plans, no time to think, just scrambling back and when he hits the wall Neku clambers up, dragging in a breath as his hand suddenly hits empty air - he’s standing on the outer wall, and there’s a length of pipe that juts out from the side and after that, nothing. A straight drop, a thousand feet down and he’s trying to use his powers to do anything at all but the cats are growling and sparking and he’s screwed. Amidst the vertigo, his thoughts stuttering to a blank silence as the adrenaline flattens the world out, Neku thinks that it’s actually rather pretty, the shadows of the clouds passing over the trees, and wonders how the Angel will write up the report on this.

It probably won’t take him all that long.

The lead cat has put its paws up on the wall, trying to figure out the best way to swipe at him as Neku looks around for even the most impossible escape route, above or below. He thinks there might be a chance, a way to grab for a railing off to his left, just as the section of pipe under his feet gives way completely. Neku’s stomach quickly follows, and he lets out a stupid, squeaky sound and then he’s tumbling, watching the green rushing up to meet him, and then the sky and then a black shape, one of the cats following him down, claws outstretched and getting closer and you have got to be kidding!

Neku shuts his eyes, the wind roaring around him, not sure if he should hope he hits the ground before he’s shredded into pieces -

“… found you.”

It takes a good minute to remember which of his parts do what, like an old computer coming slowly back online. First, Neku realizes that he’s no longer falling, his stomach climbing its way down out of his throat. The second, that he’s no longer falling. Really. A few moments later, Neku manages to open his eyes, Brede looking down at him as his heartbeat slowly stops being audible, along with the urge to scream himself hoarse. He’s sitting on the curb, fingers digging into the pavement like it might be lying to him if he loosens his hold. Shibuya rises up around him, tall and...
familiar and comfortable. Neku sits where he is, looking for differences in the skyline, in the smallest details, as his legs consider the benefits of ever moving again.

“What was… what were those things? Were those… were those Fallen?”

The Angel looks surprised for a moment, and then smiles gently, offering a hand to pull him up off the ground.

“No, it was one of the… enforcers of the peace, in that world. That version of your friend and his rebel friends have been fighting them for quite some time.” He lets out a slight laugh, at Neku’s expression of dismay. “Creativity can flourish quite well in restrictive environments. Even oppressive ones often provide the necessary pressure to produce amazing results. It’s part of our job as Angels to apply some of that pressure on the Higher Plane. The Composers wouldn’t be half as happy if they weren’t able to bitch about how we keep them from real greatness. Many of them do their most brilliant work just seeking ways to show us up.”

Neku thinks he’s never really going to pick up this cavalier attitude the rest of the UG has toward life and death and being assholes, but he’s kind of okay with that, even if it’s a horrific disadvantage.

“I think… I think I might have been dead there. The me that lived there.”

“It does happen. An impressive distance on your first attempt at jumping dimensions, I must say. I didn’t expect you to land quite that far away.”

“I… uh… it wasn’t really intentional…”

“No more than what happened in Shinjuku, or in your own Game, you mean.”

Neku freezes. “You… ah… you noticed that.”

Brede nods, but at least he’s still smirking and even if it looks obnoxiously self-confident he’s not like, prepping to send each of Neku’s limbs to a different dimension. At least, maybe. Possibly.

“Was it… wrong?”

“Define wrong.”

The Angel’s wings stretch a bit, shifting, and even though he knows they’re not really allies, not really, a part of Neku just wants to lunge under them and hide forever. “I… I don’t even know what I did.”

“You changed your Music, Neku. When you were in Shinjuku, you were a part of that district. That’s why it didn’t destroy you, like it was trying to do. Reapers can move in and out of most districts at will, they’re not powerful enough for it to make a difference to the overall Song. On the other end of the spectrum, Composers are too powerful to be threatened - Conductors, though, can be Erased if they’re not careful. Very few of them move outside the boundaries of their Games, and certainly not without permission.”

“… Erased? Really?”

“Really.”

It ought to be more worrisome than it is, instead it just reminds Neku what else went wrong in Shinjuku. “I did something… to the Music. I made it quiet. I think I scared the Conductor. I didn’t
mean…”

“Of course you didn’t.” Again that look, the outright pity that has him wanting to do something, anything dangerous or stupid or destructive just so the Angel will see that he’s not on their side. It surprises him, how angry he is not to be the enemy from the very start. “We’re not perfect, Neku, no matter how much we want to be. It would be a lot easier if we were, and with the responsibilities we have, it would be a hell of a lot more fair.” Brede crosses his arms, looking away. “No one wants to hurt you. Hell, I don’t particularly want to hurt your Composer, or even Hanekoma, but with what they’ve done to Shibuya, and you - god, to do this to you, and then put us in the position of being the bad guys for trying to help… Kiryu’s good at getting his claws in deep, there’s no denying that.”

“Josh hasn’t done anything to me.”

“Exactly, Neku. Exactly. He hasn’t done anything, he hasn’t told you anything, and Hanekoma hasn’t told you anything. They’re so damn afraid of what you’ll do if you realize you’ve got options, that you don’t have to keep leaning on them. Joshua didn’t elevate you, Neku, he chained you down. You’re not one of them, and you never have been, not a Conductor or a Composer. You’re one of us.”

The first thought he has, after waiting for Brede to continue and then realizing no, that was in fact the punch line, is that Mr. H hid it a lot better than Joshua. Giving him just a little information was the perfect hiding spot for everything he wasn’t saying, about Minamimoto and the Game and… this. The second thought is that the only thing he can be absolutely sure of is that, no matter how guilty Mr. H feels, he’s not ever going to discount his coffee.

“You’re telling me I’m an… Angel.”

“You can’t be that surprised.”

Neku searches for an appropriate, thoughtful response.

“Wow, that’s bullshit. That is such total bullshit.” He considers that he might want to consider being slightly nicer to the being of presumably unspeakable power, even though the Angel is laughing.

“God, you’re so young. I keep forgetting that.”

“Right,” Neku gestures to the world around them, even though it looks just like his Shibuya, he’s sure something freaky is going to happen any minute now. “It’s my age that’s the problem. Where are we, anyway?”

“Neku, why couldn’t it be possible? Look at everything that you’ve done, not just as the Conductor but as a Player. You stayed alive in a Game for three weeks straight, one of which was spent as the Composer’s Partner, one of which the Underground was nearly overrun by Taboo noise. You weren’t even officially the Conductor of Shibuya when you defeated the Composer of Manhattan in single combat - and that’s when you’re trying, when you’re not working by instinct and accident.” Brede gestures, arms wide, his wings half-mirroring the move. “Did your Composer tell you that he’s never seen anyone raise an entire Game’s worth of Players up the Frequencies like that? I know he hasn’t, because I sure as hell haven’t. I don’t know anyone else who would have even thought to try.”
“I didn’t…” Neku stops, “I didn’t… hurt anyone, did I?” It’s like he can feel the Angel right there along with him, as his thoughts race down darker and darker paths - what he might have done to his former friend, if the Angel hadn’t-

“Oh, I doubt you’ll do any damage to your friends. At least, not intentionally. When it comes to Imprinting, well, you know how that works well enough, and an Angel naturally… influences the world around them. Of course, you know best how Joshua chose to-”

“I trust him.” Better to be adamant, better to be angry than have to even think about what he’s implying, that Shiki or Eri or Beat - that Neku could do something to them, and not even know it?

Brede nods. “If you wanted to, you could have half of Shibuya lining up to be your personal entourage, but I think we both know that’s really not your style. You don’t act out, you pull away. It’s far more troublesome for me if you were to shut down again, and drag the UG with you.”

So now he knows what that was all about, in Mr. H’s cafe. “When I… the first Game, when the Players turned on their teammates. I was…” Hurt. Betrayed. Desolate. “Angry. I put Shibuya in danger, because of that?”

“No, Neku. You didn’t know. Kiryu did. Hanekoma did, and he damn well should have known better, not to train you, not to tell you what you were capable of the first moment he had a chance. He’s not acting like a Producer, letting his Composer have free reign over everything, over you.”

“He didn’t…” Neku wants to say something, about how Mr. H saved Shiki’s life, but he’s got the feeling Brede doesn’t care much about his friends, the same dismissive way a lot of the UG seems to treat the Realground, not important except when it’s useful. He’s still not sure if what Mr. H is in trouble for what he did for Rhyme, but Neku’s not going to draw any extra attention to it.

“He did, Neku. I understand what your Composer is to you - I do. But you need to understand that there have been issues surrounding Yoshiya Kiryu from the day he took the position. Things that should have made Hanekoma hesitate more than the did. The powers he had, outside of his role in the UG - it’s not always a good thing, when a Player knows about the Game before he gets there. It can be dangerous, when Players choose to play.”

Choosing to - well of course, right? Just confirming what Neku’s always been pretty sure of, even if he doesn’t like to think about it - that once he knew about the Game, Joshua would have taken the most direct route to get what he wanted. If Neku had been able to see the Game, if he’d made friends with Mr. H first, who’s to say he might not have…

Neku blinks, deliberately turns the thought over again in his mind, like hitting the back button to listen to the crescendo of a song again. He wouldn’t have done it, not with what he knows now, with what he went through - but that other Neku? The Neku that might have pulled the trigger?

If there is a world where he did, Neku is absolutely certain he never wants to go there.

“It wasn’t just illegal, what Joshua did, and he knows it. He was throwing it back in our faces, deconstructing the entire Game just to spite us - recruiting Partners, entering as a Player, forcing your hand the way he did. Then cutting you loose after, knowing Shibuya chose you, that he’d slotted you in as Conductor before the Game was even over. What do you think would have happened, if you hadn’t forced the issue?”

“It chose me?”

Brede smiks. “Hell, Neku, everything chose you, and Kiryu just grabbed you to spite the rest of us.
Is that so bad? Is it really the worst thing in the world, if Joshua isn’t as special as you thought he was? If he just got there first?”

He has to admit, the Angel has set this up perfectly. Arriving near the statue of Hachiko, just in time to watch himself - panicked, confused - run onto the scene. The Music is familiar enough that Neku could hum the melody without hesitating, not quite conscious thought but what he is, the Conductor - this is turning pages, this is looking back over what was written. He’s watching his own past unfold, that very first day in the Game. A delicate procession of notes - and there’s Shiki, wearing Eri’s face - and there will be a Pact, and Neku knows everything that’s going to follow, so he can focus instead on the boy standing a few paces away. White shirt. Pale hair. Violet eyes. The damn smile.

“He’s exactly the same in every dimension, isn’t he?” Neku isn’t angry about this, even though he could be, even though he probably ought to be. Of course Joshua was watching him in that first week. Keeping track of his Proxy. A shame, if Neku had gone and died too early, and spoiled his fun.

“I admit, we do prefer the universes where you end up with anyone else. Even Minamimoto.”

“I’m not-” Neku stops. “Tell me you didn’t just say what you just said.”

“It was a political marriage. You were young and new to your throne, and Shiroi Minamimoto and her army-”

“Never speak again.”

The Angel laughs.

Brede doesn’t keep him in the past for much longer than it takes to make his point, and a few moments later they’re walking across yet another alien Earth, another dimension where everything… looks kind of airbrushed, honestly. Two small, dark blue moons hang over a flat sea that’s nearly lavender in the fading light. Neku can either look at the slight glow his footprints are leaving in the sand, water swirling up to erase them as the light fades away, or at the glimpse of scales out in the darkness. Long, serpentine shapes, like what he’d always imagined the Loch Ness monster might look like, except maybe just for a moment he sees a glimpse of pale skin, a human-looking shoulder and arm and hand.

Neku stops looking after that. He’s kind of tired of seeing versions of his friends he doesn’t know, that don’t know him, or think he’s some sort of ghost. It’s still troubling to remember the way that Beat had looked at him - weird to think he was already dead, really all-the-way dead in some other universe, and that it’s probably not the only one. Joshua… the Joshua from his dimension… had he hung out with that other Neku, in that Tin Pin world? The whole week Neku had been trying not to grieve - and Joshua had been fine, as he always was. Could he be doing it now? Why not? Neku’s not working out as a boyfriend, not saying the right thing or doing the right thing, but there’s probably a Neku out there who can and will be whatever Joshua wants.

Maybe all the Joshuas have a time-share. Neku thinks, with a perfect combination of wanting to giggle and never smile again.

“What do you want from him, Neku? What do you think he can give you?”

The angel is allowing him some time to process everything, here in this quiet, peaceful world - or
at least, Neku guesses it’s what he’s supposed to think. Still trying to be friendly, and just because Brede’s dishing dirt on Mr. H and Joshua and even if it’s all true, it doesn’t mean the Angel doesn’t have his own agenda. The question still makes him look down rather than answer, watching the light outline his toes as he puts his full weight on the sand. Brede had shown him how to wish his shoes away and back again, a simple, meaningless trick that still felt like he was betraying Joshua, somehow.

Brede sighs. “Composers aren’t really built for love, you know. It’s novel for him, to be reminded what it’s like to care. At least for now.”

“Yeah. I know, okay? I think I figured that out.”

*If not him, then what?* is what Neku wants to say, because the Angel can show him a thousand other wonders in as many spectacular worlds, and all he can think about is what Joshua will say when Neku tells him. Imagining the way he’d smirk and feign total disinterest, imagining how he’d come up with his own, better story - the best part is that Neku knows whatever he can think up isn’t going to be at all right, Joshua nothing if not a constant, irritating, marvelous surprise.

“It’s what’s right for Shibuya. Joshua’s right for Shibuya. Mr. H… he did what he thought he had to do.”

Brede stops, and Neku halts a step behind him, doesn’t move even though the Angel isn’t looking at him, eyes cast to the horizon.

“By all of man’s hopes and fears, and all the wonders poets sing, the laughter of unclouded years, and every sad and lovely thing.” He glances back at Neku. “Make me a man, O Lord. Hodgson. Killed by the machine gun. Invented by a Sir Hiram Maxim, on the advice of a… close acquaintance. How good are you with the first World War?”

Neku shakes his head. “Not very.”

“I’d avoid it. After a while, keeping track of the poets that were gunned down… it gets stale.” A distinct edge in the Angel’s voice. Neku takes a small, careful step forward, still can’t quite see the look on his face.

“You weren’t… you weren’t there, were you?”

“Oh, everyone was. The Composers might have been neutral, some of them, but the Angels - there was no stopping, not even slowing down, not for years. You can’t imagine, Neku, what it does to the whole of the UG, a war like that. No way to collect a single Soul in the place where the greatest amount of them are doing the dying. There isn’t a Composer yet who can handle that kind of strain, to keep a Game going in the middle of that much chaos. So many vanish, and we can’t do anything, and the Noise grows and grows, unchecked, growing in numbers and fury. Threatening to spill over into the Games that remain, and the echoes go on and on. One war into the next, and the next. It’s the greatest weapon they have.”

“… you’re talking about the Fallen.”

“I’m talking about a single whisper in the ear of the right man. A simple suggestion, to make a weapon that would come to kill millions, tens of millions, and change the whole of the world. It is not all the Fallen do, but there are times when they don’t have to do any more.”

Difficult enough, to imagine CAT helping Minamimoto. Impossible to turn his idol into such a monster.
“Mr. H wouldn’t do that. He just… that’s crazy. I know that he - I get it, what he did to the Noise, but he was just trying to help.”

“Yes, he was. He realized he’d failed. He put too much trust in his suicidal Composer, and then took it upon himself to find a solution, believing that his own future was all he’d placed in the balance. As if anyone gave a damn at all, if Sanae Hanekoma went Fallen.” The Angel is angry, and Neku can feel his own wings shifting down, as if to protect himself, to present as small a target as possible. “We have rules to keep ourselves in line, most of all, Neku. The power we have - when we make mistakes, everyone pays. When we think that we know, that we can…”

Brede stops himself. “It would be easier just to show you.”

It takes a moment for Neku to realize the Angel is asking permission, rather than simply taking him wherever he thinks will best suit his argument, and yes, that is his heart beating a bit faster now, thanks. For a moment, Neku’s tempted to say no, already full to the brim with things he can’t quite believe, and willing to take the Angel at his word. Maybe the smallest chance, though, that Brede is just trying to lead him on, that whatever he’s going to show off won’t look the same to Neku’s eyes, seeing it from outside of an Angelic perspective.

Neku’s not in their league, he’s just not. Maybe he looks better than Joshua by comparison, but that’s not exactly hard. If he goes, and doesn’t see what Brede wants him to see, maybe the Angel will realize his mistake.

“… okay. Sure.”

“Brace yourself. It’s not exactly… pleasant.”

Neku’s not sure what he’s supposed to do with that information, and he shifts his feet against the ground, summons his shoes back into being. Brede’s wings unfold, stretching out - this shift apparently taking more concentration than before - and the world blurs out around him.

Neku’s on his knees the instant they touch down, one hand against the ground and bracing all of his weight, the feel of it like a kick in the chest before he’s even figured out why it feels so wrong, so empty - nothing. Nothing. He’s straining with everything he’s got before he realizes what he’s doing, searching in a silence so profound his ears are ringing but this is worse. This is the kind of quiet he’s never known before, not in Shinjuku and not in Joshua’s throne room and not even… not even…

Maybe. Maybe the whisper of it, when he’d sat in that limbo within Shibuya and thought about vanishing forever, and Neku shudders all the way to the tips of his wings, teeth chattering with the force of it. It’s like cold but it’s not cold, the absence of Music, of a UG, of any Underground at all. The stone beneath his hand is filthy, soaked in water and mud and ash. More of it, falling like snow from a sodden, dishwater sky, and even before he looks Neku knows there is no life here. No noise. No Noise. Nothing will ever sing in this world again.

It’s like Brede said, Neku’s seen enough apocalypse movies, that he can take it all in without having to ask how or why. The husks of what are close enough to be cars, abandoned, half-destroyed. The buildings, some rendered down to dark, charred outlines, others whole, with their windows smashed. Barricades block many of the streets, pieced together from the wreckage, and twined here and there are bits of wood, with the remainders of what he soon realizes are signs.

The same symbol, repeated over and over, blue and silver on posters, hints of blue peeking out from under the drifts of ash. Bits and pieces, it’s difficult for Neku to piece together the whole, but eventually he gets close. The spiral of what looks like some kind of cocoon, with what must be an
Angel’s wing, rising up, breaking free. He supposes once, it must have been a symbol of hope. It is everywhere, painted on walls, on flags - or at least on bits of what once were flags, curling out in the wind with a rustling sound Neku never thought could be so terrible, as if the corner of the world itself had come undone. It sounds out in counterpoint, to a soft, uneven clicking, and Neku lets out a strangled little sound, staring at the uneven strings of skeletal hands dangling from long ropes above their heads.

“By the time they started cutting the hands off all the artists, most of the Angels had given this world up for lost. A few of them stayed, trying to undo what had been done, to save anything they could. The Noise was… it had gone Taboo of its own accord, by the end of it. Finally devouring itself in a frenzy of mad rage, when there were no Souls left to feed on. Of course, none of it was supposed to happen.”

He wonders how many times Brede has been here. The Angel’s voice is calm and flat, like a docent in a museum, in front of some staged, taxidermied scene. Neku thinks he ought to be shouting, or maybe throwing up, if he could get his thoughts together long enough to remember how.

“The Fallen,” he whispers, looking around as if the silence itself might swoop in to attack, “the Fallen did this?”

“All a matter of perspective. At the beginning, it was much like any other world, with harmonies and conflicts and Games. However, it also was home to an Angel who felt that the Composers were an… unnecessary complication in what would otherwise be a simple, perfect system. An interesting theory, with potentially ground-breaking ramifications, at a time when certain tensions ran… particularly high. He was intelligent, and charismatic, and there were many who came to agree with him - not just in this world, but across others as well. The Composers here, and some of those elsewhere became aware of it. It enraged them, of course. This world began to have problems, but most were willing to see it through, the worst-case scenario… well, it quickly grew beyond that. Producers were Erased - Angels fighting Angels, in some places - along with Composers, Conductors - entire Games worth of Reapers. The chaos grew so intense, there were some that said the Fallen had to be fault - that the Angel who’d started it, he had to be one of them.”

“It was true, wasn’t it.”

“Neku,” Brede’s wings lower, nearly flush against his spine. Brede needs to keep talking, Neku really needs the Angel to keep telling his awful, terrible story, to drown out the sound of bone brushing against bone, the hush of the wind along the empty streets, “there are those in the Higher Plane who believe only in absolutes, that there are Angels and Fallen and a clear distinction between them. A matter of obvious evil and intentional sin. The Angels who did this, who swept this world clean of those beneath them and tried to run it on their own, they Fell in the cause of what was good, and right. This world was destroyed in the name of beauty, and hope for a better future - they didn’t intend for this to happen. No one could have.”

“… then how?”

“It is what we are. The reason the Game is as it is, the reason there are rules that deem us Fallen, the reason we keep ourselves in such tight control. Human beings create possibilities, an almost infinite variety. Angels create certainties. We are meant to guide, to nurture and tend - the moment we overstep those bounds, the moment we go further than we know is wise, whatever the reason - this world was doomed the moment the Angels decided they could save it. Sanae Hanekoma Fell the moment he put himself above our rules - it doesn’t matter why. The fact that he did it, because
“He didn’t, though! Joshua didn’t destroy Shibuya!” Neku wonders where exactly this universe is, in what collection. He wants it to be far, far away from the world he knows. Maybe he isn’t even here and never was. Maybe no one he knows lived here, or died here, no one who was ever anything like anyone he’s ever passed on the street. He desperately needs it to be true and knows it can’t be.

“Neku, you won’t be enough. I know how much you want to be, but when Kiryu makes his choice, it… the world, the one where you weren’t a part of it? Who do you think made that happen?”

Neku’s hands clench, mostly because fists can’t tremble. “So there’s a world where he pulls the trigger and walks away. I’m sure there’s a world where I do too.”

“Why do you think the Higher Plane has shown this much interest in you, now? Quite a few Joshuas end up finding quite a few Nekus, but no matter who you are or who he is, things don’t tend to skew in your favor. You need to think about it… even if you go with him to the end, what if it’s not far enough? What happens the next time he grows tired of Shibuya, and you can’t change his mind?”

“But…”

“I’m not asking you to walk away today, Neku. You don’t even need to believe what I’m saying, but I want you to hear it - you can love him all you want, and it won’t save him. I wanted you to see us for what we are, our glories as well as our flaws. You decide who’s told you the truth, and who said nothing at all. You need to know, no matter what, that you have a place with us. No judgments, no I-told-you-so. It’s your right - your right - to Ascend. Your choice and no one else’s, to do what you were meant to do.”

He wants to say something stubborn, or clever. He wants to be Joshua, just for this moment, who would know how to keep the Angel from feeling as if he’d come out of this the clear victor. Instead, Neku can feel the words coming out in a rush, stupid and defeated and he doesn’t even care.

“Can we please get out of here?”

The last thing anyone needs after skipping to that particular dimension is to be left alone. So Brede gets them back to Shibuya, nudges Neku in the direction of a ramen shop, and walks away. The poor kid is anchored fast to his Music, and pulls away with an almost audible tearing sound. Neku flinches, but obviously doesn’t know why, taking a few wobbly steps through the door, to find a bowl of ramen or seven that the Angel knows will do nothing for the chill. Even the laziest Composers will teach their Conductors how to protect their Music, if only to defend themselves, but Neku is too young and too emotional for that kind of control and of course his useless Composer taught him nothing.

If Brede had really wanted him, Neku could have been his before they’d ever left the moon. Poor kid.

A few keystrokes, and the block he’d put on Neku’s cell phone is disabled - little more annoying than being interrupted in the middle of a sales pitch. If Kiryu had noticed, Brede has no doubt his pride would be enough to keep Neku from finding out. Nothing quite as reliable as a Composer’s boundless ego.
A few, tiny skips in reality, and he’s walking through the door of the nearest pachinko parlor. The frantic cycles of light and noise inside the mirrored hall are fairly soothing, no way he’d want to come back to a place any smaller than Tokyo after going where he had. All this time and it can still rattle him, each visit as bad as the very first. He moves to the back corner, where two men sit, one of them typing steadily into his phone, while his companion has just finished smacking his machine in energetic frustration.

“I’m so much better at slot machines,” the man says, without looking up, giving the machine a final, disdainful thump. “Where did you go?”

“I showed him the Dead Game.”

“Wow, you’re nice. Why not just unload a clip in a basket of puppies while you’re at it?”

Ezra is the youngest of his current associates, born somewhere between the invention of the zeppelin and the double-bladed razor. A passion for Art Deco and an unfortunate accident abroad had put him in a foreign Game, and his own skills had kept him alive just in time for the Great War. He’d survived, he’d kept guard at the edge of the worst of it, holding the Taboo Noise at bay so that Games could go on at the periphery, without asking for help or even asking why. By the time it was through, he’d obviously Ascended, though they’d had to take him aside to explain just what that meant.

He’s enjoyed upgrading his hats over the years, from fedoras to derbys to an inexplicable fondness for cowboy hats, and a recent, rather unfortunate trucker hat phase. Currently he’s sporting a retro - and that word always makes him laugh - duckbill, tan with a bit of a stylized graphic on one side. Hard to tell, from the childish eagerness with which he dives into everything, but Ezra’s dealt with his share of Fallen, and there’s few Brede would rather have at his back.

“I found, like, six new things in the convenience store that taste like shrimp.” Still not looking at him, eyes darting between the tiny balls and the colored lights and Brede’s sure he doesn’t care if he’s winning. “Still holding out for a shrimp-flavored Kit Kat.”

“Good move, throwing that boy in his way.”

“Ex-boyfriend? I couldn’t quite tell.” Ezra is also good at noticing connections, subtle patterns in the Music even other Angels would overlook. It hadn’t been necessary, to throw Neku so badly off-balance from the very first, but there was something to be said for attacking from a position of strength. Neku had been badly upset, Music reaching for his the moment Brede had arrived, needing anything steady to hold onto.

“Bad timing, or they might have been.” Brede says, leaning over the shoulder of the other man, still typing into his phone. He has a good team - Ezra in the front, to attract attention, while Brede says anything that needs to be said - and Dev - Devante, always silent, always waiting in the shadows. Taking down Fallen so quickly that they’ve often vanished before the confused look is off their faces, unable to figure out where the fatal blow came from.

He is very much the soldier, close-cropped hair and understated clothes, an olive complexion that could set him anywhere from South America to Greece to the Middle East with little trouble. Dev blends, disappearing at will, even his Music a subtle, muted thing. In over six centuries of working together, Brede knows maybe five things for sure about the man - and really, he can only be mostly sure he’s a man. A poet and a critic, though with the advent of the Internet to keep him anonymous, Dev’s one of the many Angels who’ve come to spend their time rifling through the world’s Imagination, like the obsessive scours of some global record store. He has had several centuries to sharpen his words, and writes as sparingly as he speaks - maybe not what he’d
intended, to use such talents mostly to win at flame wars, but what is life, if not swinging for the curve balls?

He hasn’t been here for long, but it’s little surprise that Dev’s already picked a target, some local trend-follower who calls himself the Duke or the Prince or something. Just over five-hundred e-mails in his box and climbing, no doubt screaming for his blood for attacking their beloved icon. It seems he’s just getting started.

“He reminds me of my little brother,” Dev says softly, without looking up. Six things Brede now knows for sure.

The machine lets out an ear-piercing burst of tinny music, and Dev stands up as Ezra drops his hat, letting it fill up with a minor jackpot, hardly worth all the fuss. Brede has kept an ear to Neku’s Music - still soft, struggling to regain its momentum - and watches Dev flicker at the door, never looking up from his phone. He can let the other Angel take over now, hearing him move into place, trailing the boy back home. Neku will be guarded, carefully observed and protected until the moment they’ve dealt with whatever is lurking in the corners of the Shibuya Game.

Brede steps out the door as Ezra goes to collect his winnings, the nearest convenience store perhaps their next destination. He lights a cigarette, and then another off the end of his own, passing it to Ezra as the door opens behind him. A parcel of girls pass by, all bright, unfocused energy, and they giggle when Ezra tips his hat.

“He reminds me of my little brother too, and I was an only child. No wonder the higher-ups want him so bad.”

“He’s fresh blood, and they think they can have him on their terms.”

Powerful enough to Ascend, and yet with a fresh Imagination, surely cultivating that vitality wherever he went, even as he grew into his powers. The Higher Plane is constantly bickering amongst itself, whether or not they grow stagnant - if so, how much? If so, how to change it? A vast plain for disagreement, between the two extremes. On one side, the stultifying Angelic bureaucracy, all analysis and no production, what little work gets made flavorless and dull. On the other side… the Dead Game, the empty world. Inspiration pushed to its limits, warped into rule-breaking without the thought of consequence, Imagination run wild until it had spilled over into the Realground and burnt up everyone and everything in its wake.

He hopes Neku can understand now, why they are so cautious. That it will be easier to apologize later, for lying to him now.

Ezra takes a long drag off his cigarette. “You want him for our team?”

“We’d never get him. The only reason they’re letting me do this is because I convinced them it would take care of everything at once. Half of them still think we’re chasing shadows, but Hanekoma’s made a hell of a lot of enemies, and that Composer of his doesn’t improve anyone’s mood.”

Hanekoma is a Fallen, by all but the barest of technicalities, and the fact that his last-ditch scheme had in some measure succeeded should never have been enough to keep his wings out of the fire. His work is trite, if not derivative, and really, how popular would CAT continue to be without his death grip on one of the most prominent Games in the world?

Brede shuts his eyes, needing a different view than the back of the neighboring building, and when he opens them again they are perched the north strut of the Rainbow Bridge, nothing but lights
below them and around them. Densely packed, flickering on and off here and there, as if they’d just moved into a bigger game parlor.

“Kariya is here. The Crane.”

“The assassin?” Ezra ashes his cigarette over the bay. “I’d sure love to take him on, just some friendly competition. He knows about the Fallen?”

“He knows something. Might be the reason he hasn’t gotten rid of Hanekoma yet - that’s why he thinks I’m here, that the Higher Plane is irritated with his hesitation. But… he knows it’s here. Probably annoyed that we want to get in on his kill.”

Ezra nods, a thoughtful, distant expression in his eyes. No one who has faced even one of the Fallen takes a fight lightly - the Higher Plane likes to pretend that high ideals give them an upper hand, and Brede could only wish it were that easy, that there was any certain way to have the advantage. Especially in this case, this particular Fallen slipping in and out of the UG in an entirely new way, moving so quickly and subtly there is hardly a trace it was ever there at all. Another reason for the rules, that Taboo Noise almost always meant the Fall - once you cracked open those boundaries, all sorts of things might decide to come out and play.

“The Composer really hasn’t noticed anything?”

“The censure’s taken away far more than either one of them will let on, and Kiryu’s too busy burning bridges to watch the gate.”

All but throwing his Conductor away in a fit of pique, as if trying to make it as easy as possible for Brede to argue Neku into Ascending. He can only imagine the sort of terrible offense Neku had committed, probably slipping up and showing an actual human feeling, that alone enough to cast him out of the Composer’s good graces. Joshua probably thinks it’s all so personal, but unlike those in the higher ranks, Brede can’t quite care enough to loathe the spoiled little twit.

He inhales, exhales, not really tasting the smoke. It’s mostly something to do with his hands, to distract him just enough from his thoughts. Brede likes to believe that Dev’s perpetual silence hides a perfect equanimity, if only that someday he might attain the same. He’d thought, once, that it was just a matter of time, and he’d had all the time there was.

Something to be said, of course, for refined Imagination, for the true masters of their art and the years of study it requires, but the sheer exuberance of Neku’s Imagination is intoxicating, more raw potential, more promise than Brede had seen in what felt like a thousand years, and he wasn’t nearly so old.

"What will it affect when all is done?" thinks Major Tom,” Ezra says softly, and grins at him, taking note of his sudden pensiveness. Many of the Angels recite poems and hoard quotes, those small, perfect moments of personal inspiration, gathered together over the ages. He is no different, though there are some that Brede hasn’t spoken aloud in centuries, even younger Angels unfamiliar with the source.

He made swords, once, a very long time ago. The perfect expression of both form and function, or so Brede had thought. Fortunately, before the time had passed to refine the craft and reduce his place in it, no one had needed swords anymore. As a young Angel, Brede had turned to ceramics instead. Always the tangible arts, he’d liked the process as much as the result - but the things he’d made then, anyone could buy them now by the crateful. A dollar a piece for what used to be considered irreplaceable. The anger he feels, the insult of it borders on dangerous ground, but for all that the Game is supposed to nurture greatness, to make the world a better place, he is not
always certain it is so.

Brede has watched the world progress, and change - and he has seen so many beautiful things disappear. Artists of breathtaking ability who had died penniless, or even those brilliant Souls in their own time, forgotten almost from the moment they had been buried.

What if it doesn't matter? What if everything we do means nothing at all?

It is a Fallen question, such doubt. Brede knows it, and thinks it softly, and yet it remains. So much work, a lifetime’s worth of effort for what is only transitory, when it is appreciated at all. What if all of this, this city and these people and every Game and even the Higher Plane are nothing more than a tinkling music box in an empty room, slowly winding down?

The ends of Brede’s wings shiver. If the other angel notices, he’ll think it is only the wind.

“Sakuraba is badly off-balance, and vulnerable now.” He speaks calmly into the silence. “The perfect bait. The Fallen will reveal itself, and when it does we take it down. Until then, full coverage on Shibuya’s Conductor. Don’t even blink. Pack plenty of snacks.”

Ezra flicks him a quick, mock salute and vanishes into the night, probably off to stuff himself on late-night kaiten sushi before taking Dev’s place on watch. The younger Angel has no problems with the world, still paints when he is inspired - still is inspired, but then he’s also little more than a century old, and the world still mostly remembers what he remembers.

Name-dropping is the other constant, along with the tendency toward poetry. Always someone in the Higher Plane happy to brag of their time with this or that well-known genius, though talent alone does not an Angel make, and Brede has seen as many famous names scoff at the idea of being Producers as those who accept the position. One of those things the Angels never talk about, what happens after - not for those who Fall or who are erased, but those who simply fade away. Returning to the RG, to be reborn - or Ascending even higher, to some unknown, greater destiny? No one knows, and the Angels don’t like to talk about what they don’t know.

Brede shuts his eyes, lets the Music of the vast city fill him, point and counterpoint - the Fallen can’t hear the Music, once they’ve been cast down, that’s what everyone says. It’s only static for them, barely the whisper of what ought to be, and if there were nothing else that would be enough to keep him on the path of the righteous. Whatever subtle disappointments there are in the world, Brede will not falter, will not hesitate simply because he is frustrated or unhappy with the answers as they stand. He may not be content, not as certain as he once was, but he can still be useful, and hunting the Fallen still comes close to reminding him of what it felt like, to give metal an edge and make it shine, to put a little of himself out there in the world.

Of course it isn’t fair, to do this to Neku, but the Fallen will go after him regardless, and this is the best way - if not the only way - to control the outcome. Hanekoma will be blamed, in the aftermath, for allowing such a thing to threaten the Conductor who is not a Conductor, to threaten Shibuya so soon after it had gone unstable. He will be cast out, along with the Composer, and Neku will Ascend to Produce a bright and glorious future. At last, a challenge worthy of his ability.

If Brede is not as excited as the thought merits, if the current course is not quite as heartening as it ought to be, it is only that he is so certain of his success. As if victory is a place he could visit now, if he wanted to.

Chapter End Notes
1. Chapter title - Band of Horses (Cee-Lo cover) - “No One’s Gonna Love You”
2. The poem Brede quotes is W.N Hodgson - ‘Before Action’
3. Ezra’s quoting Peter Schilling’s “Major Tom (Coming Home)”
4. Huge thanks to Flidget, for everything and then some.
it's a hell of a role if you can keep it alive

Chapter Notes

Chapter title - Elliot Smith, 'King’s Crossing'

The French word of the day is orthographe, which is useless but that’s fine, since Eri’s not at all sure Paris is the right place to start. The Italian word is velocita, and that’s just a curse - nothing moves fast enough, stuck in class and bored out of her mind while hemlines rise and fall without her input. The English word of the day is breakfast, and in New York City that means bagels and lox and okay, maybe basing her deep suspicion of cream cheese entirely off of one sketchy philly maki isn’t fair, when she really should have known better, but still…

Eri snaps her phone shut as she turns the corner, a long wall and a row of flowering trees marking the edge of St. Ursula’s campus. Clusters of girls wave to her in their matching dark uniforms as she passes by, the trees scattering leaves now the same way they do petals in the spring. It’s all very, very shojo manga. Including the part where Eri’s making plans to steal Shiki away with her to distant shores and never give Shiki’s mother a forwarding address.

She really loathes putting off tough decisions. It’s easier to push forward and deal with the consequences as they come, but there’s no way to avoid stealth mode this time. Preparing to argue Shiki into a more artistic but ever-so-slightly-less prestigious high-school, where they’ll have more time for design and less for pretending they want to do something else with their lives.

Eri’s father doesn’t think much of her ambitions, but Eri’s father lives an hour out from Kyoto and she hasn’t paid attention to him since she was five, which was about five years longer than her mother bothered with. It’s amazing to her, that Shiki comes from a home that isn’t ‘broken’, and yet Eri is absolutely sure she has the better deal.

It isn’t that the Misakis are bad people, not violent or cruel or… anything, really. She’s been over to dinner a few times, all quiet and tepid conversation. Lifeless and empty, nothing at all like the way she and her mother usually end up standing around the fridge, bickering about the news of the day between bites of whatever doesn’t need cooking.

A good psychologist could write a whole book on Shiki’s mother, probably even a series. Eri can’t imagine what sort of dark secrets in her past have left her so hell-bent on teaching her daughter how to live a small and dull life, with flatlined expectations. How to avoid taking credit for her hard work and how not to expect much from the world. A bits-and-pieces sort of discouragement, as if disappointment in advance hurts less than the regular kind.

Also she has terrible taste in combining patterns, and wears enough beige to make her look like a statue made of miso paste, but even Eri knows that’s just being picky.

The trunk show threw down a gauntlet she’d never intended to. Eri knows pretty well how to deal with adults, not that they generally have a problem with her good grades and her politeness and her vast social armada. Up until now, Eri was sure she was golden in the eyes of the Misakis. The perfect, harmless friend for their harmless little girl.

Things are no longer quite so simple. All the proof she needed was Shiki’s stammering, nervous
unhappiness the day after that first taste of success. It hadn’t taken much convincing to get the story, filling in all the blanks Shiki politely tried to dance around.

Shiki’s mother thinks Eri makes Shiki do all the work. Shiki’s mother thinks Eri takes all the credit. Shiki’s mother thinks Eri does all the talking because Eri is not a friend, but a walking ego in hooker boots. Eri’s mother is a terrible parent, for many reasons beyond those boots, but certainly for supporting an unrealistic, childish dream. Shiki should not be a seamstress. Shiki should not be a designer. Shiki shouldn’t even be considering a part-time job in one of Shibuya’s higher-end boutiques. She should be something sensible. Safe. An accountant.

Maybe that’s aiming too high. Accountants have secretaries, don’t they?

Shiki’s mother also thinks Shiki is spending too much time with boys, by which she means boy, by which she means Neku, and at that point Eri’s fury had bubbled out into disbelieving laughter, amused and astonished and infuriated in turn. She does try, she really does try to respect Shiki’s mother for the simple fact she’s responsible for putting Shiki in the world, but really, how on Earth does she think she can plot out her daughter’s future when she doesn’t understand a thing going on in front of her now?

As if Neku isn’t the best thing to happen to Shiki in years, and maybe Eri just needs to show the woman some more pictures, like Neku in nail polish or that time they’d jumped him with a few choice pieces from Lapin Angelique.

What can she say, the boy’s got the ass for layered ruffles.

It isn’t always easy having Shiki for her partner and very best friend, which is one of those things Eri would never say under pain of death, puff-paint or semi-formal jorts. Shiki is always second-guessing herself - thanks again, Mrs. Misaki. Forever convinced she’s replaceable, certain there’s something about her that just isn’t quite as good as everyone else. Nothing Eri can say or do, no gift or pep talk or argument has ever convinced her otherwise.

It’s better now, not because of anything she did. She refuses to feel jealous of Neku, for being able to give Shiki what she couldn’t, for being what she needs.

Everyone’s got a checklist in their heart, the things they want, the things they know better than to ever expect to get. Eri wants to design for Oscar night, wants to see what she’s drawn on more than one A-lister, and have every blog on her bookmark list give her high marks. Eri wants to create the next pillbox hat, the miniskirt, some bit of fashion that will go right into the history books, so popular and well-known they will have to look it up to realize it actually came from one person, from her.

Neku put an ‘x’ in at least a couple of Shiki’s boxes. He’s a boy, a boy who’s cool and smart and who likes her, and it doesn’t matter if Neku’s got a boyfriend or Shiki’s got a girlfriend, the point is that he was her friend before Eri even knew his name. He was Shiki’s friend first, and it makes Eri’s heart ache, knowing how important that is, and how much Shiki needed it.

At least Neku seems just as set on being an artist as they are, and might even end up at the same school and maybe even the same college, and they can all rent a shitty apartment and be fabulous and starving together until the inevitable day the world recognizes their genius. Eri gets it. Nobody believes it, but she knows that this is going to be a fight. It’s going to be a lot of hard work, against designers out there from all over the world. All as young and smart and talented as they are - well, almost as talented - and she needs to know that Shiki understands, that she’s on Eri’s checklist and always has been, and not just because Eri has trouble sewing buttons on straight.
It will be tedious, thinking of new ways to dodge Shiki’s mother, but Eri’s good at telling adults what they want to hear. She can figure this out, the same old balancing act of trying to be encouraging without being too aggressive, being stubborn without pushing Shiki faster than she’s willing to go, than the boundaries of her confidence will allow.

Unless she fumbles. Like she did before.

Eri doesn’t remember the fight well, not the details or what started it or even how long it lasted. The only reason she’s sure it happened at all is because of how much she wishes it hadn’t.

She can guess some of the things she said, even though it’s not fair to ask Shiki to be more confident, to stand up to her mother or anyone. If there was a fight, it would have been because Shiki refused to fight, the line between being shy and not believing in her work, not even being brave enough to reach for their dream. It’s not Shiki’s fault, even if it feels sometimes like she’s punishing Eri for being the popular one, the one who steps up and speaks out because well, someone has to be.

Thinking about the aftermath, fuzzy as it is, still leaves her stomach in knots. Eri’s pretty sure she’d made Shiki cry, and run away, and then… Eri doesn’t know, and doesn’t really want to know. Following that train of thought only leads to a dark, empty place all her thoughts shy away from, that somehow there was no apology big enough and she’d lost Shiki forever.

Eri can’t let that happen, she can’t do this alone, there’s no backup plan and she doesn’t want one anyway. It’s Shiki & Eri, like Dolce & Gabanna or Viktor & Rolf.

It’s little Eri, who’s been drawing matching wedding dresses since she was seven years old - seven - downright traumatic explosions of lace and flowers and puffy sleeves and thankfully she’s grown out of appalling judgment of her younger years. This year’s design is more classic, a Regency waist and long gloves to match and only the question of where to get the embroidery done, what will be up to Shiki’s standards if she can’t stitch it herself.

Life just won’t be any fun without Shiki to share it with, and if it comes down to another fight that’s what Eri’s going to say right from the start. Well, that and “let’s run away together and have breakfast in New York City. Just the lox.”

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Shiki comes to school from the opposite direction, and usually arrives first, so when Eri turns the corner into the campus courtyard the trees are rustling and the leaves are blowing… shojo manga all the way. It really doesn’t feel like the day’s even started until Eri sees her smile. So when Shiki is scowling into her cell phone with what might be tears in the corner of her eyes, Eri… well, all right, so she’s in auto-kill mode. It happens.

No one’s dared to tease Shiki for years now, so that narrows down the list to either Shiki’s Horrible Mother or maybe something to do with Neku. Shiki worries about him - and it’s sweet, it really is - but just because Eri likes him doesn’t mean she’s about to let Neku make Shiki cry and hopefully it’s something else. There’s only so many consecutive murders she can multitask.

Eri doesn’t bother with hello, or asking what’s wrong, just slips her arms around Shiki’s waist and puts her chin on her shoulder, looking down at the display on her cell phone. It’s F-Yeah!, the official Eji Oji fanboard, she can tell by the wallpaper - lime green, with little winged Prince heads reduced to dots on the tiny screen. She breathes a sigh of relief, though she still squeezes Shiki a bit tighter.
“Funny how much working on the Internet looks like screaming at people on the Internet.”

“We’re at war.” Shiki growls, not intending to be cute and all the more adorable for it. It’s a good thing they’re girls, Eri would have no problem hanging off of her regardless, but it’s so much easier to get away with it this way. Shiki relaxes a little, leaning back against her, and takes a deep breath.

“You know that sketch you sent me last night - it’s not physically possible to actually sew that.”

Eri shrugs. “Ok then, sequins.”

“Sequins aren’t a compromise.” Shiki makes a face, still typing furiously into the screen, the phone wobbling enough that Eri can’t read whatever’s going on. “Do you think it’s a mistake to hem pleather with hot glue?”

“Pleather is a mistake,” Eri responds automatically. “The Prince isn’t wearing pleather, is he? I thought we had emergency alerts for that kind of thing.”

“No. Some jerk troll’s written up this whole… this… just bashing the Prince. He says he’s… argh, ‘barely one-dimensional’, that his ‘only redeeming feature is being a part of the electronic age, where at least he can be ignored with a single click of the mouse.’ He’s an ‘icon for those young ladies not quite ready to bother with actual thinking’ and and,” Shiki shakes the phone until her charms jingle, “He’s just… such a stupid jerk!”

“I guess that last chapter of the manga did seem a little like filler.” Eri smiles innocently as Shiki turns to glare at her. “Oh, don’t get me wrong, we still need to kneecap him. It’s our duty as veteran commenters.”

Eri takes the cell phone out of Shiki’s hands and steps back, though it’s clear this jackass, whoever he is, is already facing down the combined forces of the F-army, post after post screaming about various pieces of his ‘manifesto’. Eri’s eyes pick out the usual criticisms, ‘vacant’ and ‘shallow’ and ‘like an idol singer without the mediocre defense of a bad playlist or a short hemline’ - all right, so that’s one’s new.

“In the end, Oji’s kingdom is just another… Potemkin village? Really? The piddling reign of a badly aging plagiarist? Oh no, you didn’t.” Eri says, shocked to grinning at the audacity of some idiot who at least might actually be using his real name. He has a website, at any rate, making no attempt to hide himself or his - wow - rather extensive opinions about how much he hates everything. All right, so she has a bit of tentative respect for this new enemy, and she’d certainly rather spend the morning fighting on the Internet than paying attention in class anyway.

Eri cancels out of the browser, ready to spend at least a few minutes on the way into class calming Shiki down, but just as she’s about to hand the phone back she stops, staring at the wallpaper.

“What the…”

“Oh, no.” Shiki mutters. “Eri…”

A lot of the time Shiki’s wallpaper will be some picture of the two of them, but ever since she accidentally erased her photo of her with the Prince at one of his IRL appearances from her archives, Shiki occasionally puts any important pictures up as her wallpaper, just to keep from losing them. Eri can see why this one is important, even though it isn’t framed quite right, with some random tourist in the background. It’s Neku, with another boy in a school uniform standing over him, and from the gutted look on Neku’s face there’s only one possible explanation for what this is all about.
“You have a really good camera on this thing.” Eri says, quickly tapping the buttons that will send the picture from Shiki’s phone to hers. Eri knows how to use Shiki’s cell just as well as her own. Eri knows how to get the name of this boy, which class he’s in and his inseam before lunchtime.

“Eri, Neku looked really upset. I don’t even know who that is. I just…”

“You know who that is. I know who that is. This is that little douchebag of an ex Neku doesn’t talk about. The one who turned him into emo Bambi.” She takes another moment to admire Shiki’s megapixel count. “He has really terrible hair for so much angst.”

“I… I don’t know what to do.”

“We destroy him, obviously.”

“Eri!”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything just yet.” Eri says, a few more button taps e-mailing twenty-seven people with the photo attached, and a link back to her own e-mail, asking for an ID. “It’s reconnaissance. Besides, you’re the one who took the picture.”

“I was just… passing by. I didn’t… I mean…”

“You really are the cutest little stalker ever.”

“Eri.”

She gives up the phone, no more damage to be done and Shiki knows it even as she takes it back.

“You said Neku was upset. Did you call him?”

Shiki bites a little at her lip. “He’s not answering his phone. I left him a message. Two messages.” She’s embarrassed, as that’s two more messages than she’s ever left any boy ever for any reason. “He’s been acting… I don’t think he’s feeling well.”

Eri pulls out her own phone, ignoring the e-mail alerts, an easy dozen messages from F-Yeah!, outraged commenters and even a few mods howling for blood. Luckily, school hasn’t started just yet for St. Michael’s either, though that wouldn’t stop most of the people she talks to. It only takes a few moments for a reply to her text.

“It doesn’t look like Neku’s in class yet. What about that boyfriend of his? You know, what’s his name? I’m sure he’d be real interested to hear about this.”

“Who?”

“You remember, we met him the once.”

Eri ought to have found a way to get his e-mail out of him when they’d met, or if nothing else she should have swipe his phone. Funny that she hadn’t, the same way it’s odd that she can’t quite get a fix on what he’d looked like. Eri can put him next to Neku, just about the same height. He was quiet, and had a tendency to fade into the background. Almost like the wallpaper, except Eri remembers a definite sense of self-satisfaction, and no small amount of money to back it up. Neku was dating very expensive, smug wallpaper.

The bell rings, and Eri all but growls under her breath, even though she’ll keep her phone on and is certain she’ll at least have a name before second period.
“Eri, please don’t… do anything crazy. Neku, I think this really hurt him. I don’t think he wants anyone to know about it, not even us.”

Sometimes Shiki is right, and Eri pushes harder than she should, but sometimes people need a push, whether they’ll thank her for it later or not - the power of friendship as a firm and supportive kick in the ass. It’s all right if Neku is annoyed at her for a while over this. Eri likes him, but his worst scowl is easier to deal with than five more minutes of Shiki’s worried frown.

What’s the deal anyway, if Neku’s not feeling well, if the ex has shown his face and this boyfriend isn’t already on it? If little rich boy cares as much as he’s supposed to, he should already be there. Eri should arrive to find him already taking care of the problem. If he’s not… well, that might be something she’ll need to get involved with too.

“I’m not going to make a meme out of him, I promise. If this guy hurt Neku, and he’s back in the picture, we just have to make sure he gets out of the picture, right?” After a moment, Shiki nods, and Eri smiles. “So, then… why don’t we track down Neku’s boyfriend, and see what he thinks we should do?”

Eri is pretty sure the wallpaper will second her plan to crush him, and maybe drop the card for a decent stylist on whatever’s left of the body.

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Neku roars back into consciousness with his heart pounding, a terrified, blind, absolute panic, bathed in sweat and curled on the floor with his blankets all wadded tight against his chest.

The sixth time in an hour. At least he hopes it’s been an hour.

He’s freezing. The A/C is on, full blast, not that it’s warm out or he even remembers turning it on. At some point, he’d ripped his curtains right off the window, the sickly yellow streetlight shining in and the back of his throat tastes like a whole lot of ramen thrown into reverse. He hopes he actually made it to the bathroom. It would be really nice, right now, to be living someone else’s much less interesting life.

His hand aches, his phone permanently death-gripped there, the little digital numbers the best he’s got to anchor him to reality, a place where seconds turn into minutes and time is still a thing that moves. His wings ache too, like they’re being crushed down against his spine, but when he reaches back his fingers catch only empty air because this is the real world. It’s the real world, it’s real—

Neku wakes up. The seventh time in... a full minute ticks by on the phone. Shibuya’s Music is so far away, like oil on water, skittering away from his attentions. It’s amazing, there was actually a time it was too distracting, when it was a burden and now he only notices when it’s gone. Does he dare reach out now, knowing what catastrophe sounds like? Joshua named him Conductor and that moment changed everything, perception shaping reality. Now the Angel says he’s one of them, and what happens next?

It feels as if he’s been beaten from the inside out, a whole war going on just beneath his skin. Neku shuts his eyes, the emptiness pushing out from inside his chest, the crackling static crawling through his veins, and if he listens any more closely he’s going to hear the sound of skeletal hands click-clacking together, beads on a string. Is that the place they send Angels when they Fall?

He’s up and off the ground, fingers scraping against the floor as he scrambles forward. He must have made the bathroom before because he’s there again, retching up nothing. Curled up on the floor and panting softly, and it hasn’t been this bad since the last time it was this bad, the Dead
Game’s emptiness all stuffed up inside of him. The same way the Player’s Music had touched him, the boy who’d preferred to disappear rather than fight. The way Neku had let that entropy all but swallow him up, right there in the first week.

A flicker of awareness - all this misery means something, and it’s important, and Neku clings to the thought desperately, willing it into form like cupping a spark, gently coaxing it into a flame. A scattered mess of Joshua and Brede, Manhattan’s Conductor and Mr. H and seeing his old friend again. The best friend who’d wanted more, and couldn’t handle it, and Joshua, who wanted nothing, and couldn’t handle it - and Brede, swooping in to make it all go away.

Neku laughs, can’t help it, that it’s starting to feel this familiar to teeter on the edge of disaster. A few deep breaths, and he braces himself and lifts up on his arms. In the RG he’s just a boy getting to his feet, but this isn’t just the RG, and it’s more than gravity pushing down on him, forcing his knees to buckle and he shakes with the effort of two steps, three, collapsing in the chair and slowly dragging his headphones on.

Neku puts his head on the desk, and lets out an audible sigh of relief as the first few beats wash over him. Emergency triage, one of Shiki’s latest mix tapes, and when the chorus breaks and the bridge begins, some acoustic jam recorded live, Neku can feel the darkness receding, replaced with light, and sound, and he listens to that song and the two that follow it before he even bothers to open his eyes again, and check the phone he still hasn’t let go of.

Just a little past three in the morning. Neku watches a few more numbers crawl by. How the hell he’d even gotten home is beyond him, nothing more than little flashes: trembling and sliding down against the wall as the first crescendo of where he’d been swept up over him, realizing that coming home, that being on his own was probably the last thing he should have done.

He doesn’t remember saying goodbye to the Angel. He doesn’t remember when Brede left. Neku can’t remember everything they talked about, too much that just can’t be true. Neku’s an Angel. Mr. H knew, Joshua knew and neither of them had said anything. Brede is here because they are all in some truly epic shit, because the Angels think that Mr. H is capable of destroying... everything and that Joshua will just stand by and let it happen, because hell, he had. He’d all but cheered it on the last time.

Brede, who’d stepped in just as Neku had been having the fight with an ex-friend who might have actually been his first ex-boyfriend, if Neku wanted to close one eye, tilt his head and look at it from the right angle.

There’s not enough self-delusion on the planet, to think it was all a coincidence. The Angel had waited to strike, when Neku had tripped over bad to faceplant in worse. Which means that everyone knows. Every Angel must know about all his stupid problems, and that he’s involved with Joshua and how he ruined all that, too. He’s probably a funny sidebar to the daily conversation, another Composer’s idiot conquest - ‘Oh, did you hear about Shibuya’s Conductor,’ - and they’re probably taking bets on how long he’ll last.

Except that Neku’s an Angel, so the news is nowhere near that good.

He listens to two more songs, until the chill in his chest has finally, finally been replaced with the beating of his heart. His headphones are never more than an arm’s reach away, haven’t been for years, but it means even more now than ever before. He’s going to need to consider stockpiling, links and songs and art, like a first-aid kit against the darkness. His computer is near the front door, but that might as well be on the other side of the world.

Shibuya’s closer now, hovering at the edges of his awareness. He can feel the Music reaching for
him, warm sunlight to thaw him out but Neku doesn’t dare, not now.

He feels a spike of anger, not cold despair but something hot and welcome, that Joshua would play with the district like that, would ever risk letting Neku hurt it in his ignorance. Joshua had promised him, promised him he wouldn’t put Shibuya in danger, but there’s something else buried in that shock and hurt. Brede didn’t tell him anything out of the kindness of his heart, sure as hell didn’t take him on the grand studio tour of the cosmos just for something to do. Didn’t kick him across a thousand different worlds just to trip over the one that was silent and empty and dead.

Brede took him there to soften him up, trying to play the good cop to Joshua’s bad cop, but there is no good cop. He still wants to see Neku crumble. The Angels want Shibuya’s Conductor like this, on edge and exhausted and suspicious, because if they get him on their side there’s nothing standing between them and Joshua, and there was no mistaking the look on Brede’s face in WildKat, whenever he had to remember Shibuya’s Composer existed. They want Joshua gone. Erased. Or worse.

Before he can talk himself out of it, Neku flips open his phone. As tired he is, it takes a little while to scroll up and down the list, checking his address book and his prior calls and then his address book again before it actually hits him, before it sinks in that Joshua’s number isn’t there.

The Composer’s gone and deleted himself from Neku’s phone.

_Oh, you bitch. You petty, petty bitch._

Neku drops back in his chair, surprise punching the breath right out of him.

It’s such a dick move. Even for Joshua, it’s _such_ a dick move, and Neku is aware he ought to be hurt by what seems like absolute proof of the end of everything between them, but once the shock passes he can’t manage to feel angry or even offended. He’s too busy being awed, pausing on the highway of his life at the scenic overlook of Mt. Unbelievable Asshole, and boy what a view.

He’s giggling. It’s more than a little unhinged, but no one’s around to see so it doesn’t actually matter. All right, fine. If this is the way Joshua’s going to play it, then Neku will just wait until the morning… which is rapidly approaching anyway, and go to WildKat and… whatever. He doesn’t dare trust any plan he can think of further than that. His playlist switches over to some singer Eri really likes, and a ballad, cool and soothing against the frenzied tangle of what could laughably be called a strategy.

This is all he’s got for hope, that Brede had told him what his Composer had not. Neku’s an Angel, and Joshua had… lied by omission, which has pretty much been their entire partnership up until this point.

Which means Joshua kept the truth from him… out of spite? Neku’s operating on some negative amount of sleep, but he still can’t think of a single way that knowing he was an Angel all along would have made any difference at all, that Joshua kept it from him for some kind of advantage. The advantage to not having Joshua at gunpoint, with the Composer making no attempt to protect himself? If anything, Neku feels less capable of being an Angel - whatever the hell that even _means_ - than he ever was as a Conductor. Which he also kind of sucks at. Which would mean the Composer gave up a sterling opportunity to be even more smug and insufferable about his shortcomings. Which doesn’t seem like Joshua at all.

So maybe, just _maybe_, Joshua never told him because he didn’t want Neku to leave. Maybe it isn’t just Neku’s feelings getting mangled past hamburger. Maybe Joshua is just as afraid, or whatever Composers feel in lieu of actual feelings. Low coolant levels, maybe. Or heartburn.
Neku flips through his playlist until he finds something suitably acoustic, and shuts his eyes. Trying to let that thought settle a bit, trying to decide if it makes sense or if he really just needs it to be true.

It’s both good and bad, really. If Joshua actually does care, Neku has at least some hope of remembering what it is to catch his breath, to walk around without feeling as if a really important part’s gone missing, with bits of him rattling around where it used to be.

If Joshua cares, then Neku will have to stand between Brede and his Composer, and if the Angel’s orders really do come from a higher authority, then Neku’s probably going to have to face an army, and boy, if that’s not going to be a battle they’ll need to time with an atomic clock.

... even if you go with him to the end, what if it’s not far enough?

Of everything Brede tried to throw at him, that’s the one Neku might just believe in. Even if... even if everything between them isn’t already ruined, there could still come the moment when Joshua will have to make a choice, today or tomorrow or years and years away, and all of Neku’s loyalty might not even be enough to make him pause.

*Can you live with that?*

*Will you die for it?*

Stupid as it is, all Neku comes back to is the end of that second week, when he would have given anything, anything to get the obnoxious jerk back again. Even if it meant Joshua lied. Even if it meant Joshua was the Composer, and the next time they met it would be a standoff.

This is his anything.

It’s just like Manhattan’s Conductor said. It just doesn’t matter what shape his heart’s in, it’s time to get on his big boy pants and do what needs to be done. Shibuya needs Joshua, even if Joshua doesn’t need Neku, and whatever’s true and whatever happens, that won’t change. The Angels are making their play, and for whatever reason Joshua’s standing back, once again bringing a smirk to a gun fight, and if this is another test of loyalty... ah shit, he’s going to get shot again, isn’t he?

His phone buzzes once, twice, three times.

Neku finally lifts his head, narrowing his eyes at the display and then looks to the window, sunlight shining where the streetlight ought to be. He looks at his phone, out the window. Phone, window.

The A/C is still on, it’s still freezing and instead of three a.m. it’s three in the afternoon. Neku can’t really remember what day it is, let alone when the Game’s been scheduled or - no, there’s an e-mail from Uzuki. The reason his phone was buzzing, which woke him up, even though he’d just shut his eyes and now it’s the afternoon, and it’s Wednesday. Which is a word that actually means something, he’s sure.

Neku waits until his brain seems like it’s not about to shut down before he dares press any more keys. Pinky is shockingly, astonishingly competent with her pre-Game reports. All the Players and Reapers have been alphabetized, along with her best guess at an itinerary, the parts of Shibuya that will likely see the most activity, even an estimate of how quickly Uzuki thinks the fastest Player will run this particular gauntlet, and the estimated number of Erasures. He assumes that last one is out of spite.

He’s skipped school already, the least he can do is get out there and show the Angels he’s not
going to be shoved around so easily. Neku thinks this is a great idea. His knees, however, have another suggestion, and once he’s out of the chair Neku’s barely got enough strength to stumble the few steps to his bed before falling into it.

It might be time to think about stockpiling some snacks under his pillows if this nonsense keeps up.

The phone buzzes again, a text message, and Neku hopes it’s not an emergency, that nobody needs him to do anything like be vertical or sentient anytime soon.

-I know his name, address and shoe size. Just give me the kill order.

Neku blinks, staring at the message for a long, long moment, and it’s a good measure of how very wrong his life is now, that he’s trying to remember if he did actually order someone killed, and who exactly he wanted dead. Minamimoto’s the obvious target, but Neku doesn’t think he’s *quite* good enough to start assigning murders in his sleep.

-And call Shiki. She’s worried about you.

Conductor Neku and Regular Neku collide at the intersection of ‘What’ Avenue and ‘Why Is This My Life’ Boulevard. Both cars totaled, airbags blown, passengers mildly concussed.

He figures out it’s Eri who’s texted him, and he figures out what it means when he sees the picture she’s attached, his former best friend, and there’s even a bit of Brede in the background. Absolutely no way Eri is talking about the Angel and it would be so very bad if she were and he tries not to wish she were, because it means she knows which means Shiki knows.

Neku swallows back a sudden, sharp pang of sadness. Everything he’d tried to run away from, and now they know, everyone *knows*, from his best friends right on up to people he’s never met, and Angels he’s never met.

It’s like the dream of being naked in school, or on a job interview, except he’s wide awake. Neku shuts off his phone, and grabs for the blankets, solving the only part of that problem he can.

The tempo of the Music is nothing like it ought to be, much too fast for Joshua’s tastes, the kind of beat that usually threatens to burn out and topple under its own inertia into a tumble of rambling notes. It’s only a little wearying that there’s nothing fragile, nothing out of tune in what he’s listening to. Joshua catches the subtle, unexpected harmonies weaving in and out of Shibuya’s Song, surprising him whenever he thinks he knows what’s coming next. The melody weaves in and out of the click of a woman’s high heeled shoes, soaring up above the hum of traffic, the chatter of students and businessmen. Even the ringtones play their part, the Music building into what seems like a constant crescendo, perpetually at the point of peaking.

It’s a cover song of what he’d composed, not so much translated as repurposed. If Joshua closes his eyes, he can’t even be sure of where he is.

A sudden spate of giggling cuts counterpoint to the Music, and Joshua opens his eyes, the Players racing by him, close enough to ruffle the edge of his sleeve if he wasn’t skimming the surface of the RG, a shadow in everyone’s peripheral vision, barely noticed before he’s disappeared again. Joshua watches them go, and they’re smiling and the sound of their footsteps, urgency without panic, the sound of their determination all echoes down into Shibuya’s Music which is not his, and this is all Neku’s fault and Joshua is so very glad it’s finished.

He’s no longer tripping over dead Nekus every time he turns around, not a single one since he
finally realized he’d been letting things drag on, that there was no further for any of it to go. On the whole his precognition has been remarkably silent, though that’s to be expected, surely, after all the work he’s done. Trimming away unwanted possibilities like pruning dead branches off a tree, until only what was strong and healthy remained. The entire point of Composers, really.

A lesser man would have been offended, but Joshua can only be amused at how quickly the Angels had flapped in and snatched Neku away. He’d felt his Conductor leave, and knew what came back wouldn’t be his Conductor anymore, and he certainly had no right to complain, the move practically from his own rule book. Joshua has little trouble finding Conductors in a district as strong as his, which means being picky is all the more fun.

Kitaniji was a Composer himself, before Joshua had been naughty and poached him from his little UG in the middle of nowhere. Amazing, really, that the man had been able to run the Game he had with so few resources, the tiny town charged with little more than desperate ambition. Year after year of the young and the creative determined to make a break just big enough to get free of the gravity of home, just long enough to get anywhere but where they were.

The first time Joshua had rung him up, Kitaniji hadn’t believed he was serious. The second time, when Joshua had precluded his call by signing every artist in his town who’d ever picked up an instrument to a Shibuya record label, it had knocked the man right out of his chair. Of course, the moment Kitaniji had come on board, his Game had collapsed behind him like a gate deprived of its archstone, a brief blip of life in an otherwise unremarkable area.

Joshua, as always, bending rules that didn’t matter, and even then they’d dragged him out in front of the assembled Higher Plane, to do their best to bore him into Erasing himself. It had infuriated them then just like now, this business with Shibuya and then with Neku but then half of them were still whining because castrati had gone out of fashion, so there was no trustworthy measure on just how long they could hold a grudge.

Stupid to ever think it was in his best interests to get in Neku’s way. If this has hurt at all, if he’s been troubled it’s only because Joshua forgot what he was supposed to do, and now there are no more problems, no further difficulties because this is what he should have done all along. Letting Neku be what he needs to be and not standing in the way. Amazing how that works out.

He hadn’t intended on shadowing the Players, but making his way up the street toward Spain Hill, two more of them pass by, shop bags fluttering out behind them, and another pair skitters around the corner that leads to Cat Street, looking far more happy than anyone should on the third day. Hanekoma’s left him five voice messages, twenty-seven one-word texts and has now moved random pictures of whatever he happens to be looking at in the cafe, at about the rate of one every two minutes. Joshua’s turned his phone off three times, which does nothing to stop the Producer from turning it back on again, the consistent chirping reminding him all of this has an audience, no matter what sliver of reality he’s tried to slip into. He probably wants to talk about the Angels, or about Neku, but there’s no point now that Joshua’s decided to give everyone what they want.

The Players have all gathered together, an oddity in and of itself, but the mood among them is more like a picnic than a group of people fighting for their lives. A few of them have taken the role of healer, tossing cure pins back and forth while two more stand guard at the periphery, looking out for Noise, while others - the ones who’d come from WildKat - are handing out milk coffee to everyone.

Joshua considers Erasing the lot of them just on principle, though he has to admit their strategy of completing the day’s objective is a clever one. The Games Masters tend to be a little selfish with their demands, especially in the first few days. The current Reaper is no exception, Neku plunging
her into the position without warning or fanfare on the very first day of the Game, without the respect for tradition to even erase her predecessor.

A fashion writer - Joshua has a vague memory of hair dyed some eye-gouging shade - and so she’s ordered the Players on a scavenger hunt, to gather up a selection of magazines, newspapers and badly-stapled indie ‘zines that have featured her work, with double-copies for anything she’d actually got paid to write. It’s a clever way of boosting her own status, as well as taking advantage of the new crop of bookstores and newsstands Neku had insisted on after the first Game.

The Italians have almost shut up about that whole business, though there’s a joke about exchange rates that may never truly die.

In any other, sensible Game, the Players would be scattered and panicking, running in all directions to try and gather copies on their own. Instead, this group has divided the task up among themselves, each pair of Players seeking out articles in a different part of the city, a level of teamwork that ought to have no place in the Game, not his Game, but this isn’t his Game anymore.

Joshua knows he ought to be paying closer attention. One of these might very well be his new Conductor. He can barely stand to look at them.

“Hey, we’re still missing one. Where’s Akane?!”

Highly-tuned Composer instincts perk up at the possibility of even mild carnage, one pair of Players unaccounted for. What right does Neku have to do this to his Game? Why has Joshua let this go on as long as he has?

Foolish self-indulgence, obviously. Thinking that annoying the Angels was a good enough excuse.

A pair of figures dart out from an alley, the final Players, brandishing the last remaining magazine like an Olympic torch. No chance this fragile peace between the Players can last for more than a day or two. If Neku’s doing this to see if he’ll ante, if his Conductor thinks this is the way to get what he wants, Joshua will be more than happy to call and raise.

“We brought the last one. And Kit-Kats!”

A bright cheer rises up from the collective Players, and yes the Shibuya Game is woefully low on Reapers but… no. Just no.

Joshua flicks his phone open as it chirps again, ignoring the photo of… Hanekoma’s thumb over the lens, by the looks of it. His Producer had happily made several tweaks to Neku’s phone, of course, but had drawn the line on recording entire calls. Joshua’s still not particularly interested in his Conductor’s call log more than he is in the latest headlines, or the five hot songs of the moment, but he is surprised there hasn’t been a check-in from the Angel this late in the day. Maybe the bastards are giving Neku time to think, time to realize how little anything he’s got here matters against the keys to the universe.

It’s almost funny, the other number on that list that isn’t one of Neku’s school friends, isn’t anyone Neku ought to know to talk to, and Joshua wonders if Manhattan’s Conductor struck a deal with the Angels for this. If they’d agreed to look the other way when the taped-together pieces of what everyone pretends is Manhattan’s Composer has her next meltdown, if only the Conductor agreed to talk to Neku. Tell him the way things are.

He’s not sure whether to be insulted or pleased at the comparison, the Angels considering him so dangerous that he might as well be crazy.
Listening in on the conversation isn’t even necessary. What Manhattan’s Conductor will tell Neku - what she has told Neku - is the obvious, that there is no relationship between Composer and Conductor that isn’t so one-sided as to disappear if turned on its edge. Joshua smiles to himself, wondering if Neku bothered arguing with that truth. Maybe he protested and defended, or maybe he’d just agreed with everything she said. Maybe that one conversation meant the difference between Neku storming out his life a handful of years from now and already being gone.

Except Neku’s not gone, not just yet. The Angels won’t be satisfied with just snatching him away, not when they can grind it in. They want him to see it, hell, they’re probably selling tickets to the moment when Neku stands before him, white-winged and beautiful, gaze fixed to that higher Plane.

Joshua’s hand brushes his shoulder, fingertips rubbing a little, pretending he can’t still feel the pressure of the pen lingering against his back. He’ll need to get rid of Neku’s little doodle eventually, no reason for a memento of what he doesn’t need to remember. The absent curve of Neku’s hand against his spine as he’d worked, and the smug little smile when he’d finished, that Joshua had just as smugly kissed away.

Love. How dare he. How dare he say it like it means anything.

Joshua’s being proactive, leaving now, forcing the change that had to come anyway. Where else can this go but down? Staying ahead of the curve, which means letting Neku Ascend before he realizes everything he ought to have known from the beginning, and just kicks Joshua out to runs Shibuya on his own. It’s what the Angels want, obviously, and this is the rational, tactical response. Defending himself from the problem before it can become a problem.

No more tedious surprises, no more brave fools holding him at gunpoint, not at all aware of the consequences. Neku should have known what he was even from the start. Blessed by a higher power to be able to wear those outfits he’d gotten away with and not had penalties stripping him down to his underwear. Not that those had always done him any favors.

Neku Sakuraba is a silly child, with no idea of what he will become. Which is fine because he’s an Angel, he’s not for this Game or any Game and in the privacy of his own thoughts Joshua can even admit he was foolish, selfish to think he could hold on. If he’s done any damage at all, it will cease to matter the moment Neku Ascends. The next time they meet they can exchange cool glances and maybe a passing smirk, in honor of the foolishness that was, and be indifferent to each other like mature adults.

If Joshua ever sees him again.

“Hey! You!”

Everyone stumbles, a few petty distractions, a moment of self-indulgent artistic saudade, but now he’s regained his balance and the path is clear. Free from obstacle or threat or irritation.

Empty.

“Yoshiya Kiryu! I’m talking to you!”

It stops him cold, the impossible sound of his full name spoken aloud. Joshua turns slowly on his heel, mostly astonishment, only the smallest temptation to immolate whatever member of the Higher Plane thought they could address him so in his own Underground. Give them one Conductor, and they’ll think they can take the world.
The girl isn’t an Angel, though. The girl isn’t a Composer or a Conductor or even an extremely precocious Reaper with horrific impulse control. Not even a Player, which means she shouldn’t be able to see him at all, let alone speak his name.

She crosses her arms, giving him her best menacing glower, and as she shifts to better cock one hip and look like a rampaging gangster, an afterimage of light follows behind her, clinging to the edges of her profile. It is as if she’s backlit, though the sun is directly overhead, and Joshua can hear her Music, so loud that what surrounds them is like an echo, somehow just a half a beat behind-

Joshua remembers her. Shiki Misaki’s little partner. The designer who came up with Neku’s suit. The one who needs to stop wondering if shoulder pads will ever come back into fashion. He hadn’t been unimpressed, but that still doesn’t quite explain this, the power that surrounds her, the way Shibuya’s Music has swept up and twined its way through her, standing in front of him, speaking his name with her voice.

It happens, from time to time. No reason why it can’t, the Shibuya Game is at its core just an impossibly large, impossibly complex system of Noise, controlled and directed as it lives and breathes and sings. No Composer exists who isn’t at least a little in love with their Game, knowing its nuances, its needs. Treating it as if it has a mind of its own - if not preferring that mind to most anyone else. Noise can influence the RG, and the Game can work in similar ways, though it is still quite rare to see this, the will of the district poured down into a human avatar.

He can’t help but notice that neither she nor Shibuya looks very happy to see him.

Joshua smiles.

“Your name is Eri, isn’t it? One of Neku’s friends.”

The girl’s eyes narrow, and Shibuya flickers up around her like a corona, a solar flare. Unimpressed with his nonchalance.

“We need to talk.”

“It seems we do.”
“It’s those shoes with the toes again.” Joshua points them out without pointing, or even angling his drink in the direction of the offending party. “Every new pair of those makes this whole Composing business seem especially worth the effort.”

The man’s a tourist, which isn’t forgivable, but does keep Joshua from gouging out his eyes with his own drinking straw. Barely.

“I should have been a dentist,” he mutters.

“I refuse to believe in those shoes.” Eri says, shifting slightly against the wall. “Besides, they’re an exercise thing. No one complains that a wetsuit isn’t fashion-forward.”

“No one’s wearing a wetsuit in the middle of downtown Tokyo.” Joshua replies, but Eri is already distracted by the next debatable fashion choice, head cocked slightly as she measures the razor-thin distance between self-consciously cute and kill—it-with-fire.

Joshua had never really considered how it might go, what his district would be like if it could stand beside him, but fashion editor can hardly come as a surprise.

“So,” he says, wondering just how much of her distraction is real, “will you at least let me know when I need to curl up into a ball and beg for mercy?”

“Don’t rush me,” Eri says, still not looking at him, and Joshua smiles at the current of anger beneath her feigned calm.

Heads turn now and then, people doing a double-take, and he can hear the whispers when they think they’re out of range. Wondering where they’ve seen Eri before, or if Joshua was in some movie, or that maybe they’re just the children of the rich and famous. Hardly his fault, Joshua can mute his presence with relative ease in the RG but not quite so much when he’s standing next to the better part of Shibuya itself. He wonders just what the girl is going to remember of all of this, most of her observations downright normal after she’d said his name, though her poise and the looks she keeps shooting him are entirely too knowing.

“That dress? That dress is so awful I think it spontaneously grew pockets.”

Eri’s also eating her fourth rice ball and cracking the seal on her third milk tea, the empty cartons piled in the bag at her feet. A lot of power to be caged up in one small, human body, but it seems Shibuya knew what it was doing choosing her, the both of them with apparently reason to hunt him down. He probably ought to worry about that more, but she’s so beautiful and so bright that at the moment Joshua finds it hard to care.

“You ought to have a permit to wear an asymmetrical top.” Eri mutters. “Or maybe just some sort of license in general. Proof you can wear clothes without doing damage to yourself or others.”

“Hat. Trucker hat.” The cockroaches of fashion. Will they never die?

“If I don’t acknowledge it, it can’t hurt me. Oh dear god, what is that I can’t unsee.”
The first Jupiter fan Joshua had noticed was wearing a Tiger Punks herringbone cap to draw away some of the attention from the rest of the outfit, and the second one had on a baggy Wild Boar tank - but it was the same silhouette each time. Now, though, the first full-on Neku lookalike walks by, Jupiter of the Monkey from tip to toe, and they both watch him pass in silence. Joshua blinks, half-convinced he’s gone back to seeing murdered Nekus on every corner - but no, this is just his Conductor murdering fashion by proxy.

“That’s the second one in like, five minutes,” Eri says, shaking her head.

“That one was a guy, right?”

Neku the Conductor - no, Neku the Angel - strong enough that even his lack of fashion sense is starting to influence the trends, and it’s difficult to tell if the district or the girl is more annoyed with him for letting it happen.

Eri frowns. “See what happens when you don’t pay attention? At this rate he’s going to start thinking it’s okay to dress himself, and then where will be? What kind of a statement is that going to make?”

“I’m a latch-key kid and the washing machine broke a week ago’?”

Eri pushes away from the wall, dumping the bag in a trash bin, and Joshua follows her, wondering if Shibuya picked the girl because her legs are just long enough that Joshua can either walk a half-step behind or stumble at an awkward pace at her side, trying to keep up.

“You can use mine if you want to. I’ve got unlimited texting.”

“Hm?”

Eri shuffles through her bag. “So you can break up with Neku. If you don’t want him having your number, use my phone.”

Joshua raises an eyebrow. “Reverse psychology already? I thought this was going to be annoying, not dull.”

A fake pout. “You’re not being very nice.”

“You don’t like me because I’m nice.”

The pout vanishes as if it never was. “True enough. I used to like you because you were creative, but you’re not exactly holding up that end of the bargain either.”

The gloves are definitely off, then. The gloves are off and rolled in superglue and thumbtacks. Joshua realizes just how much he’s missed this, the friendly acrimony with someone who actually fights back, and Eri - Shibuya - looks at him.

“You stopped talking to me, Composer.”

“We both know that’s not true. I’m always here with you.”

Except he can’t lie to her, when they both feel the truth, and they both know that he can focus on the Song and ignore the district behind it and pretend it’s all business as usual. Except this is nothing like any other Game - and it’s not just a world for the two of them anymore. Neku’s
nowhere to be seen and he’s still absolutely everywhere.

“It’s better now.” The look in her eyes, girl and Game all tangled together and kaleidoscope bright. “I’m better. You know I am.”

Joshua frowns. “Neku can’t keep putting so much into the Game, not like he is. He’ll get himself Erased without ever meaning to.”

“Not if you’re there.”

His beautiful romantic of a district. Shibuya believes he knows best, which is true, but only because they are nothing alike. Joshua is good at making the hard decisions, at knowing when and how to say no.

“He’s Ascended twice in a week. You know what that means, I know you do. It'll only hurt more for the both of us, the longer we hold on. We have to let him go.”

“So then let him go.”

Eri holds the phone out to him, open so he can see the picture there. It’s Neku, along with the boy Joshua recognizes from the shadowed parts of his Conductor’s Frequency. The one who left Neku vulnerable enough to come play in his Game in the first place. Broken in all the proper places, so that he might heal up different and better than before. All for the best, though a part of Joshua still wants to ensure the boy is rewarded properly for all he’d done, perhaps selling used office furniture for the rest of his life.

It’s the other man in the picture, though, just inside the frame, that raises his hackles despite Joshua’s best attempts not to care. Despite all the arguments he makes to himself, there is something about seeing the Angel standing there, so certain of his victory, that makes Joshua want to do anything but let them win.

Eri shakes the phone a little to regain his attention, and she’s not even trying to hide her smirk, knowing he won’t reach for it. Joshua sighs.

“I can’t do it with you watching.”

Joshua’s distracted - the girl’s made of distraction now - and so it takes him much longer than it should to realize they’re moving toward an actual destination and not just on safari through the world of incredible fashion blunders. Or they still are, and this is upping the ante.

He recognizes the street they’re on far too late, the dark awning looming ominously in the distance, and he’d like to pretend he doesn’t care but Shadow Ramen without a thick, protective shell of irony is more than enough to break any man.

“You aren’t serious.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Which does not explain what we’re doing here.”

“We could always go to that other place instead. What’s it called - WildKat?”

Shibuya, looking at him from the corner of Eri’s eye, and she’ll absolutely do it. Drag in
Hanekoma and the Angels like it’s nothing at all and it’s kind of amazing she hadn’t just called Neku up herself already and convinced him to come over.

“You see?” Eri says, “this is why you need him around. So you can bitch to him when people are horrible and he can fail to be sympathetic.”

Joshua keeps walking, as if he’s politely bending to her wishes, because it’s not going to take her long to regret this and then it will be his turn to be smug and everyone loves a good Cold War. He still pauses right at the entrance, the ‘Shadow Ramen’ sign badly painted over, with a new-and-surely-unimproved ‘Shadow Kaiten’ in its place.

“I certainly don’t already regret this.” Joshua says, but Eri threads her arm through his a moment later, dragging them both inside.

The first thing Joshua notices despite his best efforts not to notice anything is how the sushi belt creaks. The tiniest little squeak every few seconds despite being gleaming and new, as if begging to be put out of its misery.

“Hey look, they’ve got crepes!”

Or at least a crepe griddle, abandoned in a corner of what looks like it might have been a DJ booth. All right, so maybe it was wrong not to want to come inside - real schadenfreude is all about savoring the details.

The restaurant is, of course, empty, and everything from the chairs to the tables and the little bottles of soy sauce seem to be quietly apologizing. Desperation clings to every surface, the sort of place that /wishes/ it were a money laundering front - and even if he weren’t who he was, Joshua could feel it. Irritating and unnatural, to be where the Music just isn’t, all the pulse and inspiration swirling past this lifeless stone in the river. He feels like a cat with all his fur being brushed the wrong way.

The only other sound besides the whimpering belt is a fan and a radio being played very low, in the well-hidden room where the chef must be, two little slots where the plates go in and come out, though without guests it’s pretty much just a food poisoning merry-go-round.

“Man, this place was a lot better when the chefs were hot.”

“Or when it was a shoe store.”

New Composers often believe that every inch of their city or district or borough must be full of the bright and new and expensive, and they often get into the same kind of trouble as the owner of this sad excuse for a sad themed restaurant. A district, a city grows and lives and changes, and a Composer can make plans, can influence and suggest, but for all his very real power Joshua can no more demand this place or that place in Shibuya prosper any more than a farmer can make a tree bear fruit on command.

The older a Composer is, the more likely they are to resist change, to lose themselves in old routines and grow complacent and let their Underground sink into obscurity. The younger a Composer is, the more likely they are to break instead of innovate, to push too hard and burn out too fast, leaving things worse than when they arrived.

There’s never an easy answer. Never a plan that works all the way to the end.

Eri swiftly parks herself in a chair near the middle of the conveyer belt, the furthest place from any exit. The one waitress playing games on her cell phone had glanced up when they’d entered and
now seems somewhat baffled that they’re real, and actually staying. Joshua can see her tugging at
the cord of her bright enthusiasm, though she’s almost to them before it finally catches, perkiness
revving into gear.

“Hello! Welcome to Shadow-”

“Ten-thousand yen if you don’t smile,” Joshua says, holding up the folded bill between two
fingers, “We both know you don’t mean it.”

“… and you wonder why Neku likes you.” Eri smirks, eyes on her menu.

The smile falls from the girl’s face, but oddly she seems more cheerful for it, snatching the money
out of his hand. “No offense, but if you’re that smart what are you doing here?”

“Sociology experiment.” The girl raises an eyebrow, glancing around the empty restaurant, and
Joshua shrugs. “Extremely small sample size.”

“Whatever. I’ll get you some tea.”

“Anything you’d recommend?” Eri says, no one at all surprised when she points back toward the
door.

Joshua picks up the menu like a detective lifting the tarp off a murder victim, except this is
considerably more traumatic. The original full-color menu’s been replaced with a quickly xeroxed
black and white sheet, the kind of menu-of-the-day a more trendy restaurant would use, though
without quite so many items crossed out. It looks like some kind of secret document involving a
covered, protracted war on oshi-zushi.

“I don’t think this is so bad,” Eri says, snapping a pair of chopsticks with an optimism she would
not have if she weren’t currently possessed.

“I think that, right there, is the moment he gave up on life.” Joshua says, pointing at some sort of
inside-out roll that only possibly started out that way, utterly smothered in no less than three
sauces. One of them seems to have blue sprinkles.

Eri makes a small, thoughtful sound in the back of her throat, glancing at him from the corner of
her eye and the meaning entirely too clear - so when did you give up?

Chapter End Notes

Not really a full chapter. Not quite sure how much longer the rest will take, and
you’ve all been exceedingly patient. Many apologies for the long silence. Life got in
the way. Boy howdy.
There’s a ghost in me, it wants to say I’m sorry, doesn’t mean I’m sorry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shadow Kaiten’s menu is a mix of influences, in a sort of Frankenstein ‘where is your God now?’ kind of way. Joshua makes no attempt to hide his smugness - Eri’s in trouble, and she knows it. She has to eat something on the Russian Roulette wheel of doom, and soon, so it’s just a matter of picking her poison. Literally.

“Does everything in this place have cream cheese in it?”

“Not the tea.” The waitress says, handing them each a cold can before vanishing with a haste she obviously hopes will score her another large tip further down the line.

“You know, I think we're looking at some kind of metaphor for karma here.” Joshua says, watching the plates pass by, “even with the shrimp… whatever that is. It works.”

“A Kaiten Game?”

“Only if we’re taking good taste as the entry fee,” Joshua says.

Shibuya’s trying to tease him, to bait him and he’s not going to let it, he’s not going to think about how he’d believed exactly that, not so long ago. How beneath all the silly, pointless garnish of Music and Imagination it’s just the same days spinning round and round again, endlessly. How he’d come to the Game to escape the slow, tedious disappointment of the world, only to finally have it follow him there - and what was he supposed to do then? How could he escape?

“You were happy with him. I know you were. You’d be happy now, if you stopped pretending you’re not.” Eri - Shibuya - says offhandedly, still searching for something on the belt that might be edible, “You don’t like him? I like him.”

Neku as a gift, an offering from the district to its Composer? Amazing, really, that he’d never thought of it that way before.

Joshua smirks, not quite sure if it’s for her or himself. “He’s not even in high-school.”

“That’s the worst excuse since your last one.” Eri says, and frowns, for a moment a little less district and a bit more of the girl. “You know, you’re really not being fair. To anyone.”

“No, I’m not. I’m doing my job.”

Joshua intends it to be cold, but Eri only smirks at him, fingers out in front of her in an imaginary picture frame, lining him up for a shot in the movie of her mind.

“Memoirs of a Douche,” she says, and in irritation and the determination not to think any more on it, Joshua reaches forward and takes a plate off the line.

A long soak in soy sauce barely puts a dent in the maki - cream cheese and maybe avocado and a lot of questionable topping that may or may not be - dear lord almighty - ketchup. He wants to pick his teeth with the quills of the Producer who ever thought fusion cuisine was a good idea.

“You’re doing that to spite me.” Eri pouts over her still-rumbling stomach.
“Yes.”

“How is it?”

“Inedible.” He grabs a napkin to give the rest some semblance of a dignified burial, before taking out a thousand-yen note and writing several thoughtful suggestions in the margins, folding it into a small crane and setting it back on the conveyer belt. Eri waves to it as it disappears behind the curtain.

After that, it’s obviously either admit defeat or start eating her own arm, and Eri sighs and reaches for the first thing that at least looks familiar. It also opens up another slot for Joshua to send another five-thousand yen back behind the curtain, in the hopes that maybe the chef is just holding the actual food for ransom.

“… modanyaki?” Eri says, poking at it suspiciously. It looks all right, or at least the right colors, though that’s hardly a guarantee.

“Fried noodles in fried egg. How bad can it be?” Joshua smiles as she scowls - it’s not a hypothetical question. “Oh don’t worry, if there’s fois gras in there I’m setting this place on fire.”

“Is that ranch dressing?” Eri says in awe, unsuccessfully trying to scrape off all of the restaurant’s unexpected flair - it is ranch, god in heaven - while still having something left to eat. In the end, there’s nothing to do but nibble at the very edges of the noodles in a sullen silence.

“Do you remember when we met?” Joshua asks, and wonders if Shibuya picked the girl because even with the dreamy smile Eri makes a passing attempt at indifference.

“You were shorter.” Her gaze changes, sharper, remembering, but the smile is still there and this is the way it used to be. The Game and the Composer and the long honeymoon, when he’d reach for his district each morning and fall in love all over again.

“You liked me.”

Shibuya smiling at him with the girl’s mouth, indulgent even though she knows better. “You listened, back then.”

“I listen now. I just…” Don’t care. One of those things he can say to the Higher Plane without it meaning anything special, but not here, not to her. Except Shibuya already knows.

Joshua wishes that he could remember those first days better, something more substantial than the patterns of light and shadow in the back of his mind, echoes of songs no one sings anymore. It had been a quiet world then, and so much slower. The Music had defined the world, had guided all things, and now it’s difficult to tell if the Game is pulling the district forward or being dragged on the leash.

At the start, of course, he hadn’t seen quite that far ahead. An imperfect clairvoyance, just enough to leave him wanting more.

“It was a moment of clarity.” Revelation. Transcendence, if the word had any meaning at all, seeing the Game and what it meant and knowing how it would go on. “I saw the way the world would change, and keep changing. I saw it, and I knew…”

A mix of his own innate gifts and the sheer awe at the potential all around him, more than enough to knock him sideways, to change everything he wanted - to make him want, really want, for the very first time. Nothing had been more important than ensuring he was the one to bring the world
forward, to make that future his own and stand in the middle of Shibuya as if it were the center of the sun. Joshua would have sacrificed anything, anyone, and in the end all it had taken was himself and that was no loss at all.

“I had to see it. I had to be there.”

Shibuya’s smile is no longer indifferent, but wistful, and sad. “You let me change you, but that was all right… because in the end you could always hurt me more.”

A whole world hangs between them in the silence - and then a new bowl appears from the other end of the conveyer belt, slowly making its way toward them. Piled high with succulent morsels of fish and untouched by dijon or mango-wasabi-foam or any other of the devil’s condiments. A whole, perfect bowl of *chirashizushi*, which means someone is actually still alive somewhere behind that curtain.

Joshua’s closer, and even more so as he makes a violent, graceless lunge, but Eri is taller than he is with longer arms and he swears Shibuya might bend time and space to make sure it’s her hand that grabs the bowl first, half of the fish seemingly gone before she even sits down again.

“I’ve shot people for less,” he says, landing back on his stool, feeling more annoyed than he ought to as she smirks around another mouthful of fish, and even more irritated at being annoyed at all. “I could make you choose between us. Neku and I. You know I can.”

A slight overreaction, perhaps. Phoning in a nuclear strike for a pretty butterfly. Her chopsticks hover, halfway to her mouth, and Joshua can feel Shibuya tremble, though Eri manages nothing more than to go a little pale, taking another bite.

“Get your own fish, Kiryuu.”

Oddly enough, now he can. The plates they’ve taken down have not been replaced with more of the same, but portions of what look like *actual food*, and Joshua takes all of them. He tries to tell himself he’s not thinking about the dark look in Eri’s eyes - how he’d promised, he’d *swore* he wouldn’t hurt Shibuya, and even if he doesn’t care what Neku thinks there’s the matter of pride. This is not what being in control feels like.

“What do you get out of this, Eri?” Deliberately calling out the girl, though he’s not completely sure it will work, “I know why my district’s here, but what about you?”

“Shiki’s his best friend, and if he hurts then she hurts, and if she hurts I have to get all *Oldboy* on people’s asses and right now? Right now I’ve kind of got other stuff going on.” Eri says between bites, “I have three people still on the fence about ordering from our show, and I’m like a week behind on my homework and all my blogs but when Neku hurts, Shiki hurts. So, me. You. *Oldboy*, if that what it takes.”

“And the hammer?”

“I’ll buy one. You can autograph it for me when they let you out of traction.”

“You know, I’ve heard it said that girls are too emotional, but I am really not seeing it.”

The sound of the bell ought to signal the end of the round - nothing impressive, all signs pointing to a late TKO - but it’s just the one over the door because there are people stepping into the restaurant and not just to find directions to someplace better to be. Actual people who actually sit at the sushi belt and start taking plates, and though it’s mostly the new ones, every once in a while another ode to wrongness will disappear, replaced by a new and shockingly edible looking dish.
“We’re going to talk about self-destruction while we make Shadow Kaiten the most popular restaurant in Shibuya,” Joshua says, nudging a piece of rather tolerable white tuna sashimi with his chopsticks, “and then we can build a monument to irony out of the irony.”

“Shiki was dead, wasn’t she?”

A sudden swerve he’s not quite expecting, but Joshua can’t say he’s surprised. Shibuya isn’t about straight lines, and there’s still a girl rattling around inside all that power. He hadn’t disliked Eri, exactly, but she’s far stronger than he’d given her credit for. Thankfully he’s always made high marks in random conversations, with that double major in not giving a shit. A lesser Composer would have died a thousand deaths by now, this far out in unknown waters with no sign of the shore.

“Yes and no - at that point Shiki was the proverbial cat in the box. If that cat had really amazing fashion sense and even more amazing self-esteem issues. You’re welcome for that, by the way. I fixed what I could.”

“You did, didn’t you? You really did. It’s so weird,” Eri says, the last piece of fish hanging in her chopsticks, forgotten as she stares out into space. “I can see it all now, all the little connections, all those same-and-different places - the world where she is and she isn’t. We had a fight, and then she went off, and then I got the call… Is this how it is for you, all the time? No wonder your face looks like that.”

“I have it on good authority I’ve always been this attractive.”

“I sucked at being alone, didn’t I?” Eri says, her voice a little distant, and Joshua wonders if she’s seeing that alternate timeline, or feeling it, or both. “I mean, even worse than I thought I would. I was really… how can you want this? All by yourself, forever? You can’t possibly want this.”

“It’s not about what I want.”

Eri snorts, “Cry me a mascara river, skinny jeans.”

The bell rings again, and this time four more people enter the restaurant, with another group peeking in from outside. The waitress seats them all with a baffled expression, and pulls her phone with the same look of disbelief: seating tables and placing orders and calling in reinforcements without ever quite being sure it’s actually happening.

Joshua might very well have to set the place on fire, just to live this down. “You do know if the Angels find you here, find us here - that is, if they don’t already know - they would call for my Erasure. Sanae would jump on that grenade, I’m sure, for whatever reasons-”

“He likes you.”

Oh his sweet, beautiful, deluded district. “Hanekoma loves you, and I’m the means to an end. I always have been. Don’t you remember? When he decided I ought to be here, he practically set the Composer up to fall.”


“Lucky you,” Joshua says, reaching for another plate, pretending he doesn’t know what she’s talking about, that it all hasn’t circled around again. It figures that now the food is edible he’s no longer hungry, but he can take one for the team and get rid of another experiment gone wrong. He pokes at it lazily with his chopsticks, a half-assed autopsy for a half-assed roll of… whatever, with cucumber.
Shibuya wants an apology for the Long Game, and Joshua is biting on the inside of his lip and he wonders just why he won’t give it to her. As if it wasn’t stupid, and juvenile, and overdramatic and exactly the sort of thing he’s gleefully Erased countless Players and Reapers for.

As if she doesn’t already know he’s sorry, or what little difference that makes.

“It’s not about Neku loving you.” Eri says. “It’s about you loving him. You bluffed, he called, you ran.”

Joshua rolls his eyes.

“It’s not about love. Eri, think about it, do what you can to get past the Music and think. Shibuya’s got you because it’s trying to understand, so make it understand. You’re seeing it all. Look at what happened with Manhattan, look what Neku did - look what the district threw him into. Do you know how easily that could have gone wrong? It would have killed him, it should have - and I mean the kind of death that lasts. If Shibuya keeps putting him in the way for my sake… well, I wouldn’t dress him in anything you couldn’t afford to write off.”

“That’s not…”

“It’s exactly what it’s doing. Shibuya doesn’t understand, it’s not human, it can’t know - that’s why Composers exist in the first place, to guide their Game, to do what needs to be done. You get a Composer who isn’t strong enough, who doesn’t know how to listen or listens too hard… the Game’s a living thing, and it’s strong, and the better the Composer is, the stronger the Game becomes. The more damage it can do.”

“Is that why you…” A tremble that doesn’t belong to Eri, and finally he gets it. Shibuya wants an explanation for the Long Game, not an apology. As if that makes anything easier.

“No,” Joshua says, with a gentleness he can only give his district, “but it’s why Neku has to go. It’s why we can’t keep him. Shibuya doesn’t understand, the Game just doesn’t understand that there are things even I can’t do.”

Did he really just say that? He’s not actually arguing devil’s advocate - Angel’s advocate, really - and admitting there are rules he can’t break? Beating his head up against the glass wall of limitations even he can’t find his way around, what seems like freedom, but it never is and is it all just destined to end the same?

Shibuya once again on a beautiful day, like all the ones that came before it, except the honeymoon’s long past. The world spinning, the Reapers reaping and Konishi plotting betrayal and Kitaniji in his perfect, pressed suit and the same damned plates going around and around. Circling the drain. Joshua had been wrong then, of course - but there’s no guarantee he won’t do it again, and every reason to think he will.

“I know what it must feel like, Eri. All that power, all that life. I know what you think Shibuya is, but it’s not-.”

“I AM NOT A CAGE!” Eri shouts, slamming a fist against the table, rattling the plates but the force of Shibuya’s anger echoes much further than that. It ripples over the room and across the Music and all eyes are on them, everyone in the restaurant frozen and staring even if no one knows what they’re seeing. Joshua hadn’t noticed the two Players sitting at the far end of the belt - Neku’s Players, with their music too complex and all wrong, so attuned to the district they barely sound like Players at all.
“I’m not a cage…” Eri whispers, barely audible, ten gallons of cosmic power in two ounces of human Tupperware, and of course it had been his little speech about responsibility to set her off, of course it had. She’s all but blurring at the edges in the UG, a near-constant hum in the Music and Joshua swears he can see Shibuya gleaming in her eyes, even in the Realground and if she doesn’t calm down soon…

“No, only Shibuya now, glaring back at him. “Is that why? Why you went away? I was a disappointment? I held you down - I held you back. What I am kept you from what you wanted, and that’s why....”

“No,” he sighs. “No, it wasn’t.”

“So why?”

“... we would have gone together,” Joshua says, very softly. It’s not an explanation, but it is the truth, and the closest he has to an apology.

Slowly, the Music fades back to normal, and the noises of the restaurant rise up around them, everyone shaking off the sudden push to the brink as if it never happened. Joshua didn’t just have his Game melt down, didn’t nearly punch a hole through reality and turn the whole thing inside out - which is only a slight improvement on the conversation.

Shibuya looks out at him through Eri’s eyes with a pain it can feel but not understand - and it might as well be Neku, watching him run away, vanishing the moment his Conductor had said more than he meant. Nothing worse to do to Neku than leave him alone, Joshua knows that, he’s known from the start. No way worse to hurt him and he’d done it without thinking because doing thoughtless damage past repair may well be the greatest power he has.

“Do you understand now?” Joshua says to his district, “See how bad it hurts - and he’s human all the way through, not just pretending, not just putting it on for an afternoon. If this keeps going, I will only hurt him more before it’s over. Killing him would be the easy way out. I will take everything that makes him Neku Sakuraba and I will crush it out of him. It’s not a matter of if I care, or why or how much, and I know you know that. We both know what I’m capable of.”

An eternity’s worth of work, his district, and look what he’d nearly done to it in a fit of artistic pique. Joshua had thought it was the greatest gift once, his most impressive talent, to play fast and hard with the Game because nothing actually mattered. It’s one thing to play the Irreverent Bastard Artist to the crowd, to the Higher Plane, but he’s not just deluded enough to sell it to himself.

“I was your Composer, and I would have destroyed you.”

Shibuya will forgive him, the instant he lets her, but if Joshua never apologizes there can never be the chance. Oh, his district sings so brightly now and so very little of it is his doing.

Eri shakes her head. “You didn’t. You kept the Game alive.”

Joshua lets out a short, bitter laugh. “Not for the reason you think.”

“So then why?”

He thinks back, and he’s there again, at the endgame, with the princess saved and all the plot untwisted. All Neku had to do was what he was supposed to, just get through the scene without reading the stage directions out loud. It was INT. THRONE ROOM (SHIBUYA RIVER) - DAY
with JOSHUA (THE COMPOSER) and NEKU (THE PROXY) and everything as he’d known it would be, all falling into place exactly as he’d planned, except it hadn’t even been a plan, more like a law, as immutable as gravity.

The cameras rolled and the orchestra fell to a tense hush, close-ups on JOSHUA (THE BASTARD) and a slow pan to showcase the full, trembling fury of NEKU (THE DUPE) and all that remained was the thrilling climax.

His proxy would shoot him, Neku would pull the trigger and it would prove that Joshua had been justified all along.

End scene. Cut to black. Credit to stunt doubles and catering. One vending machine harmed in the making of this film, but Minamimoto more than had it coming.

Neku had walked in blind, and gone for it like an improv star: the shaking hands, the red-faced fury - there’d even been tears. A perfect ending - until he’d missed his cue. Backed into that corner, with one step left to take, and instead he’d gone and torn the last page off the script. Scribbled over the FADE OUT and just… kept going. Kept coloring outside all the lines, in shades Joshua had never seen before.

“Neku’s an Angel, Eri. Higher Plane. It was absurd… I don’t know what I was thinking, ever trying to keep him here. It’s making a mess of everything, to pretend that I can. He’s affecting the whole district, which leads to you being here, telling me-”

“Do you like making things this complicated?”

Joshua fights back the frustrated snarl, not really succeeding. “I’ve got lifetimes of knowing how complicated this is.”

“Well, I’ve got half a city shoved up inside my heart, Joshua.” Eri snaps back, completely unimpressed, “So at the moment I think we’re kind of even.”

The both of them take a drink and another plate, with anger burning through calories like jet fuel. It doesn’t do much for the dramatic moment, but neither would ending up face down in a neat row of temaki. Eri sets her empty plate down, and Joshua frowns, their stacks like a miniature skyline of a newly-booming metropolis.

“Do you even have any money?”

Eri snorts. “I ought to make you pay.”

Joshua arches an eyebrow. “We’re doing something else here?”

She tips her head, a merciless knowing there, “Are you afraid that you need him more than he needs you? It scares me, how much I need Shiki. I keep telling myself it doesn’t, but it’s not true.”

“I don’t need him.” Eri doesn’t even bother responding to that, and Joshua rolls his eyes again. Two times in the same conversation, that’s just marvelous. “All right, then Neku doesn’t need me. Or I’m making things worse - every time I hurt him, his Imagination goes straight down the toilet. He will be more boring and less useful with every fight we have. So I walk now before it can get any worse. I’m trying to be the better person.”

Joshua’s hit his half-life, as a Composer, and it’s taken a while but he’s finally got the balls to admit to it. Ascension is out of the question, he wouldn’t want it if they asked, so this is about what it always should have been about - finding the courtesy to go down without taking anyone else with
“Suicide is not self-improvement.” Eri says, as if it’s a fact. As if Joshua can’t think of a perfectly good argument or ten against it, “Give up on yourself, and you give up on the world.”

Ah, the platitudes. He never did get around to buying Hanekoma a book and highlighting some new ones.

“To be fair, I did both.”

Or tried to, and he still knows what he knows and what she ought to know - postponing the inevitable is not the same as change.

“I’m doing this for you.” Joshua says, “it’s the first rational, unselfish thing I’ve tried to do since I – since always - and all I want is for you to let me do it.”

“It’s an excuse. It’s what you say because you’re scared to lose, and if you’re scared to lose then you’ve already lost,” Eri says slowly, thoughtfully, and there’s the shift in her gaze, a realization fit for two - girl and district, and he’s still a step behind, “and if it’s an excuse, we don’t accept it. If it’s a cage, let’s crack it open.”

Anyone else, and there’s no way Joshua wouldn’t see it coming. He would have never stepped through the door of the restaurant, let alone encouraged what now seems like half of Shibuya to join in, more people piling in and someone even working to reconnect the sound system. Joshua never would have sat down and pretended to have real people feelings, but this is what the district does to him.

So when the girl reaches out, he doesn’t lunge back, doesn’t bat the hand away that brushes gently against his brow. Joshua doesn’t shift Frequencies or try to protect himself or even think he has to.

His mistake.

“Sir? Are you all right, sir?”

Joshua stares up at the ceiling, flat on his back on the floor. All on its own, it’s a unique enough experience that his first few moments of blinking are downright novel, and damn near entertaining. Except that he’s on the floor and there’s a familiar and horrible bass line shaking the ground beneath him, because some Composers inspire the talentless just to troll the rest of the world.

“It’s only then that Joshua realizes he’s been blinking a face into focus - a very familiar face. None less than Makoto ‘Shadow Ramen Kaiten Sushi Crepes Stop Me Before I Cook Again’ Miki. Joshua keeps blinking a bit, but the bit of smudge on his chin doesn’t go away because good old ‘Mick’ actually thought the soul patch wasn’t a bigger mistake than trying to be a restauranteur. Which means Joshua’s right about everything, absolutely everything.

He glances from face to face, to tell Eri he’s right about it all and always was, but she’s not looking down at him. Just the usual random group of bystanders all staring blankly, ready to applaud for anything. More than a few of them are nodding to the beat.

Joshua shuts his eyes and flips to the UG and he could give a damn who takes notice, as if the Angels aren’t already counting his daily mistakes in base ten.
“Sir? Can I help you up?”

A hand on his arm, which doesn’t make sense because he’s in the UG and the Players aren’t - oh god, the owner’s touching him.

“Let go… might rub off…”

Joshua sits up slowly, feeling the world spin for a moment before settling in around him, and a few of the onlookers have returned to their meals now that it’s clear he’s not going to be more entertaining. Makoto’s still watching him anxiously and why, why does Joshua remember his name and why is he not in the Underground?

Why is Shibuya silent?

If Makoto says anything else, if anyone says or does anything else Joshua doesn’t hear it, too busy scrambling up off the floor. Headed for the door and straining for what ought to be there, what he’s known as the backbeat to every thought he’s had for as far back as he can remember. Joshua doesn’t remember what it was to be human. Right now, it feels a lot like waking up in a bathtub full of ice with a kidney-shaped hole in his side.

Or two. Dozen.

It’s bright outside. A few people are out on the street, and maybe if he concentrated he might be able to glean something but Joshua doesn’t want to concentrate. The silence raises goosebumps on his skin and the day is hot and he still shivers.

His phone rings.

“You can’t do this,” he says instantly into the receiver. Clutching the phone so hard he might very well crack the case, looking up and down the street like it’s going to do a bit of good, as if she’d still be anywhere nearby.

“Did and done. Think of it like a vacation.”

“Eri. Eri, listen to me.” He tries to ignore the hint of fluttery panic in his voice, to concentrated on the anger instead, to be the cool rational Composer he’s been since before digital clocks and smooth jazz and internal combustion. “You can’t let Shibuya do this. You can’t control it. This is not some mad moment of inspiration - this is fourteen beers and getting behind the wheel of the Earth. The district doesn’t know what you are and it doesn’t care. You’re not in charge, and it’s going to tear you apart from the inside out.”

She laughs. She laughs at him. “When did you stop taking risks? You’ve been thinking of ‘us’ for too long, Joshua. You need to think about you. Just you, and what you really want.”

“I want you to give me back my city, and then get beaten to death by construction equipment.”

Eri laughs again. Other than that, there’s no sound. No Music, no Game, nothing but the weak rasp of his own breathing.

“You know the rules, Composer. Pay the entry fee, make a pact, get in touch with your feelings. A feeling. Pick your favorite.”

“I am going to destroy you.”

Nothing in any world more merciless than a district that is well entertained, and she is and Joshua
knows he is intimidating no one. “I think you’d a better job figuring things out before they realize nobody’s running the Game.”

“You can’t-”

Yes she can, actually, and he’s left listening to a dial tone. Joshua makes a cursory check to see if he can track the call, no surprise that even Hanekoma’s best tweaks aren’t going to catch his district off guard. The phone buzzes - a text - and Joshua doesn’t even have to look to know what he’ll see.

“You have two days… to get your head out of your ass. Fail, and face a new life scrubbing the grease traps at Stationside. — Shibuya”

Chapter End Notes

1. Ladytron, Ghosts. Yeah the song from Little Big Planet 2

2. I have written easier conversations. Boy howdy.
You apply the pressure to help me crystallize

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound of the sword is almost musical, a gentle keening against the whetstone in his hand. Of all the swords in all the world this one hardly needs the help, but it’s old and familiar and entirely for Kariya’s benefit, nothing at all to do with the blade.

It distracts from current uncertainties, a reminder of a thousand past days and past battles won. He’s had moments of doubt, there’s been trial after trial and some hard, hard battles - but he’s still here.

He might not need to be in this exact spot, once more on the rooftop across from Neku’s apartment, but Uzuki more or less kicked him out after his approximately nine-thousandth loop across the floor of the living room. Kariya’s got a perfect line of sight with the front door, though it’s been a night and a day and now night again with no sign of him. Neku’s in there, in the same way that a carton of eggs is still a carton of eggs after it’s hit with a bat a couple dozen times.

His Music hurts to listen to, all off-key and fragmented tempo, and Kariya’s been waiting for Shibuya’s Composer to show up but for whatever reason it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen. Maybe the Composer’s really that much of a prick, unwilling to venture out of his comfort zone - but he has to know, doesn’t he? Whatever punishment they laid out on him for the Long Game, the Angels would still want him to know when they’re messing with his Conductor right in his own back yard.

Unless he doesn’t care, and Neku’s just the rope in another round of tug-of-bastard.

The kid’s just a kid, and Kariya’s an idiot for having to remind himself of that. He’s getting way too rattled by all this, making connections that aren’t there when nothing’s even happened yet. Neku’s not a Composer, not the son of a daimyo, with nothing he has to prove in battle. Facing Death With Honor is not nearly as popular as Running Away With Screaming.

Neku’s got way, way too much power and keeps making insane decisions completely at a whim and he may be young and stupidly optimistic but that doesn’t actually make him stupid. If he sees - when he sees what he’s up against, he’ll retreat and there’s no reason for him not to.

He’s not going to refuse to save himself.

Kariya puts down the honing steel, picking up the tiny figurine sitting beside it, nearly weightless in his palm but softly humming with power. It’s a netsuke, carved like a crane, with its wings tucked in and its neck arched in a long, graceful curve toward the ground. A hairline fracture traces a path up the middle of it, with the tiniest missing fragment in its wing but when he flicks his hand out it shifts shape to a blade that is perfect, the tanto a pure sliver of white like a slice off the moon, before he returns it to its resting form.

Kariya’s never used the blade. He barely has the right to wield its partner.

He closes his eyes for a moment, leaning back and breathing in and listening. It’s kind of a bitch, really, to be the Crane again. It means he has to know things outside the realm of normal Reapers, like how in the middle of the day there’d been an audible skip in the Music. The Game kept on, and the Players kept on but Kariya nearly ended up flat on his face with two Wall Reapers trying
not to laugh at him and he’d like to think he’s wrong about what he heard but he knows he’s not.

Shibuya’s Music is different. It’s a subtle thing, like taking the record off and putting it on another machine but it’s there. In any other Game he’d say the Composer had changed up, but even that doesn’t feel like this, and surely someone would have told him or Neku or at least come down to gloat and light up some fireworks and propose a toast.

So he’s here, watching over Neku like a creepy stalker and waiting and waiting and how much does he hate waiting, until Kariya’s half-begging to have some Taboo noise chewing on his spinal column just to make the time go by.

It’s still unnerving when the Angel shows up, appearing on the rooftop behind him in a weighted silence, a soft rush of air. It’s not the same one Kariya saw before, tonight’s Angel far less impressive, shabby and wrinkled with curls spinning out from under a duckbill cap, his gaze wandering in a lazy, indifferent sort of way. He looks like harmless slacker - but Kariya’s been living that same trick for lifetimes, and keeps to his own slouch even as his hand tightens around the hilt of his sword and he’s listening very carefully on a few different planes. The only sound is the cellophane of the bag in the Angel’s hand as he tips it forward.

“Shrimp chip?”

Kariya doesn’t respond, and the Angel quickly tilts the bag up, tipping his head at an increasingly bizarre angle to get out the last few crumbs. Playing the fool. He kind of looks like he might be a poet.

Oh, please God, let him not be a poet.

“You know,” the Angel says, licking his fingers clean, the bag vanishing before it hits the ground, “what really gets to me is all the stuff.” He makes a broad, vague gesture towards the city with the hand not currently in his mouth. “I mean, I’m young enough, we had lights, sure. We had people and candy wrappers and all that - but this, all this stuff? A guy like you - do you ever get used to how much crap is just lying around everywhere?”

“Haven’t noticed.”

The Angel takes the brusque reply in stride, his grin widening. “Huh. Just me, then. Name’s Ezra, by the way.”

Kariya glances away, half-wishing he had some bean paste to suck on. It gives him a good twenty IQ point drop for anyone watching, not that the Angel’s going to buy it, not with that ‘guy like you’ remark. The hell he doesn’t know who Kariya is, either. The fact that he’s up here at all means he’s not here for Neku, which is good for a few reasons and very bad for all the rest.

Of course he’s heard the rumors about himself, about the Crane, how it appears out of nowhere, striking down its victims with a single blow, and there’s nowhere to run and no way to fight back. The truth… the truth is, Kariya does not go in without a plan and a distinct advantage and he definitely does not pick fights with Angels.

“So, what happened to the Music?” Ezra says, and Kariya’s surprised despite himself by the bluntness of the question. He must be young, actually young. Most Angels would try to bore him unconscious before daring to get to the point.

“You tell me.”

The Angel shrugs, and steps up to the edge, looking down towards Neku’s front door. “I doubt he
can feel it yet, either way.”
“What did you do to him?”
“You mean our new Angel? Gave him the grand tour. Showed him what he has to look forward to.”

So Neku knows, now. All of it. Except he’s still here, which means Kariya can smile back, all teeth.
“He didn’t want to be your draft pick, did he? Shame.”
Ezra grins back, and lights a cigarette and there shouldn’t be anything threatening in the gesture but the hell it’s not.
“I don’t know about you, but I’ve never seen the Higher Plane let anything like this go on for so long, not in a city this size. With what that Producer did here? Do they think you’ve got it under control, because I’m thinking… not so much.”

Kariya does his best to glance around without making a show of it, checking for any other shapes in the shadows. The Angels play as dirty as anyone when they want to, they just don’t try to get caught at it.

“Brede says I’m just supposed to watch, but then the Music… and you’re here, and it was really more of a suggestion than an order. I can’t help but wonder… why didn’t you take out Sanae Hanekoma? A smarter person than me might even think you’re protecting this mystery Fallen.”

“Does that happen?” Kariya says, smirking, though his laid-back pose is threaded through tension.
Ezra shrugs, dropping the cigarette, grinding it under his heel. “What doesn’t happen, sooner or later? Come on, if I promise not to care, will you give me a hint? I know you know something, or you wouldn’t be here. We’re all on the same team, right, old man?”

“Old man?” Kariya drops his sword to the side, not bothering to hide his fighting stance now, and watches the Angel’s eyes light up. He should be smarter than this, shouldn’t be so easily baited into a Get To Know Your Neighborhood Ass-Kicking, but he’s got a lot of nervous energy to burn and that little voice in the back of his head with the better ideas abandoned him to his fate some time ago, and seems to have no interest in coming back.

“Or, you know…” Ezra grins, tugging his hat a little further on his head before cracking his knuckles, “we can talk later, while we wait for the bleeding to stop.”

It must be late, one of those new definitions of late Neku didn’t think he’d be using until college. The room is dark around him and quiet and he no longer feels like he’s going to yank himself right out his skin. He swore he set his phone to vibrate but it’s on a ringtone Vegas - of all people - sent him, some Japanese band that she’s heard of and he hasn’t - thanks, Internet - doing a really questionable cover of “I’m Turning Japanese.” For some reason, this is hilarious to her. He’d try and figure out why, but Neku’s terrified because all her replies seem to come in the form of boobs, and lots of them. He’s pretty sure just talking to her is illegal in more than one country and in at least half the dimensions Brede took him. Maybe not the one with the sea-serpent people. Maybe.

So, I’ve finally reached the part where I make jokes about all this?
No. Yes. Does it matter?

The phone rings, a late-night call so beyond normal now that it doesn’t even register as odd. Neku reaches for the phone, still more than a little muzzy. He shuts his eyes and lets out a breath and focuses, pulls for that vibe he’s been wobbling in and out of for hours. Neku turns his head and looks up, and his Reaper’s wings are still as they’ve always been, twisting up above him in gleaming obsidian arcs. No change in color, not a single sign of feathers or fluff and it shouldn’t be comforting but Neku’s surprised how much it is. He realizes he’d been half afraid that this wreck of a night had been some sort of metamorphosis.

“As Neku Sakuraba awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant dickhead.”

Brede had been giving him the soft sell, but he’s sure the Angels are going to be real, real unhappy when they find out he’s not going along with the plan.

The phone’s still ringing, which is amazing, because he’s not sure how long he’s been lying here not answering it.

“It’s Neku. Maybe.”

“I was right. Shadow Ramen is the place dreams go to commit murder-suicide pacts.”

He freezes, the sound of that voice like a swift dip in liquid nitrogen and an even swifter drop kick against the wall. Neku nearly chokes, as he tries to speak and breathe and swallow all at the same time. In any other circumstances, he would have had something more clever to say about murder-suicide pacts, but at the moment his mind’s just looping static. He can feel his wings stretch out, tucking down fast around him in meager protection.

“… Josh?”

The moment of silence would be meaningless coming from anyone else but Joshua doesn’t do unintentional pauses. Of course, he doesn’t do conversations like this either, which means there is absolutely nothing Neku can think to say that won’t make him hang up. Except Joshua still doesn’t speak, which means it’s his job to fire the first shot, even if he’s standing in front of the cannon - or in the cannon.

“Uh,” Neku finally says, “you know you’re going to have to delete your number off my phone again. Unless you’re on a pay phone.”

“A what?”

Tense as he is, Neku can’t help but smile. God forbid Shibuya’s Composer be bitchy on anything less than the most cutting edge of modern technology. He realizes Joshua isn’t running with the conversation, and the quiet this time goes on and on and that’s… that’s odd, and odd’s not good, because all the conversation options on the Joshua dating sim just bluescreen the whole machine.

“No Players were Erased today, Neku. Again. We’re going to start to lose Reapers at this rate.”

It hurts, that bland, formal tone. It feels like Neku’s swallowing his heart down and it throbs and it hurts - okay, so this is a Conductor call, not a Neku call, or at least that’s how it’s going to start. The Composer wants to talk shop, and Neku puts his hand over the receiver and takes a slow, steady breath, forcing all the need out of his voice because he can ignore the obvious as well as anyone, if that’s what it takes.
“So… we bump all our current ones into Wall Reapers to keep them from vanishing, and recruit these Players to take their place.”

“Do you really think they’re going to go for that?”


He’s still waking up by degrees, and every moment passes with some new and violent emotion, surprise and panic and shame at caring so damn much all followed by worry that the Composer can hear him caring. Underneath it all, knowing that he’d been more afraid than anything that Joshua wouldn’t call at all. So this - well, it’s awkward as hell but at least it’s not the absolute worst-case scenario. Half a conversation’s better than nothing.

Joshua hasn’t answered him yet, and it’s kinda doubtful he’s been struck speechless by the brilliance of Neku’s plan. Neku honestly cannot remember where Uzuki’s last report is or if he’s read it or what day it is. It’s all he can do to try and play it cool, which is a little difficult when he realizes he’s sleeping… in the bathtub?

Yep, it seems he’d dragged his blankets right in and everything. When the hell did that even happen?

“I think I have a science test tomorrow,” he mutters, only half intending to speak out loud. “Today. Whatever.”

“You should really just drop out, Neku. Set an example for your deadbeat army.”

“It’s your army. I’m just there so you can have some fleeting chance at credibility.” Neku swallows, and wonders if he’s imagining the hesitation in the silence, and if he ought to just keep pretending - oh hell with it, with Joshua even polite conversation will be apocalypse before long.

“You know I was out with that Angel tonight, right?”

“Oh, were you?” Which means yes.

“Yeah. I guess he thought we had a lot to talk about, and there was some… stuff he needed to show me.”

I saw you. The other you… and a whole lot more.

How much did the Dead Game resemble what Joshua would have done to Shibuya? It couldn’t have been the same thing, he wouldn’t have done something like that, not even Joshua - and the Angels, they wouldn’t have let it happen. It had happened the once, because no one would have known it could go that far…

Joshua isn’t talking, and Neku’s waiting for the dial tone but that doesn’t happen either.

“I’m still here, Josh.” He says quietly. “I need to… you should know it’s all your call, okay? Nothing has to change.”

Joshua laughs, exactly the laugh that translates into a dozen insulting things, all of them some variation on how stupid Neku is and how little he knows. It annoyed him before he was the Conductor and there’s so much on his plate that he’s got extra plates, all of them spinning frantically and this just hurts. He can argue the facts with himself as much as he wants, but one little chuckle and he’s defenseless.

“Yeah, okay. Fine, so thanks for calling. Need a pizza, or are we done?” Maybe his voice waives a
little, not the kind of thing a cell phone’s good enough to pick up and why didn’t he even think that Joshua can’t hang up on him if he hangs up first?

“What did the Angel show you?”

It isn’t quite concern, but it certainly isn’t indifference. Neku’s kind of glad he’s still rattled, still tired. If he had to deal with this feeling well-prepared, he might care more about failing.

“Well, for one, you have crap imagination when it comes to picking out hiding spots. Tin Pin world? Really?”

“I wasn’t hiding.”

“Yeah, I know that.” Neku says, and it’s his turn to laugh and he can’t help the way it cracks at the edges and it’s kind of hard not to just start yelling yeah I know it Josh I know you don’t give a shit about anything or anyone and you’re never going to and my life’s become one of those really hideous love songs and-

“It’s dangerous, Neku. All of this, for me, it isn’t… You’ve been Conductor long enough, but I’ve been the Composer for a lot longer. A lot of things… turn out true, even when you don’t want them to.”

“So you’re saying I’m just the next in line, and you’ve done all this before.”

“No.”

Neku licks his lips, not quite sure he can keep his voice steady even if he’s just got to say the one word. “No?”

He’s maybe heard it before, once or twice. Joshua’s voice when he’s not trying to be… when he’s not trying, when it’s just him and nothing more. “I… there’s never been anyone like you, Neku. I’ve never… it’s dangerous.”

“Are you being the Composer with me, about this? Is that what this is all about? What do you think I’m going to do, Josh? If I wanted to kick you out and… dump your stuff in some metaphorical box on the curb, I think I would have done that by now. I’m not… I’m not trying to score points on you. I don’t have the time. It’s not some chess game -you don’t need a plan of attack.”

Or, knowing Joshua, three plans involving multiple floors and alternate routes. Maybe he didn’t know what to do with anything that didn’t show up complicated or rigged to explode. Could anyone be too omniscient for their own good?

“Tell me more about this metaphorical box.”

“It’s big and fancy and flammable. I just, I don’t… it’s just me here, Josh. Nobody’s after your poncy, poncy job. Well okay, everyone else is, but they’re all insane.” Neku honestly can’t say if it’s better or worse, doing this over the phone. His palms are sweating badly and he can practically taste his heartbeat he’s so nervous, so maybe the phone is good. “If you need some kind of, I don’t know, collateral… I wish you didn’t know me as well as you do, ok?”

“You’re an Angel, Neku.”

“I’m Shibuya’s Conductor. Guess which of those things I actually care about.”
A soft laugh over the line, but this one doesn’t sound mocking. It almost sounds fond. “You really have no idea what you’re doing.”

“It’s my special strategy. Worked so far. Kinda.”

“Neku. I’m not-“

He seriously is living out the chorus of the world’s worst love song, when Joshua just not hating him can cheer him up this much. When he thinks he can hear inside those silences and there’s - maybe not an apology, but at least recognition. Whatever it is they’ve got together, Joshua might try to hold onto it too.

“Josh, I spent a week thinking you murdered me, and then I spent a week thinking I’d murdered you, and I’ve spent all the weeks since thinking I was an idiot for not shooting you when I had the chance. Beat and I had to pierce each others’ ears in a bathroom stall because we were getting desperate and the jewelry stats were too good to pass up. So this? Whatever this is, I’m in. I can keep it together for the children like a motherfucking champion.”

“Drops or hoops?”

“Studs, you dick.” Just how the hell is Neku supposed to live without this? “So don’t worry. I’ll get on my big boy pants and-“

“Which ones are your big-“

“Shut up. I hate you.”

“You do, don’t you.”

The Composer’s voice is suddenly, devastatingly gentle, and it almost, almost sounds like…

Neku pulls the phone away, half curious and half trying to get his breath back - there’s a number on the display, and he’s not even all that put out that it’s not Joshua’s, that he’s being called from WildKat. Neku hopes he sounds more casual than he’s feeling. It isn’t much of a question but any kind of question feels like he’s treading uncertain ground.

“A little late for lattes, isn’t it? Or is Mr. H running a nightclub now?”

“If I leave the owner unsupervised, he gets creative, and for some reason my Conductor thinks that’s a good thing.”

Neku snorts. “Yeah, that guy. What’s his problem, anyway?”

“Suicidal tendencies.”

“Ass.”

If Joshua really didn’t give a damn, he’d have smiled, maybe even said ‘I love you too’ because lies meant nothing to him. Neku’s had the special backstage tour into the pure ruthlessness of Joshua’s indifference, and if that were this? He wouldn’t even know anything was wrong.

He could have made it easy, and instead they’re doing this. If that’s not love, what is?

“Josh, you cannot begin to imagine the shit I’m going to do to you on White Day.”

He can hear it when Joshua smiles back, that sly fox’s smirk. “We should wait to break up until
after the summer festival.”

“Right.”

“Otherwise you’d miss me in a kimono.”

“Sure.”

“It’s all in how you move.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“We’ll talk later, Neku.”

It’s like he’s fallen in love with a damn haiku, for how much Joshua can do to him with so little. Three tiny words and they’re not even important ones, but he’s still reeling. If he gets all this stupid out of the way while he’s young, he won’t have to do it again, right?

“Night, Josh.”

Neku listens to the dial tone for a while, before letting the phone fall from his ear.

Well, he sure did that well. Adequately. He clammers up out of the bathtub and his feet have him moving toward the fridge even though Neku knows there’s nothing worth looking at inside. It’s way, way too late to go out. He really ought to go out. He’s got to make a stand, and so what if it seems like he already sort of did that and the stakes seem both vague and yet incredibly high.

Hey, it can only go wrong like, immediately.

--------------------------------------------

“You think we should sell tickets? I think we should sell tickets!” Ezra says, as a thousand bullets slam into the space Kariya was standing an instant before.

He’s fighting an Angel, so these are some kind of magic laser ray-gun bullets and in the green, electric glow of the aftermath he’s tossed right off the edge of the rooftop. Kariya floats in place as the figurative dust settles and Ezra grins at him from behind his main weapons, two large art deco statues burnished a flawless deep green. Women with perfect frozen faces and graceful curved poses that are elegant and powerful and carrying ornately wrought chainguns.

It’s always a little strange, these UG fights, insane firepower with no tangible evidence left behind - no craters, no rubble. A big fight, a real upheaval might be enough to change trends or attitudes on the surface, but there’s still no such thing as a visible aftermath. The only thing close to a body count is the staggering amount of Yellow Noise that’s been drawn to the conflict, cracking and
popping like bugs in a zapper whenever they drift too near.

Kariya kicks off the side of the building, shifting into his bird form and snapping his wings to push himself higher, listening to the bullets hiss behind him as he curves and barrel rolls in the sky like a flying ace and fuck this is why nobody fights Angels unless they have to.

He swoops down hard over the side of the building for cover and then snaps up at a speed that defies any laws of the Realground. His wings are out before the bullets can meet him and he slices down and up, a spin that leaves shrieking metal in his wake and Kariya snaps back into his human form even as he’s falling forward, letting the momentum throw him into the Angel as he brings the sword down. He feels the impact, but it’s not clean or solid and more annoyingly there’s no screaming as what’s left of the glancing blow carries him to the side, Kariya shifting so he has the sword up and waiting for the next strike.

Ezra’s not staring him, but at the weapon he’d barely managed to put between them. The poses look oddly similar, in a realm where baseball bats can sometimes stand up against samurai swords, but Kariya’s blade is not the one with a massive crack from the impact.

“Well, shit,” Ezra says, frowning. “I didn’t even mean to pack that. It’s my favorite bat. Autographed and everything.”

“It was.” Kariya says, a little out of breath, only slightly comforted by the fact that the Angel is too. The ease with which he’d taken Hanekoma down is only proof of just how hard the Producer been censured.

“Are we done here, then?”

“Well, no. Obviously not now.” Ezra says, and shakes the damaged bat in his direction for emphasis. “Vengeance!”

Kariya hears a door open somewhere below them, the only sound that could pull his eyes away from the Angel - and yep, it’s Neku. In the space it takes his eyes to flick down and back Ezra is moving and Kariya can only twist just far enough that the bat connects with his shoulder instead of taking his head clean off.

The only bit of satisfaction to be had as he’s thrown back through the air is that Kariya’s pretty sure the Angel’s prized possession wasn’t ready for that sort of follow-up hit. He rolls to his feet, but there’s no attack waiting to meet him - just a beloved heirloom now snapped completely in two, and the Angel whines slightly in the back of his throat.

“Why did I do that?!?”

Kariya lunges, ignoring the pain in his shoulder for the opportunity, the moment of distraction but it’s not enough and Ezra sweeps out a hand and he bounces off another sculpture, leaping back as the blue-gray woman scythes the air in front of him, metal features twisted with fury. Neku’s not moving fast, but he’s still moving, and his Music sounds better but there’s a few high notes that shouldn’t be in a Conductor’s Song. He still doesn’t look up, no sign he’s aware of the fight going on just over his head.

“You don’t need to worry, we’ll take good care of him.” Ezra calls.

“We can’t do this now! We need to follow-”

Ezra’s smirking, throws up a hand and Kariya dives to the side, just barely misses being skewered by another damn statue, a gleaming sword longer than he is tall, wide-enough across that he can
see his full reflection in it, and then the ground splits again beneath his feet, and there’s another and another, with the Angel watching him all the while.

“What’s out there that you think he can’t handle? More Taboo Noise? What did the Producer drag up here? What big, dumb mistake of his are you covering for this time?”

Ladies and gentlemen, his reward for showing discretion - to end up in some heavenly report as aiding and abetting a jackass Producer who probably isn’t even worth hating as much as Kariya does. Resentment gives him a bit of a boost, though, and when Ezra summons more iron sylphs with more guns he’s back into his Noise form to meet them. The Crane flicks out feathers like knives, shattering the barrels, blowing apart the guns where they stand and as the Angel’s waving away the smoke Kariya is already over the side of the building and gone.

A montage pin? Now that’s an idea with potential, and Neku wonders if it should be support or - no, offensive. Offensive has more explosions. Neku turns the corner, out onto the quiet street, and wonders if there’s any way he can add in a soundtrack.

The air smells clean and cool and Shibuya… well, there’s something off but that’s probably just him, his senses so battered and worn it feels like he’s wearing oven mitts on every one he has. Neku reaches for the Music and it winds around him like christmas tree lights made of laughter and good secrets and surprises, winking happily off and on. The district’s in its usual good mood, playful and feeling quite proud of itself. He wonders why. Maybe Joshua knows.

Neku checks his phone - no new messages, and his fingers stray to the weave of Vancouver’s bracelet, catching at each of the bumps as if they’re prayer beads, and Neku’s not sure if it still counts as a prayer if he’s not really asking for anything, if he’s just happy. It’s a little unnerving, that he can feel the boundary between his district and the next when he’s a few streets away, but it makes sense that he might be a little sensitive, and there’s no reason to push it.

He’s content to just wander, not even trying to catch the vibe off the laughing college students who stagger by, performing the double encore of their karaoke so badly he can’t even figure out the song it’s supposed to be. It feels like he’s back in the Game, this late at night, all the buildings and shops lit up but only a few people strolling here and there. Neku window shops, and his reflection smiles back at him. If he were just that little bit braver, he’d maybe go to WildKat, except Joshua’s probably back at his apartment now and either way it feels a bit too much like playing double-or-nothing with his heart.

“Hey, boss.”

He can’t even place the sound before the shape blurs past him, jumping the curb - it’s the Reaper, the skating one from Shinjuku and she makes a slow, wide turn in front of him that quickly becomes a figure-eight, looping expertly around him as he walks down the street.

“Boss?” Neku smiles, and she smiles back - taking large sips of a bucket-sized coffee without slowing down or seeming to pay much attention to where she’s going, still maneuvering past every bit of landscaping and trash bin with ease.

“Yeah. It’s what they call you, right?”

“I think they call me a lot of things.” Neku says, and he feels a little bad that he doesn’t remember her name, if she ever told him, and he hasn’t been paying as much attention to the Game in front of him as he needs to be - it’s his job, after all. “What’s the word?”
“If I had to pick one? Ow.” The Reaper stops, shimmies back and launches the empty cup into a trash bin, lifting both arms in victory at her successful free throw. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’ll take a couple of smart Players over grumpy management anyday. You run a weird Game here, but nobody gets Erased for saying so.”

“Does that happen in Shinjuku?”

The girl is circling behind him when he asks the question, and she doesn’t answer, and by the time she’s appeared in front of him it’s like he never asked at all, like she didn’t hear him except they both know she did.

“You’re up late, boss man. Any problems with the Game? I mean, that aren’t supposed to be there. I can’t… really tell.”

“No, I just felt like a walk. What are you doing out here so late?”

The Reaper laughs. “I don’t sleep.”

“Switch to decaf.”

The expression slides across her face as if it’s on skates of its own, amused but wistful. “No, I mean I don’t sleep, not anymore. Entry fee.” Neku’s not sure how the shock translates to his expression, but she laughs. “Yeah, not the best moment of my life. Death. Thing.”

“That’s… never?”

She shrugs, spinning in a little circle, braid trailing out behind her. “It’s not so bad. A little boring, but…” she stretched her arms out, “there’s more space to move around in, this time of night, more room to think. It’s not the same world, is it?”

Neku starts to answer, but stops at the sharp shock of dissonance, as if a window’s been smashed at the other end of the street. It’s not until the Reaper looks up sharply that he’s sure of what he’s sensing, that he sees the figure approach - they’ve got a visitor from another district, a strong one.

“You, uh… you want some backup, boss?” Neku can hear the warring emotions in her voice - irritation at a foreign Reaper on her turf, fear over her own chances against a powerful enemy. Maybe even a little pride, not wanting Neku to know how interested she is in saving her own skin. He’d be annoyed by that, but Neku remembers being a Player, and some of the decisions he’d made in the service of self-preservation.

“I think I’ll be okay.” He says, another half a block bringing their unexpected visitor fully into view. It’s Akihabara’s Conductor, still rocking the French Maid outfit and still as bored as ever about it. The Reaper nods, and he listens to the sound of her skates carrying her back off into the night.

“I hope you didn’t have any problems on the way over.” Neku says. Akihabara’s Conductor curtseys in response, frills and lace from tip to toe, even a dainty touch to the laptop bag she has over one shoulder. It’s amazing to think that after everything he’s been through he might still be getting the better deal. At least until the next two-for-one sale at Lapin Angelique.

“Our Game has had several long-standing agreements with the other Composers in Tokyo. We’ve proven the usefulness of being able to work outside set boundaries.” Neku imagines there’s a cuter voice the girl has to use when she’s on duty back home, probably with a reduced syllable count and some hand gestures and he’s glad he’s only ever met her in her off hours. He’s not entirely relaxed, although he’s got this coming, what with all the shit he’s pulled in other Games, but it’s still a relief
when Akihabara calmly shrugs the bag off her shoulder, before handing him a folder from inside.

“What…” Neku flips it open, glancing through color-coded pages, picking out what he soon realizes are the shapes of all the districts, all the Games, with dates and tallies and one-line biographies that get him in the gut like always. He’s become too familiar with this. “Death counts?”

“The Composer of Akihabara was informed that Shibuya’s Conductor had an interest in the patterns of recent suicides and accidents, the deaths of those who might have been eligible for the Game but never appeared as Players.”

Neku flips through the pages again, now that there’s a purpose besides just being mildly horrified, and then he starts picking out patterns, adding up tallies across Games. Calculations and comparisons that no one else would bother to put together because that’s not how Composers work, this is the first that he’s heard of anyone sharing this sort of information.

The numbers are not good. The more he looks, the worse they get: bloggers and student artists, the unknowns and the up-and-comings, exactly the sort of people the Game is meant to nurture - all vanishing without a trace.

“Am I seeing what I think I’m seeing?”

Akihabara’s Conductor shrugs. “The Composer had no comment. Even with such a limited data set, the cross-referencing with each district’s results was too time consuming to go further. There is no long-term comparison for this kind of information, especially involving those districts that experienced a mass influx of Taboo Noise without a summary systemic Game collapse.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“It’s Taboo for a reason.”

Neku tries not to shiver. “You know, you could have just sent me an e-mail. You didn’t have to walk it all the way over by yourself.”

“My… master,” Akihabara says, with a roll of her eyes so profound it likely slows the Earth’s rotation, “considered this the most likely method of receiving prompt payment.”

“Payment?”

“You can think of it like a trade, if you’d prefer.”

Before he even has the chance to feel a proper amount of dread, the Conductor is reaching back into her bag, and Neku’s not sure what the proper amount even is when he sees what she has in her hand.

“You are not even serious.”

The Conductor steps a little closer, arm outstretched, offering him the headband with its accompanying kitty ears. “It will save people from having to continue photoshopping them on.”

“Continue? People?” Neku’s so dumbfounded she manages to put them in his slack grip before he realizes it. “Photoshop?”

“The Composer requires only a few dozen photos. Preferably with an impressive backdrop.” The Conductor takes a small camera with an alarmingly large lens from the bag, looking around for a
Neku’s hand tightens on the folder.

“It’s okay if I hate myself while we do this?”

The girl nods, the definition of nonplussed. “It makes you look shy, so yes.”

“Well… fine. Whatever. At least there’s no tail.”

The Conductor lifts her hand out of the bag again.

“Oh, goddammit.”

Kariya catches up with Neku just in time for the Angel to catch up with Kariya, and it’s bullets and swords and anything that isn’t nailed down being flung back and forth across the street, fancy fighting giving way to a good old-fashioned street brawl. He sees - shit, is that Akihabara’s Conductor? - and there’s an odd moment of confidence, that this is just Neku’s usual brand of inexplicable lunacy.

Ezra hits him with a moving van then, and he’s tossed into a side-alley, skidding to a halt mostly on his face.

By the time he tries to raise his head, the Angel’s got a boot on his throat, leaning in just enough to be painful. A flick of the Angel’s hand, and he’s pinned down among a dozen spears of smooth steel in ways that twist his limbs and leave all his joints screaming. He’s probably going wearing tread marks for the next day or two.

Of course, transformation is the obvious option. All Kariya has to do is shift a little, bring his arm up and the Crane’s wing will take care of the rest, neatly beheading the problem. Except that if Kariya starts killing Angels - even the annoying ones, even if they’re kind of trying to kill him… yeah, that’s not going to work. What’s also not going to work, though, is his jaw being ground into the pavement as Ezra leans in just a little bit more, savoring the moment.

“You don’t usually see Conductors being so friendly with each other. What’s that all about?”

“Why don’t you go ask him.” Killing the Angel might be off the table, but Kariya sure wouldn’t mind relieving him of his favorite leg. At least Ezra seems to be wincing a little, not entirely untouched by their fight.

“Nope, not our orders. We’re just surveillance for the inevitable. Maybe we’ll even let the kid take a whack at it, see how strong he really is.”

The pavement’s cool, but he hasn’t felt the chill of it until this moment - they do know more than they’re letting on.

Neku isn’t just the new recruit, he’s bait.

He can’t… they have to know… there has to be a way to tell them, tell this idiot and still keep Uzuki clear.

“It’s not…” he finally growls between clenched teeth, “not just a Fallen. It might not be a Fallen at all.”
The pressure on his throat lightens up a little, the Angel leaning forward, curious.

“How is it not a Fallen? What else could it be?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it. No idea where it came from. It likes to fight. It wants to fight.”

The Angel’s bad enough when he’s annoying, but the dark, curious look on his face is much worse, asking all kinds of questions Kariya has no intention of answering.

“You could have said something.”

“We can take care of our own problems,” he lies, pretending at district pride, and the Angel grins, leaning closer.

Kariya regrets the move even as he shifts into his Noise form, feels the pop and shift of otherworldly bones that sure the hell do hurt just like the real ones as he twists his head and sends the Crane’s long beak spearing for Ezra’s eye.

The Angel lunges back with a curse and Kariya has his wings instantly stretching out through the forest of spears, back to his human form with his hand on the sword before they can hit the ground. Another ten-thousand rounds are being chambered in front of him and Kariya is poised to lunge when the cool barrel presses against the back of his head.

He wonders how worried he ought to be, since he can see another gun out of the corner of his eye, pointed at Ezra. The Angel raises his hands with a sigh, his statues and weapons swiftly melting away to nothing.

“In my defense,” he says, “all of that was awesome.”

No response from whoever’s behind him, but Kariya thinks that Ezra flinches just slightly, his grin of the not-really-sorry-except-at-gunpoint variety.

Whatever’s going to happen next, it’s truncated by the unassuming figure that appears at the other end of the alley. Neku stares at them, and they stare back - so it seems the kid’s got his Frequencies sorted out again, or they’ve dropped back down somewhere nearer to the RG. Kariya’s ears are ringing too hard to tell. It’s Ezra who speaks up first.

“You feeling better, then?”

“Yeah.” Neku says, any nervousness well covered by a thick layer of teenage indifference.

Kariya feels the dread seep all the way into his wings, when the kid’s eyes flick to him, and he’s not sure if he’s more unnerved by the question there or how well they know each other without talking - it was never supposed to be like this. Neku asking him if he’s okay, and all he needs to see is the wrong answer and he’ll be in this fight. The kid doesn’t even know what Kariya’s been fighting - hell, maybe he does know - and he remembers well enough those last few days of the Long Game, when he and Uzuki had been flagging, too many Taboo Noise - and Neku had jumped in then too.

The kid’s not stupid. He’s got no code to follow. Just a good heart - and no one is strong enough to survive that.

“Keep walking, kid.” Kariya says, and Neku lets his eyes flick back and forth between the three of them one more time before he nods.
“Nice ears!” Ezra calls out, and immediately Neku has his hand on his head, and Kariya sees the cat ears sticking up just before he pulls them off. Kariya’s not asking, he’s just not asking. Hey, at least it’s a costume - is that a tail? The kid stalks away, and Kariya feels the gun drop from behind him, turns to see the other Angel tucking two rather normal looking guns back into their holsters. He shares another loaded look with his compatriot, and Ezra shrugs, grins at Kariya and tips his hat, before taking two steps back and vanishing with the third.

Small favors, that the Angel he’s left with doesn’t seem to be much for monologues. The man’s so nondescript Kariya can’t figure out which part of him is the most unmemorable, though there’s a swift professionalism in it, as he moves to follow Neku. Kariya’s pride gives him an earnest, solid thump of indignation for not following, but he’s feeling all his ribs arguing with each organ whenever he dares to move, the fight echoing through him on a couple of different planes.

“Hey,” he says, as the silent Angel turns at the corner. “Stay close to him. Stay sharp.”

Kariya more imagines the nod than sees it, but it’s enough for the moment, and as soon as he’s sure the Angel is out of sight he masterfully and elegantly collapses in a heap. No blood, of course, far too unfashionable for the Higher Plane, and he’s not about to fade into nothingness but that doesn’t mean it can’t hurt like hell. The Fallen are one thing, it’s been a while since he’s been stupid enough for a fight like this, and if the second Angel had pulled the trigger?

He has the phone in his hand on the second ring. It takes two more rings to get his fingers to work enough to pick up.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” It’s Uzuki. Kariya glances up, the sky a shade or so lighter than it was when he started getting pounded into the pavement. Night’s officially over, so she’s no doubt already working, even though the next Game won’t start until well past mid-morning. “Pick up some breakfast on your way back from wherever it is you are?”

Maybe it’s the fight, or he’s so tired that all he can hear is the tremor in her voice, the way it’s more of a demand than a request because demands sound tougher. Looking for some reason to call him just to make sure he’s there to pick up.

“Make it a mission.” Kariya says, his eyes closed. He remembers this, and what comes next is waking up when the cop rolls him over in a few hours to make sure he’s not dead. “Erase them if the donuts aren’t warm.”

“I’ll have them count the sprinkles. We’ll eliminate anyone who actually does it.” Annoyance covers up any lingering nervousness. He knows Uzuki had dreams of her first week as Games Master as a blowout, all the Players gone by day three.

*It could still happen. Just not that way.* He no longer quite feels like passing out in the street.

“Kariya, are you…”

“Getting breakfast, like you said. Maybe I’ll go bother Higashizawa.” Bum a shower, shoot the shit and hope he’s healed enough after that no one will ask any questions. Kariya hangs up, so there’s no audience to hear him groan as he drags himself up off the pavement.
Title from the Gorillaz, 'Crystallized'. I listened to the acoustic version while writing. The one with the xylophone.

Also, quoted from Kafka's Metamorphosis for reasons.
It’s the fourth day of the Game. They’re over halfway through, which would almost be worth celebrating except that things just get harder the closer they get to the end and Ami’s not sure what ‘the end’ is supposed to mean anyway. Maybe they get to go home, or maybe there will just be some giant Noise lurking behind the last door, ready to eat them in one bite.

Akane probably thinks so, but Ami wants to trust the Conductor, even if they only met him for a minute. He’d looked just like any other student, and he’d been kind when he talked to them. Even that had made her less afraid, and then he’d done - well, if it were anywhere but here and now Ami’d feel silly, calling it magic. Given that she’s currently swinging a bat at what seems an infinite number of electrified attack tadpoles - magic is sort of an understatement.

It’s kind of their own fault that they’re in this particular mess. Maybe just a little more Akane’s fault, she’s the one who keeps torturing the particular Wall Reaper who’s sent them on this ‘special’ quest to pick off strange little clusters of metal from the even stranger piles of junk - ‘‘statues,’ you underflows, they’re statues’’ - scattered all over Shibuya.

It’s only when she finds one of the gadgets still lit, like a twinkling handful of Christmas, that Ami even understands what they were originally supposed to be. The colors are pretty, really, and Akane slips it carefully into her pocket as a kind of a good-luck charm.

Scraping garbage off garbage. Akane types fiercely in between battles, just as angry whether she’s fighting or not. It’s true, but if they don’t clean them all off the Wall Reaper won’t let them past into Cadom City, and what’s hopefully that much closer to the end of the mission.

Akane can’t talk, but she can sure scream, a piercing note that dissolves a cluster of frog noise in front of her. Ami sees her eyes widen and doesn’t even think, just turns and throws her whole shoulder into the blow, sending a Wolf Noise flying back, scattering the smaller Noise as it hits the ground.

It isn’t as mortifying as it used to be, being big and tough and, well, a boy. At the start, it had been humiliating to stomp around and fight and know everyone was staring, but Ami’s secretly thinking she might actually be sort of good at this, and even if giving up being a girl was her entry fee, it might not be the penalty she thought it was.

You don’t like being a girl. Akane had typed furiously at her, somewhere near the start of the second day. You just like being able to use it as an excuse, so you can pretend you don’t take up space.

Akane is small, but she takes up a lot of space - all of it, really, stronger and tougher than any other girl Ami’s ever met. Loud too, even with her voice as the entry fee, and those first few days had been tough to get through, with Akane glaring at her to hurry up, or to stop trying to make herself seem smaller or to just hurry up and hit the Wall Reaper with her bat already.

Ami hadn’t hit him, though the Reaper still twitched every time he saw them coming, and his demands often seemed to have them running as far away from him as possible.

One last shout from Akane, and the street goes quiet and still. The Noise are vanquished, which means its their chance to finish cleaning the tower. It’s taken less and less time to scour each pillar of trash clean, Ami relying on a combination of pins to shake, blow and knock them down while Akane just yells them to pieces. So far she hasn’t succeeded in toppling a whole tower, but Ami
doubts that means she’s stopped trying.

Ami knows why she’s in the Game - a car blowing through a red light, a rainy day with the pavement just a little too slick. Akane doesn’t talk - type - about how she entered the Game, or much about her life at all. Only that she’s a singer, and how going voiceless through the Game has only taught her how hard she’s going to pound the crap out of whoever did this when she finally gets to them.

Ami thinks maybe Akane might be here to learn how to be a little less angry all the time. Not that she’s ever going to say it out loud.

It started out bad, with Akane charging ahead, smart enough to do it all on her own and Ami struggling to keep up. The other girl hated having to wait and hated having to explain things and probably just hated her by the end of the very first day. Ami’s kind of used to people being annoyed with her, and that’s when her shyness can’t get anyone killed, and so she’d thought it was just the way things would be. At least until the end of the second day, when they’d been chasing down their objective through the Udagawa Back Streets, a Pig Noise that refused to slow down and die.

Ami didn’t know how she saw the Reaper’s trap coming before Akane did - dumb luck, really, and she hadn’t bothered to think, just pushed her out of the way with her stupid huge boy body, with no time to even be afraid as the Noise rushed her, and all she could hear was Akane’s battle cry tearing through the air.

The next thing she knew she was on the ground, Akane’s hands on her shoulders and shaking her frantically, her hands trembling so badly she couldn’t even type out the words to scold her properly. Ami thought it didn’t need to mean anything special, Akane could have just been worried about losing her Partner and being Erased, nothing more than that. Except things have been better since then, Akane keeping pace with her as they race down the streets, and there’s a rhythm between them as they fight the Noise, working together like they’re a real team. Or maybe even something like friends.

Ami said, in one of those quiet moments after a fight, that she hoped they got out, not just to be alive again but so she could come hear Akane sing. The girl had smiled, and bought a bottle of nail polish from the Lapin Angélique store, making a face when Ami said she didn’t think boys could wear it.

The color’s a dark metallic blue, and even though her hands still look strange, with thick knuckles and broad nails, it doesn’t look so bad. It had been nice, anyway, to watch Akane put it on, brow furrowed in concentration. Taking it seriously, the same way she takes everything, from tearing into the Noise to watching out for Noise while they take a moment’s rest to now, returning to the Wall Reaper with the job complete.

---------------------------------------------

Higashizawa must admit - if only to himself - that the Conductor might be on to something with his concept of the sabbatical. He has enough back-time docked that a week off carries no threat of Erasure, and even before the Long Game Higashizawa knew he had been in something of a slump. He had been grateful to Kitaniji for the promotion, of course, and absolutely determined to succeed, but had it really been what was best for him? He’d had no time left to pursue culinary excellence, and had barely managed culinary competence at his day job, coming unforgivably close more than once to throwing soy sauce in the shio ramen, or sending out a kitsune udon without any fried tofu at all. The added stress had also not been accompanied by an equal portion of respect, with the Iron Maiden subtly hinting that a few more croquettes might go a long way to keeping him
in as Games Master. As if she’d had any control over that whatsoever, acting like the Conductor herself whenever Kitaniji’s back was turned.

All of that has changed with Sakuraba’s takeover, and as much as he hates to accept it, the new state of affairs is not entirely bad.

He would always respect Kitaniji to the utmost, but the new Conductor had never asked him not to, or demanded even the respect he was due. As the Games progressed, Higashizawa found it more and more difficult to put the blame fully on Sakuraba for what happened. The former Conductor was too powerful to fall to any stupid tricks - it must have been an honorable battle - and the new Conductor has proven remarkably resilient.

Strong enough to win in a fair challenge. Enough to Erase Higashizawa for his insolence and his tardiness - but also to allow an enemy to learn from his mistakes instead.

Higashizawa still keeps his defenses up, and he’s pretty sure Uzuki will cave his head in with one of her oversized handbags before she’ll let him be Games Master again, but it has even proved rather satisfying to watch the Game from a distance. It may have helped that he’s picked up half a dozen new cookbooks to keep him company for the week and every failed batch of macarons is one closer to perfection, with the Reapers an eager garbage disposal for his rejects.

“I’m going to randomize your - ow zetta shit you OW!”

Watching Minamimoto have a total nervous breakdown is rather like icing on the three-tiered cake, then. Of all the Reapers, he is still having the hardest time with the new kinder, gentler Shibuya, even though being a Wall Reaper has nothing to do with Erasing Players.

Despite the Conductor’s laid-back nature, Sakuraba still possesses a bit of Reaper in him somewhere. Maybe he didn’t sic his personal Rabbit Noise on the Wall Reaper, but there is a good chance he’s responsible for the pin on the bunny’s hat that’s sending out little snaps of lightning every minute or so, just enough to send Minamimoto’s hair on end.

“If I were Games Master, I would inquire about the location of your hat.” Higashizawa says. “You are practically out of uniform.”

“Shut up.”

Higashizawa wonders just how long this little war has been going on, as the Wall Reaper reaches into a bucket beside him, pulling out a water balloon full of paint and launching it at his foes, the rabbits more than fast enough to get out of the way, the street shining with a volley of failed attempts.

The return-fire of lightning hits its mark yet again.

“I was not aware the Noise could even use pins.” Higishizawa says, flipping through a few more pages to try and discover why the centers on his cookies keep going soggy. Maybe he’s adding too much almond meal?

“Shut up?” Minamimoto hisses, muttering pi back to the tenths place and beyond as he narrows his eyes, waiting to dodge the next attack. The rabbit in the hat leaps up in a circle, kicking its back legs in what’s probably delight. It is rather remarkably cute. Higashizawa wonders if such a creature is smart enough to keep score.

“The city has grown familiar with your statues. You ought to consider another hobby. Perhaps as a pâtissier.” Higashizawa muses as the Wall Reaper continues to twitch. He’s certainly focused and
obsessive enough for the detail work. “I had my doubts about the Bito child, but he’s quite adept with his basic knife skills. He may even be ready to try his hand at noodles soon.”

He did still retain a few regrettable habits, like writing down certain cooking steps on his cast, or attempting to use it as a chopping block.

“You have any good recipes for rabbit ste - ARGH!”

Minamimoto upends the rest of his bucket in one scattershot blast. It is painfully ineffective, and Higashizawa stares for a moment at a drop of purple shrapnel on the toe of his boot.

“Are you aware of the correlation between great mathematicians and insane asylums?”

“The square root of a negative number is blow me.”

Higashizawa shrugs, and keeps reading. Might he attempt to mix a macaron with a mochi or in that way does madness lie?

Two Players skid around the corner, their eyes going wide at the sight of him, the way most Players do. He’s broad-shouldered enough that usually even his wings are hidden, though no one ever seems to mistake him for human. The rabbits are seated calmly at the curb, and he can hear Minamimoto panting for breath as he tries to put himself together. It’s the smaller of the two players, the girl who walks right up to them and tips her hand over, a waterfall of broken metal, magnets and little lights tinkling against the pavement. Higashizawa recognizes the small devices - so it’s true, the Conductor was the one to spruce up Minamimoto’s artistic vision.

“I don’t recall the Games Master making that part of the challenge.” He says, and watches the Player’s eyes shine fiercely, glaring at the Wall Reaper. A strange batch of Players, this game. The Conductor did something to them, they’re not as frightened as they usually are, not as afraid to stand strong. It’s probably less impressive for the Reapers who actually have to try and take them down. Minamimoto sneers back at her, as if he hasn’t been tossing paint bombs at rabbits for the better part of the day.

“Hey, remainders! This is a zero-sum game!” He points dramatically at where the rabbit noise are now occupied chasing each other in a circle. “Erase them!”

“Oh, they’re cute!” The boy chirps in one of those ‘what-was-your-Entry-Fee-again?’ ways as the girl looks from the Noise to Minamimoto and back again. It’s clear she suspects what Higashizawa knows for sure - a Noise that’s using pins is not a Noise worth messing with. The Conductor’s personal pets? It would likely be easier to move the district around them than try to get them to leave.

The boy looks nervous, bat in hand but definitely unwilling to attack a lop-eared rabbit under any circumstances, especially when his Partner is so angry it’s nearly changing her Music. Higashizawa wonders why she remains so quiet when she starts typing on her phone and then he realizes she can’t speak at all. It’s not all that uncommon an Entry Fee, and this girl seems to be quite close to solving the problem by simply feeding Minamimoto her phone.

The Wall Reaper stares at her texted threat, undeterred, holding out with sheer stubbornness when all else has failed him.

“I’m rewriting the equation,” Minamimoto snarls. The girl glares at the wall behind him, sizing it up. “Huff and puff all you want, this house ain’t coming down.”

“Well, that’s not very nice.”
Reapers and Players turn together to stare at the new arrival.

The girl has no wings, which means she ought to be a Player - except that there’s no sign of her Partner, either. Higashizawa glances at Minamimoto, but the Wall Reaper seems as baffled as he is, if a little more annoyed about it.

The girl smiles at all of them, bright and welcoming, but mainly at the Player who’s dropped his eyes, shoulders hunched nervously in on himself.

“You remind me of someone special. She couldn’t believe how amazing she was, either.” The boy smiles shyly. The girl’s grin is almost too brilliant to look at directly. “Don’t worry, you’re exactly who you ought to be.”

Higashizawa thinks maybe he can hear something, just beneath the usual sounds of the city, a gentle hum, the pure, low tone of a gently-struck bell. The rabbits are nowhere to be seen.

“Man,” the girl says abruptly, as if she hasn’t just crashed into an argument. As if she belongs here. “Now I know what it was like for Shiki that time she drank all those double espressos and pulled that all-nighter. I am never going to need to do drugs in my life. Like, ever.”

She giggles suddenly, and leans back on her heels as if she might lose her balance, like maybe she won’t need to do the drugs because there aren’t any more left to do.

“How’s the food, Ram Crotch?” The girl gives him a cheerful fingergun, but doesn’t pull the trigger. “Beat’ll barely remember he’s supposed to be famous, but he’s going to flip out when he gets that second Michelin star.”

Next to him, Minamimoto blinks, eyes dropping to his belt buckle and up again. “Did she just call you Ram Crotch? Why don’t I call you Ram Crotch?”

“Silence,” Higashizawa mutters absently, his eyes still on the girl. He’s used to the UG and its tricks, aware that things are rarely what they seem and there’s invisible hands on all the strings, but he has the unnerving sensation that this girl - whatever she is - is juggling live, invisible grenades and expecting them to be impressed by her nonchalance.

“Who are you? How are you seeing us?”

“Okay, so I kind of get what Joshua was talking about now, you know? The danger and the whole exploding from sheer awesome and the - I mean, he still needs to learn his lesson, but… you know…” The girl stares down at her hands, fingers spread and palms toward the street, obviously looking at a lot more and maybe even believing that she’s answering his question. “It’s all like… I can’t quite… oh man, I’m going to need another milkshake.”

She giggles again. “I’m not saying this isn’t fun, because it is, but there’s not much judgment going on. At any moment, I think I might be convinced to bring the formal rompersuit into style, and I’m not sure I can stop me.”

“The Conductor did this.” Minamimoto mutters. “Whatever it is. It’s too stupid not to be his bullshit.”

“Neku?!” The girl’s head snaps up, her whole expression like a lit firecracker, and she winces just as fast, as if her surprise even took her by surprise. “Okay. Yes. Neku. We like Neku, yes we do. Wow.”

All this time, the Players have been watching silently, and though Higashizawa hadn’t thought
they’d be any less baffled, it’s clear there’s a benefit to just being a Player, to have a weak enough vibe that they can ignore the girl as just one more part of a Game that doesn’t make sense and is trying to kill them. Still, he’s impressed with the nerve of the mute girl, who takes two steps forward and lifts her phone up for the new girl to read.

“Huh… huh? Oh yeah, I think…”

The girl stretches out a hand, and the Wall disappears.

“Hey, look at that. I did a thing. Ha.”

Minamimoto makes a startled noise of dismay, like someone told him they’d outlawed triangles, but Higashizawa is glad for the rush of anger that cuts through his confusion. Whatever this girl is, there are rules to the Game and even if it’s not his week as Games Master this is still his UG and there is a system to uphold. He moves forward with all the solemn intent of a freight train, reaching for her.

“Not a step further. I will not allow this—“

He’s certain he never touches her. He comes close, maybe just brushing the edge of her shoulder before the whole world explodes, vanishing in a wall of flashbulb-white.

Minamimoto listens to the two Players run off through what used to be his Wall, not so much caring about that as he stands over the bodies of Ram Crotch and Crazy Girl. Maybe they’re dead or something, sprawled in a sort of post-battle anime shambles, just missing a little bit of smoke rising from the twitching corpses. He considers nudging one of them with his shoe, but quickly reconsiders.

He shuffles a little to the left, and then to the right. He raises a hand to adjust his hat, forgetting its not there, and adjusts the empty air anyway, before staring up into the indifferent sky.

“Do I have to have feelings about this?”

The girl groans, and Minamimoto jumps, glad there’s no one around to see him pressing against the wall behind him in case she feels like playing nuclear Tesla coil with anything else today.

Thankfully, whatever she did to Higashizawa has hit her just as hard, and it’s a long moment of blinking and shaking her head before she even seems to realize where she is. Minamimoto takes freezing like a stunned squirrel as the better part of valor. Higashizawa is still flat on his back and enviably free of having to be conscious for this bullshit.

“Wow,” the girl chuckles, a little breathless. “I think… I think maybe I popped a seam. I’m gonna… I’m just gonna go, ok?”

“Yeah.” Minamimoto says, because it’s not like he actually cares about doing his job. “Yeah, why don’t you do that?”

The girl clambers drunkenly to her feet, tottering off in the direction that the Players vanished and Minamimoto can only sort of hope she somehow accidentally napalms their asses into Harajuku because really that’d just equal things out.

Higashizawa sits bolt upright. Minamimoto jumps, yelps and immediately swears to deny all knowledge. Although as the moments pass, it seems less and less likely the other Reaper even noticed his reaction, just as staggered and dazed as the girl was. Slowly, he gets to his feet and
slowly it dawns on Minamimoto that something’s changed, something essential. He doesn’t figure it out until one massive hand reaches back, to where Higashizawa’s wings used to be, clutching at nothing but empty air, and the man’s eyes scan the street, passing over Minamimoto without any sign of seeing him.

“I’m alive,” Higashizawa breathes, a hand pressed against his chest, over his now-beating heart. “I’m alive?” Obviously it’s the perfect time for him to say something pompous, or make some grandiose vow, but he just stands there, staring into space.

“Well, shit.”

Higashizawa takes a step toward him and Minamimoto lunges to the side, just in case it’s contagious, though they’re on two different planes now, which means the man’s hand ought to go right through him. He’d ask what they should do, but at the moment his mind is an absolute perfect blank, shocked even out of remembering how to switch back to the Realground.

“Well, shit.”

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“Well, shit.”

It’s a beautiful day in Shibuya and the sky is clear and the flowers are blooming and Neku has yet to learn how to dodge an overhand strike.

“I think I’d be better at this without the audi-OW!”

“No.” Kariya says, coming around for a second strike that Neku manages to block. “You’re pretty much this bad all the time.”

“Are those Hip Snake pants? Are you paying any attention to my reports?” Uzuki calls from her spot along the wall. “The Game Master demands you feed him your ninja fist!”

It’s hard to tell Kariya was in a fight by the way he’s moving now, though Neku thinks he can see a hesitation here and there, bruised muscles being forced through their paces.

It’d be real nice to hear what that epic battle was all about, and against whom and what it all meant but the moment he’d seen Kariya after school it had been all crossed arms and long-distance glances and Neku knew he wasn’t getting anything out of the Reaper that he didn’t want to give. For whatever reason, Neku has the feeling that Uzuki doesn’t know about any of it - maybe he doesn’t want to ruin her first Game week - and it’d be a dick move to push the point.

Maybe it should bother him more, but he just somehow aced a surprise history quiz in record time and it really is a spectacular day and he’s not just saying that because he’s still riding high on half a conversation with his actual sort-of boyfriend.

It might even have been good to get it out of the way, letting the ‘love’ thing slip because he is sort of In Love and Josh would have noticed it, sooner or later. Better to just do it all at once, and now it seems like the disaster has been averted, even if it means dodging peril by crashing into calamity. Still, Joshua’s on speaking terms with him again, and Neku feels damn near invincible.

“Oh, shit!”
Okay, figure of speech, and Neku winces as he hauls himself up off the pavement for what feels like the thousandth time. Kariya hovers like a lazy vulture, obviously trying to choose from the full buffet of ass-kicking possibilities.

“All right, let’s try something different. Go into your Conductor form for me. I want to see what we have to work with there.”

“… no.”

Kariya doesn’t even blink. “Neku, I can keep hitting you until you show me.”

It’s hard not to whine, trying to think of a way out. It’s not the first time Kariya’s asked for this, but after whatever it was that happened yesterday Neku thinks he’s not going to be able to dodge the issue, at least not any better than he’s been dodging anything else.

“Can’t we just-?”

“Nope.” Kariya says, tapping the bokken lightly against his calf in an unnecessary warning. Uzuki is checking her makeup, and he figures he’s got until the moment the compact snaps shut to make a decision.

“All right. Fine. Fine.”

Neku’s been practicing switching in and out of his Noise form. Okay, mostly he’s been trying to stretch out his wings or imagine much bigger claws or anything that might make him larger than an underfed green snake.

So it doesn’t take long for him to shift - and shrink. And shrink.

The sound of Reaper laughter cascades off the buildings until it sounds like the whole district is mocking him, and Neku mantles his wings and puffs out what passes for his chest and reminds himself that all life is sacred and if he starts pasting Reapers for mockery he’s easily going to run out of Reapers and what he lacks in size he makes up in speed… and tinyness.

Damn it.

“Wow,” Kariya says, and it looks like he’s enjoying the first laugh he’s had in a while. “No, it’s good. You’re… okay. I was just expecting a bit more…”

“What were you expecting?” Uzuki says. “I can’t even see anything.”

“Oh just shut up.” Neku says, but for some reason being annoyed makes his tongue dart out which just provokes another round of laughter. All life is sacred. All life is sacred. Even if Reapers are already sort of dead and god his life is so dumb.

“There’s not even enough of you for a handbag,” Uzuki says. “Maybe a clutch purse. I mean, if you were a more stylish shade of blue.”

Neku weighs his options, leaps into the air and just aims his claws for Kariya’s crotch. Maybe not the most honorable of targets, but it gets his point across and he finally has the satisfaction of watching Kariya dodge out of his way.

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“So, Beat,” Neku says, lifting up the top tray of the massive bento box, revealing one just as
stuffed beneath it, “which starving nation were you planning to feed with all this?”

“Uh, me? An’ you an’ Rhyme, of course.” Beat throws a glare in Kariya’s direction, not that the Reaper takes any notice of him, too busy double-fisting the rice balls. Uzuki’s being a little more delicate about it, though neither one of them had actually bothered to ask before making their move on lunch.

Looking at it from the outside, the group of them could be a commercial or an ad campaign for Typical Teens Having Typical Fun, so far from the truth that light will never reach it. But he’s lucky for all of this, and Neku knows he’s lucky, remembering not so long ago, those late-night internet searches for jobs on oil rigs or deep-sea fishing, any place where he’d have to deal with as few people as little as possible.

“You gonna eat that or just keep staring?” Kariya asks

“I will cut you.” Neku says, without looking up.

Not only has Beat stacked the layered bento with at least four solid layers of food, but he’s still going out of his way to make it extra cute. Rice, vegetables and fruit have been molded and cut into little frogs and smiling fish and even a kappa, but when Neku hits the box full of rolls in the shape of pins - each one different - from Burning Berry to Lucky Star, he can only stare. Beat at least has the decency to look a little embarrassed.

“Rhyme likes Tin Pin, and I thought… okay, so I overdid it. A little. I had to work on my knife skills anyway.”

Everyone gathers around the box to try and find familiar favorites amidst the spread. Neku grabs for a Peace Full - egg-and-rice with a smiley face - and a pretty impressive Unjo with what might be kanpyo making up at least part of the pattern. Uzuki and Kariya go for a pair of vaguely purple pieces that seem to be a matched set, bickering as they fight over who gets what - which is also part of a theme. The Dragon Couture pins are so pretty it seems a shame to eat them, but enjoying the view means Neku barely gets one out of the set.

One Red Pin gets nudged back and forth, until it’s finally forgotten in the corner of the box.

Yoyogi Park’s a good place for a break, some distance from the criss-crossing of the Game’s official pathways, but still within the district, close enough to feel the Game but far enough that he can focus on just being Neku for a while. He can still see the boundary with Harajuku, like a nearly-invisible pane of glass rising up into the sky, higher than he can see. It catches glints of pale gold now and then as the barrier wavers with the beat of Shibuya’s irrepressible rhythm. Neku wonders just how much stronger the district is than the rest, and how long it might last.

It’s a little strange to relax with the Game going on, even though he knows being a hands-on Conductor in the day-to-day Game is more an oddity than anything. Maybe even an insult, though Uzuki’s made it clear there’s little more he can do to her that he hasn’t done just by existing.

He has to admit, the new Games Master is on top of things. Given Uzuki’s fashion obsession it’s no surprise there’s been an emphasis on pushing all the top brands, requiring Players to be fashion-forward enough even to enter certain streets, let alone get anything done there. He’s trying to ignore that the J to the M store is having some sort of clearance sale in a desperate bid for any business this week, half-certain that arson might end up on the menu if he weren’t there to discourage it.

Here and now in the middle of the game, things are starting to get serious, but Neku knows more
than one set of Players are handling themselves well, with the goal well in sight. Uzuki’s got them bartering hard, trading various pieces of different brands for slightly better swag at the next, with the game-winning finale of an absurdly priced pair of solid crystal Pavo Real shoes.

Yes, his Games Master is using the Players to go shoe shopping, and yes, the shoes in question are really majestically ugly. No, he’s not going to point that out. At least not this week.

He’s not sure if the vague Cinderella theme is intentional or not, but Neku’s seen a few players in full-length ball gowns so the stats must be up.

Uzuki’s giving it her all, enough that he can see it’s taking a toll. Maybe Higashizawa had his tells in different ways, but Uzuki is just pale and quiet and tired-looking, her phone never leaving her hand, even as she eats with the other, too distracted to bother with teasing anyone.

Even with all the mortal peril and constant threat of death and plaids, this is another part of the job Neku’s got to figure out. How to make sure Uzuki knows she’s doing a good job without her thinking he’s being condescending. How to let Higashizawa take the job back over so she can get some rest, without thinking that she’s failed.

Maybe middle management feels less strange when no one has wings or a kill count.

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“Neku, are you feeling okay?” Rhyme says, and he realizes he’s had a roll poised in his chopsticks and hovering for some time. It’s easy to smile and nod, popping it in his mouth - good, as good as any he’s had anywhere, and when he says so Kariya nods too. It’s funny how annoyed Beat still is around the Harriers - does any part of him remember being a Reaper, even a little? Still, he’s happy they’re all happy, that much is clear.

“I’m fine.” Neku says. “So, Beat, are we celebrating something here?”

“Nothin.” Beat says, and cringes from his little sister’s glare. “What? ’S not like Shiki ’n Eri could make it. ’S not a party.”

“Where are they, anyway?” Neku says, idly considering sending Shiki a text. He’s been distracted around her, no doubt about that, and she deserves better. Once this Game week is up and he has a chance to breathe, he’ll make sure to block out some real time for her. Maybe go see a movie, not that he has any idea what’s even playing.

“Eri isn’t feeling well, and Shiki’s tailoring a dress at the last minute for her aunt.” Rhyme says. “Except it’s still a party, ’cause Beat’s got something he wants to share.”

She waits, expectantly, while Beat stares down at the ground and digs his toe into the gap between two bricks, until Rhyme finally gives up and shoves him.

“Uh, I guess… I mean, Mom and Dad said, um, y’know… it’s cool if I want to go to culinary school.”

Neku grins. “Oh, yeah?”

Beat snorts. “You’re not surprised. I know Rhyme already told ya.”

“I didn’t!” His sister protests, shooting Beat a fierce glare.

“She didn’t.” Neku says, grabbing for another roll, what could be Kinetic Warning or maybe King’s Knight - almost definitely certainly some kind of horse. “But I can’t say I’m surprised. Congratulations, Chef Daisukenojō.”
“Aw man, don’t you even start that shit with me.” Beat says, but he’s grinning, one hand against the back of his head, pleased and embarrassed all at once.

Neku’s starting to have some sort of a theory there, how it’s always the loudest people demanding the most respect who have the hardest time really believing they deserve it. He’d always figured, with Rhyme the way she was, that things in the Bito household weren’t beyond fixing, that Beat was likely just as frustrated as they were with how he couldn’t seem to find his place. The kitchen seemed to be good for him, a mix of tough talk and simple rules, of knowing what he had to do and working his ass off to do it.

“Well, it’s not like I’m going to complain about eating your homework.” Neku says, popping two potato croquettes in quick succession and following it up with a pile of tart, pickled vegetables in the shape of little stars.

“I was half expecting you to cancel on me. You’re kinda hard to get a hold of lately.”

“I’ve had…” Neku would have to be a couple of Akutagawa prize-winners to even try to sum up any of what’s happened, let alone what he feels about it, “… a lot going on.”

Beat nods, but he’s got a weird sort of thoughtful frown on his face that Neku doesn’t entirely find reassuring.

“So is that all, the cooking? You’re not flying away now to go be a chef in Paris or something, are you?”

“What? No, nah man I’m just gettin’ started. It’s gonna be years before they let me do anythin’ more than dicing stuff up in the shop.” Beat shifts a little nervously and his voice lowers, the sort of secretive voice Neku hadn’t actually been sure he was capable of. “So… uh, is that him? Shiki said like, that you had… you know, and Eri said I wasn’t supposed to ask or whatever, but…”

He’s looking at Kariya, and then Neku’s looking at Kariya, and after a moment Kariya’s looking back at the both of them. The Reaper very deliberately swallows the last bite of whatever he’d been chewing on, and just as deliberately leans over to grab seconds, gesturing for Rhyme to keep adding more food to the lid he’s using for a makeshift plate.

“You and him, like…” Beat frowns. If he still had his wings, they’d be tucking in with embarrassment. “Nevermind, man.”

“… dating?” Neku hazards a guess, and though it seems entirely out of left field Beat’s only ever met Joshua the once, and the Composer’s not supposed to be a memory anyone gets to hold on to but even then - they’ve never really talked about it, have they?

“Kariya?” Wow, how would that even- “No. Really, really… no.”

“Oh.”

“I do, uh… I have one, though. A boyfriend.” Neku’s always been able to count on Beat on taking weird shit in stride, on rolling with it, and this shouldn’t be any weirder than a life-or-death fight against a flying tiger woman, but Neku’s been drop-kicked by this particular set of circumstances before. So he’s got his chopsticks in a bit of a death grip, biting back on a dozen nervous half-apologies because if Beat can’t deal, nothing he can say is going to-

“Cool. That’s cool, man.” Beat says. “We’re cool?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we are.”
Beat grins, as if he’s just pounded a dozen Noise into submission all on his own, and he almost certainly prefers that to having to talk about feelings.

“So Eri says he’s some kind of rich guy? Don’t go and get all rock star and leave all us little people behind.”

Neku remembers waking up in his shower, half-amazed he hadn’t accidentally drowned in his sleep “Beat, whatever it is you think I’ve been doing, I can promise you-”

“Hey. Neku.”

777 is walking toward them, raising one lazy hand in greeting, flanked by the rest of Def March. Beat has a pretty good deadpan look for someone impervious to irony.

“I’m jus’ sayin? I’m jus’ sayin.”

The Def March crew is here to hand over free tickets to their concert, and 777 wants to talk to Uzuki about how the Game’s going to interfere with his show. The both of them quickly wave him away when Neku tries to listen in, so he figures it’s got less to do with actual danger and more with dueling egos, 777 not wanting to lose his audience if any Noise should happen to wander inside.

Uzuki counters with apathy, obviously amazed that such masters of music could be so aggressively lame in person. 777 blithely tosses BJ into the line of fire, and they all watch him mumble a bit while shifting and giving her awkward puppy eyes. Tenho and Beat are over by the slowly dwindling remains of his picnic, discussing whether curry or ramen is the superior food of choice, mostly based on cost, the use of leftovers and how long they can stay in the fridge before going bad. Rhyme is picking through the dessert box for her favorite flavors of mochi.

777 looks good, stronger and more solid every time Neku sees him, although as far as he knows Def March haven’t bothered playing this week’s Game, too busy getting ready for tomorrow’s concert. Time off for bad behavior. It’s not like there’s been many Erasures anyway, and Neku’s sort of starting to wonder if that might be a problem, if he can’t convince more than a few of this week’s Players to become Reapers. Is it really a problem, if too many Players cross back over, or can the system hold? In moments like this, it feels like Shibuya is invincible, but the district’s no more likely to show weakness than the people - and Reapers - who call it home.

Which is sort of annoying when he’s trying to hunt down clues, to pin down a problem that might not even exist. Neku’s tried to make some general queries, to see how the system works in other games, but except for friendly pings from Ibiza and Vegas mentioning that the Hollywood Game’s rolled over three full times since the Composer party it’s been a lot of people either not wanting to get involved or - more likely - too busy with their own Games to think about sharing secrets.

He’s in a real dangerous spot with the data Akihabara’s handed over. It doesn’t look good, and the more Neku studies it the worse it gets - there’s a problem, and Shibuya’s the source. What are the odds the Long Game doesn’t have something to do with it? The moment Neku had the data in hand he’d wanted to run to Wildkat - but the moment after that he’d stumbled over Kariya possibly getting his ass handed to him by a couple of Angels, and now he’s not so sure this isn’t just the excuse Brede needs. Solid proof that the Long Game had measurable consequences in Shibuya, the Producer and the Composer undone by the Conductor’s own hand.

The hell with that.
“I think you need to make feeding us a mission.” Kariya says, slouching next to him, as casual as ever. “Once, maybe twice a week. It’s good for morale.”

“I have to work too hard when you get happy.” Neku wonders if this is a deliberate opening, the two of them just far enough away from the crowd not to be overheard, or if Kariya will let it all slide if he doesn’t come out and ask.

“So… those guys you were - those were Angels, huh?”

The Reaper doesn’t even blink. “They’re watching you.”

“Figures.” Neku doesn’t glance around, but he wants to. “Now?”

“Probably.” Kariya says, unwrapping one of his red bean pastes for dessert. “The American’s a jackass. Not sure about the other one”

“So there’s two of them?” And Brede. Three Angels in Shibuya. Yeah, that’s probably just going to be awesome. “I already told them, I’m not going anywhere.” Once again, Neku’s aware he’s not telling Kariya anything the Harrier doesn’t already know. “So how long did you know I was… you know.”

“An Angel? I had my suspicions for a while now. That time you Ascended, without meaning to…” Kariya smirks, still amazed, before switching the paste to the other side of his mouth. “What were you doing there, with Akihabara’s Loli?”

He probably shouldn’t be confiding this much in one of his Reapers - but Kariya isn’t just any Reaper, and it’s nice to think that Kitaniji didn’t know that, that even Joshua doesn’t know it.

“I think something’s wrong with the Game. Or the district, or… I don’t know…” Tokyo? He can’t actually say that out loud and still take himself seriously. “There’s people who are dying, people who ought to be Players and they’re not popping back up anywhere. No one seems to notice, I think all the Composers just assume that the worthy Souls will show up in one district or another, so nobody even keeps track of the ones that don’t. Maybe it’s nothing, but… but if they’re not going to the Games and they should be, then where are they?”

Kariya is frowning, maybe thoughtfully, maybe not so interested. At least he’s not laughing outright, so maybe Neku isn’t completely out of his mind.

“When I saw you facing off against those Angels… now I’m thinking just telling them all this up front might not do anyone any good.”

“Did you work things out with the Composer?”

All right, so Kariya also knows he’s dating Joshua. Neku sighs, and wonders why he hasn’t made a pin for a hole to crawl into. The Harrier uses the distraction to swipe a tempura shrimp off his plate.

“Don’t be so dramatic, kid. It happens a lot more than the upper ranks like to let on. So… what’s the next move?”

Neku does sort of have a plan coming together, now that he has a handful of tickets to Def March’s surprise ‘reunion’ show. It seems like the sort of thing Joshua might like to hate, neutral ground for all kinds of awkwardness and plenty of excuses for not talking, or talking and then pretending not to hear.

The perfect date.
“Not sure. We’re talking again. I don’t know what’ll happen if I bring up this whole… district thing. Either he’ll think I’m an idiot or he’ll take it as a personal insult. How does it usually happen, in the districts you’ve been in?”

“Usually there’s a new Conductor and nobody asks what happened to the old one.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Neku shrugs. “Well, if he leaves me hanging too much longer it might start looking like he’s worried, so… either he really loves me or he really loves himself. Guess which one I’m sticking with.”

Kariya lets out half a laugh around the rest of the hand roll he’s also stolen from Neku’s plate, and they sit in a surprisingly friendly silence as the world rolls by around them. No one else is in this corner of the park - he wonders if maybe 777 has some sort of power for not being seen when he doesn’t want to be.

Rhyme is asking the leader of Def March a few questions with that laser-guided precociousness of hers, leaving Beat to do his usual awful job of pretending he’s not protectively hovering. In the even-more-painful-to-watch competition, BJ is putting some extremely awkward moves on Uzuki while Tenho cringes helpfully in the background.

The thought is very quiet, as easy to ignore as to accept - that this is his life, and he kind of might actually like being the Conductor of Shibuya.

“Here, boss. I been meaning to give you this.”

Kariya hands the small figurine over with no more ceremony than a stick of gum, though it looks like an antique. It’s slightly damaged, cracked and scratched, but still beautiful. A tiny crane sculpture, and Neku turns it slowly in his hand, feeling the odd, UG weight of it, heavy and light at the same time. Old, but familiar too.

“It’s like… it’s a pin, isn’t it?”

Kariya nods, granting permission before Neku can even ask, and he glances behind him to see where Rhyme and Beat are, even if they wouldn’t notice this, as he focuses and the pin wavers to a blade in his hand that’s almost weightless, even lighter than in its other form. If it is like a pin, it ought work on his will and intent alone - which means he has some hope of not chopping all his fingers off by looking at it wrong.

“It’s beautiful, but a sword? Won’t that just limit my Imagination?”

Kariya snorts. “Like you haven’t watched enough ninja movies to be creative?”

“Point.”

Neku lets it shift back into its other form, and that’s when he notices the slight discolorations on the surface, dark and faded stains that might be ink or lacquer but just as likely could be blood. The longer he studies it, the older it seems, the kind of thing he usually has to look at through a museum’s thickest pane of glass.

“Oh man, this - this means something doesn’t it?” Neku blurts, and Kariya laughs. A real laugh, though the look in his eyes is dark and deep and raw, probably the sort of thing Neku isn’t supposed to notice.

“Yeah… it means something.”
“You could warn a guy before you start having feelings all over the place.” Neku says, trying to
lighten the mood, but Kariya still looks troubled, miles away and who knows how many years ago.

“You’re fast, boss, in that Noise form of yours.”

“Kinda.” He says a little suspiciously, though Kariya’s not aiming for a cheap shot.

“You actually wink in and out of combat Frequency, you know that? It makes you almost
impossible to hit.” The Harrier says. “Remember it - and remember, as long as you stay in the RG,
none of this shit can get to you.”

“You know, a straight answer now and then can really make a conversation shine.” Neku’s trying
to pretend he isn’t nervous, but screw it - if Kariya’s this serious, then there’s definitely something
to worry about. “Is there a fight I need to worry about? Is this about those Angels?”

“Do you ever think about taking them up on their offer?”

Okay, so that’s maybe the last thing he ever expected to hear, but there’s nothing in Kariya’s pose
that’s casual and nothing in the way he won’t meet Neku’s eyes to suggest it’s any kind of joke.

“What are you-“

A heavy weight drops across both their shoulders, 777 leering down cheerfully into the space
between them. Kariya grunts slightly under the singer’s full weight, and 777 looks at each of them,
and the tiny crane in Neku’s hand, finally raising an eyebrow in menacing amusement.

“So, how’s it going there, Kariya-‘niisan?’”

“Shut up.” Kariya sighs. Neku’s about to ask, when he remembers what he’d said to Tsuyoshi, the
spur-of-the-moment explanation for the Reaper’s semi-constant presence around school, and he’d
never come up with a better answer for why Kariya hung around. So Tsuyoshi must have met up
with 777 to grab his tickets and talk about plans for shooting the show and… yeah.

Yeah.

“Hey man, nothing wrong with a little brother complex. Find the right audience and it’ll sell like
crazy.” 777 chuckles a little as Kariya shoves him off, though each of them is doing their best to
work as little at it as possible. God forbid the antagonism gets the better of the laziness. “Learn a
few chords and I could hire you as my warm-up act.”

“You think BJ and Tenho would have as much fun putting you together a second time?” Kariya
says, but at least he isn’t going for his sword. Yet.

“Maybe we should take a vote.” 777 turns his head, raising his voice. “Hey guys, I got this great
idea, raise your hand if-“

Everyone raises their hands. Half of them don’t even look up.

777’s expression is punchably smug as he whacks Neku on the back hard enough to displace a rib.
It’s still not clear if the singer’s got a special kissed-you-in-the-kitchen smirk or if Neku just gets
the regular groupie discount grin. Either way he has to look away and pretend he has no idea why
777 is still smiling.

He’s praying that Kariya doesn’t notice. Once again, whatever god is listening finds it much more
entertaining not to answer his prayers. To his credit, the Harrier only blinks twice at the thought,
although this is probably nothing new in his world.

“So, I’m the overprotective pervert who won’t let Neku walk home alone, and you’re the super fancy pervert in the liquid leather pants?”

“No,” 777 says, “you’re the thirty-year-old pervert with no job who lives at home, and I’m the sex god who exists beyond all petty mortal conventions.”

Neku’s really looking forward to the end of the week. A break from the Game and a quiet weekend and maybe a single twenty-four hour period somewhere in the rest of his life where he isn’t surrounded by lunatic assholes.

“You know,” he says, “I know a guy who’d shoot you both for a bowl of ramen, and for all I know we’re still actually dating.”

Eventually they run out of food and Def March has to get back to practice and Kariya and Uzuki have to get back to the Game - three hours left to go, more or less. Neku ought to go home and at least stare at his pile of unfinished homework but Beat and Rhyme still want to hang out for a while, which means a long, quiet stroll through the city to home. 777 went so far as to sign Rhyme’s bag, and she’s still happily talking to her brother as Neku scrolls through his phone.

He will never actually see the bottom of his e-mail pile again. The best he can do at this point is try to scrape down through the most recent layers, making sure not to lose sight of anything immediately important. No e-mails from Joshua, and he refuses to be disappointed by that - the Composer’s been around for a long time, it’s okay if they go slow and it’s okay if ‘slow’ by his demands is more on the geologic scale.

Of the dozen people who’ve checked out his sketches on pixiv, three of them are recurring bots and the newest one is a dick who’s reprinting them on stickers and lighters and hot mitts - of all things - and selling them on ebay. From somewhere in… Calgary. Bless the global marketplace. Neku had bitched to Vancouver because she’d been on and he had the notion that the two places were vaguely in the same area so maybe he might bum a favor, but she’d been rather annoyingly Zen about the whole business - ‘the really timeless things, Neku, they stop belonging to you.’

The really timeless things, in his opinion, deserved a little better than a pilfered three- dollar hot mitt. He could have used that three dollars. Maybe it’s time he thinks about merchandising.

There’s a spate of Conductor mail, announcing this concert or that performance, pretending to be open invitations when it’s mostly a chance to brag. Neku’s not sure if he ought to mention Def March or not - maybe he should get one of Tsuyoshi’s pictures or a poster or something first, to be properly impressive. If he had the knowledge and the inclination, Neku imagines he could watch the effects of the ebbs and flows of power sweeping back and forth between Games, affecting everything from politics to finances to - well, just look at Beat. He’ll take Shibuya with him, wherever he goes, and when he lands there that Composer will know exactly where he came from.

Of course, not everything in Neku’s inbox is quite so edifying. Apparently a Player’s entry fee has gone missing somewhere in Belgium, not so much a problem save that his most treasured possession was a rather extensive porn collection, and one Composer is currently blaming another for the theft, while Conductors from Lisbon to outer Mongolia point and laugh and Neku learns that this sort of thing isn’t nearly as uncommon as he needs it to be.

“Neku? Can I ask you something?”
Rhyme's cheerful chirp catches him in the middle of scrolling through an incredibly unfortunate and hairy image of said theft, and he throws his phone into his pocket with slightly more force than necessary. Rhyme looks like she's worried she might have interrupted something important, and Neku remembers what Beat said, about being too busy and important for his friends.

“Sorry, Rhyme. What was that?”

It seems she had been interviewing 777 for some sort of class project, words of advice from older sempai and important businesspeople on how to live a successful life. Well... Neku is older, at least. He has the twin notions that it would be absolutely hilarious to get Joshua’s idea of advice, as well as the worst idea he’s ever had, so it’s sort of amazing Josh isn’t here now.

“What do you think is the most important part of being an artist?”

“I dunno, I suppose it’s different for everyone, depending on where they are.” Neku shrugs. “Always challenge yourself? Don’t be afraid to push further than you think you can go.”

Beat nods approvingly. Neku wonders if the interview with the owner of Ramen Don has happened yet. Def March is pretty much the high point of his chain of acquaintances - well, maybe...

“Hey, have you thought about interviewing Mr. H, from the coffee shop?” A super-secret interview with CAT might not impress any grade schoolers, but Neku certainly wouldn’t mind taking a look at the answers. Rhyme frowns, and shakes her head, looking oddly serious for a moment.

“She’s already got a barista, an’ I know the guy who works Wild Boar.” Beat says, and Rhyme nods, moving to the next question on her list.

“How would you define a... work/life balance?”

Neku can’t help but laugh. “Can I get back to you on that one?”

“Kay.” Rhyme taps the pen against the paper. “So what do you think is the most important element of a partnership?”

“Superior firepower.”

“What?”

“Respect.” Neku says, and at least these lessons come from honest experience. “Trust. It’s not easy, but in the end it’s the only thing that matters.”

Beat nods again. Maybe he remembers it somewhere, deep down, that they were a halfway decent team even running for their lives with the world going a thousand kinds of batshit around them.

It seems like his phone rings the minute they step back into the borders of the UG, his ringtone somehow turned into a song he’s never heard before. 777’s voice calls out, small and tinny, so he can only assume it’s Def March’s newest hit, probably the opener for the concert. He shouldn’t answer it, this is Realground time and he needs to separate at least a little space for himself, but if someone’s calling him... and there’s that shit with the Angels, and Kariya was nervous...

Beat rolls his eyes but grins just the same, stepping back with Rhyme to give Neku some privacy.

His fingers knock against the tiny figurine Kariya gave him as he reaches for his phone. It’s almost a shock, the difference between the ancient wood and the brand-new plastic, and he really should...
have asked what Kariya was doing giving it to him, and why, but if the Harrier wanted to tell him, he would have.

“Hello? Hel- what? What? Who is this? Minami- I didn’t give you this number. I didn’t even give you a phone.”

Neku stops moving, turning further away from Beat and Rhyme and toward the open street. They’re actually quite near Scramble Crossing, what he’s thought of as the epicenter of the Game since the third day he’d played. It’s no big surprise that there’s a fight happening, a good one, and it’d be distracting even if Minamimoto was making any sense at all.

He’s grateful that he’s gotten used to tuning out the RG without having to shift Frequencies completely. The Game is nearly impossible to see through the crush of cars and people, but if he concentrates a little, the RG will fade into the background and allow him to see the Players in action.

His Shinjuku Reaper is the one in charge, making wide, fast circles around two Players, corralling a pile of Noise toward them like a herd of cattle. No, they’re antelope, or antelope’s slightly faster homicidal cousin, and nothing Neku remembers fighting before. Was Shinjuku dumping its secondhand Noise on him along with its secondhand Reapers?

It’s impossible to consider it for long, with Minamimoto still yowling frantic nonsense in his ear.

“I can’t understand you when you talk in quadratics. Can you maybe calm down a - nope.” It’s like asking a neurotic parrot to stop molting, the Wall Reaper’s screeching rising so loud Neku can hear him with the phone at arm’s length, swearing he’s going to ditch them all for Kyoto or Hokkaido or Des Moines, wherever that is.

The Reaper’s got the Noise moving nearly as fast as the passing traffic Neku can still see in the UG, but he knows these Players, consistently ranking at the top of Uzuki’s reports, fighting now together in near-perfect harmony. He’d love to watch them win, but there’s the matter of this tinny voice intent on impaling his eardrum, and the only thing he can do is double down and… god help him, have a conversation with Minamimoto.

“What are you… ok, wait - some ‘crazy girl’?” Neku lowers his voice, though Beat is on his own phone, and Rhyme seems engrossed with her interview notes. “One of the Reap - okay, what? Not a Reaper? So then she’s - what do you mean she wasn’t a Player, either? What? What do you mean we have to hit Higashizawa with a car?”

The Music stops.

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Neku’s barely clinging to the physical world, more UG than RG despite all his best intentions and so at first it feels like he’s gone deaf, like those first few moments that very first time in the UG, before Shiki and the Frog Noise and everything that followed.

No, it’s really not like that at all. It’s the silence of the moon, of being so far away that the world and everything on it might as well not exist. It’s being hunted by long claws and longer teeth in the dark, and hearing it come closer. It’s the long, slow slide of time with no one left to mark it, the sound of wind sneaking through the gaps in bones, the click of skeletal hands left to bleach in the sun.

He’s dragged under in the space between one breath and the next, swallowed and frozen like a bug
in glacial amber. The world’s become a soundproofed room with one-way glass between him and his Reaper and his Players - if he shouted they wouldn’t hear him, but Neku can’t even breathe. It takes all his focus just to try and untangle what it is he’s feeling and hearing, straining to listen to Shibuya’s Music. Where is it? Where?

The Reaper throws her hand out, the Noise leaping forth like a team of charging horses, and for a moment it all seems as if everything else is still normal, the Players working together, watching each others backs even as the Noise seek to pull them apart.

The taller of the Players, the girl who’s a boy with a pretty good arm - Aiko? Ayaka? - darts away from a snapping set of jaws only to suddenly stumble, letting out a cry of pain, and Neku sees the pin flare up like a fireball as the Player throws it away, staggering another step back only to cry out again. When he tosses the next pin away it isn’t without effort, attached to a spear of ice that he has to wrench out of his side, and the wound leaves him limping. Neku’s seen Players accidentally knocking themselves and their Partners silly with a poorly-judged attack, and he’s certainly made more than his share of misfires, but this…

A jolt of lightning leaves Neku blinking away the afterimage, and the boy slumps heavily to his knees, pins scattering around him, where they sputter and crackle like fireworks. His partner screams - the singer, the one who can’t talk, pushing the Noise back to reach the boy who’s bracing himself against the bat, struggling back to his feet.

The Noise aren’t being Erased.

Neku watches them break beneath the girl’s sonic assault as she fights to reach her Partner, sees them stumble and crumble only to rise and reform and attack again. It doesn’t feel like Taboo Noise, that was only mindless fury, heat and rage - this Noise is empty and hollow, as silent as the Scramble that rises up all around them. Neku’s lived here his entire life, and he doesn’t know where he is.

He looks to where the Reaper is still circling, but she’s slowed, no longer attacking and with no triumph on her face. Instead, she looks confused - whatever her plan was, this isn’t it.

The Player’s back on his feet, if a bit shaky, and dodges the Noise that lunges forward - it shifts and bulges violently beneath the skin, as if something inside is trying to tear it apart. The Player brings his bat up for a massive line drive, a home run - and it splinters into a thousand pieces against the back of the Noise that barely pauses, lunging forward to Erase him - her - Ami, her name is Ami - with a single blow.

Her Partner is still howling, futile rage and sorrow tearing through the Noise, though this only serves to make them grow larger and more twisted. The girl stumbles suddenly, nearly falls, striking at what Neku sees is a pair of pale gray arms rising from the street, clutching at her legs. The hands claw for purchase, dragging her down, and another pair joins them, and another as the Noise close in. With one last defiant cry, the Player disappears in the twisted chaos, the Noise seeming to devour each other along with everything else, until only bare street remains.

It’s been a matter of moments, of a few staggering steps, Neku nowhere near close enough or fast enough even if he were in the UG and even if he had known what was about to happen and he still doesn’t know, he doesn’t know…

The Reaper doesn’t know either, poised on her skates in the very center of the Scramble and there’s nothing left of the Players, not a single pin - the pins, what’s wrong with the pins - or weapon or whisper of song to mark their passing and Neku can’t hear anything but the wet bone and sinew sound of his own dry swallow and the scrabble of his breath caught in his throat as the whole world
trembles.

The district rumbles with it, the slow stir of a wakening heart - like a massive beast, uncoiling itself in the dark. Neku thinks about the shiver of the needle on a Richter scale, how logarithmic means that when the needle jumps of the page the earth itself might as well crack in two. His ears pop, and he swallows hard but it doesn’t help, and Neku can feel the soft, static crackle as if it’s crawled right down his throat.

A slow, building hiss rises up where the Music ought to be, louder and louder, and the Reaper - his Reaper - looks up, her wide eyes locking on his with an almost audible click. He sees a bit of relief in her fear, as she turns, ready to skate toward him. Just one more day in the weirdo Shibuya Game, but now he’s here so it will all be okay - but she can’t hear what he does.

The whole world comes apart, and the great wave of emptiness sweeps down and over her and through her. Neku watches her shatter, she vanishes with nothing left behind.

He can’t feel his wings rise up but they must be there, as he calls up fire in one hand and lightning in the other and even with it dancing between his fingertips Neku feels unarmed, and terribly small. He feels pathetic, the way it was at the very beginning of the Game when he knew nothing and everything wanted him dead.

A flicker of movement at his feet has him jerking back in terror, but there’s no sign of anything else trying to claw itself up. Just a tiny mark on the street, weak and wobbling, but more of them follow, and then more - and Neku figures out what’s being written just as he realizes it’s being done backwards, as if the street is a window and they’re scrawling at him from the other side.

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dripping around his ears and down the back of his neck. Cars are rushing by from what seems like far too close, but Neku can’t find the strength to move his legs or even lean away from the road. He can’t do anything except stand where he is - crouch where he is, and tremble.

He glances up, already knowing he’ll only see a soft drink ad scrolling across the screen of the 104. Somehow it makes him feel worse.

The rest of living Shibuya spills around them like water around stones, but Neku cannot keep the image out of his head, the moment the Reaper vanished - vaporized, annihilated - playing over and over again even with his eyes open. The Players torn to pieces by Noise that didn’t die. He can hear Shibuya again, distantly, through a heavy ringing in his ears. Neku feels battered, exhausted, as if he’s just broke the surface of a dark ocean, but there’s no star to guide him and even less to get him back to the shore.


At least his friends are safe. Neku’s been more grateful for that than anything, that no matter what happens or what he has to do, at least the rest of them have been through the Game and won, and they’re free from all his consequences.

Except that Rhyme is staring at the Scramble, at what she couldn’t have seen, she couldn’t have - but she has, and she’s pale and crying and even Beat’s frantic shouts are no match for her screams.

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Author’s Notes -

1) “I am so pissed at Vancouver. You have no idea. I had to get up and pace this morning about that. Fuck her and her successful artist bullshit.”

“If it’s any consolation I don’t agree with her either.”

“The thing is I can see Neku reacting as he did, because he’s a high-school kid who lives in Shibuya and has a cleaning lady and goes to a private school and his cashflow problems are mostly about not being able to buy Shiki a ridiculously expensive necklace. He’s 15. He doesn’t /know/. But can you put it in end of chapter notes or something? The fact that Vancouver needs a face punching? Or your beta rebels and eats a baby?”

2) Chapter title - Editors - "Eat Raw Meat = Blood Drool"
and I'm prepared to go it alone

Beat’s in the kitchen, and due to some miracle of fate or timing or Def March, Neku’s actually got food in his fridge. Rhyme’s trembling request for chocolate pudding had been the only thing that had a chance of keeping Beat from hovering anxiously at her side.

He’s been looking for something to punch ever since the Scramble, now reduced to crashing around in the kitchen, though Beat still glances to where they’re sitting every other second or so. At least now that Rhyme’s stopped crying it seems less and less likely that her brother will want too many details about just what happened, too afraid of upsetting her again. Which brings the total of Neku’s problems down to… everything else.

It’s his apartment they go to, because it’s the closest and Beat doesn’t want to take Rhyme home while she’s so upset and Neku just wants to get off the street even if that doesn’t make a lot of sense. He pulls all the shades down the moment they’re inside, though that makes even less sense. Beat gives him a funny look when he does it, but at the moment Neku is just not capable of staring out into the dark. Everything in his house looks strange with all the lights on, oddly distant and unreal. It feels like he’s standing on a stage, surrounded by props that just resemble his life, and the greater part of him is still frozen at the Scramble.

He’s still breathing a little shallow. Neku hasn’t been this scared since he was a Player, and if there are any special Conductor tricks to pull himself together they are sure as shit not working.

Shibuya’s perfectly fine, and that would be the part that scares him the most if every part of this didn’t scare him the most. The District is singing like always and if Shibuya didn’t even notice what happened then there’s no reason to think it hasn’t happened before, if not in his Game then elsewhere. He’s got the hard data that people who ought to be Players are just vanishing instead. How many Players have been… eaten like that, how many Reapers destroyed and as far as anyone knows, it’s all just one more day in the Game?

Would you have even seen it, if she didn’t want you to?

So maybe this is it, maybe Neku’s facing his first real Fallen. It makes Minamimoto at his worst seem like nothing but cheap cosplay. It’s hard even to think it through clearly, like frostbite inside his head, and Neku honestly can’t remember if there was endless screaming or endless silence in the Scramble, either way equally horrible.

In the kitchen Beat whacks his cast against the counter hard enough that Neku hears the pause where there should have been a lot of swearing - but Rhyme’s in the room, so he finally just mutters under his breath, hiding anything worse beneath a clatter of dishware.

At some point along the way Neku’s texted an all-points call for his Reapers. The responses he’s received are mostly confused, just one more bizarre inanity the last Conductor never bothered with but Neku doesn’t care, barely even notices the surly replies as he tallies them up. Minamimoto’s got Higashizawa with him, and a wall of nonsensical text that he just does not have the time to try and figure out. The Players are safe, at least until tomorrow and he sends out what might be his first actual Conductor order - every Reaper stays in the RG until further instructions.

Kitaniji had an army. Hell, even Konishi commanded at least some fear if not respect. All Neku
has a whole bunch of people a little bit older than him who don’t like him very much, and even if he had their loyalty Neku knows he couldn’t send even one of them out there, not against what he’d just seen.

A soft sniffle reminds him that he isn’t the only one who’d been there. If Rhyme saw that, then there’s no reason to think she hasn’t seen everything.

“How long?” He says, very softly. Rhyme’s hands tighten around her still-full cup of tea.

“I didn’t want to say anything,” she says, in nearly a whisper. “Beat was okay, and everyone… no one else remembered. So I just pretended that I couldn’t see it.” Rhyme looks up at him, and away, quickly. “What was that out there?”

She’s not just keeping her voice down for her brother’s sake, and Neku’s not managing any better, not even trying to go above a whisper. It’s his own apartment, in the RG, in his district and he still feels completely exposed.

“I don’t know. I have no idea.”

“… but you’re the Conductor now, aren’t you?” As bad as the fear is on the face of a stranger, it’s so much worse in Rhyme’s eyes. “I can see your wings.”

So can he, actually. Neku quickly tucks the dark arches down against his back and wonders just how close he is to going UG altogether without even meaning to, his control absolutely shredded.

“Yeah, Rhyme. I am.”

“… do you have to kill me now?”

“Oh, Rhyme - no. Oh my God, no.” Neku reaches for her, and hears Beat stop in the kitchen behind them, only a half-second from jumping over the couch if he thinks Rhyme’s crying again. She’s not, just shaking, and for the first time since the Scramble Neku feels a little anger seeping past the horror, rising up against the fear, that she’s been as terrified of him finding out as anything else that’s happened. “No one’s going to hurt you. I would never let them try. I promise.”

“But what if…”

“I don’t care.”

He really doesn’t. Certainly not with the shitty revelations stacking up now like dominoes, because this is just the same every other lie the Game has ever told him. Which has to mean he’s the only one who’s been left out of the loop. Again.

“You didn’t want to talk to Mr. H, for your project. Is this why?”

Rhyme slowly nods, and Neku feels that anger burn a little brighter. He’d thought that maybe, just maybe, a show of good faith might gain him something in return, that not pushing the Producer might prove he was worth trusting - as if that’s the way anyone’s played things up until now. Manhattan’s Conductor tried to tell him that’s not how it works, he knows that - but this isn’t some hypothetical kick in the face. It isn’t about backstabbing him - this is Rhyme. Beat’s little sister, who’s already gone through so much, and now to deal with this? Months and months alone and afraid and thinking that if Neku knew, that he’s have to… no, he’d walk first, leave Shibuya without a look back. Even Joshua isn’t worth -

Joshua knows. Of course, if Mr. H knew that Rhyme could see the UG, then that meant Joshua
knew too. Joshua had been there, with Shiki and Eri and Rhyme and the rest of them - he’d known. All this time and not even a hint, not a word. So either Rhyme is somehow in terrible danger, so much that even telling Neku was putting too much at risk, or no one thought that her fear - one of his own friends terrified of him - was worth mentioning.

He wishes he could believe there’s a good reason for it, but Neku’s already been the Conductor a little too long.

“What are you going to do?”

He wants action hero words for her, brave comic book words with special poses and little speed lines of determination. He’d lie to her if he could figure out how, but this thoughts are all blank and dark and full of the Scramble - Rhyme’s not his only problem, she’s not even his biggest problem. Neku can’t make her stop seeing the UG, not now and maybe not ever, and he can’t bring himself to ask her exactly what she has seen over the past few weeks. What she might have seen him do.

“You don’t need to worry about that. No matter how scary it is, I promise you’re safe in the Realground. Nothing here-“

“… as long as you stay in the RG, none of this shit can get to you.”

“Neku?” Rhyme says, and he’d started this little speech not to scare her - but it’s Kariya’s voice in his head and Kariya’s too-serious expression looking out of his memories and a scarred stone bird in Neku’s white-knuckled grip.

Kariya’s question, out of nowhere - did Neku ever think about Ascending?

He knows. Kariya knows there’s something out there, lurking the dark - and if all of it, the training and the talking, all of it is to prepare him Neku is certain of two things - Kariya’s been aware of this long before anyone else, and Neku isn’t prepared, there is no preparing for what he saw. Maybe jumping a few dimensions and hiding out under a rock. On Mars.

“I need you to let me worry about all this, Rhyme.” He says as calmly as he can, even with his hand twitching to go for his phone and find the button that makes Kariya give him an answer. Maybe it’s time he played Conductor a little closer to the script. “We both know Beat needs you. So I need you to be as strong as you can right now, and let me do the worrying, ok?”

Beat’s on the couch before she can answer, the pudding setting up in the fridge and Beat’s voice a little too loud with false cheer as he flips through the channels, looking for a show she’d like. When he leans forward a little Rhyme looks over his shoulder at Neku and nods once. The girl’s so serious for her age, he remembers that even from the short time she’d been in the game - maybe she really can handle it, seeing the Game. Maybe it will be okay.

He has the feeling it might be the last thing that’s going to be, for a very long time.

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So, Hanekoma’s still Censured and his district’s full of Angels and his Composer isn’t returning his calls and he hasn’t sketched so much as a smiley face in longer than he can remember - but hallelujah, he’s cracked the iced caramel mocha at last.

He takes a few sips, and then makes a second one to see if he can replicate the results. Score. Hanekoma’s feeling so elated he considers making them a freebie tomorrow, or maybe some sort of buy-one-get-one deal, as a nod to the Players - yeah, that’d be clever. Except he’s finally got this drink up to where it’s worth paying for and he should be proud of that and it has been so long since
he’s done anything of artistic merit he’s been doodling his ‘best of’ in the foam of every other
coffee that passes by.

The last phone call he’d received had been from a gallery owner asking if he’d gone into early
retirement. Hanekoma had calmly responded by lying on the floor of the cafe for the better part of
an afternoon, but at least he’d gone starfish and not fetal ball.

It’s been a good Game this week, and by that he means the Higher Plane is still muttering to itself
about what Neku did to the Players that first day, tapping them all into the city, breaking rules
they’d never bothered to set down. He’d have loved to advise the Conductor on the danger, he’d
said, even though that was also against their rules - and no, the Composer didn’t put Neku up to it,
obviously.

It’s true, Hanekoma would give the Conductor a little more advice, except for how he kept doing
things no one had ever even considered before.

It’s rare that success ever looks like success while it’s happening. Hanekoma knows this, even if
the Higher Plane is perfectly content to spend all its time impressed with its own past. Innovation is
messy, and ugly, and this is hardly the first fight Hanekoma’s had, to keep reminding them that
weeds are just another name for wildflowers. So he made a desperately stupid decision for all the
right reasons, but he’s the Producer of Shibuya and he still knows a thing or two.

Hanekoma’s pretty sure they’re all just a different sort of Player, all the Producers, even the Higher
Plane. Pull back the curtain and there’s just another curtain, and it’s beautiful, sure. He puts all his
faith in the Game, but after all this time Hanekoma knows - really knows about as much about what
it all means as the newest Player on his first day.

A knock at the door, even though it’s late and the Game is done and his ‘CLOSED’ sign is in five
languages and a border of cartoon animals with anti-tank guns, one of his looks from several years
ago. He ought to redo it, or maybe get Neku to redo it. Hey, why not a collaboration with the
Composer, he’s seen Joshua doodling a bit more now, when he thinks no one’s paying attention,
and there’s the knock again and Hanekoma looks up.

Joshua stares back at him.

Hanekoma’s hardly expecting an apology, any more than he’d give one for spamming Joshua’s
phone with pictures of annoying nothing, but it doesn’t make any sense why he’s not already
inside, slouching daintily on a chair and making note of some new improvement to the cafe he
doesn’t like.

He waits. Joshua continues to stare. Hanekoma’s expecting some sort of punishment for setting up
that app to annoy him, but he’s not about to let the Composer go radio silent again, ready to hand
over his merit badge in sloth rather than let things go the way of another Long Game.

Except this isn’t a punishment, it’s just… weird.

Joshua rolls his eyes, and points at the handle, and it isn’t until he’s got the door unlocked and half
open that Hanekoma realizes how impossibly quiet it is.

“What.” He says, once the door is open. It’s not exactly a question, more a statement of fact, and
Joshua - not the Composer, not a whisper of that power - moves past him with a slight limp he’s
trying to ignore.

“Did you know I don’t have a key to my apartment? Because I totally forgot keys were a thing.”
Joshua’s at the counter and to the bottom of the first mocha before Hanekoma’s even across the floor. “I see you finally figured out the coffee. What was it, too much syrup?”

“Changed the beans. Couple of times.” Hanekoma says blankly, waiting for this to make sense. The Composer can’t not be the Composer. Even when he’d been a Player it hadn’t felt like this. If Joshua had been deposed, he’d have been Erased. If he’d Ascended, Hanekoma would have known the instant it happened, if only by the immediate uptick in Higher Plane bitching. Joshua is flickering, ever so slightly - he’s been fighting Noise, and obviously with less success than the last time.

The Higher Plane has to know what’s happened. The Angels have to know.

Metal clinks against the tabletop, as Joshua drops a handful of pins sorting through them with quiet, weary amusement. Hanekoma might think he can take it all in stride but no one, no one is as blithely unmoved by oncoming armageddon as Yoshiya Kiryuu.

“Any other Game, the Players wouldn’t have taken pity on me.” He studies a pin more closely, raising it toward the light. “I’ve never seen... hm, this must be one of Neku’s new ones.”

“Josh.”

“Oh look, someone else who doesn’t know how your pin set works.” A Big Crunch skitters toward him. “At least they gave me a Cure Drink, that was thoughtful.”

“Talk to me, Josh.”

“She stole my credit card, by which I mean your credit card, what with your convenient real person job and all. I’m pretty sure she’s using it to buy adorable hats for her girlfriend. Or the Pavo Real summer collection. Or both.”

“Who?”

“Shibuya.” Joshua says, finishing the last of his drink.

It’s happened before, a city or a district rejecting its Composer outright, absolutely refusing to follow their guidance. Usually it’s an instant Erasure the moment they take the position, like touching a live wire. The places that are old enough and strong enough to have wills of their own usually attract the Composers they do because they understand how their cities work, and how to improve upon the Game while still keeping it happy.

A Game overthrowing its Composer after this long, and after everything they’ve gone through?

“So, what, did you finally wear stripes and plaids together?”

Joshua smiles - the sly Composer smile he’s always had, even before the Game, always aware the world was his for the taking.

“I’m being taught a lesson.”

“Are you hurt?”

Joshua pulls a face, deeply annoyed at the question for being applicable.

“Only my pride and... various minor organs. I think I can officially call this as the lowest point of several consecutive lives.”
Before he can ask any more questions, two small, furry and familiar Noise bound into the cafe. The bunnies come and go as they please, adorably cadging bits of pastry from whoever happens to be in at the moment. Even the Players think they’re cute. Hanekoma’s thought about putting in some sort of pet door, though he can probably spare himself the indignity of them ignoring it.

“Oh look, it’s insult and injury.” Joshua says as the Noise leaps up onto the counter, but he’s barely annoyed at best. If anything, he seems ready to fall asleep over his mocha, and Hanekoma feels a familiar pang of responsibility and pride and affection. It’s a good thing Joshua’s not looking, or he’d have to throw something.

“I wouldn’t…” Joshua says, as the Sota Noise nuzzles its way through the pins, only to swallow one. Hanekoma hopes it was the Cure Drink. “Okay, well. Enjoy that.”

Hanekoma wonders why the Higher Plane hasn’t - no, of course. Of course they’d been watching, hoping Joshua might do them the favor of being properly Erased this time. Maybe they’re queuing up to point and laugh before it’s time to render judgment.

“How are you not human yet?” Joshua asks, as the Nao Nao rabbit perches on her hind legs, balanced on the rim of his cup and peering down at the last half-inch of mocha. “Or did you give up on it? I certainly wouldn’t blame you.”

“If Shibuya’s not with you, then where…?”

“Slowly killing a young girl. At least she’ll enjoy the trip.” The words are pure indifference, the look on his face anything but. “I shouldn’t have come here. You don’t need to be involved.”

“It’s Shibuya. I’m always involved.” Hanekoma says. “Which girl?”

“Eri. Shiki Misaki’s partner in crime.” Joshua laughs a little, to himself, leaning a little bit more on his hand. “You know, I think I’m really rather glad she wasn’t a Player.”

“What happened, Josh?”

He’s not certain he’ll get an answer. Hanekoma’s half-surprised that Joshua came to the cafe, even if he was out of other options. It’s not the Composer’s style - when Joshua doesn’t win, he cuts his losses, he walks. A choice between keeping his pride and staying alive isn’t a choice to him. One Game shouldn’t be enough to change that, no matter how long it lasted, but when the Composer prefers to stir the cubes in his cup rather than answer, Hanekoma makes an educated guess.

“Where’s Neku?”

“Out doing Neku things, I imagine. Torturing himself with meaningless homework while listening to horrible music. Batting adorably at his own reflection.”

Hanekoma knows he shouldn’t be amused - this isn’t funny and there’s a world of pain that’s likely on its way, but the irritation in Joshua’s voice is truly one of his favorite things. The Composer only gets annoyed when he’s changing and growing and forced to rummage around in the quotidian world. Hanekoma remembers other moments when the Composer learned a valuable life lesson - Joshua hated all of those too.

“You and Neku should know better than to fight in front of the kids.”

Joshua shoots him a look full of murder, only somewhat undercut by the way he’s scratching a lop-eared bunny behind the ears.
“We didn’t fight, actually.” His fingers still, just for a moment, and when Joshua speaks again, his voice is secret soft.

“What if I can’t be what they need me to be?”

Shibuya played it right. Hanekoma has a vague idea of what’s going on, yet another round in the endless push-and-pull between the Composer and the Conductor, and the district stepped in to raise the stakes, to give Joshua no choice but to face the things he needs to without any excuses, without even the Composer’s power to hide behind. Hanekoma wonders if this is also his fault somehow, the district influenced by his rather reckless choices, or if Shibuya has always been the one nudging him forward?

Either way, they’re all probably insane, and just as likely doomed.

“Isn’t your philosophy grow or die?”

Joshua rolls his eyes. “For other people. I’m obviously perfect the way I am.”

He yawns again, and wobbles as he slides slowly off the chair. Hanekoma quickly steps around the counter, putting a hand out to steady him. Hanekoma can’t hear much from his Music, but he doesn’t need to. Joshua’s a Player without a partner on a Game Day. It’s amazing he even made it here at all.

“So… just what’s holding you together?”

“I’m not entirely sure.” Joshua says, not pulling away from his support. “I don’t think I’ll be hopping to Shinjuku for a midnight snack.”

It doesn’t take much effort at all to herd this particular cat toward the back room, the rabbits hopping behind them in a processional equal parts odd and ridiculous. Hanekoma flips on the light, and though the space is full of posters and a TV and a mini-fridge covered in stickers they are for the most part brightly colored failures to make it look like something other than a couch stuffed into a storage closet.

“… and so my life is complete.” Joshua says, but he stumbles out from under Hanekoma’s hand to curl up on the couch regardless. The Noise rabbits jump up quickly beside, Sota settling down at his feet while Nao Nao curls up near his chest, only fussing slightly when Hanekoma finds a blanket and settles it over them.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you like this, Josh.”

“Oh, are we being superior?” He doesn’t bother opening his eyes. “How refreshing.”

“If it made you happy, it wouldn’t be a learning experience.”

Joshua doesn’t answer him. Two pair of glass button eyes stare back, the bunnies quietly studying the Producer of Shibuya as he watches his Composer sleep.

Shibuya won’t let him run. Hanekoma knows all the ways Joshua has to evade what he’d rather not deal with, thinking fast and talking his way around anything he’d rather not face. He’s put it all in the Game, all those feelings all this time, and this is the direct result of all that cleverness and care and love. A swift boot in the ass from his own district.

It’s marvelous. It’s at the razor’s edge of breaking the Game - again - and can’t mean anything good for their current parole, but Hanekoma’s never a little thing like consequences stop him from
being properly impressed.

He feels ancient. He is ancient, and for just a moment Hanekoma feels a couple eons more decrepit than that, the oldest man with the oldest lawn that the damned kids will not get off of. Maybe that’s what all this means, unsubtle enough that even he can’t miss it, a reminder that he’s overstayed his welcome. Maybe it’s time for Joshua to take on a little extra responsibility - and Neku can more than handle Composer, he’s sure of that.

Every fifty years or so, Hanekoma makes sure to ask himself if it’s time to move on, to wander off out there beyond the Higher Plane to whatever’s waiting, or just fade away. Except there’s always a reason to stick around, some new trend to catch his eye the interconnections of art and life across the span of centuries.

He just doesn’t want to leave. It’s still too interesting - just look at this - and he needs to see what’s coming next, to be right in the middle of it all. Hanekoma doesn’t want it easy, anymore than he did in the Long Game - even as he feels the sudden swell of power like gravity increasing, a thundercloud gathering in the front of the cafe.

He turns off the light before he opens the door. He’s already doubled down on how far he’ll go for Shibuya and Joshua, what he’s willing to sacrifice, so it’s nothing at all to step out into his cafe as the Angels swagger in with all the restraint of a B-grade yakuza movie. He wonders if they’ll actually demand protection money before getting down to business.

“One grande quad one-pump vanilla mocha latte.” Brede says, bright as knife. “Extra foam.”

The Angels have ambled out of some catalog of smug, Brede flanked by his two lieutenants - one grinning, with a baseball bat loosely over his shoulder, the other calm and unassuming, glancing around as if suspicious of the entire concept of beverages.

“Please, please tell me that you’ve just fucked up in the middle of our inquiry into how you fucked up.” Brede says, clearly ready to start high-fiving himself. At his side, Baseball Bat snickers.

For half a heartbeat, Hanekoma actually considers Falling, just letting himself become the thing they all believe he’s so close to being anyway. He’s so old, and there’s power in those years even if he’s always found more useful avenues than wielding it outright. Hanekoma thinks he could probably kill two of them, that he might even escape - but Fallen don’t really do noble causes, they don’t have friends or districts that are worth fighting for.

So he doesn’t damn himself, and sighs instead. “You’re going to make me listen to the whole speech, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been practicing.” Brede grins. “We’ve been waiting for this. Well, not this, exactly. Obviously my mistake for lowballing your incompetence. Shibuya without its Composer. In a Game week. We know Kiryuu hasn’t been Erased, or the Higher Plane would have invited us to the party. So where is he?”

“If the District wanted him gone, he’d be gone. Shibuya kept him around, so I think it’s fair to say he hasn’t been punted from his position just yet.”

Of course the Angels aren’t buying it - this is the Higher Plane’s real hit squad, and Hanekoma feels the burn of grim amusement, actually wishing he had Kariya to deal with instead. Time and space and reality all infinitely malleable, and he’s almost never met an Angel who can think past
Brede looks amused, chagrined, pitying. “How many times did they warn you, that you were too close to your Composer? You poor bastard, even now you can’t see how far he’s dragged you down.”

“If Joshua hadn’t been Censured as hard as he was, this might never have—”

“Oh, so this is their fault now?” Brede laughs. “Use that as your defense, I’m sure they’ll go for it.”

“So you’re just the Higher Plane’s messenger boy?” The Angels are spreading out a little, their power pushing noticeably against him now but Hanekoma ignores it. “How convenient.”

He can’t talk his way out of this, not that there’s much else he can do, and Hanekoma’s not going to argue that Shibuya knows exactly what it’s doing, but yeah, maybe it could have picked a slightly better time.

“There’s a girl out there. She’s not even a Player. Fully Realground - the District pulled her into this. We need to track her down. The district will kill her if it doesn’t drive her crazy first.”

“I don’t see how that’s our problem, honestly.” Brede says, in that falsely patient voice of reason that has Hanekoma seriously considering trying to hit him with the coffee machine. A nice steaming cup of shut the fuck up, that’s the saying. Why has he never put that on the menu?

“Look at this from my position, Hanekoma. No one cares if the Composer goes and hangs himself, you know that as well as anyone. If this were any other Game we’d all sit back and make popcorn - but if Shibuya falls, it could take Shinjuku, and Nakano and every other ward and then what? The whole city? If Tokyo destabilizes, what’s to keep from losing every Game between here and Nagoya? You know what’s at stake, I know you do, and you damn well know why I have to be here.”

“Do I sound like that when I’m gloating? I hope not.”

Hanekoma feels the thrill of dread, all his insides sliding into a pile of cold fish, though he can’t say he’s all that surprised to hear the wry, scratchy tone. Joshua is barefoot, stepping through the doorway, hair slightly mussed and clothes a little too creased to be artful, looking the Angels from the epicenter of the Tragic Global Crash of Fucks Given.

“My goodness, Kiryuu, look at you.” Brede says. “If it were up to me, I think I’d let you finish the job yourself and save us all the effort.”

“If only I’d known you were coming.” Joshua says. “You can leave the Producer alone, he didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“Josh-“ Hanekoma starts, but Joshua glances coolly back over his shoulder, as if annoyed that anyone would try to steal his glory. He has so few tells, barely a foothold in the sheer flat ice of his indifference. Just the sort of person to stare down his own suicide and treat it no different than impending victory.

“I would think the Higher Plane would be ecstatic. It’s not every day a Composer gets dethroned by their own Game. The fact that I still exist to be humiliated is practically a bonus.”

Brede nods, conceding the point, but no further. “Gentlemen, you’ve had a good run of it, but the party’s over. You don’t get points for having a new debacle slightly smaller than the last. If you go
in now, maybe they’ll even take the time to pretend there’s two sides to this.”

“I don’t need to pretend.” Joshua says. “My Game has operated successfully under conditions far more taxing than this without a seated Composer and everything turned out fine.”

Baseball Bat laughs, swinging his weapon to the other shoulder. Joshua glares.

“My district is stable. Obviously stable enough to make its own decisions. As I said, if it wished to Erase me I wouldn’t have to be standing here trying to explain that to you.”

Hanekoma glances down at the softest brush of power against his foot, the bunnies lined up next to him, nestled together like a pair of mismatched shoes. Terrified, and trying to stay out of sight, but still here for moral support.

“You can’t leave Neku alone here.” Hanekoma interrupts, ignoring the venomous look Joshua throws his way. “I’ll go, I’ll petition the Higher-“

“No, you won’t.” Joshua snaps, turning back to the Angels, barely a Player and all too happy to stare them down. “Who are you planning to have take my Producer’s place? What veteran talent is out there ready to step up and be Shibuya’s Producer. If CAT vanishes like that, everyone he’s influenced takes a hit. If there’s no one there to fill the gap - *that* will destabilize my district.“

Brede shakes his head. “Funny, I don’t remember offering any deals. I’m just giving you both the last chance for a bit of dignity. I suggest you take it.”

Silence, and Baseball Bat lets his weapon fall, the end resting lightly against the ground, wings rising in anticipation.

Brede sighs, full of feigned annoyance and real satisfaction. “Kicking and screaming it is, then.”

Hanekoma’s ready to strike. It won’t change the way this is all going to turn out, but he wants to remember the sound an Angel makes trying to eat an espresso machine. He’s just about to go for it when the door flies open and they all turn as Neku all but tumbles into the shop.

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The Conductor looks wrecked, wide-eyed and pale as any Player, and Hanekoma knows then just how far the Angels have been pushing their hard sell. Nearly two full Games in and Neku still has next to nothing when it comes to armor, open worry and confusion and a surprising amount of panic in his expression as he looks from Angel to Angel - freezing in place when he finally comes to Joshua, and yeah, the Higher Plane can wave goodbye to any chance of doing this quietly. Hanekoma wonders if Joshua would appreciate it, being the one silent spot in a room currently spilling over with power makes him far more noticeable than if he had never been Censured.

Neku’s Music is nearly visible, reaching out toward the Composer even as the kid shoves past the Angels to reach him. Neku stops short, not quite touching, even his Music held back, afraid to hurt what his fledgling powers can’t begin to make sense of.

“You didn’t… you’re okay? Why don’t you sound… what *happened*?!”

“Hello, dear.” Joshua says dryly, for lack of other options. Neku is too stunned to remember being annoyed is even an option. It’s not like Hanekoma had any doubts about the extent of their relationship but it is more than a little satisfying to watch the Angels have to listen to Neku’s heart being played in Joshua’s key.
“Shibuya has overthrown the Composer of its own accord.” Brede says. “Obviously not how we expected this all to end, but when presented with such a scenario…”

“… something something lemonade.” Joshua finishes for him.

Neku shakes his head. “I don’t… I don’t understand. How did Shibuya-“

“It will have to wait until later, Neku.” Brede interrupts. “I’m afraid these two are already late for their meeting with the Higher Plane.”

“No.” Neku says. “They can’t leave. You can’t leave.”

“Neku…”

“No, you don’t understand. I saw… I think… I think there’s a Fallen in Shibuya.”

He glances at Joshua, a look full of panic and apology. Neku’s aware he’s not doing them any favors, that this wasn’t what he meant to walk into but whatever he’s seen or thinks he’s seen has shaken him right out of strategy. Hanekoma can’t imagine what’s actually happened - he’s censured, but he’d have to be blind, deaf and dead to miss something like that prowling around Shibuya. Brede looks coolly amused, though sympathetic, raising an eyebrow.

“Are you certain it was a Fallen?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Neku snaps back, slapping the thick sheaf of papers he’s brought along against his other hand. “Funny thing, they’re so dangerous, but once again there’s nothing anyone feels like sharing!”

Brede raises his hands in apology. “Easy, easy. Calm down, all right? Just tell us what you saw.”

Do not let him be the hero here, Josh.

Hanekoma hopes against reason that the Composer will step in, will keep the Angels from being the sole voice of reason, but Joshua says nothing. He’s hurt, that much is clear, that his Conductor is reaching out to the Higher Plane for help, no matter what the cause. All too aware that he’s the least powerful one in the room, and the only thing he has left for armor is indifference. Pretending it’s his choice to let his Conductor stand alone.

“I saw something out there, during the Game tonight. It… it ate two of my best Players, and one of my Reapers. There was Noise, it had Noise with it… but it didn’t disappear. They fought it and defeated it but it just came back. It wasn’t right. It’s not supposed to… to come back like that. I think there was a girl, older, in a high-school uniform. She.. she smiled at me.”

He shudders, hard. Whatever he saw out there, it hasn’t let go. Brede nods, his voice gentle.

“Neku, I’m sure what you witnessed was terrible. Games often seem that way. The Higher Plane has made note of some… rather unconventional choices you’ve made, even during your short tenure, regarding your Players. You’re new, and very kind, and it’s all right to be a little skittish, about the demands of…”

“I fed my first batch of winners to a giant bird.” Neku says flatly, eyes flashing with growing anger. “I am telling you, what I saw out there was not the Circle of Reaper Life, okay? You’ve obviously been keeping track of the Game here - you can’t tell me none of you felt anything?!”

Neku looks to them, and Hanekoma would truly like to have his back - but even before he can
plead ignorance, too censured to be sure of much beyond the front door of the shop, Neku’s gaze slides by him without stopping, expecting no help from his corner, and even though Hanekoma knows he has it coming it still stings.

Neku looks to Joshua for far longer, saying nothing, though it’s all in his eyes and threaded through each note of the Music that’s still reaching for him, so ready to protect. Please, it says have my back on this. Please trust me, that I’m good for it. Please don’t make me do this alone.

The Composer doesn’t move, somehow making it seem entirely casual, how he’s not meeting Neku’s gaze. If only this weren’t all happening now, with Joshua laid so low in front of the world’s worst possible audience. If only Neku wasn’t asking him to admit to the worst of crimes, that he might have had a hand in unleashing monsters on his own Game, but here they are and Joshua can’t do it. Won’t do it.

Abandonment slides across Neku’s expression like a rime of ice, strength and pain all at once, but at last he only nods a little, shifting his shoulders as if steadying under a heavy weight.

“I know what I saw, and I have no idea how to fight it. It’s going to destroy this Game, and it… it’s not going to stop. I can’t… you didn’t see it, but you must know what the Fallen can do.”

“Taboo Noise, maybe. Evolved, somehow?” Baseball Bat shrugs, glancing at Brede. “Who knows what this Underground’s been infested with, considering.” A glare at Hanekoma, just in case anyone forgot who was to blame in the last minute-and-a-half.

“Neku, I appreciate your concern. I understand your desire to protect your Game, and we’ll look into it, but without any sort of actual proof-“

He’s fishing, Hanekoma knows he’s fishing and his little Angel stooges know it - and Neku knows it too, hand tightening around the stack of paper he’s carrying because if he does have the evidence, that there’s more Taboo Noise in the District, possibly a Fallen… there’s just no way the Higher Plane won’t draw a direct line back to what Hanekoma did, bringing that sin into this world, a door opened by the Composer’s callous selfishness, and who cared what had changed in the meantime?

Neku hesitates, and Brede’s eyes narrow.

“Any evidence that could help us untangle this mess would be of use, Conductor. If nothing else, the Higher Plane will certainly take your help into account when considering the full scope of the Producer’s… adjustments of the rules.”

“What are you…”

“I believe you call her Rhyme.”

The snap and rush of wings fills the air, making a dark curtain of empty space, tips brushing the ceiling as Neku bristles in anger.

“You leave her out of this. It has nothing to do with her.”

Brede smiles, even though Neku’s threat is hardly empty - not with those wings, dark as any Reaper’s but full-feathered as an Angel’s, a few loose bits of shadowed plumage gently fluttering to the floor.

Joshua’s wide eyes shatter his mask of disinterest, looking far more wounded than he could have possibly intended. Neku looks up, and then back at his Composer, surprise or shame or shock, it’s
hard to tell. Halfway between Reaper and Angel - and he’s slipping.

“Neku…” Hanekoma says, not at all certain what he’s going to ask for. A plea for understanding, skirting apology. A warning not to trust these Angels, just because he’s angry - but it doesn’t matter, all words fading as Neku’s eyes meet his.

Maybe he’s not quite the revolutionary he thinks he is. Maybe Hanekoma really has bought into his own hype. He saw the potential there - for the girl, and her brother, in the Long Game and beyond, if any of them survived to see it. So he’d given her that second chance, and it didn’t seem such a terrible payoff after, to send her back into the Realground with a slightly better view of what lay beyond. He thought she was fine, growing and learning, and then he didn’t think about her much at all, truth be told, the success of her life lost amidst the clamor of his less respectable deeds.

Big-time Angel too busy to care about a little girl?

No. He’d saved her. He’d been there when it counted. Which is why Neku’s anger is mostly disappointment, hoping for better but not expecting it. Hanekoma’s kept the truth from him before, but this time there’s no reason to go looking for a lesson.

“You should have told me.”

Before he can say a word, Neku turns back to the Angels, neither expecting his apology or needing one.

“I had Akihabara’s Composer run some numbers, compile a few searches. People are dying all over Tokyo, maybe even farther out, and they’re not coming back to the Game.”

“No one who dies will-“

“No, these people are dancers, designers, they make garage kits and compose their own soundtracks - look.” He nearly throws the pages into Brede’s hands, equal measures angry and desperate. “Look at this. Maybe one or two, sure, they’re not Game material - but all of them? All of these people, just gone, and if no one notices when it’s even here then it could be killing Reapers too, in the same kind of numbers. No one knows, no one cares. Everyone thinks it’s just Noise, it’s just the Game as usual, but it’s not. It’s hunting Players before they die - it’s hunting us. What kind of Fallen is that? Will you just, for once, tell me what’s happening in my Game?!”

Brede couldn’t if he wanted to, Hanekoma knows, because the Fallen might find their way into Games, they might attack Player and Reaper alike but they certainly don’t go unnoticed. No one can take Players before they’re even in the Game, or anything like what Neku’s suggesting. It’s clear the Angels think Neku’s hysterical, pushed too far, and damned if it isn’t so very convenient, one more black mark against the Producer and Composer that sent him over that edge.

“Neku, I’ll make sure this gets to the Higher Plane.”

“I’m sure you will.” Joshua says. Neku’s dark wings mantle slightly, and whatever he’s feeling he still takes a step back, putting himself between the Angels and their prey. Hanekoma is close enough to see his feathers shiver with tension, like a living thundercloud.

“I’m not letting you take him up there. Either of them.”

Brede sighs. “Flattered as I am by the thought of being so important, Neku, and despite how deeply satisfying this is on a personal level, I assure you that at the end of the day I’m still little more than middle management. If I go back up there alone, all that will happen is that the Higher Plane will send someone else - and when they come, they won’t ask.”
“At this point, I almost want to go.” Joshua mutters. “The mood I’m in deserves to be shared.”

Hanekoma’s little coffee shop is starting to feel just a bit overcrowded, between the competing wingspans and the rising tension in the air - and that’s when the front door bangs open hard enough to knock the bell clean off. Hanekoma doesn’t even hear it hit the ground, not with the girl standing in the threshold, blazing with Music and power like she just rode a comet through the front of the shop.

“Neku! I found you!”

Eri leaps into Neku’s arms, and the kiss is long and passionate and straight out of one of those movies with multiple explosions in the background. Neku doesn’t move, stunned silent even when she pulls away and grins, pushing a few strands of hair out of his eyes and straightening his collar slightly.

“E-eri?”

“Yeah, mostly. Kinda. I think. It’s getting a little weird in here, that’s for sure. I, uh… I think I might have called Shiki’s mom and said some… things? About her, uh, parenting techniques. I think maybe I shouldn’t have. It’s going to suck when I remember how to regret things.” She tips her head, studying him. “You have wings. Did you know that? Do you put little… wing slots in your clothes, or what?”

“Eri.” Neku says more gently, confused and worried, his hands carefully settling around her shoulders. “Eri… what happened? Why are you… god, what did you do?”

“We had to make everything okay again. I couldn’t, it couldn’t…” She frowns, makes a soft, pained sound, but her voice steadies after a moment. “It’s harder to… but it’s going to be all right now. He’s here, and you’re here, and now you can just talk to each other… or I can beat you up until you do.”

Eri grins, and though her eyes are bright her skin is dull and pale, her hair hanging limp and Hanekoma’s sure if he hugged her he could feel every bone. It’s killing her fast, trying to keep the rein on so much power. It’s amazing she’s lasted this long.

Jealousy’s never been a problem for him, but now here he is, more than a little envious of the dying girl. Hanekoma’s always been there to watch Shibuya, nurture it, help it grow - and here this girl stands, caught right in the white-hot core of it. He’s never seen anything so beautiful, the district he’s loved all this time turning, beaming right back at him.

Neku looks to Joshua. “Why does she sound like Shibuya when you don’t?”

“There was a… situation.” Joshua says, ignoring Eri’s rather pointed snort. “The district’s chosen an avatar, but it doesn’t understand the consequences. It’s burning her away from the inside.”

Neku’s eyes widen. “You have to help her! Do something!”

Joshua makes several annoyed faces at once. “No, you talk to her. You started this.”

“What are you even-?”

“Hey!” Eri says, staring across the room at where Brede’s fellow Angel is standing, the one who hasn’t spoken since they arrived. “I know you. You’re the dick who keeps trolling Oji’s site! I… I’m not sure how I know that. Dick.”
Brede sighs, taking a step forward. “Entertaining as this little show might be, it does not change the facts. If anything, I think it should be even more clear to all involved that the time has long since passed for lenience.”

Eri frowns, looking to Joshua. “… and you actually bother listening to all that?”

The Composer shrugs. “One word in six?”

So goes the very last of Brede’s feigned patience, and he steps forward with his own wings outstretched. Neku moves to protect Joshua - there’s no taking him without a fight. Keeping quiet all this time has given Hanekoma maybe the chance to be overlooked, just long enough to take one of the Angels down, and with Neku here they might just -

Eri steps right into the middle, raw and fearless, with Shibuya’s music a controlled, low hum, a thousand violins drawing out the same shuddering note. Brede’s old enough, that he ought to know better, not to discount the dangers in the unexpected even when the unexpected is mostly human, and seems barely able to keep on her feet.

“Get out of my way, little girl.”

“I don’t think I like you very much.”

Brede steps forward and Eri throws one hand out. The flash of light is blinding and the sound is even worse and when it clears they’re all frozen exactly where they were, the Angels with wings out and weapons raised - except that Brede is nowhere to be found. Shibuya’s banished him, tossed him right back into the Higher Plane, though the cost of it is clear as Eri staggers, turning slowly, her shoulders slumped and knees buckling, crushed beneath the price of that much power.

“Okay, so,” she breathes, giggles, though she’s struggling for the words, “I think… maybe I might have overdone it.”

She blinks, confused, just at the edge of remembering how to be afraid.

“… Neku?”

Eri falls, and Neku catches her before she’s halfway to the floor, shouting her name, the rest of them frozen, stunned and staring at the place the Angel used to be.

Chapter End Notes

1. Chapter title - Gnarls Barkley, Going On
If evil were a lesser breed then justice after all these years, the righteous would have freed the world of sin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In twenty years, Eri’s going to look like a movie star, just like her mother does. The woman’s all careless style and bold confidence, even if the hospital lights quickly strip away most of that, and the body in the bed takes care of what’s left.

Neku didn’t even have to double-check her Music to know who she was, not that there’s much left to compare it to.

He’s hiding across the hall, not in the UG, just in the dark, watching as Eri’s mother sits down at her daughter’s bedside and takes her hand and smooths her hair back. Just watching it is comforting, except that Neku can hear all the way down beneath Eri’s skin and there’s nothing but silence.

The tickets don’t make much noise as they tear apart in his hands. A pair of front-row seats to tomorrow’s - no, tonight’s Def March show. One of those perks of being Shibuya’s Conductor. A gift for his best friends - and Neku slowly and carefully shreds them into smaller and smaller pieces, until they stick to his sweating palms.

The doctor speaking to Eri’s mother is an Angel, and so is the attending nurse, and everyone who’d rushed her here. Neku’s not entirely sure how that works, but bending reality’s probably good for getting private rooms in the best hospitals, and whatever visiting hours they need. For all he knows they might really be here to help her, or they could just be here for the chance to study something new.

It’s not like he has any better ideas.

Shibuya doesn’t want them here, Angelic Music on a whole different level, warping the space around them like melting plastic, but whatever the district did seems to be a one-time deal. Brede might not coming back, but he hadn’t been lying about what would happen once he was gone.

One moment Neku had been frantic over Eri, and the next the whole UG was creaking and bending beneath the strain of a dozen Angels, maybe more. A whole cohort descending on Wildkat like the world’s most dour flashmob.

Mr. H had disappeared in a sea of well-tailored frowns, and Neku had one last look at Joshua, just long enough for the Composer’s eyes to meet his, for the bastard to flash him that same smug, satisfied smile as the last time he disappeared in a blaze of glory - but now there’s not going to be a throne room or a gun or an I-told-you-so.

The Angels hadn’t even looked Neku’s way.

“Hey there, boss.”

Kariya steps into the room, and in another moment there’s a cup of coffee in Neku’s hand. He feels a bit of shock or outrage, but it fizzles fast - he can’t possibly pretend he’s surprised that Kariya is here, or that the Reaper knows what’s going on. Neku would bother being hurt and pissed and suspicious except he’s done all of that already and it hasn’t done any good. He has the feeling
Kariya’s in the same position he is anyway, kinda-sorta talking to the Angels and sorta-kinda trying to do his own thing and pretty much getting his ass kicked in all directions.

Neku can feel anything he wants to feel about this, so he goes with relieved and takes a sip of what tastes like burnt carpet glue. He catches the exact moment the Angel says that Eri’s probably not waking up again because that’s when Eri’s mother starts crying.

“She’s going to die, isn’t she?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Kariya’s the worst liar in the world when he’s trying to be nice. He’s also the first Reaper that Neku’s seen since the Higher Plane put in their appearance. All that bravado and malice around the Players, but now that the apex predators are here - damn, the Angels aren’t even supposed to be in a Game, not like this.

Neku looks down, where he’s been worrying and picking at the bracelet he forgot he was wearing, fairly surprised it’s lasted all this time. The gift Vancouver gave him the night of the Composer party. He wants to talk to her more than anything, to anyone who might be able to give him answers. How he's supposed to fix what has to be a fuckup visible from space.

Reapers from neighboring districts are at all borders of the Shibuya Game, trying to peer in. His inbox is overflowing. Composers and Conductors, friends and strangers and Neku doesn’t even have the time to read them and doesn’t dare answer a single one. Not even to warn them, anything he says no doubt being underlined and bold-faced to use against Shibuya’s Producer and Composer.

Joshua, who hadn’t said a single word to help him, who’d looked at his feathered wings as if Neku had finally gone and pulled the trigger. Betrayal, but there was no mistaking the flicker of grim satisfaction, as if Neku were just proving him right after all this time - and son of a bitch Josh, it wasn’t like he’d wanted to-

It’s an effort each time to push those thoughts aside, but Neku can’t do anything else, can’t let himself feel angry or hurt or regretful now if he wants to have any hope of fixing things.

“I’ve never seen a district boot an Angel.” Kariya says, and there’s real respect in his voice. “Didn’t even know it could be done. I hear he bounced halfway to Kyoto. On his face.”

Neku smiles despite himself. Eri’d like to hear that. Would have liked.

The door wobbles a little, and again, as if something’s trying to push it open, and all at once his Noise rabbits are pressed up against his ankles and trembling hard. He’d forgotten all about them in the chaos, and it’s a small miracle they’re still here at all. Neku can imagine it too easily, one of the Angels grinding them under his heel on the way out the door.

“Hey, come here, that’s it. You all right?”

A little bit of comfort, at least, as Nao Nao tucks her head into the crook of his arm while Sota tries to lap at the coffee he’s still holding. Neku manages to put the cup down without spilling anything and juggle the rabbits without dropping anyone and before too long they’re on his shoulders and Neku’s leaning back against the wall. Still here in the dark, watching what’s left of his friend die.

Shibuya sings around him, no longer connected to a human host and utterly indifferent to all the damage it’s done - it doesn’t know damage, just energy trading forms. It doesn’t even seem to notice its Composer has wandered off again - Neku’s here, so everything must be okay.
The district is beautiful and ridiculous and for a moment he hates it more than anything.

“… so what happens now?”

Kariya’s sigh is pure minimum wage, a sigh that spends its time not saying what it thinks while mopping up other people’s mistakes.

“A trial. I imagine the Angels were hoping they might keep it all a lot more quiet, but… not so much, not after this.” Kariya grimaces. “It might be… it’s not a total waste, what your friend did with Shibuya. The Higher Plane didn’t want this kind of attention - you know how the Games work, when there’s blood in the water. Everyone will want in on the spectacle, everyone will want to be heard. Hanekoma’s been circling the drain so long it’s starting to look like an art form, and that Composer of yours knows how to work a crowd. If nothing else, it’ll buy them some time.”

“My Composer.” Neku says softly, because he can see the end like it’s already over. Joshua just… going with it, whatever’s going to happen. Playing cool and indifferent while the Angels tear him to shreds because not caring is still enough like victory. Maybe this is how Joshua finally proves he doesn’t need anyone or anything.

Except Neku’s never really been very good at letting the Composer write his own endings.

“I thought the Higher Plane wanted me to be an Angel. I thought… I don’t see how this is going to get me on anyone’s good side.”

Brede wasn’t lying - what little of the Higher Plane that Neku’s seen reminds him of every inane speech from every school assembly he’s fell asleep in, every principal that has ever talked at him while ticking cliches off their checklist. Neku’s special and important when it’s convenient and useful and he fits into the paint-by-numbers spot they’ve picked out for him, and otherwise they can’t quite find the time to remember he’s alive.

“The way you sound right now, maybe they don’t think they need to convince you.” Kariya says, with the sort of look that says that Neku’s Music is exactly as under control as everything else. Joshua had seen that, hadn’t he? He’d seen those wings right when he’d needed Neku most.


“It might be they’ll try to slot you in as Composer first, maybe give you that little girl for a Conductor to tie up all the loose ends. Wait for you to go Angel for good, and get over this.” He shrugs at Neku’s glare. “You’d be amazed what a couple hundred years can do.”

“You knew about Rhyme,” Neku says, because sure, yeah. Why not?

The Harrier looks at him for a long moment, and Neku doesn’t ask, doesn’t pry, but the Reaper finally sets his cup down and takes a step back and his Music shifts and bends and - wow, hello orchestral remix Kariya.

All his notes are still there, but echoing back from some deep well at the end of time, fringed in counterpoint melodies that whisper along with the shift of Noise feathers, white and black and a flick of crimson above the deep, looking-glass eyes.

Dr. McAngel looks up from the other room, and Neku can see how still he is even when Kariya shifts back into his Reaper form, and he wonders how many fights there have been with how many other Angels, and what happens when Kariya wins.

“I knew there was a reason you were kicking my ass.”
“It’s called dodging, boss. All the cool kids are doing it.”

“How much do I even bother asking about?”

He looks different now, slacker layabout Kariya superimposed over this powerful stranger, and Neku has no idea why the Harrier has ever listened to a word he said.

“Not much to tell, really. I… made a promise - I was a promise, a long time ago.” He looks away, his voice flat and low. “I’ve been making it all up since then. Pretending it matters because I say it does.”

“You’ve been up there? You’ve been to the Higher Plane?”

“Eternity’s most boring airport terminal.”

“So you can tell me how to get them out, and where we’re supposed to go once I’ve done it.”

Yes, he is going to smash-and-grab the afterlife, even if Neku doesn’t know what that actually entails and can’t imagine he’ll actually succeed. Maybe he can write it off as some daring new sort of performance art. Kariya doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t answer or even blink, a few wisps of lingering steam from Neku’s coffee the only thing that moves, even the Noise rabbits too tired to shift their grip.

Neku frowns. “I won’t let them-”

“I know.” Kariya says, and grins a little. “The Angels have no idea what they’re doing with you, none at all.”

“It seems there’s a lot in Shibuya they don’t know about.”

And there goes the smile. Kariya looks away, and down.

“I saw it tonight, right in the middle of the Scramble.” Neku pushes, because he has to. “It wanted me to see, right after it… Two Players and a Reaper, gone. Not Erased, but… I don’t even know. I’m not sure I want to - and no one else felt a thing. It’s a Fallen, isn’t it? It’s in the Shibuya Game and they don’t know it’s here and it’s not leaving.”

“It wants you gone, kid.”

No. It wants much, much worse.

“I kinda figured that part out.” Neku says, and doesn’t let himself shiver. “You didn’t tell me it was here, because… what, I’m not supposed to know? You didn’t think I could handle it?”

“It’s never good for a Game when things like that come calling, and it’s not a coincidence the Higher Plane’s isn’t interested in taking precautions. If a Fallen shows up for real, that’s all the excuse the Angels need to do whatever they want. After all this,” he gestures out toward the hospital bed, “I doubt it’s even going to take that much. Which means this is the only chance you’re going to get.”

“Chance?”

“I think they’re underestimating this Fallen. The Higher Plane will win this, one way or another, but it’s going to cost them, and they’re not exactly used to losing. It’s going to get crazy, it’s going to happen fast - and that’s when you Ascend. Hit the Higher Plane, grab the Producer and the
Composer and go.”

“Go? Where?”

“Out.” Kariya says. “A thousand universes away. A million. I know you can do it, and you’re strong enough to carry them along with you if they can’t. Find another Shibuya to grab hold of. By the time the Angels clean up, maybe they won’t even want to track you down. Maybe they’ll be too busy doing damage control to want to do anything but pretend it never happened.”

“You want me to… abandon Shibuya?”

Neku doesn’t have to ask what it means, just how the Angels will go about solving the problem, and it’s not just about ditching the district. It means leaving Shiki. Saying goodbye to Beat and Rhyme and his father and his life. This is not where Neku had thought this conversation would go when it started.

“It’s just one Shibuya, kid. You know the universe has a couple of spares. The Producer’s smart and the Composer’s ruthless. You’ll figure it out from there.”

He can’t be serious. He can’t be.

“I thought maybe… I-I thought we’d fight it… together?” Neku winces into the silence. “Yeah, so that sounded pretty stupid, but I’m not just going to-“

“I’ve been here, Neku.” Kariya says. “I’ve done all this before, and I’ve seen how it ends. The Higher Plane’s going to Erase your Composer, and it’s not going to mean anything or solve anything and you’re gonna spend the next thousand years wondering why you ever thought holding back was the right decision. I know you want some happy ending where everything turns out okay and everyone is safe but that’s not what’s going to happen here. You need to make a choice, and you need to do it now.”

As if to underline the point, two Angels appear in the hall between the rooms, dressed like secret service runway models. Neku can only imagine the words Eri would have about that, and then they’re looking through the glass at him and at Kariya - definitely at Kariya.

The doctor intercepts them at the door, exchanging a few tense words that have them retreating, though Neku doubts it means much and Kariya’s got one hand quietly poised near his waist, exactly the place the hilt of a sword would be.

“You’ve been asked to… provide testimony,” The Doctor keeps his hand on the door, as if ready to use it as a shield, “and by asked I mean they’re waiting outside. Impatiently… and armed.”

“I tell them what they already know, have them not listen to what they don’t want to hear?” Kariya says. “Yeah, we can skip it. I’m not leaving.”

“You don’t have a choice.” The Doctor says, his voice not angry, simply urgent. “My patient’s already unstable enough. You can’t do this here.”

Kariya grinds expletives between his back teeth until they’re powder, and swallows them down. Neku’s not sure he can handle any more of this particular pep talk, so it’s probably better when the Harrier heads toward the door.

“I’ll be back before the Game starts.” Kariya says, turning to look at him. “Just… stay here, Neku. Just be human, and stay in the RG.”
On that inspiring note, he’s gone. The doctor lingers, stepping back into the doorway because yes, there’s still a whole tragedy going on in the other room that’s also Neku’s responsibility.

“Is there… is there anything else I can do for Eri?”

No. By the way the Angel sets his shoulders and looks back with an unbearable sympathy, Neku has his answer, but they can both pretend.

“Does she have anyone else she’s close to? Anyone who loves her? A friend or a partner or-”

“Yeah.” Neku says, and that’s the punchline and here’s the absolute shittiest he’s ever going to feel because now he has to stand here and breathe until he can work up the nerve to call Shiki.

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Kariya’s not usually allowed into the Higher Plane, even with an escort. The Angels bracketing him don’t talk, and they’re tense, and he’s not even in a good enough mood to be amused by it.

He lied to Neku, of course. Lies of omission, as if it makes a difference. It’s a real shit thing he’s doing, a very shit thing telling him to run but Kariya’s not really seeing another way out of this, and wow, just fuck the stoic noble sacrifice. Let the Angels bleed for it, if they want this victory so badly, if they’re willing to hold out this long while Saika bats the kid around like a cat toy.

He’s not going to be able to forget it anytime soon, the look on Neku’s face when he realized just what Kariya was telling him to do. But it’s not the first Game Kariya’s seen go down from too much love or not enough or this, just bad luck that invited all its friends until Shibuya buckled under the weight of it.

Welcome to the world, kid.

It’s going to be hard to get Uzuki far enough away - she can’t jump, she can’t cross dimensions but that doesn’t mean they can’t just run and hide, and there are people who owe him enough to keep quiet, at least. It’s not much of a plan but Kariya hadn’t realized just how little time he had left until Neku’s little friend went and drop-kicked an Angel into the deep end of Lake Biwa.

He doesn’t want to be up here, but since he’s up here he might really want to see about sneaking a message to the convicts, at least. Kariya’s really really hoping it won’t come down to breaking them out his damn self, so that the Conductor has no choice but to run.

The kid really thought they’d face it as a team. He thought it was the reason for all of Kariya’s half-assed ‘training’. Why had he ever thought Neku would be selfish? Look at everything he’d done so far - and whatever had happened back then, in the throne room at the end of the Long Game, he doubts Neku had the chance to hug it out.

Any other Game, and Kariya would never care enough to… but when’s the last time any of this has been like any other Game? If things were at all normal, the Angels wouldn’t be here and no one would care and they probably would have all been Erased anyway, months ago. Saika could have showed up late to the party to find all her work already done for her.

Kariya can be the villain this time, because no one should be the hero.

The Higher Plane is an elegant, infinite jumble of influences from every city that is or was, across universes, and more than one that never was at all - lost libraries and Troy and Shangri-La, the archives of all creation back to scattered handprints on the first cave wall. Stand anywhere for long and the city will move on its own, Angels constantly arranging and re-arranging buildings like
obsessive docents looking for the best bit of light, playing tug-of-war with this cathedral and that piece of sculpture.

Kariya thinks it’s all a bit too grand and a bit too clean. A shined-up version of the real, a brochure for some place that doesn’t particularly want him to visit, thrown through one too many Instagram filters.

“Wait here.”

The Angels don’t shove him forward so much as tip the universe at his feet. Kariya stumbles, and by the time he’s righted himself they’re gone and he’s standing at the dead end of a long brick garden, the walls too high to see over and no sign of a door. The ‘hurry up’ part is over, and now the wait has begun. He’s tempted to just drop his vibe so they have to come collect him again, but this is already time he can’t afford to lose.

Kariya starts walking - the Angels can pick him up just as easily as they’ve dropped him, and maybe if he keeps strolling - not pacing - he’ll walk right into an actual plan instead of this suicidal nonsense he’s pretending at.

The path in front of him opens into a very pretty view, with a pond and some trees and the wind scattering leaves across the water and Kariya stops.

“Hold this.”

Three strands of dark twine are pressed into his hand, and Kariya stares a moment, though the girl doesn’t look up from her work, her head bent and hair falling into her eyes. The t-shirt she’s wearing is for a band she’d be too young to have ever seen in person if she were the age she looks, and Kariya tries to get some better estimate but the Higher Plane’s getting in the way. He can’t sense anything about her.

Except that she’s sitting on a bench in the corner of what was once his daimyo’s garden.

A million ponds in the world, shaded by a million trees but Kariya knows this one down to the last blade of long grass rustling at the edges of the water. He’s not sure how long he stands there, feeling the slight tug on the strands in his hand as the girl carefully weaves the other ends. It’s simple and intricate at the same time, interlocking loops and knots that seem very familiar -

“Hold up. You’re that Composer, the one…”

The one who’d put a bracelet just like that around Neku’s wrist. Vancouver tilts her head just enough that he can see the smile, though she still doesn’t look up.

“Keep the tension on your end, or I’ll have to start over.”

Ask him why he doesn’t just let go. Once upon a time, Kariya used to be something vaguely approaching badass. Now here he is, doing arts and crafts in the corner of a bad memory.

“So what, is the Higher Plane calling up every Game just in case someone’s got some dirt, or is Shibuya’s Producer really that good at ruining the world?”

Vancouver chuckles. “I didn’t think his last collection was so bad. A little under-inspired, maybe. It’ll be nice to see what he comes up with this time, once the dust has settled.”

“It seems like you think he’s going to make it through this.”
“I guess I am kind of spoiling the ending,” The girl says mildly, still amused, but Kariya can feel the hair rising on the back of his neck. A lot of Angels try to pretend at this, at being calm and cool and above it all when everything that’s happened in Shibuya has pretty much proved the opposite - but she’s looking at him with a gentle understanding that has nothing at all to do with being a Composer. When she tugs the ends of the bracelet out of his hand and holds it up, Kariya shies away from it as if it were about to strike.

“What is that?”

“Macrame.” She offers it again, and shrugs when he doesn’t move. “Maybe I should have added some beads.” The calm gaze never wavers and knows too much. “It’s going to be all right, Kariya. I just thought you deserved to know that. You don’t have to worry. Neku will do just fine. He’ll save Shibuya. He’ll even save Uzuki Yashiro.”

Kariya doesn’t even mean to draw the sword, it’s just in his hand. Yeah, it’s probably real stupid to just go and prove what she might have been fishing for but all he can feel is raw panic, barely held in check. All this time doing everything he could to keep Uzuki away from any suspicion and here this Composer is chatting him up about it in the middle of the Higher Plane.

Composer. Right.

“You’re not Vancouver, are you?”

“It’s been a while.”

Kariya listens close again, and now maybe he’s hearing it true. He’d thought the Higher Plane was drowning her out, but instead there’s just so little difference between them she’s nearly invisible. The closest he’s ever heard anything like it had been those little crystalline echoes when Neku shot up the Frequencies and came back down again, shedding echoes of paradise.

“… you’re not even a Producer.”

The girl just smiles. Kariya still hasn’t moved out of his fighting stance, and she hasn’t moved at all.

“Not to disparage your ability to creep me right the fuck out, but I’m not seeing how any of this looks like a win. I’m guessing you know all about our little Fallen problem, except I have to keep saying it - it’s not just a Fallen, and if you’re thinking Neku’s going to have some easy victory-“

“Of course it’s not a Fallen, and Neku’s not going to defeat her,” she says calmly. “He’s going to take her place.”

Chapter End Notes

1. Chapter title - Ok Go - The House Wins
everybody hates a tourist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes eight tries on the Misaki house phone before a groggy, annoyed voice finally picks up.

“… Hello?”

Shiki’s father. Eri’s not always complimentary when it comes to the Misakis, but Neku only has to explain himself once, slowly, before the man sets the phone down. He’s left with a nice long pause to try and swallow back his thudding heart, and then there’s Shiki’s voice, sleepy and bewildered.

“… Neku? What’s wrong?”

Oh, it sucks exactly as much as he knew it would, to hear the confusion in her voice slowly replaced by fear, and how her breath catches when he says no, that it can’t really wait until morning.

He spends an eon of fluorescent-lit hell just waiting then, until the silence gets to be too much. His headphones are barely a refuge, getting all teary-eyed over music Josh would mock him mercilessly for, flipping through songs before they’re even half-done. Neku’s still not ready when Shiki finally comes around the corner. All at once she’s hugging him hard, pressed so tight that when she looks over his shoulder and gasps the shock hits him all over again, seeing Eri so pale and motionless.

Neku hovers at the door after that, but there’s not much else he can do. Shiki is holding on to Eri’s hand and blind to the rest of the world. The Misakis and Eri’s mother are not talking to each other, while the Angel’s putting together whatever bullshit story makes sense of this, along with the Imprinting so that no one will argue that Shiki should stay.

The first step away is awful, and the next few aren’t any better but Neku can’t do any good here and maybe the only ones who might know how to save her are on some distant plane, with a paradise full of Angels circling for the kill.

“You know, he did try to tell you.”

One of Brede’s henchangels is standing near the exit doors, baseball bat nowhere in sight but still looking a good century too dapper to be human. Neku wonders if there’s any way on any world that he could just maybe wad the angel into a ball of feathers and toss him into the sun.

“The wings aren’t as flammable as you’d think.” Reading his Vibe, or Neku’s violent glare might not even need the subtitles.

“This isn’t funny.” Neku snaps. “It isn’t some…” The Angel raises a wry eyebrow, waiting, and even Neku has to admit he’d rather not finish the sentence. “…game.”

The Angel chuckles. “Yeah, no kidding. The last time I saw anything like this, they had to redraw all the maps.” He flicks his wings oddly, what Neku thinks might be the equivalent of a lazy knuckle crack. “Do I introduce myself, or are we already past the giving-a-shit phase?”

“I could give you a name.” Neku says flatly.
“Ezra.”

“Mine was better.” The Angel doesn’t even bother to look offended. “What are you even doing here? Shouldn’t you be out there leading the invasion force?”

Ezra makes a face. “Yeah, I suppose that sounds like absolutely no fun. Lucky for me, the boss said I should check in with you instead.”

“Too busy pouting to come back himself?”

Ezra’s eyes widen, surprised. “You didn’t know? Shibuya doesn’t want him past the rope. He can’t get back inside.” He grins. “Don’t worry, he’s not angry with you. Probably more pissed he didn’t see it coming, after everything else that’s happened.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

“Course you weren’t.” Ezra shrugs, stretching. His wings twitch again. It seems odd, to think that Mr. H has wings too, or had - “So what sage advice was the Crane handing out? He tell you to run? I hear he’s good at that.”

Neku is pretty damn sure the Angel has never said that to Kariya’s face.

“I saw you fighting with him. Why?”

If Ezra could shrug while shrugging, he’d do it. Maybe that’s why his wings keep ruffling. “Kill some time, see if he’s everything they say he is. I mean, come on, I have a chance to take a shot at something like that and I don’t do it?”

Neku thought he’d found an balance with the job, that he was finally coming to terms with being the Conductor but he’s never going to really understand what it means to be a Reaper, to rise in the ranks the way it’s supposed to happen, or be the Angel they somehow think he’s destined to be.

He’s scared, and he’s been this scared before. He’s been this alone before, with no idea what to do next or how. It’s Week Three all over again, when all the rules have stopped working and this time Beat’s not even in the shit alongside him.

Kariya says he has to go, his Reaper who might be an Angel or close enough, who’s seen and done ten lifetimes worth of this and he says there’s no winning. It’s time to abandon his district to monsters of all kinds - these Angels have no interest in this Game, or his Players, and it will only get worse from here. If he leaves this Shibuya, his Shibuya, Neku’s leaving it to die.

He can’t do it. Even if he can, he can’t.

“I know it’s not worth much, but I am sorry about your friend.”

Neku really would go for the throat, or the wingspan, but it doesn’t seem like the Angel’s joking.

“That’s not your line.”

“Are we enemies, Neku? Should we be?” The Angel slouches back, hands in his pockets. “Tell you the truth, all this you’re doing here? I think it’s pretty great. You’ve got this whole place singing like a third rail, and I know Brede thinks so too. You’re just getting started, that’s why they’re all scouting you. If we could have just gotten to you sooner…”

“You wouldn’t have wanted me then.” Neku says, and knows it’s the truth. He wasn’t much use to
anyone before he’d dropped into the Game, not even himself. He’d fought it every step of the way, and admitting it still feels a bit like a self-inflicted wedgie, but Joshua and Mr. H knew what they were on about. “I wasn’t anything special, before the Game.”

“Maybe it’s the only thing they did right.”

Yes. Yes, it is, but it’s connected to all the rest. Neku wouldn’t be everything they wanted without all the bad decisions that came before. The mistakes created the rewards - if they’d done it by the rules, Shibuya might not be here at all.

Neku nearly staggers from the thought, and how it knocks everything else into place. Everything Mr. H told him about the Game, what it means, and all that Kariya said about the Higher Plane, the trial, the Angels and all those onlookers.

Joshua’s going to be making wet cat face through to the next millennium, but that doesn’t change what Neku has to do.

“Doing okay there, kid?”

Neku nods, already with most of his attention on his phone. The Reapers have responded to his all-points alert, most of them surprisingly prompt this time. Higashizawa really is alive, it seems, unless he’s already tossed himself in front of a bus and Neku hopes the former Reaper will reconsider, or realize he might not end up playing the same Game that’s been annoying him all this time.

“What’s going to happen to my Game?”

The Angel shrugs. “No official word yet. Most Conductors wouldn’t care, what with your Composer gone. The Higher Plane will probably just shut it all down, disperse the remaining Soul energy and-“

“No.” Neku says. “You call them. You do… whatever the hell it is you do, and you tell them the Game keeps going.”

“What will you do if someone actually wins?”

Neku scowls. “If I’m as great as they all say I am, I can handle it. If anything happens to the Game, if they do anything, make sure they know I’ll never be an Angel. Ever. I’ll go off to Hokkaido and open up an onsen.”

“Mm, monkeys.” Ezra grins. “Yeah, I’ll pass that along. I wouldn’t worry, they’re probably too busy slap-fighting over who gets to cut off your Producer’s wings.”

Maybe they’ll just snuff out Joshua like a candle flame, the last wink of some errant spark. The thought kicks all the air out of him, and Neku can feel his wings flex, trying to keep him balanced.

“I need… okay, I need to go. I think I’ve got a lot to do today.”

“Be careful out there, kid.”

It doesn’t take Neku long to track down what he needs - who he needs. Just like Kariya said, this particular pile of Reapers have all thrown in on a tiny apartment, seven floors up in as close as downtown Tokyo has to the middle of nowhere.
Sota is hopping along right at his heels, while Nao Nao keeps a fast hold on his shoulder, fuzzy face so close her velvet nose tickles against his neck and maybe he shouldn’t have told them to keep the Game going. Maybe it would have been a kinder fate to kill it now, to Erase the Players. At least they’d just be Noise and Soul and not... worse, so much worse, but how can he make that call? How can he take their last hope away and call it protection?

It’s way too early to knock and expect results but Neku’s not quite ready to go walking through walls just because he can. He’s surprised to hear movement behind the door after only a few minutes of steady pounding, the lock sliding back and then a Wall Reaper blinking out at him in confusion, then dread, then confusion again, obviously trying to calculate the hours back from yesterday’s Game without looking at his watch.

“It’s cool. I’m early. Really really early.”

The Reaper continues blinking.

“I hear that you’re into video editing.”

Obviously the very last thing the Reaper had been expecting to hear, but Neku’s out of time for explanations.

“Yeah. I mean... sure? I guess?”

He pretty much pushes his way into the apartment after that, a cluster of half-dressed and barely awake Reapers soon blinking at him in the not-quite morning. Neku remembers the Game that turned him into what he is now, and he remembers what Mr. H told him there.

He’s only alone in this if he believes he is.

“Oh.” A Reaper says, blue boxers and black beanie and utterly baffled. Neku recognizes the hat.

“You’re a sound guy, right? You do music, audio stuff. How’d you like some tickets to tomorrow’s Def March show? All of you?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, listen, I don’t have a lot of time to explain. I need your help, and I need it fast and I need you not to pay a whole lot of attention to anything I do or say along the way, all right?”

Video-Editing Reaper is staring at Nao Nao, maybe hoping if he blinks enough all this might go away.

“I already don’t want to be involved.”

“Great.” Neku says. “Let’s get started.”

Angels don’t usually get marked for death until they’ve soared right past simple arrogance and out into the exosphere of truly transcendent clusterfucks, the kind so bad they can inspire as much awe as anger. Which is a roundabout way of saying that during his tenure as the Higher Plane’s errand boy, Kariya’s heard some extremely powerful people say some extremely stupid shit. If only his badass sword came with a microphone and a YouTube account.

Now would be good, really, with his sword still pointed at Vancouver, who is anything but one
more Composer looking for a good view of the action. Kariya wonders if the Angels can even tell she’s here.

“Do you want me to explain?”

“Will it matter?”

Her smile is kind. “You can put that sword down if you want.”

“No, I’m good.”

Vancouver nods. “It’s been very difficult for you, hasn’t it? All these years doing a job you don’t really believe in, for reasons you don’t understand, or care to understand. You wondered why your Composer left, and then you see all this and you really start to wonder why-“

“Anytime you want to start talking about Neku, that’d be pretty great.”

“You aren’t on the payroll of the Higher Plane, Kariya. You never were. You answer to a somewhat… higher authority, and we’ve been nothing but pleased with your performance.”

So that’s a bit of a revelation, if it’s true. Still, nothing he can’t shrug off. Here comes another boss, just like the last boss.

“What, then? Do I get a raise?”

She laughs. She’s calm. Of course she’s calm. It’s not her Shibuya at risk.

“You have served honorably and well, Kariya, and are more than worthy of the powers you were granted. I am here to release you of all further obligations.”

It’s always been annoying to be on the Angels’ leash, the sword taken away as often as it has been granted. Never in his care for too long, in case he ever felt the urge to turn it in the direction of the Higher Plane. A conditional Ascent, always temporary - but even as she speaks, he can feel the shift in his vibe. A subtle weight and energy setting down under his skin, a hollow note ringing all along his bones and down through the blade in his hand.

“What did you just…”

“You are free.”

Except Kariya’s never felt all that trapped, not really. The Angels rarely cared where he traveled, as long as they could find him when they needed to, and there was nowhere he needed to see and nothing he needed to do. Only the one question, really. Only the one truth he’s never been able to live with, that his Composer could be cut down, Erased to Noise and dust and gone. A waste, and the longer Kariya’s lived and the more he’s seen the harder it is to believe it ever could have happened the way it did, that he left his Composer to die there alone.

“You never tried to look for him, did you?” Kariya hates that she knows what he wants, that everything like her must know all about him. He hates the sympathy in her eyes, the the condescension that ought to be there, and isn’t. She’s playing him and he’s letting her do it because if she’s more than an Angel then that means there is more out there, other Planes beyond this one. He’d thought his Composer gone, no trace of him anywhere, but if there are other realms…

“… where is he? With you?”
Vancouver’s expression is gentle. “No, he’s not, and I know no more about what lies beyond our realm than the Higher Plane knows of us.”

It shouldn’t be as disappointing as it is. Kariya needs to get his head back in the game, to remember what she said about Neku and-

“He didn’t do it to hurt you.”

Kariya chokes on a sound he can’t even identify, scorn and laughter and rage. Hurt. The stupid, endless longing, exiled from a place that barely exists even in his memories. “What do you know?”

“At a certain level, power is little more than an impediment. You’ve seen the damage Angels can do unwittingly, the irreparable harm. We alter worlds so easily that it becomes difficult to do much at all.” Vancouver scoops up a few tiny pebbles and tosses them one at a time into the water, the ripples expanding and colliding. “One moment we’re nudging at worlds and the next, they’re little more than mere reflections of our wishes. A play upon a stage - not real. Happy enough, but empty, too.” She looks up. “If your sword was still sworn to him, you would never have learned to think or question or walk your own path. As long as he existed in this world, you would never be any more than a perfect extension of his will.”

“It was what I was supposed to be.”

“Maybe he wanted you better than perfect?”

He doesn’t have an answer, except maybe to try and cut her down, and Kariya doubts that will do more than make him look foolish. He listens to his new Frequency, set at the very height of his powers, and knows what she thinks he will do. Hell, he might be able to manage it, stretch his wings and go up, and up, and find the answers to his questions himself. Except there won’t be any coming back from that - it’s what she’s counting on. Kariya hears the wind catch against the feathers of his Noise form, and forces his vibe down, until his human hand holds the sword again.

Vancouver smiles at him, as if he were some masterpiece hanging on a wall.

“How wonderful. All the paths in all the worlds lie open at your feet, and you would be Sakuraba’s champion.”

“The champion of fuck-all, with the way things are going.” Kariya snarls. “You know what the Higher Plane’s about to walk into - they’re going to get slaughtered by this thing, and you think somehow Neku’s going to-“

“You know what he is, Kariya. It wouldn’t scare you so much, if he was any less. You felt him Ascend without even trying, and we’ve watched him go below with the same ease. Out of all the worlds, out of all the possibilities, this boy in this time has an Imagination that is nearly limitless. At this moment, he is potential without boundaries. Neku Sakuraba can be anything he chooses to be.”

Of course she’s right. Kariya’s known that for a while now, if not that moment of Ascension then definitely when Neku’d raised the Vibe of every Player in the Game. Maybe even earlier, when he’d seen them under attack by the Taboo Noise and hadn’t left them to die.

“We have an opportunity. Across all the Games and worlds, we have waited and watched for this. The choices made by Shibuya’s Composer, and the Producer’s decision to counter that choice. The Taboo Noise, and the cracks it opened up in the world. The shadows that linger, and summon more of their own into this Game.”
“Saika.”

Vancouver nods. “If not from the beginning, then certainly now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You know as well as anyone why Taboo Noise is so forbidden. You know how long the stain of it can remain in the UG, and how easily it can grow, to spread and consume all that it touches. One dark thought can be enough to sustain it. A desire for power, a fear of failure. Or a fervent belief in one’s absolute inferiority.”

His sword point touches the dirt. Kariya can’t help it.

“… Uzuki.”

Joshua’s rather grateful his vibe is worse than ever, little more to his view now than blinding brilliance as they make their way toward the brightest patch of disdain at the center of the Heavens. Of course, he’s seen Grand Central Asshole before, a reproduction of the Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine in all of its absurdly oversized grandiosity, a marvel of architecture that might just have a chance of housing so many Angelic egos.

It’s not the Erasure that worries him, not really. Joshua’s nearly evaporated once already, right when they’d made the Ascension, whatever sketched-out version of him Shibuya had left behind nearly crumbling to nothing, and when the first Angel had reached for him he’d gone right through, a stupid look on his face as he flexed his hand where Joshua’s chest should have been.

He thinks he knows what kept him together. Neku’s stupid drawing, the one he’d left on his skin and the power in it was solid when nothing else in him cared to stay. He’s certain Hanekoma noticed, though if the Angel was surprised it hadn’t lasted long.

A shame they’d reeled him back in, really. What a way to go, Erased by their incompetence on the way to being tried for his own.

It’s not about destroying him, though, but everything that comes before. It’s theatre, and for every Angel there to call for his head, two more will be painting pictures about it, or writing one-act avant-garde music-free musicals. Maybe that’s how the Higher Plane will do it, watching them inspire bad art until Joshua begs to Erase himself.

He glances over to say as much, but the slight grin quickly fades at the defeated slump of Hanekoma’s shoulders, his gaze turned inward - sharp and in focus, wings pressed so tightly against his back they might as well not be there at all. It’s not a good sign - yes, at this moment they are being marched toward unquestionable doom, but there’s no reason to let the Higher Plane know they care.

Joshua hopes they’ll shift him up before they finish things, give him a little bit of power if only so he has a clear view of the executioner.

He has to make sure he goes first, load up on the insults so they burn through him fast. The Angels want to punish him, but Joshua knows they want to see Hanekoma suffer more, and he won’t put his Producer through that.

The fact that it’s all come back to suicide - again - is not without irony. Neku would never forgive him.
Joshua smirks, half a grimace in it, remembering the look of betrayal on Neku’s face when he realized his Composer wouldn’t stand with him, the confused hurt there - as if Joshua’s ever done anything but disappoint, and usually at a much higher caliber. Neku’s too much of everything - too powerful, too distracting - enough that even Joshua forgets just how young a Conductor he is. Only his second Game, it could have been anything to scare him out there, all the more so with how much he cared, more involved with the Players than is at all sane.

... and where were you, to tell him different?

As if he ever listened. As if it matters now. Neku has his Angel’s wings, or close enough, just as beautiful as Joshua knew they’d have to be, and Eri has destroyed herself for nothing and if he wished for Neku to hate him forever there’s really no better way he could have done it.

So this is everything he wanted. Neku out of his life, soon to join the Higher Plane and no threat to him, even if it’s hard to remember just what he was so determined to avoid. Shibuya will recover, his Conductor will see to that, and it seems he’ll even get that Erasure of his own he’s been chasing for so long.

What a victory.

“Hey, Josh. Look.”

Hanekoma chuckles, more life than he’s shown since they arrived, though it’s easy to see why. The ‘FREE CAT’ graffiti stretches out across the wall next to them, the brilliance of the heavens marred by a protest nearly as tall as he is.

The Angels say nothing.

The room they’re unceremoniously dumped in must have been built especially for them - nothing so ugly would exist here for any other reason. In this place where there is no need for lights or the electricity to power them, someone’s painstakingly reproduced a bank of fluorescent lights - one or two of them even flickering. An ugly, stained blue rug rolls up at one end, with a long bank of chairs attached at the armrests and even the faint smell of oil and gasoline in the air.

Purgatory as a repair shop waiting room. Cute.

“Do we at least get a magazine?” Joshua says, the only answer the ringing bell as the door shuts. A fan is blowing out lukewarm air against the far wall, just enough to wobble the leaves on a half-dead plant and Joshua watches it sweep back and forth in its arc once, and again. Hanekoma hasn’t moved, his eyes fixed on the cracked floor tiles, dishwater gray and disintegrating into the concrete.

“… I’m sorry, Josh.”

“I’m not.”

Regretting it means regretting how and why it happened which is a whole lot more than a single bad decision, and Joshua’s not about to apologize for his life or his death or the way he lived either one.

“I shouldn’t have…”

“I didn’t exactly give you options.” Joshua does his best languid slouch in the nearest cheap, fake-leather seat, pretending it’s not that he’s too exhausted to keep standing. Hanekoma crosses his arms, staring again into his own middle-distance.
“Neku was worried about the Game. He said there was a Fallen in Shibuya.”

Joshua would like to think he’d have sensed anything so bad, but he hasn’t been more than a fragment of himself since the Censure, let alone what Shibuya has stripped away. “I’m sure the Angels will be more than happy to deal with it. One more strike against us.”

“You know Phones didn’t mean-“

“I know. It hardly matters now.” He’s still got his cell phone, though of course there’s no signal. Even if they gave him one phone call, Joshua can’t say what he’d do with it. “What are we going to do? I’m not about to give them what they want - not like this.”

“I know.” Hanekoma might have half an idea already, keeping it in reserve until the last moment. Maybe there’s an Angel out there who will keep them afloat a while longer, if only for the entertainment value, and they can use that, even if only to end it before the Angels can. It’s not the worst of all possible fates, really, some defiant blaze of glory in front of a full house.

“Brede was right about one thing. We did have a good run.”

Joshua shuts his eyes, though it barely dims the lights overhead. “Next time, you should open up a jazz club.”

“You think so?”

“Alcohol has the better markup.”

“True.”

It’s quiet. He’s worn thin, and going to sleep here might annoy the Higher Plane more than anything, but Joshua can’t quite settle. When his thoughts drift to Neku, he doesn’t bother to pull them back. It’s safe now, there’s nothing more they can do to each other, and he cards through all the memories he knew he’d need to keep just for a moment like this.

Neku, on the beach, backlit by the waves and turning to him in pure delight. Neku asleep, arms curled up tight against his chest, toes nudging against Joshua’s calf. Neku that very first day as Conductor, and before that, in the Game, as his Partner - so defiant and sharp and infuriated and alive.

It won’t stop here. Neku won’t be just some new Angel - they’re taking on so much more than they know with him, and Joshua only wishes he could be there to see how his Conductor surprises them. He had a part in that, and no matter what happens Joshua will always be there, a part of Neku’s story, the whisper of a harmony.

No telling how long they sit there - time does odd things in the Higher Plane, but it doesn’t seem long enough for the Angels to dither properly through a pre-trial, and nothing deliberate in the way the door slams open, or how Brede storms into the room.

“Did you put him up to this?”

“Yes.” Joshua says, before he even opens his eyes. It’s obvious the Angel’s spent a lot of time trying to make himself look as unruffled as possible, but there’s still something about him that seems ruffled, a man ejected from an exclusive club and still not quite sure how he ended up on the pavement.

“Up who what?”
The Angel scoffs. “Like you know anything. You’re just trying to take the credit.”

Joshua blinks. “… yes?”

“You didn’t do this.” The Angel looks from Joshua to Hanekoma, not quite sure which one of them he wants to punch first, not caring that he makes no sense. “It doesn’t matter what anyone says. I don’t care. You’re not responsible for what he is.”

He turns on his heel and disappears. A few shards of light slowly float to the ground, and Joshua picks one up, twirling the feather slowly between his fingers.

“So he’s molting now. I’m not saying I need context to enjoy this, but…”

An unexpected buzz from his pocket - his phone is on, the signal back. Whatever’s changed, it seems like someone in the Higher Plane is on their side, at least enough to pass along some information.

“If nothing else,” Joshua says, “I can spend the lingering moments of my existence zero-starring Shadow Kaiten out of existence.”

His e-mail pops up immediately, the CC: Composer All that even the Higher Plane doesn’t dare spam them with too often. Joshua’s sure the announcement of his and Hanekoma’s trial must have gone out in some similar way, a dull set of bullet points - but this isn’t that.

It’s a video link without a title, just a few notes of rising music as it starts. One of those slow and wistful Def March ballads they stick on as hidden tracks. A slow pan shot sweeps across what Joshua easily recognizes as CAT’s mural. A testament to his skills that nobody else has tagged it yet, although that will have to happen eventually, and after the first it won’t take long for more to follow - and Joshua stops thinking about that once the voiceover begins.

“A lot of you probably know this mural, or at least about the artist that did it, and I’m sure you all know where he is right now. What you might not know is how I died here, on what I thought was the worst day of my life.”

Neku’s voice is a little faded out by what must not be the world’s best microphone, but he’s steady and calm and Joshua has no idea what he thinks he’s doing.

“I… uh, I had a bad couple of weeks, a while back, when I was still… before all this. I didn’t… it got so just about the only thing I liked to do was come here and look at this mural. It made me feel good, to know that people were doing big things in the world, trying to open it up - even if I didn’t think it would work.”

A small, self-deprecating laugh. Joshua wonders who’s holding the camera. Neku barely talks about this in private, and now he’s broadcasting it to the world.

“I was really alone, and… I wasn’t going to make it, if it got any worse. If I tried and it didn’t… so I pushed people away instead, so I didn’t have to worry about anything. I thought it would be safer for me, and I knew the world wouldn’t care… and that’s about when my Composer shot me. The first time.”

The camera shifts, and there’s Neku. It’s been hours, but Joshua feels as if he’s watching footage filmed from some distant past. He looks tired in the early light of dawn, and so young, tossing a wry smile to the camera. Nao Nao is perched on his shoulder, with all the quiet gravitas a bunny in
“I’m Shibuya’s Conductor, Neku Sakuraba. I’d like to tell you a story, and give you a little tour of my home.”

“Who is this meant for?” Hanekoma says. “Who’s seeing this?”

“It went viral.” Joshua says, quickly glancing at the send history - four Composers to eight, eight to twenty-two - and then the shout-out to the world, all in about six minutes’ time.

Neku walks past the statue of Hachiko, describing his first week in the Game. How he met Shiki, how he’d nearly betrayed her - and how he’d lost his memories, given them up to play.

“It was weird, being in the UG with no idea who I was… but I have to admit, when I wasn’t getting chased to death by frogs, it felt pretty good. I wasn’t sure who that other Neku was, or what he knew, or even if I really wanted to be him again, when things were all over. I just wanted to keep my music on and the world out.” Neku lifts the headphones from around his neck, when a voice behind the camera says something. “Yeah, these are CAT exclusives. Yeah, they kinda do match the phone. I think I might have a problem.”

He’s grinning, fanboyng out for just a moment. Hanekoma is silent and still, with no trace of the easy smile that usually hides whatever else he might be feeling.

The Angels must have been watching him do all this, an eye on Shibuya’s Conductor - but it probably didn’t seem dangerous, anything they needed to pay attention to or worry about. Joshua could have warned them about that. Neku is always at his least threatening right when he’s about to win.

As he walks across the district, Neku tells the whole story of the Long Game. A few stilted cuts and slightly awkward camera shifts betray the haste in production, though it’s meaningless against the power of the truths he’s telling. He mentions each rule Joshua broke - forcing him to play, entering as his Partner, abandoning his own Game. He talks about Hanekoma and Minamimoto and the Taboo Noise, all the salacious details every UG has been desperate to hear.

Joshua knows he ought to be more upset, that Neku’s shredding any hope they have of cutting deals, or of even keeping the barest shred of dignity with all their dirty laundry hoisted as high as it will fly.

He doesn’t care. He doesn’t give a damn what any other Game might think. It’s not even important if his Conductor’s doing this just to hurt him, one final strike for what he’d let happen to Eri. All he cares about is watching Neku, at turns grim or happy or annoyed, rolling his eyes as he describes their initial meeting, or at least what he believed was the first time.

“I thought that the Composer…” Neku glances off, an odd little smile on his face. “I really liked him. I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to feel like that, not about anyone anymore - but it didn’t matter and he didn’t care either way. So, at the end of that second week, when I thought he was dead…”

The camera pans away, nothing special in the transition, a shot of a few pedestrians in front of the 104. Joshua wonders if that is the answer he’s been looking for, now after all this time - he’d made a mistake with that bit of theatre, ‘sacrificing’ himself. Maybe Neku could have shot him, if he hadn’t known what it felt like afterward.

“I’m telling you all this, what happened and why, because the Higher Plane says that I’m special somehow. I’m supposed to be important, and they’re all so happy to have me around. But I
wouldn’t be here, I wouldn’t be who I am if I hadn’t gone through everything that happened in the Shibuya Game, even the dumbest and the worst of it. What the Producer did was wrong, but I think it had to be done or things would have been so much worse. CAT loves Shibuya more than anyone - he was willing to Fall to save it. Maybe our Game doesn’t look like anyone else’s, or play like anyone else’s - and maybe that’s the way it has to be.”

It’s the slight nervousness that sells it. Neku’s not a bad speaker, but the little hint of shyness and earnest uncertainty in his voice, the way he glances up at the camera - it absolutely kills. Taking down Manhattan was a party trick compared to this.

The e-mail’s been nested a dozen times or more, linked and re-linked - the Angels have been trying to shut it down, to erase it off the Internet as if that’s a thing that can happen.

“If I believe we deserve special treatment, it’s because I think all the Games deserve that, everywhere.” Neku says. “We can’t all follow the same rules and get to the same place and call that right. It might be difficult, and dangerous, but if we ask for anything less we’re just going through the motions, and what we do is too important for that. I know this isn’t what you’re used to, standing together, or even liking each other, but what the Angels are doing now is wrong, and they’re not even doing it for the right reasons.”

One last shot, Neku just to one side of the Crossing, a backdrop of cars and pedestrians and city life. Joshua thinks he can even hear a reckless busker, just close enough for a few chords to echo off a distant building.

“I want you to think about my story. About Shibuya, and how it’s going to change without people like CAT and my Composer in it. What will be left here, when there’s no one to take any risks, and what your Games might look like if the Angels think that this was a success. If you feel like I do, if you think what we have is worth saving… then it's time to speak up.”

Neku grins, just a little shaky, as if the enormity of what he’s doing has just settled in, before he bows slightly to the camera.

“CAT told me once, when I was a Player, that the way to enjoy life is to expand your world. So I hope you’ve enjoyed this look around mine. Thank you.”

A slight blip of static, and the video ends. Hanekoma doesn’t move. Joshua doesn’t even blink.

He hits the web for a quick survey of the damage, aware of the Producer as a silent shadow at his shoulder. It ought to be nothing more than a call for mass hilarity, the Shibuya Game caught with its pants down in front of the whole world. The Composer twitter feeds are indeed through the roof, but nobody’s laughing - hashtag FreeCAT, hashtag NoAngel, hashtag OccupyShibuya hashtag irony.


Joshua couldn’t get the smirk off his face with dynamite and a backhoe. Hanekoma looks like if he stops being stunned he might just cry - and that’s when the next e-mail catches his eye.

Manhattan’s formally ejected her Producer from the Game, the five boroughs standing united against the Higher Plane. Similar responses are popping up from Mumbai, London, Shanghai,
Jakarta - nearly every Game with the power to do it. Anyone without a true grievance against the Angels is jumping in purely for the fun of it.

“I believe this is what they call ‘the lulz.’” Joshua murmurs. “You think it’s fair to say our trial is postponed?”

Hanekoma doesn’t answer, still speechless, and Joshua can’t blame him. The last time he was surprised like this - well, that was Neku too, wasn’t it? He’s a fool to read too much into this, even so. A love letter to Shibuya doesn’t necessarily have to be for him as well. He’s doing this for CAT, for the job and the district, and Joshua’s just part of the package deal.

If Neku follows through on this, though, if he realizes just how much leverage he has - Joshua will be the Composer again, with all his powers restored. He can put Eri back together, he knows he can. It’s not much of an apology but Joshua’s never been good at apologies, even the bad ones.

He could call Neku. Right now, and tell him anything he wants to.

“Hey.”

It’s barely a sound, but Hanekoma hears it. “Mm?”

“… I really love him, don’t I?”

“Yeah, Josh.” Hanekoma sighs. “Yeah, you do.”

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Kariya had been there for Uzuki’s first step into the UG. Running mostly solo then, his reputation already solid as the Little Reaper who Didn’t Give a Damn. He’d watched her mostly on a whim, out of convenience, though over the course of that week she’d found more than one opportunity to surprise him. A stronger fighter than she looked, easily carrying her Partner along, rolling through the Game’s surprises without much shock or hesitation. Twice, she’d even tricked other Players into Erasing themselves.

Uzuki was fast and ruthless, and she’d seemed a perfect fit for the Game. Kariya had said so, and just like that she’d turned Reaper. He’d offered to show her the ropes, still for no better reason than ‘why not’, and soon enough they were pulling down some decent numbers.

It took a little longer, to see beneath the posing and the pride. It took a lot longer, before she told him how she’d come to play the Game, and even then he’d had to read between the silences. Even then, she’d never mentioned Saika. Uzuki threw herself into attacking because it proved she was good enough, and the points it scored proved she was good enough and it took him a long time to realize that Uzuki only believed she had any value when she was proving it.

No wonder she’d worshiped the Iron Maiden - Konishi had everything she wanted, equal measures of power and coldness, not needing anyone or anything to know who she was. Kariya had teased her about it, once or twice, the two of them Erasing Konishi themselves - why not? Maybe he should have done it. Maybe it would have made some difference to Uzuki, to that desperate need to be someone better than herself.

“You’re saying that Saika is here because Uzuki wants her to be?”

“In Uzuki’s heart, she was never really gone at all. There are a thousand million worlds like this one, where the Taboo Noise faded without any lasting harm. Countless more where Uzuki never played the Game, or did not choose to stay in the UG, or survive long enough to make a choice. Yet
there is one world, this world, where the echoes of Hanekoma’s sin lingered, where the darkness stirred and found a fertile Imagination, able to give it form and substance.”

All this time, Kariya’s known that he had to protect Uzuki, that the Higher Plane would Erase her as a precaution, without a hint of hesitation. He’d never thought about what he might do if they were right.

“Whatever it may have been, it believes it is Saika now, and has always been so. All that chaos the Taboo Noise has called together, drawn together across Games, across realities. Strong and dangerous and more powerful with every victory, connected to Shibuya through a helpless host. Uzuki believes Saika is unstoppable, and so that has become the truth.”

No wonder Kariya couldn’t stop her. Who can even say how strong she might be, how many bits and pieces of the darkest corners of countless realms have all come together for this…

“You shouldn’t lose hope, Kariya. It is simply creation and destruction as they have always been, the shifting tide of balance - and this time we will see it move it in our favor. You know that the ranks of the Angels are hardly free of villains - so why should chaos not belong to the light?”

Kariya lets out a sound, pained, not quite a laugh. “Hell, with all that power, he might even get his Producer and Composer back. Or make the Angels real unhappy about winning.”

“The Higher Plane does consider itself above most… inconveniences. This may prove an opportunity for them to grow as well.”

Elite Angel-speak for unleashing Neku on the Higher Plane like a wildfire, a kinder, gentler sort of decimation. Wielding chaos like a shepherd’s crook to an unruly flock. It seems like a contradiction, but that’s all the kid’s ever been - and this is where he’ll end, if Vancouver and those she represents get their way.

“It won’t be Neku anymore, and you know it. You know what it means, giving him over to that.” Kariya remembers Saika looking out at him through Uzuki’s eyes, and the thought of a Neku like that, no longer alive, no longer human or Reaper or anything he can recognize makes him shudder to his wingtips.

“We know what it means.” Vancouver says, fingertips tracing the edge of the words at her wrist, and for a moment the look on her face is the closest he’s seen to sadness or regret. “It’s why I came here, to see him. Before.”

Kariya brings the sword up again, light as air. “You’d destroy everything he is. You’d turn him into a monster because you can’t be bothered to think up a better idea.”

“It’s what he’s meant to do. Neku will make her power his own, and save this world and all that he cares for, and we will make an ally of entropy.”

Kariya shakes his head. “It’s what you’ve decided he should do. Just like the Angels decided he should be an Angel, and the Composer thinks he should stay Conductor, and Hanekoma decided he should get in on all this bullshit in the first place.”

“… and you want him to stay the same.”

“I want a bowl of ramen and six beers and a long-ass nap, is what I want.” Kariya snaps. “You can stop pretending this is a discussion. The Higher Plane doesn’t call me until they’ve already made up their minds. You’re no different.”
“… and there’s no chance at all that we might just have the better perspective?”

Kariya snorts. “I think from where you’re looking, we all are just too damn small to matter. Otherwise you’d see Neku for more than just what he can do for you.”

He drops his Frequency without warning, what should be an immediate drop back to the UG. It’s not going to be a real fun landing, and the Higher Plane will be up his ass the instant they notice he’s gone, but that’s not remotely his biggest concern - especially when nothing happens. Kariya doesn’t move an inch, not that the attempt went unnoticed.

“Yeah, I figured as much. Why tell me all this if you were ever gonna let me leave?” He feels sick, packed with dread. The faintest flickering of an old, old panic, his world burning down around him while he does nothing. “It’s happening right now, isn’t it? This is when you feed him to the beast.”

“You are free, Kariya. You can go anywhere you wish.”

Anywhere except the one place he has to be now, and who cares how strong he is now if the damned sword still won’t work on her? Whatever Frequency she’s on, there’s no way he can disrupt it, useless waste of-

No, not entirely. There’s still one thing here the blade can cut.

It is connected to him, a part of his Soul, or he is a part of it, whatever. A sword that can take down Angels, and Kariya’s never really considered it much beyond that, never how it does what it does or why. The kind of thing that didn’t matter right up until now, when it suddenly matters more than anything.

Kariya spins the blade around, the point sharp against his stomach. An honor he owed to a master who would have never asked - and it feels right, to do this now. Vancouver’s eyes widen - at last, he’s surprised her.

This is going to be so stupid if it doesn’t work.

Kariya takes one short, sharp breath and pulls his arm in hard, the sword sliding through his body with an electric jolt of agony, the Higher Plane wavering wildly around him as the pain rushes in. Only Vancouver’s eyes seem to stay in focus, that and her slight, curious smile.

“… how wonderful.”

The words follow him down, as he falls and falls and falls.

Chapter End Notes

1. Chapter title - ‘Common People’ - Blur (or William Shatner, pick your poison).
it's gonna be a glorious day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We should do... something. Right?”

“Dude, so poke him, then.”

“... you poke him.”

“No way. No. Way.”

“Maybe we should just give him the apartment.”

Neku’s headphones have slipped off down around his neck, but the music’s still on and there’s a pen in his hand. His face aches, because he’s fallen asleep or passed out half on his notebook and now he has a crease running from his eye nearly to his chin. Neku rubs at it, and Nao Nao licks his nose while three Reapers watch him cautiously from the doorway.

He feels lighter. It’s easier to breathe, although that might just be the tiny bit he’s managed to chip from his sleep deficit. The last that he remembered, he’d been pulling power from the district to try and make up the lack, but somewhere along the way he must have fumbled it, that whole still-being-alive thing keeping him from simple solutions. Neku tries to remember the last time he had a decent night’s sleep or anything even close, and realizes he’s going to have to check his phone to even find out what day it is now.

Six-hundred forty nine e-mails in his inbox. So that answers the question of whether or not anyone paid any attention to his video.

It’s also eleven-thirty in the morning. So yeah, school maybe? That was a thing he used to do for some reason. Neku winces, so hungry it hurts, and he’s going to have to make a checklist of the dozen or so things that all need to happen five minutes ago.

Six-hundred and fifty four e-mails. Holy shit. At least not all of them are pointed directly at him, a lot of information he’s being forwarded and conversations someone wants him to know about, and Neku thumbs through the headers and clicks a few at random and Nao Nao has her own fan page and Twitter feed - someone’s pretending to be his Noise rabbit, alternating texts about the ‘revolution’ with wondering just what keeps Neku’s hair looking so good.

Holy shit, Manhattan’s gone and punted all the Producers out of New York, and holy shit a dozen other Composers have followed her lead.

Neku’s stomach growls again - six hundred seventy two e-mails - and he tries to sort them into some semblance of name recognition. Nothing from Josh or Mr. H, no big surprise there. Nothing from Brede, or the Angel who’d waylaid him at the door - and that’s when Neku realizes what it is that’s missing, the weight in the air. No Angels in Shibuya, they’ve all gone away, and here he is without enough information to even know if that’s a good sign or a very bad one.

He knew, of course, that he was throwing down some kind of gauntlet - a direct statement against the Higher Plane, even if nobody watched his whole video or gave a damn once they did it, and this is a lot more people than nobody. In fact, it’s looking like something a lot closer to all of the people.
Seven hundred fifteen e-mails and counting. Neku goes to stand up - and barely makes it halfway, a wave of dizziness leaving him with his head pressed against the desk and a bunny nibbling on his hair, with Sota hopping at his feet. A bit of shuffling close up, and then further off, and Neku looks up when the pork buns hit the desk and he inhales the entire pack, even half-eating the paper wrapping off one by accident.

“… thanks. Thanks, guys.”

The Reapers don’t respond much, besides a little shrugging and the same wary stares they’ve been giving him the entire time. Obviously if he really wants to thank them, the best way is to do it while walking out the door. Neku’s a little worried - he doesn’t think he said anything particularly incriminating, anything they shouldn’t know, but the Higher Plane hasn’t exactly been afraid of grand, sweeping gestures where Shibuya’s concerned.

“Listen,” Neku says around his last bite of pork bun, a full stomach at least getting him on his feet again, and a scramble in his pocket actually produces one of those business cards Tsuyoshi made up for him. Neku writes his name and number on it, feeling half like a professional and half like a fraud when he hands it over. “If anything... weird happens, call me right away. Or if they don’t let you in at the show, but that should do it.”

The people who should have been there are busy dying instead, or watching it happen, because he didn’t know - Neku’s eyes sting, and his stomach drops but he blinks it away. Being sad now isn’t going to help anyone, and he’s got to figure out if there’s any more he can do for Josh and Mr. H and there’s a Game to run and he needs to stop home and shower and change and maybe at least /think/ about showing up for class.

Eight hundred and four new messages. Oh god, they’ve found the pictures from Akihabara’s photo shoot.

Neku somehow stumbles his way down the stairs, out into the light. A bright day, normal people on a normal street, no sign of the Angels he’d half-assumed would smite him through the pavement before he’d made it half a block. It almost feels like a foreign country, even with Shibuya’s music humming soft and familiar, the beat of it matching to his footsteps which is pretty damned ridiculous.

The phone rings as he reaches the edge of the crossing, and Neku doesn’t even look at the screen which is stupid but whoever it is it’s probably not good and he’ll put off having to know to the very last millisecond.

“Hello?”

“See, what I’ve been wondering all this time is how you’re expecting to beat me with pictures of bunnies.”

The world stops.

“I mean, they are cute. You put a lot of pride in your work. It shows.”

Neku doesn’t have to know her voice to know it, that cold, dark space between seconds when she’d killed his players and put a crack in the world with her smile. He looks up before he can stop himself, for some reason scanning the tops of the buildings, the cracks in the pavement. He can’t remember where she’d come from, before.

Everywhere. She’d come from everywhere.
“Okay, wait. No. I’ve got a better one. Hold on.”

The line goes dead.

Neku pulls the phone away on instinct, as if she’s just going to Sadako him through the stupid screen and why the hell did he ever let Beat show him that damn movie and he doesn’t, he can’t...

It’s hard, animal fear coursing through him, like the moment that first week when he’d tripped trying to dodge and for a split-second he’d thought that was it, the end. Shiki had saved him, of course, Mr. Mew to the rescue and he’d laughed it off but the aftershocks had lasted, little flinches at nothing, moments where his heart would double-beat in his chest, too fast just like this and -

Uzuki’s name and number are staring back at him from the display. Neku wonders when she went down, where she went down. He wonders if it was fast.

No. It wouldn’t have been.

He’s shaking. Neku moves out of the shadow of the awning, into the brightest patch of sunlight he can find. Listens to the sounds of the city, the footsteps of people and music and Music...

The phone rings. Twice. The cheery tone might as well be coming from some other universe.

“Knock-knock?”

He has to calm down. She can hear it, he has no doubt of that. She can drink up all his dread and never be full.

“Come on. It’s an English thing. Knock-knock.”

She laughs. An odd, leaden undertone to the sound, blurry around the edges, as if it’s breaking apart into static even as she speaks. Eddies of dust in abandoned buildings. Tape hiss, and flickering lights and looming figures at the end of dark alleys, blocking the way out.

“Where’s Uzuki?” Neku whispers, already knowing the answer. Gone, she’s gone, because this thing is moving its way up the food chain. She worked so hard to be Game Master. She wanted it so badly. Neku should have said something. He should have warned her. Why couldn’t he tell it, when she was Erased? Why can’t he sense this thing now? A real Conductor would know, a Conductor with more than a Game-and-a-half under his belt and a UG not overflowing with Angels and he still should have known, he should have...

“Uzuki who?”

*What are you? What do you want?* Neku would ask, except he already knows, and there’s nothing else he can say that doesn’t sound like a movie he wouldn’t even see, let alone be the starring victim in.

“Wow,” she says, as the silence stretches to eternity, “you are really not good at this, Neku.”

All right, she knows his name. Sure. She probably watches him sleep too, just to make sure this is all-the-way creepy.

“So… how do you think this should go?” He can almost see her twirling a bit of hair around one finger, tapping a toe against the ground. Neku remembers the way she’d posed, the frightening playfulness of it all. Tearing his Players out of the world. “Anticipation’s half the fun. I mean, the other half… that’s fun too, but this part… this part. I already miss this part and we’re still in the
Neku’s hand is tight around the netsuke in his pocket, holding so hard he thinks he might have cut himself, even if it can’t be a blade on this side. He keeps glancing over his shoulder, or fighting the impulse.

He should have tried harder to tell Josh, should have made them see - but if this gets out now, if news of the Fallen or whatever she is hits the Higher Plane there won’t be enough viral videos in the world to keep Joshua and Mr. H alive, no matter how many cute bunnies he adds.

“I’m not going to let you win.” Or sound at all convincing, it seems.

“Ooh, determination and unfounded optimism. I love it. Keep going. Tell me I don’t have a chance.”

The street’s gone silent again. The way it really shouldn’t be able to in downtown Shibuya, no people and no advertisements and the air smells odd - sweet and synthetic, as if the whole street is made of bubble gum. Neku fights the urge to look around again, like she’s about to snipe him from the rooftops.

“I’m not actually doing anything, Neku. You know that, right? I just… am. The Game exists, and so do I. Simple as that.”

“You’re lying.”

“Nope. You know better, I know you do.”

Neku wants to say no. He opens his mouth but nothing comes.

“You know exactly what I am, Neku. You’re never that far away.”

The feeling isn’t the brutal violence at the Crossing, the sudden, savage tearing down. Instead, what rises up around him now is intimate, quiet and subtle but no less terrifying for it. An endless, corrosive parade of days, a weight with no other purpose but to grow heavier until he breaks. It’s having only two numbers on his cell and one of those that he can never call again. A best friend who cut all ties without hesitating or looking back.

It’s his first Game, and losing his Players to their own stupid betrayal, to fear turned into grasping ugliness. It’s the Music of the Fallen, or the hole where it ought to be, an empty atonal discord he feels as much as he hears.

A good day today. A good day tomorrow, and then Neku fucks up and everyone leaves and he’s going to fuck this up, that’s inevitable.

And it’s horrible, being alone. And it happens so easily.

What will he do? How does he think he’s going to solve this? Fight his way up to the Higher Plane and say… what? By the way, while Mr. H was doling out the mildly homicidal optimism he’d also let in some Taboo Noise nightmare out of fucking Ringu? Neku kind of wishes he hadn’t watched the ending of that one with his hands over his eyes. Maybe he’d missed a helpful clue.

“At least I’m reliable.” So calm, the monster. So pleased. “I always make sense, you can always count on me. I never ask people to play pretend. No acting happy when they’re not, that they care when they don’t. Really, at the end of the day I’m the only honest thing there is.”
“Bullshit.”

“So why is your voice shaking?”

Neku can pretend he got over being afraid with the end of the Long Game, but it’s not one of those things that goes and stays away. He tries to pretend he can’t see it, that clear view of his future - the world as a blurry postcard, nothing to see and rotting slowly from the corners in. A copy machine, spitting out day after day under the same bitter lights in a flat, unending line, and the nights are always cold, begging for a warm arm around his shoulder that never, ever comes and this is it, whether he wants it or not. Lost in space and all the stars are empty little holes.

A bright, sharp blast of pain - Nao’s teeth are in his ankle, and Neku gasps as a cold, gray hand on his other leg yanks sharply, the same color as the pavement and dragging him down. All around him a forest of Noise and desperate clenching hands and Neku reaches for power, fire, anything - it’s lightning he calls, maybe, and an overreaction, the world going white and he hopes he didn’t catch Nao Nao and Sota in the blast - how did he even get in the UG?

Neku yanks his Frequency up, like trying to drag himself out of wet, miserable cement and just like that he’s back in the Realground as the last flickers of lightning pop and crack across the pavement and he can hear Saika laughing, tinny and strange with the phone away from his ear.

“I’ll admit, I’ve seen worse.” A cheerful compliment from the eldritch horror. “I got my last Composer and Conductor just like that, you know? Swallowed them right up.”

She’d nearly had him too, and he hadn’t even noticed.

“Are you just going to stay in that world then, Neku? Hide forever?” His rabbits are safe, even in the UG. Neku’s little overreaction took care of whatever it was she summoned up, at least for the moment. “Maybe I’ll find someone else to talk to. I wish your Composer was here. I’m sure he’d like to play with me.”

“Wait, I think I’m getting it.” Neku says, shoots of irritation poking out between the cracks of his terror. “I think you might be evil.”

“And I think you might be all alone.” Saika replies. “Maybe I should be nice, maybe I should give you a choice. Since you’re little and you’re trying so damn hard. It really ought to be an inspiration, if anyone cared. So how about… I let you keep one for yourself, on me. Your pretty little life or the Game, Neku. Pick one.”

“You can’t come over to the Realground.”

Please, please let Kariya be right about that.

Kariya. If Uzuki is… gone, then - no. No, he’s fine. He’s Kariya, he’s some sort of turbo-charged uber Reaper, he has to be fine.

“Oh? Do I have to?” A chuckle like frozen splinters, like shrapnel. “Just wondering… you told them all about me, right? How did that go? Did they believe you? I can make people stop caring, but usually they get there all by themselves. How long do you think Shiki Misaki would take? She’s not exactly a hard sell, especially now. I wonder what sort of rumors I could start. How many mean tweets do you think I could gather up on behalf of her little dying friend? I bet you in a half an hour I’d have enough-“

“You leave her alone.” At least he doesn’t have to work to hold on to the anger now.
“Everyone’s just looking for an excuse to be the monster, Neku. It’s the best part of living. Take this little Game they all think matters so much. Look at what these idiots fight so hard to hang on to. I promise you, it’s going to be so beautiful, right at the end. It’s always beautiful. We can watch it together. I’ll bring snacks.”

Pins. He needs pins. All his best, and any good ideas he can whip up fast. Anything he can use when he’s too rattled to think. He needs… he needs to find out if Kariya is… and then he needs a plan, and a backup, and a backup for the backup.

Neku needs to be the normal kid who’s never heard of the Game and wouldn’t even know how to be here - but that normal kid would have destroyed himself sooner or later. The Fallen may not be right, but she’s not… she’s not as wrong as he wishes she were. He understands that now.

At least this way he has a badass ninja sword? Sure. Let’s be optimistic.

“So what’s it going to be, Neku - UG or RG? Which kid do you love more? The one that eats paste or the one that runs with scissors? Just tell me who survives, and I promise, I promise, I promise—”

Neku hangs up.

777 flicks his fingers over the strings, enjoying the familiar heat of the lights, the way the world goes dark right at the edge of the stage, as if he’s the only thing left in the universe. A pure and primal satisfaction he can feel right into his wings when it’s all coming together, lights and sound and BJ even managed to track down four cardboard boxes of their old merch, which is good because nobody’s had time to print up a new t-shirt yet. Maybe because no one was sure whether or not to call it a reunion tour when nobody knew why they’d broken up in the first place.

It would be nice if whatever’s fucking with the UG calms itself down before they start the show, though. Neither of his bandmates seem to notice, but it’s giving him a wicked headache, straining against his wings like a guitar string tuned way too tight. 777 doesn’t have much use for a place higher up on the board, especially after the Long Game, but that doesn’t mean he can’t spot upper management bullshit a mile away. Whatever’s going on in the higher ranks, the best and only thing to do is keep their heads down and mind their business and wait for the storm to pass.

All right, so maybe the last time he was really shit at following his own advice, but that doesn’t mean it’s still not a great idea. Futoshi gives him a distant thumbs up and 777 flicks his way carefully through the first few chords of a song that’s never been played on a stage until now, and never will be in front of anyone who cares.

“Ooh, that’s good.” BJ nods. “New track?”

777 makes a noncommittal noise. It is, but he’s been fighting it all the way. Which is stupid because he shouldn’t care and there’s nothing in the music or the half-cobbled together lyrics that could ever point to an inspiration even if anyone asked which - yeah, so he’ll totally lie. Or just say nothing at all. Benefits of being a cool rock star. Besides, Neku did pretty much bring him back to life and it’s completely legit to write a track for someone who did you that kind of a solid, right?

Sneaking a random kiss is one thing, but a power ballad - and it’s weird to think that Neku might actually decide to show. Sure, they’re popular and this show has mad buzz but he’s also the Conductor and it’s not like the last one ever bothered to put in an appearance. 777 isn’t sure he’d known they’d even had a band, certainly couldn’t have matched any of them to their instruments.
All the cables are here, and the instruments and the signature mic and the band. They hadn’t had to round up Players to hand out fliers and even the sound check is going smoothly. It’s almost like Def March is an actual professional group of musicians.

“I think we need a new hot girl.”

Or, you know. Not.

“We never had a hot girl.”

“Yeah, but…”

“Tenho’s cousin’s sister’s roommate’s brother’s friend who showed up for one show and bailed before the encore doesn’t count.”

“Yeah, but…”

“Besides, Uzuki Yashiro’s the Game Master now, remember? I don’t think she’s going to be interested.”

BJ goes red instead of answering, and quickly returns to checking his equipment. Okay, so that was a little harsh, but 777’s maybe just the slightest bit worried - no, determined, determined is a much better word - to make this show go right, his ‘return to the living’ debut.

He can do the interview thing, make all the right faces and tip his head up at the right angle but when it comes right down to it, 777 doesn’t much like to talk himself up. The popularity game is a tool, a way to get where he wants to go but it isn’t really about what cover he’s on or which party he might get invited to. It’s not about fame, it’s about people loving the same thing he loves. The last thing he’d thought before he’d been Erased, the very last feeling had been regret - not for what he’d done in ensuring his own demise, that had been entirely satisfying - but knowing he’d never be on a stage again, that he’d never feel the joy of having the crowd focused in on him, that smooth flow of pure enjoyment from the stage to the crowd and back again. He can’t imagine how anything, even being Composer, is even half as sweet.

“Hey, Tenho - drummers don’t get solo albums!”

Well, they do but God weeps, and Tenho scrambles up from where he’d been kicking his heels at the edge of the stage, basking in the fan love of Neku’s little friend. The kid’s not bad, and carries with him the prerequisites of killer gear and talent they couldn’t possibly afford to hire professionally and taking VIP privileges in lieu of payment. What exactly those privileges are, 777 hasn’t figured out yet, but they’ll totally come up with something before the night is through. Maybe they can even consider shooting that video they’ve been talking about for so long. If they can keep it under the price of a full-table CoCo curry.

“Why are we only popular with broke people?” 777 wonders, not for the first time.

“What?” Tenho says, tapping out the opening beat of the show starter. 777 lets the question slide and steps up to the black-winged mic instead, letting the first chord catapult him into the start of the song, a furious race to the bridge and they keep up with him and it all sounds as good as they ever have.

Yeah, it’s going to be a half-decent show.

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Minamimoto is not going to touch anything, or notice anything, or do anything for the rest of the Game but stay up here on his sculpture and let the world pass him by. It’s a good plan. Minamimoto is all about the plans.

He had better plans, before. Plans about killing the Composer and shaking the very foundations of Shibuya and okay, maybe the details are forever out of reach, but whatever refused to equal out he’s sure he had the basics down tight. The kind of plans that meant he wouldn’t end up here, not being in charge while trying to think about how to outdo his found-art masterpiece that’s finally starting to wind down to its remainders on the streets of Shibuya.

It’s fine, really, all art ought to be temporary - an experience for the top left of the scatter graph, for the lucky outliers - but he was kind of hoping by now he’d be doing a little more ruling the masses and a little less having to invent ideas to impress them.

Not that he cares if anyone’s impressed.

A businessman from wherever businessmen come from is interested in buying one of his statues for their lobby. Of course it’s the one with the most blinky-lights still blinking, one he couldn’t get the Players to scrape clean. Minamimoto wants to tell him true art can’t be sold, but man, false art sure tacks a lot of zeroes on the end. He could probably even bribe his way into a district run by competent villains.

He will cut off his own head before he admits that the LED’s probably should have been there all along.

One-seventh of this nightmare left to burn through, and Minamimoto had almost been looking forward to the last day, ready to shed his Support status and start taking down Players again because no one else seems to care what a rule is for. After Higashizawa’s little impromptu resurrection, though, he’s just going to step back and wait this one out. No point in trying to outthink a Game that’s become a perfect function for stupid over time.

Minamimoto spears the bit of egg omelette bent into the shape of a sigma - solve ham croquette to miso beef squared over rice. When Higashizawa has shitty days he cooks twice as much, and anyone within his significant arm’s reach is subject to the benefits. He claims he cooked better as a Reaper than he does human, but Minamimoto can’t say he can tell the difference.

Of course, nobody still seems to know what the fuck that was all about. Rumors of rumors, like always - the girl had been some sort of new kind of Reaper that didn’t work out, which might have something to do with the crazy powerful people showing up without warning all over the UG. At least they’re not Erasing anyone. Yet.

No one’s had any word from the Game Master about where they’re supposed to be going or what they’re supposed to be doing which is also supremely weird, Little Miss Expected Value usually wound so tightly the tweets come every fifteen point four three five three seconds on the atomic clock.

It’s not like he cares. At all. It’d just be a little easier not to care at all if he knew what was going on.

“You know, I saw a pic of one of your statues, down near Osaka. I think you’ve got a fan.”

Minamimoto neither falls off his tower nor chokes on his food nor any number of other potentially humiliating responses, and if he might come close well shut up. He glares up at the Conductor and a part of him wants to bail, just disappear, but this is his sculpture, dammit.
Does he even have to answer? The Conductor isn’t even looking at him, too busy working out the complex quadratic equations of being such a complete loser on his cell, while Minamimoto tries not to look like he’s scanning the area for the kid’s stupid rabbits and their stupid sharp teeth.

“It’s some copycat Reaper, swiping my style.” He says, grudgingly. “The binomial in-efficient thinks I’m not paying attention.”

Off-hours vacation accrual for Wall Reapers is slow as balls, but Minamimoto comforts himself by remembering just how long he can hold a grudge.

“Maybe you should drop his statue on him. It would be like performance art. Kinetic sculpture?”

Minamimoto glances up at the Conductor, still seven menus deep in whatever it is he’s doing, thumb in constant motion across the screen but that almost sounded like sympathy, or at the very least not mockery - seriously, what is this? He’d ask if he was in some sort of trouble, if the Conductor is toying with him but that’s not what he does, right? One of the reasons Minamimoto hates him so damn much, but to ask would be to admit that he gives even a fraction of a shit.

“Can I borrow your phone for a second?”

He looks tired, like he’s been dividing by zero for hours and expecting different results. Which doesn’t matter, except whatever’s got him looking like this, the odds seem unnervingly high that Minamimoto might end up facing the remainder. Once upon a blinking 12:00 he might have been curious, if only out of spite, but maybe if he doesn’t ask the Conductor won’t tell him.

He passes the cell over without comment. Neku punches a few numbers, waits, but obviously whatever calls he’s trying aren’t going through. He’s about to hand the phone back when he pauses.

“Wait, I think I get it.” The kid’s finally looked up, staring out across the ward with his head slightly cocked and a look of concentration on his face, glancing from the pile under his feet to the city and back again. “Wow, that’s actually not dumb at all. It’s Shibuya, right? It’s been Shibuya all this time. Your sculptures aren’t… the district is the sculpture. It’s about what the city looks like from exactly this perspective.”

“… it looked better a while ago.” Minamimoto admits, grudgingly. 6:28:31 at twilight, to be exact, because Tau because Pi can suck it, hard. Of all the people who had to get it, though - and worse, had to come here and sit down and make sure Minamimoto knew they understood his vision.

“So… they’re only really meaningful viewed from a place that no one can ever see them.” Neku says. “Boy, you really are an artist, aren’t you.”

Minamimoto can’t tell if that’s a compliment or an insult and which would be worse and what he would do about it either way, so he doesn’t say anything. The kid doesn’t say anything more, just punches more buttons on his own phone and waits, and waits. He’s flipping a pin over and over in his other hand, which seems a weird thing for a Conductor to ever bother with.

“Pick up, Kariya. Pick up. Pick up.” The Conductor mutters under his breath, attention back on his phone, and Minamimoto wonders what kind of shit the Harrier’s in to garner such personal attention.

“Hey, can you still talk to Higashizawa on your phone, even when you’re UG?”

“… yeah?”
“Good. Maybe... yeah, that’s probably okay then.”

It doesn’t quite feel like a conversation meant for two. Which is weird, and Conductor-weird is never good. Except they’ve only got two days left and now Minamimoto’s definitely going to double down on the plan of staying here and not doing a damn thing until it’s all over.

“I’m promoting you to Game Master.”

For the second time in ten minutes, it’s all he can do not to fall off his own sculpture. Twilight’s descending faster by the moment, enough that he can see the LED’s starting to show up in the shadows, a scattering of caffeinated neon fireflies. Are the damn things ever going to run out of batteries?

“... what?”

His phone bleeps, a Game-wide message announcing his promotion. Which is what the Conductor had been working on all this time, probably. Stupid kid is making it really, really hard not to care.

“GM’s gonna be pissed to the highest power. Not that I mind, but-“

“Uzuki’s no longer available for the position.”

Holy shit. He Erased her? All right, the little independent variable finally shows his true domain. But why now, why him - and how is this not a setup the Conductor isn’t even bothering to disguise?

The first thing Minamimoto’s going to do when he’s alone again is call Higashizawa. He won’t know anything, but between the monosyllables and the ponderous sighs it might almost sound like he does.

Minamimoto is used to the feel of the UG. He’d been a Harrier once, the last time they’d run a game this broken - a memory seen through a window cluttered with old advertisements, flyers announcing cancelled shows for all the ways his life could have gone - and taking over as GM hadn’t been such a kick up the ladder then, power-wise.

He feels it, now, the shift in power and with it comes a shuddering, painful change in pressure, any movie he’d ever seen with a space shuttle pulling too many G’s and before he knows it, despite all attempts to be cool Minamimoto has his head pretty much between his knees and trying not to throw up on his already diminished masterpiece.

“What did… what did you do… to the UG?!“

“I want to change up the dimensions of tonight’s Game.” The Conductor says, ignoring the question and his vaguely nauseous twitching. “Keep it to A-East, maybe two-thirds of Dogenzaka. Maybe try to get them to sneak into the 777 show.”

Minamimoto had been planning on doing that himself, of course. Not that he likes Def March’s base seven music and he definitely does not ever sing to himself in the shower, but now that it’s an order he’s contractually obligated to not want to do it. It doesn’t help that the Conductor is back to not looking at him at all, and he wishes he could think this was all some attempt to get under his skin. He wants to be annoyed, but this is just too weird even to take as a personal offense.

He’s having enough trouble just thinking and blinking, the entire Game feeling like it’s a half-second away from just reaching out and twisting him in half.
“You made them too strong. No surprise the GM got herself subtracted. Is that the plan? You replacing all of us because nothing can kill them?”

“Wow.” Neku says. “You’re right, that would have been a really good plan.”

“So what exactly-“

He hears the Conductor suck in a breath, and then Minamimoto catches the flash of pink from the corner of his eye - there’s a way Reapers move, even in RG, a certain noticeable quickness that sets them apart from the usual integers.

“Wait a minute. Isn’t that-“

He turns, but the Conductor is gone. Minamimoto blinks, looks around, scratches his head - it feels disloyal to replace his hat just yet. It might come back, like one of those dogs that journey across country to its master’s new address. He looks around again, and then punches the shortcut on his phone he’s rechristened ‘Ram Crotch’ because hey, it really does work.

“I hope this is an important-“

“We’re screwed.” Minamimoto’s not sure how yet, but he’s absolutely certain of it. “So zetta screwed.”

He’d gone to Wildkat first. Well, he’d tried.

Neku’s e-mail went down for good three minutes after he sent out one asking for music mixes good for fighting. As if it had only just occurred to the Higher Plane that they might want to shut down his ability to pass along any more inspiring videos.

He still had twenty-seven playlists to pick through, from eleven different countries. So Neku listened, and made pins and plans and a few local calls, just the necessary ones. He nearly called Beat and Shiki and his father, thumb resting against the buttons and trying to think of anything to say. What was the point in making any of them worry?

Neku finally went out, when there was no point left in staying in, wondering even as he did so whose eyes might be on him, keeping his Music as quiet as he knew how even in the RG, taking in every moment in Shibuya with a dreadful sort of reverence, every peaceful moment ticking closer to the last, and no sign of danger at all. The city sang and shone and loved him more than anything, the next best thing to the Composer that should have never been taken away.

So Neku walked to Wildkat, just needing to see it, half-expecting it to be trashed the way it had been at the end of the Long Game.

It was gone. A vacant lot, as if a giant hose had come down and sucked it up into the sky. Which very well might have happened. The Angels were responsible, obviously, a move made entirely out of spite, just so it was clear Shibuya couldn’t have nice things. A petty blow against Hanekoma, nothing to do with Neku at all, but it had been a stunning bit of preemptive devastation, and a long minute before he could even breathe, or move. Two minutes after that when he stopped running a hand along the brick wall next to where the shop used to be, no sign remaining that it had ever had a neighbor.

At least he remembered the camera.
Neku had counted back, trying to squeeze the year-long days into some semblance of real time, to remember how far to turn back the clock - his first shot completely off, and the second only caught the backs of heads but he got lucky with the third shot and there they were - Joshua and Mr H and him, all doing whatever it was they’d been doing before everything went completely through the floor. Mr. H with that smile that hid everything and Joshua with that smile that hid itself and Neku just looked happy.

It’s the wallpaper on his phone now, as Neku follows after Uzuki - or whatever it is that’s pretending to be her. Neku has a player pin tucked in his front shirt pocket. It saved him once, so who knows? He doesn’t think it will really do anything, but he can use a lucky charm. It’s been this grim before and he’s survived. He’s the Conductor of Shibuya. Anyone else wouldn’t know half of what he does.

*Half of zero is still zero, Null Set.* Neku shudders. He can’t die now. He can’t let the last thing he’d done on Earth be a civil conversation with Minamimoto.

Definitely a stupid idea, to make him Game Master again, and Neku contemplates all the ways Joshua would have to sigh and shake his head, but there’s no arguing that Minamimoto, for all his homicidal tendencies and inexplicable quirks, is astonishingly durable, and Neku needs to have someone as close as he can to the center of this who might also have a chance of surviving it.

He jumped out of the UG the minute he left the sculpture, of course, and Neku keeps to the busier sides of the streets when he can, as if that will make any difference. A group of high-school girls pass him in the other direction, laughing. A man in a hardhat leans against the side of his truck taking a post-work smoke break. The end of a day no different than any other.

The Higher Plane’s cut the ability for any of them to call out past the borders of Shibuya now, which means it isn’t just him that’s being punished. It means they’re watching, waiting. Whatever it is they’re trying to get out of this, they’ll step in only when they realize their enemy is not what they think it is. Kariya had said as much.

Which means all Neku has to do now is survive until they get involved. Protect his Players and his Reapers and, you know, hope the Higher Plane doesn’t just Erase them all afterward.

It’s not much of a plan, but even St. Michael’s history classes don’t go into much depth on the how-to’s of guerrilla warfare and scorched-earth tactics. No wonder Kariya had looked so grim - he’d known all along there wouldn’t be enough time.

He’d left the rabbits at A-East. As much as Neku appreciated having them around, he remembered how easily the Fallen had manipulated the Noise around her, how much power had been at play and he’s not risking them in whatever’s coming next. Nao Nao had tried to follow him - he’d had to call up a few smaller Noise to distract them so he could slip away back to the RG.

Neku’s been getting texts for hours now about Eri, questions from friends of friends who remember that he’s a new link in the chain, and he thinks about what the Fallen had threatened, that she’d gleefully feed Shiki headfirst to the Internet, which would sound funny except for how it’s really not.

He’s passing by Natural Puppy’s new window display - polo shirts with fake dog-fur collars, just in case he thought this wasn’t the end of days - and his phone rings, and Neku has to wait an extra ring just to get his fingers to move.

“Yeah?”
“Hello, sir.”

“Hey… Uzuki.” Neku says slowly, dodging a few more pedestrians, making good time up Spain Hill, the sharp turn where he’d last seen that flicker of pink, of Uzuki or whatever it is that’s pretending to be her. An obvious trap, though Neku can’t see how any place in Shibuya is more dangerous than any other, not with what he’s seen of the Fallen’s power set. He rubs a thumb against his netsuke blade, clutching it so tightly he’ll probably have a permanent bird-shaped divot in his palm. “Have you seen Kariya around? I’ve been looking for him.”

On another day, Uzuki might have made some snarky comment about him being facedown in his third bowl of ramen, but there’s just a pause, and then just - “no.” Is she some sort of hostage? Is she even real?

“Did you just make Minamimoto the Game Master? Did I get demoted?”

It’s her usual I’m-only-pretending-to-respect-you-because-I-have-to tone, but it’s brittle at the edges. Neku can hear that, even over the phone. He dodges some minor construction work on the curb, and is nearly plowed over by a random group of tourists, and then Neku pops out the other side, into the back streets.

“It’s quieter here. The meaningful sort of quiet.

“You know this is some real bullshit, right?” Neku mutters - the part of him that isn’t quietly gibbering in the corner just wants this to be over - and he’s surprised when Uzuki laughs, though it sounds as much like a sob.

“Yeah. She always did like to be noticed.”

Neku slows down, keeps the phone at his ear, scanning the street, the building and the sky - and then he’s hit the end of the road. CAT’s mural, the place where it all started - except this is a new stage, for new kind of show. It’s been a couple of days since he’s been down this way, but Neku knows that the colors had been fading a little, dribs and drabs of other tags encroaching from the margins - it’s not disrespectful, street art a naturally transient kind of thing, everyone mostly waiting to see what CAT would do next.

The entire wall’s been repainted.

An impossible feat, with a thousand small figures in great detail and even greater agony - Bruegel’s twentieth-century wet-dream of horrors. Neku steps closer, he can’t help himself, the images at once over the top and much too real - it’s Shibuya on fire, hands reaching out from broken windows, straining toward the sky in desperate, silent supplication. A world of bodies in the streets, men with guns aimed at them, aimed at each other - and hands scattered across the pavement like flower petals, the sooty black arcs of angels falling from a charred and rusty sky as Taboo Noise run wild across the RG. All barriers sundered, all realms rendered equal.

It’s one of those Renaissance pictures of the damned - Where’s Wally? In Hell - but with a familiar cast of characters, and all of his friends and his enemies are screaming, running, being dragged into the shadows or down into great cracks in the earth while all around, the dead are laughing. Neku starts looking for himself - he can’t help it - maybe hit by a car or torn apart by Noise or that pair of feet beneath the tipped-over Hachiko.

“I think maybe we need to t-talk. Before the Game starts.” Uzuki says, reading from whatever script this is that they’ve agreed on finishing to the end.

“It’s almost time.” Neku says. “Are you close by?
“I’m standing right behind you.”

It could be a joke, if Uzuki liked him enough to make jokes, and by the time he turns she already has the gun up. The both of them in the real world, and this is when Neku makes the very last mistake that matters.

It’s instinct, and even as he raises his vibe to the UG, where he has the power to deflect that shot Neku thinks - stupid stupid stupid - but it’s already too late.

The real bullet catches him from behind. Neku’s first thought isn’t fear but profound irritation because come the fuck on how many times does he have to get shot?

Then the pain hits, as overwhelming as ever. He stumbles forward, drops to his knees, trying desperately to shift his Vibe back to the RG but he can’t focus, the power slipping through his fingers even as he feels Shibuya itself rise up, sensing the attack, channeling more energy to him to retaliate.

He hears the metronome sound of footsteps against the pavement, entirely unhurried - and then, there she is, tall enough to tower over him even if he wasn’t crouched at her feet with his shoulder on fire. He watches the pleats in her skirt sway a little bit - school uniform, of course it is - and she smiles.

“Knock-knock.”

Chapter End Notes

1. Chapter title: Radiohead - Lucky
2. I jumped the gun on my beta so any errors are all me. Sorry if it sucks.
3. Here we go.
Neku pants against the pain, just barely keeping himself together, fingers scrabbling around little bits of asphalt, fighting with all he has to pull himself back into the RG but it’s not coming and his grip keeps slipping.

“Start the Game now, Uzu-chan.” The smooth, cool voice somewhere above him. “Call them all right here for me.”

“I c-can’t.” It’s Uzuki. It really is her. Why would she - it’s hard to think with a bullet in him. Neku had a plan. Stay alive? Okay, so that’s going well so far. “You heard what the Conductor said,” Uzuki continues. “I can’t do anything. I’m not the Game Master anymore.”

She doesn’t sound like herself, but worn-out, beaten down and tired. Neku can guess why - even with the pain he can still feel the fierce burn of her, the pull of the Fallen too close, chill flames licking at his skin.

“Come on, Neku. Stay with us. If you can’t handle one little gunshot wound this isn’t going to be much fun.”

He’s on his knees somehow, and there’s Shibuya twining protectively all around him, keeping back the darkness. It’s not enough to heal him, he can’t remember how that’s supposed to work… but it’s at least enough to keep him steady, a few waves of nausea notwithstanding. He hears the click, looks up to see the barrel at eye-level - and then Saika smiles and lets the gun fall.

“Well, I hardly did all of this just to shoot you in the head - although that would be marvelously anticlimactic. I just needed something to keep you down here with us so things didn’t get dull too fast.”

Uzuki is pale and unmoving, her hands up against her mouth and silent tears streaming down her cheeks. Neku tries to keep his voice steady.

“Leave her alone. I’m here now, so you can let her go.” He’s a little surprised, when his voice doesn’t even shake.

“You think I’m making her do this?” Saika shakes her head slowly, like a teacher with a disappointing pupil. “I told you, Neku. I know everyone. Uzuki best of all.” The Fallen has an arm around Uzuki’s shoulders, the backs of her fingers gently against the other girl’s cheek. “She wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me, and I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for her. So, you know…” She poses brightly. “Sisters!”

Neku’s trembling, desperate to pull any power from the district to get back to his feet, just to stand upright and he’d better start making a plan, something beyond getting up just to fall over again because eventually Saika’s going to stop gloating, and then…

It really, really hurts, getting shot, and the repetition isn’t helping.

“No questions, Neku? Usually, there’s a few more questions.” Saika says, thoughtfully, one cherry red fingernail tapping at her bottom lip. “Am I boring you?”
“A little bit, yeah.” Neku snarls, because why not? It’s not like begging’s going to get him anywhere. “Feel free to keep going, though. Did Uzuki ever tell you about Konishi? This was kind of her deal too. High-fiving herself over some apex predator bullshit.”

It’s so cold. He has to fight to keep his teeth from chattering.

“Oh, Neku.” Saika says. “You are vastly overestimating my need for a coherent narrative. I don’t need to have reasons. I have power. Everyone else can make up a story while they comb through the wreckage.”

Buy time. He just needs to buy time, right? Was that the good plan or the bad one? He’s pretty sure he had a plan once. Shibuya wants to help him, Neku can feel the power pooling under his feet, and if he can just focus through the agony and not puke on his shoes, then maybe…

“So you’re here to what, make things worse? I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but we’re fucking up just fine on our own.”

Saika moves toward him, and Neku flinches away before he can stop himself but even before he’s taken a step back she’s already moved away and there’s a gun in his hand - her gun, and Saika steps back to draw Uzuki in front of her, right into the line of fire.

“How about we say that this is what I want? You give Uzuki to me now, and all this nasty business stops. I take her away, and you and your UG and all your little friends are safe from me. Forever. You can do that, can’t you? You can do all sorts of things.”

Uzuki stiffens in surprise, but her expression is as blank and free from hope as if he’s already accepted. Because it sounds like the smart move, the same as it did when she’d suggested it to him, what seems like a lifetime ago. Killing Shiki to save himself. A cruel choice, hardly ideal, but justifiable with the odds stacked this high.

“I’m going to take her anyway, so this is your chance to be smart. It’s time to be the hero, Neku. I wouldn’t even say it’s a sacrifice. It’s not like you’re friends.”

A moment of silence. Uzuki closes her eyes.

“Actually, I’m pretty sure we hate each other.” Neku says, and activates the telekinesis pin as he flings out a hand, throwing Uzuki as far away as she’ll go, hoping her Reaper durability will help her with the landing as he unloads the rest of the round into Saika’s chest.

Okay, so he was kind of aiming for her head, but whatever, and it’s not like Neku expected it to actually stop her. A little disappointing that it seems to do nothing at all. The bullets disappear without a trace, liquid black pooling in their wake for a moment before wavering back to the fabric of the uniform and Saika gives him a wide, carnivore’s grin.

“My turn?”

A cold, sharp bite is a piercing counterpoint to the burn in his his shoulder and Neku looks down to see the pin in his hand twist itself out of any logical proportion, and even as he tosses it away it cracks, the Noise released from it like a misshapen chick from an egg, twisted in on itself, the sound of its Music a high, agonized note from a breaking string. Neku lashes out at it, though the remnants of it twitch and flail and he remembers the way the Noise acted around her before, the way they’d refused to die. Neku narrows his eyes, wastes way too much power raising the Vibe around the single Noise until it fades away.

Saika could probably attack him from a dozen different angles while he struggles, but she prefers
to watch. Enjoying the show.

“… so, am I still boring you?”

“Neku, get down!”

He doesn’t have a much choice, the solid wall of explosions slamming into the ground in front of him and knocking him off his feet. By the time Neku looks up, he’s flanked by four figures - Ezra, the Angel he met at the hospital’s main door, another Angel with dark hair and guns drawn, and two great statues already firing round after round into the place Saika was standing moments before. He can’t see where Uzuki’s gone.

The dark-haired Angel has him by his good arm, helping him stand, and Ezra cuts him a look of concern and Neku ought to be pissed - they knew, they were here all this time because they lied and they knew - but all he really feels is gratitude and relief. The cavalry’s here, and better equipped than he could ever be.

If he were a Reaper, or a regular Player, Neku wonders if just being near them wouldn’t be enough to Erase him, standing between two battle-ready Angels feels like being in the middle of a binary star, coronas of power flaring off both of them, enough to waver even Shibuya’s song.

“It’s going to be all right.”

The Angel is trying to be kind - but he isn’t overconfident, and that’s what Neku will remember. Ezra may lack any sort of class or restraint, right down to the curves on his busty battle maidens, but he’s tense and ready, both of the Angels wary in the sudden quiet, waiting for the first attack. Whatever their faults, they’ve come in expecting a hard fight.

It doesn’t help them at all.

“Dev, get ready to-“

A pillar of darkness like a geyser of oil explodes up from the street beneath him - and the Angel is gone, nothing left in the space where he stood. His statues crack and crumble, fading to nothing a moment later as Saika rises up out of the ground with a mischievous, satisfied smile.

The other Angel takes a step away from Neku, weapons drawn and trained on her but even in his expressionless face Neku can see the stunned shock, probably as close as he ever comes to panic.

“Run.” He says.

Saika nods. “I really would.”

Neku does.

“… it comes as no surprise that the Composer of Shibuya would flagrantly violate so many of our deepest held strictures. For example, I would like to call your attention to a dispute that took place on the third of March, 1889 which may have been overlooked by your eminent leadership due to confusion about the exact definitions of what we now officially refer to as the Shibuya Ward. As you can see by these maps…”
Joshua tunes out the man he doesn’t recognize, talking about some mistake he doesn’t remember not making, one of a dozen centuries-old axes dragged out to be ground down in public. An outrage rather undercut by the seven pro-Shibuya shirts Joshua can see just in the first few rows of spectators, most of them borrowing one or another of CAT’s more popular logos, with broken jail bars stenciled over top. The Higher Plane had not been shy about advertising this trial, obviously expecting an easy win, and it seems they might come to regret the open invitation.

“Furthermore, in the summer of 1903…”

A few groans from the audience, though the speaker takes no notice of them. Hanekoma twitches, ever so slightly, not much better at this avalanche of boredom than Joshua is.

“Still feeling good about that victory?” Joshua murmurs.

“Feelings?” Hanekoma murmurs back.

Joshua leans back in his chair, indifferent as always to the gazes on him - curiosity, outrage, support. Many of them are quietly chatting with each other, and probably not even about what’s going on now that they’ve gotten inside. A few Producers haven’t looked up since the opening arguments began, caught up in intensely furious texting arguments to their Composers, the number of Games around the world actively protesting their oversight still on the rise.

Hopefully, it will only take another six hours or so before they start facing charges from this century, although now Joshua thinks they might be deliberately dragging this out a bit, buying time to come up with a counter-offensive. Popular opinion should have buried them from the first, but his Conductor’s little behind-the-scenes has swayed the crowd, leaving the Higher Plane with fewer than they’d expected willing to testify against Shibuya’s Producer or Composer, and Neku Sakuraba, the one most harmed by his Composer, the three-week Game and everything that came with it openly defending it as the best possible outcome.

He can’t help but smile, imagining how Neku will come to regret having that admission on tape, especially now that he might live to see it.

In a way, breaking all of the rules was better than acting with restraint - the fact that it hadn’t destroyed Shibuya’s Game or the rest of the world makes Joshua look nearly competent. It may save Hanekoma as well - they were working against each other, and if Joshua’s insanity was so uncontrollable that he deserves Erasure, than his Producer couldn’t be judged for taking whatever measures were necessary to stop him. If Joshua wasn’t insane, then he was obviously taking calculated risks for justifiable reasons, and shouldn’t be punished for that, either.

Either way, it’s possible at least one of them is walking out of here penalty-free, and given the mood of the room it seems likely the Higher Plane will eventually have no choice but to let them both go. He’s certain Neku would never want to cause this much trouble, which only makes it all the more amusing.

The only question now is how long the Higher Plane will drag this out, until they’re forced to admit it.

Joshua’s had a very long time to become accustomed to his clairvoyance, to take absolutely anything in stride. Despite his considerable reputation for always getting his way, this isn’t the first time he’s been thwarted, and he’s had to learn how to bridge the gap between his expectations and reality like anyone else.

So when Neku strolls right into the court through a side door, Joshua doesn’t blink. He observes,
and when his Conductor steps right past the strongest Composers and Producers unseen, he knows what he’s looking at. Even though it can’t be happening, even though he’d finished with all these dead Nekus long ago - this one with his head lolling to the side and dark, empty pits where his eyes should be.

Joshua doesn’t flinch.

Neku moves all the way to the front of the room, where the tables for those recording this for posterity are seated, and Joshua watches him take out a sketchbook, that black hole gaze narrowed for a moment in consideration before he begins. He’s close enough that Joshua can see the blood spattered across his clothes, his skin - ink on bone china. The kind that couldn’t be wiped away without leaving a stain.

He’d dismissed it out of hand, when Neku had claimed there was a Fallen in Shibuya. A mix of pride - the idea he’d let anything like that into his district, even with how far he’d been Censured. Hardly the first time Neku had been squeamish about Erasures, and he’d refused to think of it as anything but a new Conductor simply overreacting to the usual state of affairs.

He’d been angry with Neku, unfairly so, for his fear and for letting the Angels see it. If there were a Fallen in Shibuya it could only be a boon for the Higher Plane, if not enough to ensure their Erasure then enough to at least stem this sudden tide of support.

Which does beg the question - if it were true, wouldn’t Brede have said something by now? Especially with the case against them beginning to unravel at both ends?

Joshua looks for him - seated near the front, with the prosecution - but the Angel is alone, his fellow enforcers nowhere to be found. Certainly, they should have stayed to testify, their first-hand accounts of Joshua losing his district to a member of the Realground both hilarious and damning.

The shadow of his Conductor is still sketching quietly, blank sockets intent on the page.

 “… Josh?” Hanekoma says softly, because of course he’s noticed, glancing from Joshua to the table and back again, one eyebrow raised.

He doesn’t answer, too busy staring at the shredded phantom of his Conductor, one more than he’d ever expected to see. The Higher Plane wants Neku, perhaps the ultimate prize in all of this - but does he really think that means his Conductor is safe?

The prosecutor continues to drone on, rifling through irrelevant documentation with a steadfast incompetence that no longer seems so amusing. At the table, the ghostly Neku leans back to study his picture for a moment, before turning it, as if asking Joshua’s opinion of the composition.

A cell phone. All right, perhaps not the most subtle suggestion but Joshua thinks he may have been ignoring the obvious for too long already.

Joshua tries his own - first calling, then e-mail, ignoring a few mutters of surprise and annoyance as he even more blatantly dismisses his own trial. No response, of course.

“Kiryu,” his preoccupation has not gone unnoticed, “we would ask you to refrain from-“

“Call him.” Joshua says, ignoring the Higher Plane and addressing the crowd instead. “I know at least half of you have his phone number, somebody call my Conductor right now.”

“Yoshiya Kiryu, you will be silent or-“
“No answer!” A shout from the crowd, and a few more of agreement, and even before Joshua can ask, another voice pipes up. “I can’t get hold of any Reapers, either. Looks like everything’s down!”

He’ll find out later just who in his Game has been chatting with other districts and why - what matters now is that it seems all of Shibuya has gone silent. Maybe it’s just the expected overreaction to Neku’s little video - too little, too late - but what it means is that whatever is happening in Shibuya right now, none of them will know about it until the Higher Plane wants them to.

“We will have order!” The angelic voice booms, as murmurs of increasing outrage begin to circle around the room. “We will not allow these grandstanding nihilists to upend this council to further their own ambitions - the very crime for which they are standing trial.”

“Shibuya’s conductor isn’t on trial.” A voice from the crowd, and another voice picks up the thread of argument. “If he was, shouldn’t he be here?”

“If he’s not, why can’t we talk to him?”

The murmurs rise, some deliberately louder than others - if what Joshua did was so terrible, leaving his game without a Composer, then why did they drag him up here now? The Higher Plane attempts to rally, but they might as well start flinging lighting bolts for all anyone is paying attention.

“The Conductor’s awareness of the Producer’s involvement in the Game is justification for heavy censure by itself, and just one of many.”

“My people can’t get in.” It’s Minato’s Composer, a man that Joshua only knows as a bullet-pointed list of traits - likes history, cats and traditional music, hates neon - despite their sharing a border for over two centuries. He always seemed a bit too traditional, not the sort of person to be standing here with his phone at his ear looking to Joshua and ignoring the Higher Plane’s increasingly loud and continually ignored demands for silence. “It’s not just the phones, the entire UG’s been locked down.”

A few gasps. A change in the tenor of the angry murmurs, and maybe more of them, from those who were withholding judgement. It still might be nothing, just more Higher Plane bullshit-as-usual with even worse timing, but Joshua looks back to where that phantom Neku sat, the empty space like an accusation - and out of the corner of his eye he sees Brede on his own phone, trying one number and another to what seems no response, his mouth set in an increasingly grim line.

Neku sprints past dimly lit storefronts all closed for the evening, though he’s not sure he’d dare to go in even if they were open, with no idea if Saika might be able to follow him inside. All he can hear is his own breathing, the sharp impact of every footstep leaving him in breathless, jarring agony and he staggers, nearly faceplants right onto the street, catching himself on a railing at the very last moment, stifling the scream.

A flurry of gunshots echo in his wake down the narrow streets - where exactly is he running to? Neku wants to find people, he’s not sure why, it’s not like they can see him, but it suddenly seems desperately important, especially as he runs for block after block without a single person in sight, no traffic, as if the Realground’s suddenly been scoured clean.

The gunshots stop, and Neku stumbles to a halt, straining to hear any new sound, the silence like a
new world swallowing UG and RG both in its wake. What did Saika do to his pins? It was like she’d unmade them, twisted the power right out of them into Noise she could throw back at him - not good, if he can’t focus enough to go without them. He wonders which is better - stick to the shadows or the light, or if it matters at all, and tries to slow his breathing, tries to quiet his Music - the Angels are gone, she took them down like it was nothing and it doesn’t sound like anyone else is rushing in for the second assault.

He has a Cure pin - seven of them, actually, mixed in with the bags he placed all over Shibuya earlier today for just this kind of emergency - but it doesn’t feel like the bullet went clean through, and having a UG bullet in him probably won’t make staying in the RG any easier.

Neku can focus enough now that he doesn’t need the pins to fight - barely, the pain spilling with abandon down his back, all the way to his hips and back up his spine in little fissures of agony and think, Neku. Think, think, think.

He punches a few buttons on his phone - the emergency order to Minamimoto, Players and Reapers both ordered into the Def March show as fast as they can go, an objective that may not save anyone but Neku never had a better option except hoping the Higher Plane would leap in - she ate the Angels as easy as if they’d been Players, and what does that even-

A great, dark shape descends, slamming down nearly at his feet and Neku doesn’t scream so much as a strangled, startled inhale, lunging back with the netsuke blade fully transformed and swinging. The only thing that keeps him from decapitating his surprise guest is that Kariya’s still curled on the ground, with a sword already through him, like a pinned butterfly tossed away unwanted. Neku tries to speak, swallows - nearly falls down himself when the Reaper’s eyes snap open.

“Oh yeah,” Kariya mutters, “that sucked.”

He groans, very carefully rising to his hands and knees, and with the clench of his jaw and one slow motion drags the blade out of his chest, gasping in the aftermath. Still here, not Erased or even flickering, though it takes a moment more than it should as he stares up at Neku for recognition to kick in.

“- the hell are you doing? You can’t be here.” Kariya says, the point of the sword against the ground as he gracelessly drags himself upright. “You need to get to the RG, now.”

He grabs Neku’s uninjured arm, thankfully, but the Harrier trying to change his vibe is like a lightning strike made of knives, and Neku screams, jerking back even as Kariya realizes his mistake.

“I can’t… I can’t…”

“What happened?” Kariya says, glancing between him and the empty street, sword out and ready.

“Uzuki… Uzuki shot me. The Fallen… Saika, or whatever it is… it made her… it made…”

Neku trails off, because Kariya’s expression isn’t confused, isn’t trying to make sense of his crap explanation. He doesn’t look surprised at all.

“You knew.” One of these days Neku’s going to have a devastatingly crucial life-or-death secret he keeps from everyone and it’s going to be awesome. “You knew Uzuki was a part of this, and you didn’t…”

Of course he didn’t. The Angels would have Erased her. Joshua would have Erased her. Maybe Kariya thought Neku might do it himself.
“Saika destroyed that Angel you fought. Devoured him, like she wasn’t even trying. He told me to run, the other one, but I don’t think he…”

Kariya glances down both sides of the still-empty street, eyes flicking from one point to the next before turning back to him.

“Can you get your shirt off? Give me the blade. We have to get the bullet out.”

“Telekinesis?” Neku says hopefully.

“It won’t work. Uzuki’s ammo doesn’t play well with pins.” So, Edo-era surgical re-enactment it is. Neku’s not even sure how he’s supposed get his shirt out of the way, let alone brace himself for this. Kariya, of course, shows no ill effects of his own impalement. No sign of any wound, not a trace of blood or even a tear in his shirt, which doesn’t seem fair but Neku probably shouldn’t complain.

“You had a sword through you.” Neku says, uncertainly. “You… on your own sword?”

It’s singing softly, like the echoes of great chimes, or some distant chorus. It sounds different. Kariya sounds different.

“Long story.” The Harrier says, reaching for the blade in Neku’s hand. “Listen, Neku, you need to know-”

He stops, hand in midair, the both of them going still at the sound of shoes tapping in a slow, steady beat against the pavement. Impossibly loud, because she wants them to hear her coming. Kariya pushes him back, putting himself between Neku and Saika.

“Kariya.” Neku says. “You can’t-“

“Probably not.” Kariya agrees. “Stay behind me.”

Saika is alone, no sign of Uzuki and not a hair or a pleat out of place, the shadows around her stretching tendrils toward them, skittering at the edge of the light.

“So,” Saika says, “anything you have to add about the true nature of evil that resides in the human heart?”

Kariya lets out a long, slow breath, raising his blade into a fighting stance.

“Fair enough.” Saika shrugs.

She lifts her own hand, closes it into a fist and two figures rise up out of the shadows before her, darkness sliding off them in waves, but clinging in too many places. It’s Ezra, and the other Angel - what’s left of them. What she’d decided to leave behind, shattered wings dripping gray feathers, standing at the odd, broken angles Neku’s come to recognize from one too many of Beat’s favorite zombie films. Empty, black-veined puppets, repurposed into weapons of her own, and their heads rise in eerie unity as Saika points at Kariya.

“Kill him.”

It doesn’t always do the greatest things to the ambiance to have a concert on a Game day, but they’re five songs into the set and the world is magnificent and 777 is back where he belongs - he
can’t believe upper management doesn’t do this, that everyone doesn’t do this. He’s still not at full strength, but that’s all right as long as he’s here, and with every note and flourish and cheer from the audience it just gets better and he wonders why he had any doubts at all.

Which is when Minamimoto shows up and throws the suck switch.

He doesn’t hate Minamimoto. Honestly, 777 barely recognizes him, they ran in decidedly different spheres even before the Long Game and if there’s any suggestion in the vague murk of what went down - the span between the start of it and his untimely hiatus - that Minamimoto was at all responsible, 777 has a thousand other things to do than hold a grudge.

Still, okay, so maybe he had been keeping an eye out toward the back of the club, and the only reason he’d even seen the Reaper was because he wondered if Neku would show. No, he still doesn’t care, he really doesn’t but it doesn’t hurt to be grateful and this is about as good as his gratitude gets.

777 turns away from Minamimoto’s arrival, strutting along the side of the stage to make sure the right side of the stage is still excited to see him - they are - and when he turns back Higashizawa’s there, the two of them gesturing to each other in agitation, Minamimoto practically hopping off the ground. Whatever’s left of the Players must be giving them a special sort of hell, he thinks with a somewhat uncharitable smirk, glad he’s paid his dues for this Game.

777 sweeps up the mic for the song’s finale - he really isn’t the pose-and-shake type but the crowd loves it and BJ noodles out a bit of extra song to accompany his grandstanding. They’re excited too, 777 can feel it. He can feel a lot of things, tapped in to this many people having this good a time, and though he doesn’t notice when the first few Players tumble in, when he looks again toward the back of the crowd there’s no mistaking them for anything else.

His concerts are always off-limits to the Game. Pre-and-post show are up for grabs but nobody’s allowed to hunt on his turf while the music plays and 777’s made that clear to both the Reapers and the Harriers even when the higher ups aren’t concerned with the rules. He thought it wouldn’t be a problem tonight, that Neku understood - but then more Players show up, and more Reapers and nobody’s attacking each other and suddenly 777 thinks that maybe he’s the one doesn’t understand.

Which is when a Noise as large as any he’s ever seen comes through the wall and bites down on one of the Wall Reapers playing bouncer for his show, dragging him out before he can make a sound. 777 blinks, staring, half-convinced he hadn’t seen it at all except for the way Minamimoto and the rest - Players and Reapers - have frozen, or started moving away from the doors.

The silence rises up around him, because the song has stopped and 777 is just standing there while all his Realground fans wonder just what the problem is. Def March isn’t a band that tends to be very chatty between numbers, but 777 clears his throat and steps up to the mic, his eyes still on what’s happening at the doors.

“Heh… thanks for coming out tonight. It’s good to be back.”

He doesn’t know how the rules work, exactly. Just that they always have, the markers on the buildings of what is and isn’t Underground, where the two sides can mingle for a time - but that’s Noise blurring here and there through the back walls, that’s the Players and the Reapers wavering up and down while Higashizawa stares in disbelief and it is a bit unnerving to see a man that size troubled by anything.

The rest of the crowd hasn’t noticed, their eyes focused on him, and 777 brings his hand down on a
power chord to keep their attention, and they cheer wildly - and the Noise retreats ever so slightly, everyone in the UG seeming a bit more real and solid.

777 launches into their next number, the crowd’s energy rising - but there’s a growing darkness at the back of the arena, and a sudden a flurry of motion. A second Reaper dragged out by the hood on his sweatshirt but two Players have him by the hands, pulling hard as more Reapers attack the Noise - and the Noise strikes back.

He hears BJ fumble, though he quickly recovers with the audience none the wiser, and 777 glances over to see that the rest of the band has finally noticed something’s wrong. He sings, there’s nothing else he can do, this is what he can do, and as long as the crowd stays hyped it’s like stoking a fire, to keep all the beasts at bay.

The last time they had a sold-out show he was Erased before it started and he’ll be damned if he’s disappearing in the middle of this one. The moment they hit the bridge of the song he turns to BJ and Tenho - band mates, brothers-in-arms - and grins.

“Play it loud. Play it loud and don’t stop.”

An arm lurches up out of the pavement, the gray hand desperately clutching for him, and Neku dodges it and nearly overbalances into two more, arms rising out of the ground like a living field of hungry flowers. He backpedals, panting for breath only to jump sideways at the explosion that tears past him, Kariya in his white-winged crane form pile-driving one of the former Angels into the ground, though a dark shape slams down on top of him only an instant after he’s landed. Kariya turns human again, little more than a blur with what remains of the Angels hammering down on him, blow after blow in that UG way that sends dumpsters flying and smashes the outlines of cars into mangled heaps that quickly collapse to empty air. In the Realground nothing has changed, no sign of damage or danger except for how eerily quiet it still is. It reminds him of those last few hours in the Long Game, after the Red Pins finished their work.

A hand wraps around his ankle, jerking hard and Neku falls, the breath knocked out of him and his vision going white with the pain from his wounded shoulder, another piercing jolt as another hand grabs at him, and another and another. He’s being dragged down beneath the surface of the street and all Neku can feel is panic and despair - they’re not even attacking him, not really, only lost in a desperate frenzy of trying to save themselves, an ocean full of the drowning and the damned and as his head dips under the surface the sound of it is all around him, screaming and pleading, an endless nightmare of pain.

A small blur in the air, and another, and then the hands loosen long enough for Neku to drag himself up, gasping on the pavement as he feels movement all around him, the slight tap of paws against his chest as Nao Nao bounces off him to her next target, a strike that knocks the hands back beneath the surface. Neku scrambles to his feet, Nao Nao and Sota racing ahead, criss-crossing each other with strike after strike, scything him a way through the wailing field of limbs and Neku can’t do anything but leave them behind.

The statue of Hachiko rises up ahead of him, and Neku nearly runs into it, staggering forward to collapse at its base, dragging himself around to the side as if somehow it might hide him from view. A few people are actually out, this close to the Crossing, and Neku tries to breathe and watch them walking around, the normal world on the other side of unbreakable glass. It feels familiar in the worst possible way.

He hid a bag of pins here too, one of practically everything he had on hand - fire and ice and
anything else that might work, though given what she’s already done he doubts much of it will.
Neku bites his lip, grabs his shoulder and tries to steady his breathing, pushing one fingertip
gingerly into the hole - and cries out, gasping for air, his vision darkening around the edges.
There’s no way he can get the bullet out on his own /or/ stay here hiding and Neku hears another
round of explosions, metal-on-metal in the distance, Kariya furiously battling to stay alive.

Nao-Nao and Sota are quickly pressed up against him on either side like guard dogs, noses
twitching fiercely, not quite as ridiculous now that he’s seen them in action.

“Good job, guys.” Neku pats them gently, as much for his comfort as theirs. “Thanks for finding
me.”

Footsteps again, louder than they ought to be, and the hairs rise on the back of his neck as Neku
risks a look out from behind the statue. No sign of Saika, no sign of anything in the UG and Neku
keeps one of the pins tight against his palm, crouching low with his back against the wall. The
closest border with the next district is at the bus stop, though Neku doesn’t even think of it until he
sees a crowd of people standing in an arbitrary line in the middle of the street - Reapers, more than
one of them with wings and they’re all staring straight at him and then Neku realizes they’re
standing that way because they can’t come any closer. Shibuya’s been blocked off, same as it was
when he was a Player and the borders of his world were clearly defined - the Higher Plane’s locked
them all in here with a monster.

Can they even hear him? Neku’s ready to speak when he sees their eyes go wide, a few of them
moving back and Neku dives to the side just as the dark spike pierces the place where he’d been
standing, rushing past him and toward the barrier.
Right through the barrier, piking a Reaper where
he stands, lifting him off his feet as he gives a little, shocked gurgle before disappearing in a flicker
of static and the other Reapers vanish like startled birds.

“Hey.” Saika gives a little wave, the lance of darkness sliding back beneath the pavement but there
are shadows all around him, shadows where there shouldn’t be shadows, closing in and Neku
tenses and breathes and reaches, reaches - and Shibuya spills through him, warm and bright and
alive.

For a moment it feels like Neku can sense every person in the district, all their worries and
preoccupations, every snip of music from every set of headphones and around him the shadows
retreat, coiling back to where Saika stands, watching him. Neku lets his wings rise up, feathered
near the bottoms but still like a Reaper’s where they bend, a steampunk cosplay crashed into a
flock of swans, and they hum with his Music, with Shibuya’s Song.

“Hey.” Neku says, Nao-Nao and Sota at his feet, tiny claws scratching stone, coiled and ready.

His pins crumble like ash, one after the next - fire and lightning devoured and ice melting before it
ever touches her, lost in that emptiness where her Music ought to be. Nao Nao and Sota make swift
work of any Noise that rises up in their wake, though Neku can see it swirl and reform, threatening
to take shape again before he blasts it to nonexistence.

None of her black-bladed attacks hit home, Neku keeping one step ahead or blocking them with the
netsuke blade, but surviving is far from winning and it’s clear Saika isn’t really trying, not even
bothering to dodge his return strikes.

Until he hits her with a dumpster, and knocks her onto a pressure mine. All right, so those pins work. The moment of victory doesn’t last long - Saika doesn’t so much get to her feet as uncurl there, a liquid, inhuman grace and then she raises a hand and Neku jumps backward as Nao Nao dodges to the side, the both of them missing the flood of darkness by inches, Neku feeling the hands clamp down on his legs the moment he hits the ground and Saika’s smile gains teeth and venom and he can feel her power boiling up beneath his feet.

Which is when Kariya crashes like a comet between them, and the Angels with him, a roar of power and fierce strikes that nearly stagger him and scatter the hands back underground and then they’re gone again, and the rabbits are already moving, Nao Nao and Sota in their swift, criss-cross pattern, driving Saika back only a few steps until a tendril of shadow lashes out around Sota’s throat, arresting him in midair, his back feet kicking wildly and Nao Nao dives for him, screaming - but Saika has her too, the darkness tightening as she stares from each to each.

“Are vulnerable things even worth loving, do you think? It seems like a lot of effort for the return on investment.”

It’s not really a thought, or a plan. All Neku knows is that he has seconds at most before they’re gone, Nao Nao and Sota destroyed forever and Shibuya is quick and golden in his veins and Neku reaches out a hand, reaches for them and Saika’s shadows snap, sending them falling into the void as Neku braces himself and pulls hard, with everything he’s got -

- and in the Realground, two former Players tumble alive and breathing and human to the pavement, as a tiny top hat hits the ground rolls in a semicircle along its edge.

Neku staggers, barely able to keep himself upright, lightheaded and gasping from the force of the pull, the effort of bringing two people back to life.

Saika blinks. “Well, that was almost interesting.”

Neku reaches into his pocket, for the only pin that has yet to be destroyed - a new one he’d been kicking around, unsure if he could get it to work, but it did and it does and he closes his hand around it and teleports as far as it will take him.

Fighting one Fallen was bad. Fighting two - no one fought two, and they were just lucky the Fallen hated each other as much as everyone else, that they never considered joining forces. The only thing that’s keeping him alive, skipping from building to building, one step ahead of every strike that cracks the ground at his feet or whips past his head, is that these aren’t true Fallen. Only Saika’s puppets, attacking with no real style, just raw speed and power and that’s still nearly enough, Kariya can’t manage much beyond blocking and dodging and he’s hacking the occasional limb here or there but they seem perfectly happy to just grow new ones, whatever force it is that keeps them up and moving seemingly inexhaustible.

It has to be costing her, though. There’s just no way Saika can keep this going forever on two fronts, which means whatever damage Kariya’s absorbing here is something Neku doesn’t have to pick up and no, it’s not nearly good enough, he can’t just abandon the kid to face off against that and what the shit is the Higher Plane playing at, this has to be raising alarm bells even they can hear - but Kariya already knows the answer. By the time they realize whatever plan they had isn’t working out the way they wanted, it will be much too late to matter.
The Noise is going wild in the streets, nearly driven to a Taboo frenzy with the UG so unstable, lashing out at anything in range and Kariya wishes he could use that, just feed what’s left of the Angels down the UG garbage disposal but it doesn’t work, whatever power has made this all possible quite happily devouring up the Noise left and right and he’s glad that wherever the Players have run off to it seems the Reapers have followed.

It’s funny how these battles happen, the effects they have, and that in the Realground Shibuya is nearly empty, everyone preferring to stay in for the night. Kariya wonders what it feels like, having a darkness like that rush through you, living in a Game at the edge of collapse. A moment or two won’t do any lasting harm - a moment of inexplicable anger or sadness, a bleak epiphany soon forgotten - but if they don’t figure this out and fast it’s going to be a problem with only one solution and Kariya’s not afraid of death, or Erasure but he doesn’t want to go out as the footnote to a footnote to That One Time We Lost Tokyo.

He misjudges the timing on the last of his leaps, rewarded with a slash of pain through his leg as one of what’s left of the Angels catches him with the edge of a strike and then the other - Kariya can’t tell the difference anymore, there’s just not enough left of them beneath the twitching shadows - tackles him, sending them out of the sky and down into the pavement with a tremendous crash.

Further down than street level, they’re trying that Frequency trick again but Kariya slashes back, another arm hits the ground and that means nothing when what slides from the end of that stump is razor-edged - knife hands, he’s fighting fucking knife hands now - and Neku’s standing a dozen feet away, still on his feet, and that’s the closest to good news Kariya gets before he has to jump away.

He perches at the corner of the nearest building, an overhead view of the fight just in time to feel the UG twist and warp and he makes the mistake of looking back, trying to see who got hit and how bad and that’s when he’s struck, the shadows trying to swallow him and Kariya shifts into his Crane form and twists out - he’s faster this way, just that little bit that allows him to dodge through gaps in the darkness, snap open his wings and push up and for a moment he’s moving faster than they can follow, higher than they can reach, up above Shibuya - but not fast enough, feeling a shadow snap tight around his ankle.

Motherfu-

Reaper Sport 2, Hide and Seek.

Yeah, Neku’s officially out of ideas.

The pins that still work are at least buying him time, though he’s had to discard anything directly offensive for diversion and evasion tactics, flashbangs and portals and black holes that drag in everything in range and that’s when he’s not just teleporting. It’s the only thing fast enough to keep ahead of the Noise, and turning into a dragon is as much a pipe dream as getting back to the RG.

Neku jumps in random scattershot across the district, searching for whatever next step is going to get him out of this. He thinks about going to the fishpad, or to the throne room but without Joshua there they might not be safer than anywhere else and it’s the very last resort, he’s not just going to let her walk into the heart of Shibuya.

He’s staying away from A-East for the same reason, hoping that Saika’s more interested in him than whatever’s left of the Game - is anyone left? He hopes someone’s managed to dodge the
Noise prowling the streets five deep in all directions. Saika’s Noise, the undead Noise and Neku can kill it, can burn it out of existence but it isn’t easy and every time seems to take more effort than the last and it’s /everywhere/. She can afford to wait him out.

A few lesser Noise are scattered here and there, though their movements seem frantic and stilted, twisting in claustrophobic circles, even attacking each other - and Saika’s own Noise pick them out of the air with serpentine speed, twisting them apart the way a child might pop the heads off of flowers. In any place he stays too long, Neku can hear footsteps in the distance, soft laughter - he can feel the darkness she’s spreading across Shibuya like a clinging vine and oh he is so screwed.

Neku jumps, and dodges, and grabs a new bag from its hiding place near Molco when the teleport pin finally falls apart in his hand and jumps again, and there’s no sign of Kariya and every exit out of Shibuya is blocked, the Reapers of the adjoining districts obviously up on what happened to the last set. He’s alone here except for the Noise, and Neku seriously doubts he’s lucky enough that Saika isn’t just keeping track of him that way, skipping along across them like the world’s creepiest transit system.

Where would he go, even if he could leave? Drag all this with him into another ward? Shibuya has him, feeding him power at a steady rate but Neku’s burning through it just as fast and that little resurrection trick with Nao Nao and Sota damn near floored him. If he had any energy left to spare Neku’s sure he would hear Joshua sighing with patient disbelief - bringing back the mostly dead on nothing but instinct and desperation? Neku’s lucky they hit the world with all their parts attached.

Of course he’d had no choice, not when she’d been about to - Neku had saved them, but now he’s down two allies and there’s no telling where Kariya is and his head is throbbing in time with his arm, even healed it still aches. It’s more than just the Noise or the cold, the entire UG feels heavy and bleak and hopeless. A sense that maybe it would better just to let this happen, and Neku can shrug it off but it doesn’t stay gone, kicking its heels and waiting at the edge of every moment.

He stumbles into the 104, and through the unlocked door of le Grand because awkward romantic vibes aside, HT Masouka is a really fucking decent guy and when Neku called and asked him to leave the shop door open for the night he’d agreed, no questions asked.

The bullet twinges in his shoulder, annoyed with the jump from UG to this middle space. It’s probably not much safer than the streets but Neku can’t see any Noise and even the illusion of safety is a relief.

Of course it’s eerie with just the security lights on, but the tidiness of the rows of clothes, the smell of cheap carpet and fresh cotton nearly brings tears to his eyes, and Neku leans against the wall and breathes between mouthfuls of everything in the bag he’d stashed just outside the building - snack food, chocolate - all fast calories, and he needs every one.

The pins that haven’t fallen apart yet or turned back into Noise are stronger than ever - he never had much use for Egg Bomb but now it’s practically dancing in his hand. He probably never should have let Beat trade his Gatito pins for that stack of double cheeseburgers in week three. Neku claps a hand over his mouth, smothering a sudden, hysterical giggle that comes from nowhere - and nearly chokes when his phone buzzes.

It’s not Uzuki. He still braces himself.

“Hello?”
“It’s him! No, no I got him!” A scuffling sound from the other sound of the phone - something’s going on, though Neku can’t figure out what. “Yeah, you told us to call you if anything weird - shit!”

It’s his Reapers, the ones who’d helped him with the video. Neku hears a distant shout, more movement, and thinks he hears ‘hectopascal’ among the chaos, and what could be a very distant, tinny song. Maybe a radio, or it could be live. Did they make it to A-East?

“Where are you? What’s happening?”

As if Neku can’t guess. As if there’s anything at all he can do for them, whatever trouble they’re in. He can barely even hear them anymore.

“… Freaking Noise!… and the Players… we need…”

The call disconnects, or the Reaper hangs up, or whatever worse options Neku wants to consider. He nearly loses his grip on the phone when it suddenly buzzes again.

“Hello?”

“Neku? It’s Brede. Where are you? Is everything all right?”

It’s not like they’re friends, but just the sound of another person out there, not stuck in the middle of this, is enough to overwhelm him for a moment, and Neku has to force back a sob.

“You have to help. The Angels - they’re gone. Your friends are gone, she made them… I don’t know what she made them!” Neku blurts out, aware he’s going to start babbling and not remember how to stop. “I told you, I told you what she was and now she’s - and they went after Kariya and I don’t know if he’s still alive and she’s here and I can’t fight her and the Noise won’t die and I can’t-“

“Neku, slow down.” An authoritative tone that unnerves him simply by being too calm - no one could know what’s going on and be so calm, not even an Angel - and Neku takes a deep breath, and another, not that it helps. “What do you mean, dead? Erased? Kariya is there with you now?”

“He’s not here and she didn’t Erase them - she, she turned the Angels into Noise, something worse than Noise. She made them like she is, they’re not people anymore-“

“Neku, that’s not how a Fallen-“

“Then she’s not a Fallen!” Neku hisses, his voice so tight and high it barely sounds like his own. “It doesn’t matter what she is, she’s going to take Shibuya and I can’t stop her! There’s Noise everywhere and I don’t know if the Players or the Reapers are - tell the Higher Plane they need to get down here, right now!”

“Neku…” Just his name, only that, but there’s something in the Angel’s tone that makes Neku’s blood seize up in his veins.

“Nobody’s coming, are they?” He says, quietly, surprised by how steady his voice is, and a small, dark murmur uncurls across his thoughts. You knew it. You need people and this is how it goes. Josh pulled the trigger, there at the end, and even with your friends… in the end, you were alone.

“Neku, it’s all right. We’ll…“

“You won’t get here in time.” He’s certain of it. Otherwise, they’d already be here. If they knew
what they were doing, the other Angels wouldn’t be gone. “You never had a plan for this, and now I-“

A whisper of static, and then Saika chuckles over the line.

“Spoiler warning, much?”

Neku looks to the door of the store and she’s not there but the Noise are - all of them, piling up outside the windows so that there’s nothing else to see eyes and fangs in the dark, and something’s cracking, whatever barrier between realms that keeps them from coming inside and Neku jumps - the Scramble, and one of his last supply drops and there’s people there at least, even with the Red Pins there’d been people there and he can get in and get out and -

Neku hits the street and nearly drops where he’s standing, gravity suddenly cranking up to crush depth and wide, dark lines twisting back and forth in complex patterns all across the pavement, up onto the curbs, marks that burn his eyes as he stares at them and oh yeah definitely reminding him of the Taboo Noise - this is a trap, Neku, this is what traps look like - and he tries to teleport, to jump but his feet barely leave the ground.

The screen above the Scramble flickers, and a picture flashes by, a girl he doesn’t know, and then a boy, stranger after stranger until Neku thinks he recognizes one of them, can’t remember where until there’s another familiar face, one of his mysterious deaths, one of his files. Face after face - and Neku nearly staggers when Beat’s face flashes by, and Shiki. Bright moments in better days, and he figures it out by the time Kariya shows up, and a few of the other Reapers - she had Uzuki’s phone, it’s not hard to make this personal.

“You know, you’re one of the more interesting things I’ve ever pulled apart.” Saika says, sliding from the shadows with maddening ease.

“Youngest.”

The sound of fingernails against concrete, and Neku lets Shibuya in and the power out, lighting up a circle of safety around him. It scatters the arms nearest him, but does nothing for the dark sigil set into the ground.

“That’s not all me. You get that, right?” Saika says, gesturing to the ripple of fingertips, just beneath the surface, like circling sharks. “They want you entirely for themselves. You can hear it, can’t you?” She rolls her eyes. “I don’t know why they’re so eager to leave. If being out here did them any good, they wouldn’t be there in the first place.” She pauses, considers. “Do you want them? I could give them to you.”

His Reaper’s there, and his two Players, and Neku remembers all those reports, all those names and faces and they would have him down in an instant, that mob of terror and sorrow. He’d disappear just like the Angels had.

“I have to say, Neku, you’re surprisingly eager to protect a group of idiots who’ve left you here to die alone. Of course, that’s never really what you’ve been afraid of, is it? It’s not the dying part you hate the most.”

She has to have a weakness. If Kariya were here, they could take turns trying to figure it out. Maybe he’ll come back. Or what’s left of the Angels will.

“Maybe I won’t kill you. Maybe I’ll just make an example.” She makes a sweeping gesture with one hand. “Do you think I can’t? That I wouldn’t give up on everything else just to make sure you’re never happy again? I can make you alone, Neku. I really can.”
What would Josh do, if he were here? Easy. Josh wouldn’t be here. Which he isn’t - and Neku does have terrible moment to wonder if all of this, all of it is just one more game inside the Game, if he isn’t being watched from some high corner, his poor performance being quietly discussed as the Composer and Producer draw up a list for the next Conductor in line.

“It might be true. What if it is?” Saika says, and Neku feels the spike of icy panic - she’d read that thought, she got in his head and he didn’t even notice. He reaches reflexively for his Player pin, finding nothing now but dark flecks that smear across his fingertips.

“I could take you, Neku. Bury you in the dark. How long would it take, before they’d stop looking? Before you’d forget you ever belonged anywhere else. Maybe your Composer would think about caring, but it would be hard. Nobody likes doing things that are hard. Eventually I’d let you go, see what you could make from the bits and pieces of what’s left over.”

When she says it, Neku can feel it, as if he’s been living it all this time. Shame and sorrow and not a single scrap of hope. Day after day of remembering what he’d lost, adrift inside nothing that still resembled a life.

“Blind you. Shatter you.” She counts off disasters, one long, lazy finger after another. “Carpal tunnel in your drawing hand? Ooh, maybe a degenerative nerve disorder, something that doesn’t respond to medication. Or I’ll just take the UG away from you. I bet I could. No more Conductor. You’d be safe from me, then. I could save you. Ask me to save you, Neku.”

He throws a bus. It won’t stop her, probably won’t do more than annoy her but he needs every second he can get.

Neku reaches for Shibuya, pulls as hard as he ever has - and then he’s listening to Def March, like he’s right in the middle of the show. The crowd’s excitement and 777 singing - and the Reapers, and the Players. Still alive and fighting, and they need him not to let them down. They need him to fight.

Neku draws the netsuke blade, a line of silver so bright it could be burning against the dark, as a dark scythe slices the bus neatly in half.

“So maybe I’ll just wear you like a cheap suit.” Saika says softly, the long spike of shadows coalescing in her hand. “Crawl inside you and never come out.”

He doesn’t have the chance to take a breath before they’re fighting. It’s so fast Neku swears he’s seeing the fight in snapshots, single frames of action timed to the chime of his sword hitting Saika’s spear - and he twists out of the way as another edge of darkness juts out impossibly from the side of her weapon - and another, and another.

It’s a battle of angles and bad internet memes - spears that grow swords that grow swords - and as Neku knocks them out of her hand or breaks them from the main they stick in the ground all around the Crossing and they grow. Out and up and around them, a forest of razor-sharp spines, bladed branches twining together with a sound like slowly splintering glass.

Saika flicks her hand, snapping branches taller than he is free and sending them scraping across the space that remains, Neku darting back and forth through margins that get smaller and smaller, holding his attacks, letting Shibuya’s power build. Waiting for 777 to hit the high note on the bitchin guitar solo on what’s going to be his favorite Def March song after tonight, if there is an after tonight.

The band delivers, and he lets the crescendo of power lash out all around him, shattering the
darkness into tiny fragments that spill around Saika’s feet, as she claps slowly, an indulgent smile on her face, glancing around at the phantom crowd that moves around them, and Neku notices that even in that other realm they’re giving Saika her space, moving around where she stands.

“Look at them. Just killing time until the end. Do you ever wonder just how many people really hate their job?” Saika says, studying the outlines of people in the RG as they go by. Neku can imagine her whispering into the right ear for days or weeks, turning tough into unbearable, ensuring those foundations crumble. “Store clerks and scientists. Bus drivers. The police. The power company?”

What is she even-

“Hey, Neku. Watch this.”

Saika raises a hand, snaps her fingers, and all the lights go out.

The shadows lash him down and down, a dark whip dropping freely through buildings and across streets with Kariya at its end and he hits the ground with a force that shatters the Noise for a block in all directions, and he can hear nothing past the ringing in his ears. Kariya has no idea where he’s been flung and attempting to leap to his feet is more of a slow, tortured crawl to his knees and as he reaches for his sword its flicked away, the shadows simmering underneath him and his whole body still numb and reeling from the blow - he can recover, it’s a matter of moments but Kariya sees the darkness already closing in and yeah, those are moments he won’t have.

Kariya braces himself for the hit - it’s going to be a bad one - but a hail of bullets strike the Angel mid-lunge, knocking it just off-balance enough that Kariya can roll out of the way, and he’s up and moving, one step to grab his sword and two more to block the succession of strikes that attempt to skewer Uzuki, who retaliates with another full round of gunfire.

Does Saika know she’s here? Did Uzuki slip away or did Saika let her go? Maybe this is just another kind of torture, allowing Uzuki to come and fight because she’s /that/ confident Kariya will lose. Or could it be that Neku’s actually got her on the ropes?

Not like it matters. If she’s here to stab him in the back his odds aren’t that much worse.

Puck passing is essential for the Players, one of those things that separates Day Three from Day Four, what saves them when things get really bad and screws them when they refuse to care. For Reapers it’s nowhere near as convenient. The fights where it matters only happen on the last day, and trust and partnership aren’t real high on the list of necessary Reaper skills and quite possibly a bad idea.

So he hadn’t expected it, the day she’d launched an attack against a more competent than usual pair of Players and Kariya felt the ebb and flow of power slide his way and Uzuki had been so startled when he’d tossed it back her way that she’d fumbled her shot and the Players had escaped. Kind of adorable, really, how embarrassed she was about it. Still, they did it then and they can do it now and it would be really great if it actually saved their asses.

Whatever Saika might say, the Angels don’t hesitate to launch themselves at Uzuki, every strike meant to kill and she’s nowhere as fast as he is, Kariya in between them, blocking their attacks and then stepping away for Uzuki to launch another barrage and it might not look like much but Kariya can feel the power building with each successive pass, and Uzuki is fighting with all her usual stubborn determination even now, even when her shots practically glance off and she must think
she’s not doing any damage at all, she still is fighting. She won’t leave him.

Kariya should have seen it, the hurt she’s been carrying all this time, hating herself so much that this thing could get its claws in. It’s his fault too, if she didn’t trust him enough to tell him how she felt, to think that he wouldn’t care.

Just a little bit more, the sword practically humming in his grasp and Kariya lets the Angels lead, lashing out like wild animals and battering them back but it doesn’t matter, he just needs that little more -

The power snaps off, all Shibuya thrown into darkness and he hears Uzuki breathe in sharply - stunned, off-balance in exactly the wrong moment and Kariya’s moving, doesn’t think just moves -

The Angel’s hand goes straight through his ribcage, Kariya can feel it flex its fingers against his back, and then a second hand through his stomach, gripping his spine, his whole body going slack from the pain.

*Never let your sword fall, Koki.* Orders from a teacher centuries gone, still fresh in his mind. *Never let it waver, and never let go, not even in death.*

His grip tightens.

Uzuki screams in fury, brings her gun up to the Angel’s temple and fires, gray eyes rolling as its teeth snap but it’s blasted back out of him - *the sword the sword the sword* - and she’s shooting the other one twice, three times and it lets go of him, staggering a single step but nothing more. Ready to attack again but now Kariya has the puck and the sword and he lets every bit of Fallen-killing power flow into the swing as he brings it up, a diagonal slice that cauterizes the darkness, two former Angels in four fading pieces on the ground.

Which is great, really, except that he’s still got a couple of arm-sized holes punched in him. He should probably… something…

“Right.” Kariya gasps. “I guess I owe you lunch.”

He tries to turn, to look at her, and the world tilts. Kariya takes two stumbling steps to the side, and doesn’t remember the third.

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Def March holds the line.

Everyone’s attention is on him, except near the doors where Minamimoto’s yelling orders to a makeshift mix of Reapers and Players fighting to keep the Noise on the other side of the door while not being dragged out with them, Higashizawa with two injured Players half-clinging to his back, trying to protect them even though he’s alive and the Noise will go right through him if they get inside and so they better make sure that doesn’t happen.

777’s screaming his way through song seven or eight - he’s lost count - his voice past shot and his hands aching, rivulets of sweat running in all directions. It’s nearly the end of the set, they’ve already blown through both of their encores and most of the songs on the album they hadn’t intended to play. It’ll be covers soon, but they haven’t rehearsed anything solid enough that he’s sure it can keep up this momentum.

Which is when the lights go out.
It’s not the first time he’s blown a fuse, but when his guitar suddenly shorts out and 777 opens his eyes and sees nothing his first thought is that somehow he just got Erased again, and his second thought is a very emphatic ‘fuck’.

A scream, then, and he realizes he hasn’t been wiped from existence - the power’s out, all the power and that can’t possibly be a coincidence.

“Nobody panic!” 777 yells, because they’re packed in too tight and if they do, people are going to get hurt, and then the Reapers and the Players are screwed and for all he knows he’ll be dessert. So instead, he straightens up and cocks his hip even though he can’t see his hand in front of his face, and 777 acts like a damn rock star.

“Everything’s all right, right? We just rocked hard enough to shut down Tokyo. No problem. We’re not afraid of the dark.”

A bit of nervous laughter, and then a light in the crowd, and another, everyone’s cell phones turning into unimpressive lanterns, but with a couple hundred of them the audience doesn’t seem quite as ready to freak out. 777 can’t hear anything from the back of the room, but if Def March was the only thing keeping the Noise at bay that won’t last long.

“What do we do?” BJ whispers. “Man, what do we do?”

“It’s okay, I’m on it.” 777 says, somewhat surprised at himself as he steps back up to the front of the stage. He’s only got the one thing he can really do, and there’s nothing that says he can’t still do it.

Damn it, he even knows which song to play.

“I didn’t plan on doing this tonight, but since I’ve got you all here, I might as well play you a little acoustic jam I’ve been working on-“

He didn’t think Tenho was listening, let alone paying attention, but as 777 picks out a few notes on his now whisper-quiet un-electric guitar, BJ is suddenly there with a harmony of his own, and Tenho adds a surprisingly delicate beat, just the barest touch of his hi-hat. Nothing to bury the sound of his voice as 777 sings something painfully close to a song about feelings, about a dumb, brave kid he knows that nobody was ever supposed to hear.

777 doesn’t have a bad voice, even wrecked as it currently is, but Def March is hardly known for their vocal stylings, and certainly not for tender-hearted ballads. Still, it feels right, better than right, and as 777 sings the Noise don’t come in and he can hear the entire audience holding their breath, leaning in to listen, the crowd lighting up with phones all trained in on him and he gives it everything he’s got, for Neku and Shibuya, as if it wasn’t just the arena but the whole world that went dark, and he’s the one keeping that very last ember burning.

Neku can’t see, or hear or there’s nothing to see or hear, or maybe all of that is true. Maybe Saika finally picked her punishment and now he’s down here in the dark, alone, and the only thing left to do is wait to start screaming.

At first, he thinks the glow is just some trick of the nonexistent light, his eyes finally adjusting to oblivion, and then Neku realizes it’s coming from him. The bracelet around his wrist, burning with a pure and steady light, maybe woven from little snips of a star and he thinks of Vancouver and all her ultra-Zen advice and what are the odds this is just some sort of glowstick trinket coincidence?
Except she’d given it to him what seems like ages ago, before he’d even known he would be Conductor. Which… isn’t exactly proof of anything. Dammit.

At least he’s stopped moving. Hit bottom, though when Neku looks down he can only make out the slightest, opalescent glimmer, as if everything below him is one vast, dark mirror - and there’s his reflection - and Neku stumbles back, one more violent jolt of panic than he honestly thought he had in him, because the reflection is another Neku but definitely not him.

It’s shocking for more subtle reasons, nothing overtly ornate in the other him’s appearance - Neku hit the goth harder than that playing the Game, cursing every time Lapin Angelique spiked in popularity in that second week and now he knows Joshua was nudging that along. If anything, he looks like he’s wearing what Neku is, just a Limited Edition Jupiter of the Monkey ‘Paint it Black’ special, and his eyes are pure dark to match, no white or iris, and his wings… his wings are like thin spires and wide, flat planes of crystal, angel feathers made of Reaper’s unbending curves, as intricate as the tatted lace Shiki always pauses over in runway spreads.

*Princess K would shoot him and mount him in the store window.*

Neku tips his head to the left. His reflection tips his to the right. Such a tiny thing shouldn’t be so unnerving, but Neku can’t help but think about how they’re standing in the exact same spot, the bottoms of their shoes perfectly aligned.

“Listen, I’ve had kind of a day, so if you’re going to destroy me just try not to be too impressed with yourself?”

The other him grins. He doesn’t look any older, but there’s a confidence in the way he carries himself, an air that reminds Neku of Joshua and Mr. H and the Angels. People who don’t have to worry so much about being hurt.

“Are you me? The Angel me, from some other universe?”

The other Neku shakes his head no, still grinning as if it’s a funny idea. He crouches down, moving closer, and puts his hand up flat against… whatever it is Neku is standing on, whatever separates them. He wants Neku to do the same, which seems all kinds of crazy but there’s not exactly anywhere else to go and he has the feeling that if the other him wanted to hurt him, destroy him it wouldn’t exactly be an effort.

Neku reaches down, the hand with the bracelet on it to match his mirror reflection, and the instant they touch he feels it. The same as the Composer party, when he’d stood at the precipice of Manhattan’s power and that was a puddle compared to what stretches out before him now. A sea, a universe - there’s no real way to measure the immeasurable. It doesn’t get bigger than this.

“Are you… a Fallen me?”

The other Neku shakes his head again - also no - and Neku realizes what they’re standing on, standing in with his hand half-submerged is Saika’s sigil, the very heart of the power she’s placed in his UG - and it’s cool, and calm and there’s a gravity to the shadows but nothing Taboo, nothing twisted or ugly about it. It’s just quiet, the sort of silence Neku had craved during the Game, the kind he’d sought out now and then even afterward.

“A power that doesn’t fight him, winding around his fingers in a gentle current - and Neku knows if he clenched his fist, if he pulled - it would be his. As easy as that. Power in the UG flows to the one who understands it best, and Neku knows this like his own heartbeat.
“So… what, I’m supposed to jack entropy?!?”

The other Neku doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t have to - he already made the choice. Whatever Frequency Neku’s been pulled into, he sincerely doubts the same rules of time and space apply and so this probably is him.

A future him, returning for the moment of his own creation, the moment he slips free of all boundaries.

The bracelet dims slightly, tiny slivers of light crumbling away.

He could take Saika’s power away from her and make it his own. Free all those trapped souls - he doesn’t need them. He doesn’t have to be cruel. He doesn’t have to be anything. Everyone in Shibuya will be safe, and the Higher Plane - well, he could deal with them however he wanted.

“If I do this, there’s no going back, is there?” Neku says. “I’ll save everyone, but I’ll lose them too.”

It’s been hard enough pretending at a normal life with one foot in the Game, and with every change in perspective, every shift up the Frequencies it’s harder and harder to remember that Neku he was at the start. He’s been cast across worlds and snipped the threads of life and been to the moon, watching life play out on a world he could hold in his hand.

If he does this now, if he chooses this path he’ll be something even Joshua can’t touch. No more meeting up with friends after classes, or hating every sketch in his sketchbook and trying to do better. No more daring Beat to shove his ice cream on his burger and watching him eat the whole thing in three bites. No college. No shitty first job or slightly less shitty second job or someday hanging his art in a gallery or seeing it on the cover of a magazine.

No fear. No doubt. No struggle. No failure.

No living.

Slowly, Neku pulls his hand back.

“I can’t do it. I’m sorry. Maybe I’m supposed to, but I… I can’t.”

The other him doesn’t look disappointed with his decision, although he’s so serene it’s hard to tell and for a moment Neku wants nothing more desperately than to be him, to already know how this is all going to turn out.

He has the terrible suspicion that he’s just refused to give up on a world he’s not going to get to keep.

“I don’t suppose you could kick her ass for me before you go?”

A smile, but that’s not how it works. Neku made his choice, which means this reflection of him is less real than it ever was and fading fast, though it does give him a nod, stretching back up to full height, wings seeming to blur as the intricate feathers slip and settle into place. A raise of one eyebrow - is he ready?

No. No, Neku really isn’t but that’s not an option. The last few wisps of the bracelet are burning away - he has a scar there now, all around his wrist in the shape of the knotwork, though it never even hurt.
The light dims, and goes out.

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Neku blinks, and he’s standing back in the Scramble, though there’s nothing welcoming about that with all the lights out. A shiver goes up his spine but Shibuya crashes into him in the next moment, dulling the fear and wherever he went it seems like no time at all has passed - Saika there in the center of a darkened crossing, looking at him as if he’d never been gone.

“Now, for my next trick, I’ll need some help from the audience.”

Saika raises a hand, and Neku braces himself for the attack - but it’s not him she’s sending the Noise after. All around them in the Scramble, in the RG people are milling about, trying to connect to a working cell tower, to figure out how far the blackout’s spread. Neku can see the ghostly outline of a small accident, one car tapping another in the dark though it doesn’t seem like anyone was injured, a group of people studying the scene for damage.

The Noise swirls up around her and bursts out like water from a main - Neku can see it latch on to people, a few of them even staggering slightly, swaying - and then the arguments start. Honking horns and shouting, a few people crying out in pain or panic. An instant riot, as the Noise pile on and feed.

Shibuya sings a high note of fury and Neku goes, blade out - half the Noise falling just to get right back up again. Attacking them one at a time is less than useless and he steps back, pulls in the district’s power and raises the Frequency of the whole area. It worked before, but there weren’t as many Noise as there are now, but Neku holds it, just lucky that Shibuya likes him this much -

He thought he’d kept an eye on Saika, aware this was a move to divide his attention, to distract him - and she still nearly gets him, a razor-sharp lunge toward his heart so fierce and fast that even the wake of it takes his breath away. Neku stumbles back, Saika slicing through two UG cars as she spins to face him. At least the Noise are no longer attacking the RG, people staring in stunned confusion around the Crossing, or already moving away, forgetting dark feelings that hadn’t belonged to them.

A good thing Saika hadn’t managed to connect, with Neku so close to the district, drawing so much power. If she’d hit him then, it might have even-

Oh. Exactly.

“… you were lying, weren’t you?” Neku says.

Saika nods. “Most likely. Care to specify?”

“You don’t break Games early. That’s not how you kill Composers.” He’s rewarded with that slow, shark’s smile. “You take your time.”

“Why, Conductor, whatever could you mean?”

All this fighting, and he hasn’t even scratched her, has he? The power he’s throwing, and she’s just devouring it all. Anything that looks like he’s gaining an advantage is just what she wants him to see, to make him think he has a chance. So that Neku will pull in more and more of Shibuya’s power for a decisive strike - and that’s when she’ll attack, take him and the district with the same blow.

all this is.”

She’s not wrong, not enough.

“It really should be your Composer here, not that you’re not the prettiest little martyr.” Saika moves slowly, each step deliberate and precise. “Just think about how many people could have stopped what I’m about to do to you, and they didn’t. Everyone ran out and left you to pick up the tab. When it all comes down to it, Neku, you are just not worth more than it takes to regret you.” Saika shakes her head. “The most memorable thing about you is the stories they’ll tell afterward to make themselves feel better.”

If Neku doesn’t want her to take Shibuya - there’s only one choice left to make.

“Terrible things happen, for no reason at all, and you get up and you keep pretending that getting up matters until the day you can’t anymore and that’s it. That’s the whole story.” Saika says. “You’re either the one who keeps getting up, or you’re the terrible thing.”

Just more gloating, the way she’s been doing all this time, but there’s an odd, grating note at the edge of it - he’s not going to be interesting for much longer, and absolute power sounds like a great idea at first but how soon before it’s just a matter of moving blank-faced dolls around from one room to the next? Giving monologues to the biggest, emptiest room.

“You don’t feel anything anymore, do you?” Neku says. “You can’t, even if you wanted to.”

Saika’s gaze is unreadable, but the smile looks, just for a moment, pasted on.

“This is your big moment, right? All that work, all that time and you want this to feel good - but it doesn’t. Not really. It’s still just one more thing.” Neku says. “It wasn’t always like this, but you can’t remember how to go back. What goes for me goes for you too, and if this isn’t enough, if you win all this and it still doesn’t matter because you don’t care…”

“So prove me wrong, Conductor. If you’ve got it all figured out, then cut me down and save the day.” Saika spreads her arms wide, and Neku doesn’t buy it for a moment that he can, but she’s not smiling, and there’s something hovering at the very edge of her gaze that says maybe she wishes he could. “Go on, Neku. One free shot. You deserve it.”

Shibuya is so beautiful. Neku lets himself feel it all, just for a moment, every single person who’s left their mark and all the people now, all their dreams and desires. Def March in a crowded hall, 777 singing to an entirely reverent silence. A painter in an apartment three streets up from Spain Hill, holding a flashlight in his teeth so he can see his canvas. A girl on the other side of the city who doesn’t even need the light to practice her piano. He thinks about the moon, and stupid Brede and his stupid useless Angel ego and Mr. H, dispensing worldly wisdom while failing yet again to draw anything useful on top of a latte and this is it, isn’t it?

This is his life flashing before his eyes. Shiki’s smile and Beat’s laugh, all of Kariya’s thoughtful silences pretending to be apathy.

Joshua, with that obnoxious sly smirk whenever he thinks he’s being the most clever creature in the universe which is all the time and that quiet, proud half-smile when he’s listening to Shibuya sing and Neku feels a rush of love and longing and fear which isn’t bravery, but it’s all he’s going to get.

Neku breathes in, hands clenching into fists, summoning every last bit of what Shibuya can offer, drawing the power up until his wings are quivering - and then he lets his hands go slack, and jumps
back, drops to his knee and lets those chalk-dust fingers dig into his arms and Neku pulls with everything he’s got.

It’s bad, worse than trying to change his vibe, worse than saving Nao Nao and Sota. It’s like trying to move the core of the Earth and Neku pulls, and pulls and then there’s a person he’s dragging up out of the pavement, the features barely human but Neku hears it let out a sob of relief, a gasp as it fades to nothing - free, and there’s another and another and a sound drowning out everything as Saika screams for the first time in real rage and real pain.

*Huh, so that’s how it works...* Neku thinks dizzily, but it’s knowledge won at too high a cost. A half-dozen freed from her grip, barely a dent in their numbers and he’s nearly out of power, everything he had going into that minuscule jailbreak and Saika is already recovering and her fury shivers through the sigil under his feet - this is going to be bad, and Neku forces his attention back to the street and he pulls and he pulls, dragging more and more phantoms free -

Maybe it’s just luck. Maybe Shibuya acted like a beacon, drawing its own back home. All Neku knows is that there’s not a cell in his body that isn’t screaming from the strain and even his wings are flapping, anything to get leverage because it isn’t just one body that comes up - they’re holding hands. One, two, three - his Players and his Reaper, the ones Saika took. Sprawled across the ground at his feet, pale and still but whole and not empty shadows, and they don’t disappear in front of his eyes.

Neku lunges, half sure it won’t work but maybe Saika only wanted to trap him here, maybe he’s loosened her hold just long enough and he has to /try/. He focuses everything he has on thinking them free, puts all his will and the last scrap of his power on that thought to send them on - hopefully to the arena, where 777 and the others might still be alive. Anywhere is better than here - and then they’re gone, as Neku lets himself drop to his knees. He’s overdrawn in every possible direction, shoulder screaming, his mind a blank blur - and the next strike hits him full-on, Saika sending him flying halfway across the Scramble.

“All right, I admit it.” A snarl. Neku can’t help but feel a vague note of triumph, even though he knows what he’ll have to pay for it. “I underestimated you.”

He makes a meager attempt to at least get his hands up in front of his face as Saika hits him again, and again, lashes of power that toss him back and forth through the air and then back down to the ground at a shattering speed.

Shibuya reaches for him, desperate to protect, to strike back - and Neku can’t let it, refuses to let the district in. Allowing every last bit of his power to drain away, until he’s an empty paper bag in front of a hurricane. Nothing more than a Player again, alone on day one and there’s only one thing that happens to Players without partners.

“You think you figured me out, then? You think it’s going to make a difference?”

Of course she drags him up by the neck, shadows curling tight around his throat. Neku lashes out with the blade, but a quick strike from Saika sends it clattering out into the night.

“Do you even understand what you’ve done? What’s going to happen when you’re gone? Did you ever read up in that little manual of yours, about the Emergency Call?”

Saika gestures behind her, a sweeping circle that takes in the district and maybe much more.

“The Shibuya Game is over. Forever. I could leave right now and they’d still level everything, just to make sure I’m gone. All those little Players of yours, all those Reapers you fought so hard to
save? Your Producer? Your Composer?” Saika shakes her head, as if in pity. “You tried so hard and I win anyway. Just like I said I would.”

He lets out a small, wounded sound before he can even think to stop it, and Saika laughs.

“Oh, but Neku, that’s not even the /best/ part. You went after the Higher Plane, didn’t you? Made your little movie, got everyone all riled up. Now when you die here tonight, in a sealed-off district with an annihilated Game, how many of them will believe the Higher Plane didn’t target you on purpose, didn’t just have you killed for daring to ruffle their feathers?”

Neku can’t breathe. Saika leans in.

“A good thing you were so popular, isn’t it? All those friendships. They’ll be angry, knowing you were cut down like that, and they’re already so scared, so pissed off. Who knows what might happen next?”

Saika rubs her hands together, slowly. Darkness twines around her feet in vast, serpentine coils.

“The story goes like this. Once the last scraps of trust disappear, and everyone is angry and suspicious - I do what I do best. Erase a Conductor here, an Angel there, the right Game collapsing and another Emergency Call - and let’s not even talk about what that does to the real world. You think those numbers you had on me were good before? And then… oh, then the Composers start going mad, and the then Angels will argue about stopping all the Games - and wouldn’t you know - they’re fighting and they’re Falling and who knows where that will end. All because of you, Neku. All because you cared so much.” A private smile, just for him, full of so much malice and certainty - this is how it goes, this is how little it means- and she’s reading his Vibe again, drunk on his horror and there’s nothing he can do to stop it.

“I guess the world really does end with you.”

He’s dropped to his feet, and before Neku can fall on his own the lash to the back of his knees hits with crushing force, and Neku goes down hard, barely catching himself on trembling hands.

“It’s all right, Neku, don’t take it too hard.” Saika says, her voice gentle - an encouraging sempai. “You did your best. You tried, and they say that’s what really counts.”

She sighs, steeples her hands together. The shadows close in.

“It really is okay. Nothing lasts forever, not even me. It’ll all come back around again eventually, with kittens and rainbows and sunshine. Just, you know - not today.”

He’s not getting any air in no matter how hard he tries, straining against the darkness, screaming through gritted teeth as it tightens its hold, as the tendrils rise up, weaving through all the narrow spaces in his wings as his heartbeat stutters.

Oh no, oh no no no…

Josh… It doesn’t even have a meaning anymore, though it did once, and Neku holds on to that memory of a memory, hopes he did at least that right, whatever it was. Maybe he still saved what needed to be saved.

A blow smashes into his jaw, snaps his head to the side, and Neku spins, falls - feels the foot in his back, Saika slamming him into the ground. His head is forced back, nothing to do but look up into her eyes, glinting. The look on Saika’s face is thoughtful, almost gentle now.
The shadows flex and his wings are fanned wide beneath the agony of increasing pressure, pulled too far and too high and Neku cries out, back arched, Saika’s hand just resting against his throat.

“Well, this was fun.”

One violent, guillotine snap, a twist and a pull.

His wings tear away, and Neku tears with them.

Chapter End Notes

1. Chapter Title - Livin in the Sunlight, Lovin in the Moonlight - Tiny Tim. Yes, really. I always thought it would make for some hilarious epic fight music. The track list for this chapter was pretty extensive. Beck’s Little One, Smashing Pumpkins’ The End is the Beginning is the End, Muse’s Apocalypse Please or Take a Bow, Konagihishoka - the ending theme for Forbidden Siren 2 and Radiohead’s Like Spinning Plates all featured heavily in rotation.
“Tokyo’s gone dark.”

In any other circumstances, adding chaos to mayhem would be a cause for celebration. Joshua would love nothing more than to sit back and watch the Higher Plane eat itself, a game of tug-of-war with everyone already in the mud and trying to strangle each other with the rope - except they’re all silent now, Minato freezing the entire hall in place just as effectively as he’d nearly started a riot the moment before.

“Over half the city’s affected. At least seventeen wards. Including Shibuya.”

A power outage is a matter for the mundane world, not the Game. Barely of notice even in those places in the world where rolling blackouts are a fact of life. Except this is here and now, with Joshua’s district past most reasonable definitions of the word ‘control,’ with the Angels locking it down from the outside and that doesn’t happen for no reason - and there’s Brede, working his way to the front of the crowd with his phone still at his ear.

He’s showing his hand, to push right up to the edge of the dais where the Higher Plane holds court. It’s even more unnerving that he doesn’t seem to care.

Hanekoma’s asking him a question, and beyond that Minato’s still talking but Joshua ignores them both, keeping his eyes on Brede, wishing he had one atom’s worth of power, a heartbeat’s worth of connection to his district. As if his precognition hasn’t been passing him cheat sheets all this time, no fault but his own that he’s failed the test.

Neku’s Soul is blindingly brilliant - Joshua should know, he’d chipped a fair share of those facets himself. All for his pride, to mock the Angels, to turn Neku into something... irresistible, to anything out there that might want to take a bite.

He may have made a terrible mistake, and not at all the one he thought he was making.

Manhattan is gone. The unhinged canary in this little coal mine has left without fanfare or warning, and the rest of the boroughs quickly follow suit. Returning home to batten the hatches and fortify the defenses, because the Higher Plane tearing itself apart is apparently no longer the biggest problem they’re facing, and Joshua feels the first twinge of true foreboding like an ice chip under his tongue.

Neku hated being alone, being left behind - and Joshua knew that, and he left anyway.

“Reinstate me.” Joshua rises, speaking to the Higher Plane but with his attention on Brede. “Return Shibuya to my care, and I’ll let your pet prosecutor back inside. Everyone likes the path of least resistance.”

It’s never going to work, they won’t listen. Or they will, but only after some interminable amount of time they don’t have - they don’t have this time, and even as Joshua thinks it, even as he’s compiling the first of an endless landslide of arguments to bury the Higher Plane in until they concede the point, the whole world upends itself in one violent, agonizing jolt, and Joshua is slammed to the floor.

It’s the tattoo, Neku’s gift, pinning him in place like a moth to a maelstrom and Joshua can feel the line of that connection traced straight down through him, all the way to Shibuya - can feel it as it begins to crack and splinter. As he can see through his hands, to the floor, like a negative burning
away in the sun.

His district is screaming, grief and horror, a cannonball through a house of mirrors, fragments upon fragments and Shibuya howls and Joshua feels himself crumbling in the wake of it. At a great distance, he can see Hanekoma shouting - to him, to the Higher Plane. There’s just enough focus left in him to think that he’s never actually seen Sanae panic before. It’s not a great look, hysterics don’t do him any favors.

Shibuya’s Music carves through him like a razor dragged along overtight strings, hysteric grief popping one right after the next, twisting notes into impossible heights of pain until Joshua can’t feel anything else, aware that he’s down on the ground with whatever whisper of will he’s still made of caught in it, twisting like a kite at the end of an impossibly long string. Maybe his distance from the district, censure on top of censure on top of whatever it was Shibuya itself did to him, maybe that’s the only thing keeping it from hurting worse, from destroying him outright.

Which is probably why the Higher Plane chooses that moment to give it all back.

Either it fixes Shibuya fast or Erases him in an instant - win-win - but they don’t know Joshua, they’ve never understood him or his district as well as they think they do, and feeling that agony amplified a thousandfold just makes things sharper, clearer than they’ve been since he was censured. It’s his element, no matter how hostile or broken, and this is what he is and exactly where he belongs.

*I have you. It’s all right. I’m here, I’m here.*

Joshua lets it all in, lets the panic and fear fill him until it spills over, sharp and unforgiving as ice water, a deluge in every space that had been parched dry for far too long. Whatever the city felt for him before, any anger or disappointment has been replaced with fear and confusion, by an attack it doesn’t understand, the kind of brutal rending that isn’t supposed to happen under normal rules. Joshua’s strong enough, he can stand there and let those waves of panic ebb, hear the Music soothe from its panicked, high staccato and there’s a part of him calming Shibuya - the perfect, untouchable Composer - as another, quieter part notices what he’d been hearing from the start: his Conductor isn’t there, the only trace of Neku left in the Music is Shibuya grieving his loss, calling out in plaintive melodies that receive no reply.

Neku’s still human. He can’t be Erased. If he were dead then he wouldn’t be human anymore and still wouldn’t be Erased because Joshua wouldn’t allow it. Will not allow it.

Calmly, as he pushes the pain to the side, as he gets to his feet, the Composer of Shibuya begins composing a very simple list of what’s going to happen next.

One - Return to his district, and see exactly what he’s been left to work with.

Two - Find Neku, and repair the damage done.

Three - Figure out who is responsible. Make a list. Check it twice.

Four - An unholy amount of violence. Which will certainly - perhaps even literally - bleed into steps five through however many it takes for Joshua to stop feeling the way he currently does, or until he runs out of pieces of his enemies to turn into smaller pieces.


“Josh?”
He opens his eyes. Hanekoma’s looking at him. Everyone’s looking at him. He can feel the blank, chill space, the icy furrows along his spine where Neku’s drawing used to be.

“Composer,” The Higher Plane rumbles, “now that you have-“

“Sorry,” Joshua says, “you’re not on my list.”

In any other circumstances, he’d enjoy the convenience of having the entirety of the Higher Plane in the same room, that he can annoy everyone at the same time. Joshua would savor the surprise and outrage left in his wake, as he vanishes, drops back to Shibuya - but he has work to do.

It’s not that the screaming isn’t nice, but there’s usually a lot more of it. Saika stares down at the Conductor’s body, nudging it with a toe and sighing to herself as logic drains the fun right out of the mayhem. It’s her fault, really, for getting caught up in the moment.

“Riiiiight. You’re still alive. Because that was your thing, being human. I knew that.”

If only by the barest of technicalities. Neku’s gaze is vacant, empty - still breathing, but that’s about as far as it goes.

“Usually it’s more dramatic than this.” Saika nudges him again. “I mean, it was great and all, it was - but maybe sort of just a little bit underwhelming?”

She casts a look around, but their little squabble has vaporized any trace of Noise in the area, and she can’t feel either of her pretty Angels anymore. Even Uzuki’s momentarily slipped the leash - but that’s fine, that’s fun. Saika can track her down later, no problem at all. It’s still pitch black, so the buildings all look abandoned and though there are headlights from slowly moving cars and the shadows of people carefully navigating the Scramble, it all feels more distant than ever. Echoes from a world that’s already fading.

Saika glances back, and lets out a little huff of surprised laughter. The Conductor’s body is nearly invisible beneath a blanket of pale gray arms - they’re shuffling him away from her, working to pull him down, although there’s not enough left of him in the UG for them to get a proper grip.

“Are you trying to protect him, from me? Oh, that is precious.”

The arms scatter, falling away and the Conductor’s body flops to the ground, and Saika had mostly been talking just to talk, threatening him with whatever sounded most fun in the moment but…

“So, yeah… cheap suit? Why not? What do you think - which one of us will do better at being you? ‘Who wore it best’? I doubt it will last long, but I bet we surprise a few of your little friends before they figure it out.” Saika reaches for him. “Imagine the looks on their faces-“

“You leave him alone!”

Saika turns slowly, regarding the little girl standing alone in the middle of the street with a… phone pointed at her. Interesting Music, mostly there but somewhat here. Somewhat Noise.

“Oh. Hello.” Saika glides forward, and the girl takes a half step back but holds her ground - oh, wonderful. Brave is good. Brave is always more fun. “What are you supposed to be?”

The girl doesn’t answer. Her eyes are wide, afraid, but she stands her ground and keeps the phone raised.
“Are we taking pictures? For who?” Saika smiles, poses. “You’re one of Neku’s little friends, aren’t you? I’m afraid there’s been a bit of an accident, but I was just about to wake him up.”

“Liar.” The girl smiles back, and it’s not a nice smile, and that’s even more interesting.

“All right, then.” Saika steps slowly forward, until the girl finally loses her nerve, backing slowly away. It would be pretty funny if she accidentally stumbled into traffic, or down a flight of stairs, but obviously she’s considered the route in advance, nothing behind her but pavement.

“It’s not a Player…” Saika takes a swipe, shadowed claws lashing out of the darkness, and the girl jumps back anyway, a little more fear there now. “… but it’s not human either, not completely. I wonder, did it play the Game, once upon a time?”

The girl has the blade in her hands, the one the little Conductor was wielding. It flickers in and out of the UG, the ghost of a memory of anything that might threaten her. Saika pulls at those traces of Noise she can feel, echoes of what the girl once was but nothing comes of it. She only shivers, as if dropped in ice water, scowling - a surprisingly effective look of disdain for her age.

“You’re not that scary. Last time, I got eaten by a shark.”

Saika towers over her, just for a moment, before crouching down so they can face each other eye-to-eye. Moving fast enough that the girl startles, and can’t really hide it.

“You know,” Saika says, “I think I’m not the only liar here.”

Oh yes, she can feel it now, that glittering lure of the real. The places in this girl that remember what they were, that had crossed over. If only Saika could reach out and break through. Smash that barrier between the worlds and wouldn’t that be fun? Wouldn’t that be something new.

Saika reaches out, feeling the space between UG and RG give a little, around her fingertips. Watching the little girl’s hands go white with how hard she’s clutching the blade-that isn’t, still standing her ground but her eyes are wide and fearful, she makes a quiet little sound as reality itself begins to warp and bend and Saika pushes all her will into it, the tip of a knife against a piece of plastic wrap and almost... almost...

It holds. Saika’s focus slips, there just isn’t enough power, and the barrier ripples back into place, undamaged as all her power slides away. Always a next time, though. Always another chance, and when Saika tries again it will be with all the howling tatters of the UG behind her, with the RG buckling, all ashes and falling down.

“Well, here we are.” She sighs. “You can’t hurt me, and I can’t hurt you. So I don’t get to be the monster, and you don’t get to be the hero.”

The little girl smiles, that not-nice smile again.

“I’m not a hero. I’m just a distraction.”

Saika turns on her heel. Never sees the girl slams her hands over her ears, trying to block out the roar of rage wild enough to shake two universes because the place where Neku was is empty.

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