An American in Tokyo

by SarcasticShepard

Summary

Allen Grissom likes knowing what role he plays. Student of engineering, ordinance disposal technician, field agent of the BGA.

However, his employer; the Bureau for Ghoul Affairs has other plans. After a medical emergency, Allen discovers himself the top candidate for an exchange he knew nothing about. Sent to Japan as part of an exercise in collaboration, Allen suddenly finds his personal definition uncertain. Is he an observer, an adviser, an equal or something else entirely?

Working alongside two of the most famous members of the CCG, Allen grows discontent with the world he has entered, despite the respect they command. As blood flows and friction grows, Allen realizes he has already chosen a role. Changing that role, however, may prove to be a fatal choice.
Enter Stage West

I hesitated, stepping off the plane. I had never been this far from home, or felt quite so out of place. Haneda airport, HND, whatever one chose to call it, was the gateway to Japan. Yet to me it could've been a gateway to another planet. Or maybe it just felt off because I had spent half a day cooped up in an aircraft cabin.

Mingling with tourists and natives at the baggage carousel, I probably looked as much an outsider as I felt. My baggage, at least was on time and intact, but I felt less out of place as just another person carrying their bags. There was nobody waiting for me at the terminal, but no sooner had I walked out the door when I was approached by a gentleman in what was a very well-tailored suit.

"Mr. Allen Grissom." The man made a bow. "A pleasure to meet you."

"The same." I bowed back. A first impression, and that's what I chose to say?

He gestured to a waiting sedan and a second man took my bags and put them in the back of the car. Inside was stock but comfortable, a far cry from military life. And my apartment.

"You have quite the interesting choice of apparel."

"My apologies, Investigator Shinohara, my assignment here gave me little notice. I'm afraid this was the only formal clothing I had on hand when I was transferred after Detective Narrow had his…" I dug around in my mind for the right word, "…stroke. My Japanese is somewhat rusty, my apologies."

"It's quite all right, though I'm glad it made finding you easy. Not a lot of people dress quite that formally when traveling."

The engine purring contentedly, the car pulled away from the terminal and joined the throng of traffic weaving into the city.

"I've only worn this when formality required it." I looked out the window, trying to change the subject. "It's a beautiful city. If I have some free time, I would like to explore and see the sights."

"Well, you'll be spending a fair amount of time in the field with our Investigators," Shinohara nodded, his eyes now looking over his home as well, "but I'll make sure they know that you're interested in going out when time allows."

I nodded. My brother had wanted to visit Tokyo, though I had no idea what he wanted to see. What I wanted to do right now was to eat something; I hadn't eaten since before the flight over the Pacific. My stomach gurgled, strangely loud in the car and I apologized again.

"It's quite all right," Shinohara answered with an air of congeniality, "You've had quite a long flight and I'll certainly agree that travel portions rarely satisfy. Since the flight arrived later in the day, we weren't planning on getting you introduced to anybody at the CCG until tomorrow. How about we get some dinner and then we can get you to your lodgings."

I nodded my agreement. Outside the car, the first fingers of dusk stained the skies with streaks. Dinner itself was a simple but intimate affair: we stopped at a small restaurant, which was barely big enough to fit three of us, a kitchen and a chef into an area the size of my college dorm.

Ok, I exaggerate. My dorm room was definitely bigger.
That said, I liked it; the atmosphere was more cozy than cramped and the whole place was filled with the smell of cooking. Shinohara was immediately noticed and greeted by the chef and one of the pair of patrons. They companions made small talk as they ate, and I caught mentions of politics, food and—I think—literature. Both of them were talking faster than I was used to and combine that with the duty of eating and my rusty Japanese meant that I was at a disadvantage.

Throughout the visit, I tried to keep what little I had learned from the book on etiquette in the front of my mind. Likely, I messed up a few things, but I saw the chef with a light smile one or twice, so maybe I didn't butcher everything. When the last of the food had been consumed, the investigator paid and we left the glowing interior into the electric haze of the streets.

The trip to my hotel was almost surreal for the most part; traffic, gaggles of people talking on the sidewalk and taking advantage of the cool night. Still more amazing to me was how polite everyone on the road was—no honking, not tailgating, no shouting and no goddamn goats. If I had to deal with livestock while driving again, it would involve roadkill.

Shinohara pointed out a pair of Investigators at a red light, two gentlemen in white trench coats—probably also wearing suits underneath—talking with a woman at a bus stop. It was strange, seeing suits rather than formal uniforms, but then, I was used to my companions wearing body armor and helmets.

After what felt like an eternity of driving through the streets, we finally arrived at the hotel where I would be staying. Investigator Shinohara told me that he would arrive at eight to pick me up before he left, as staff collected my bags and brought them inside. If he said eight, he meant eight on the dot. The staff got me my room key almost as soon as I walked through the doorway and I was waved to the elevator.

Stressed and tired, I followed their lead gladly. The elevator, instead of having buttons, used my room key to determine which floor to take me to—an intriguing feature. The room itself was almost an apartment, complete with tiny kitchenette, table setup and even a recliner.

For a moment, I wondered how my Japanese counterpart's setup looked. The BGA had residences set up for people who worked and lived on-site, but I had never been in them. Perhaps he too had been put up in an upscale hotel. Probably, maybe, but I'm too tired to care.

My gut distracted from further contemplation with a unhappy gurgle. With a sigh, I kicked off my shoes and walked over to the bathroom without a second thought.
Dawn came with the sound of muffled sounds of agony. I had neglected to make sure the sole window in the room had its blinds drawn, and now I paid the price; a blinding beam right through the eyelids. Rolling away from the stellar assault, I grabbed at my phone from its place on the bedside table. Six forty-five; too early to be awake, but too late to play the dangerous game of hitting snooze. And... one missed call; Robalson, my mentor-slash-superior.

Probably important then.

Dialing voicemail, I let gravity hold the phone as I heard the message, his voice eating away the cobwebs from my head. Then, I replayed it and actually listened to the message.

"Allen, it's Regis. Sorry about you getting into all of this, but when Narrows kicked it and the Director called me... I didn't have much of a chance to warn you. Guess that's what happens when you're only other one in the Bureau with a language proficiency, eh? Like they told you, this exchange program is as much a P.R. op as a way to build 'cooperative relationships'. They wanted me to have you send regular reports, but thanks to your buddy back home, you'll just have a debrief. Shouldn't be too bad. You'll owe me a beer when you get back. And be caref-" The message ended with a abrupt beep.

Careful. My life had revolved around careful since before I had joined the BGA; I had been an ordnance technician—a job which listed being careful as the top requirement. He had a point though. If I treated this as a vacation, I ran the risk of ending up dead or one of several worse fates.

My luggage had only been partially packed by myself; Robalson and one of the guys from the bureau had lent a hand with getting everything loaded up on short notice. I had packed casual clothes, essentials and some of my more formal stuff. On one hand, It made packing three huge bags all that much faster and easier. On the other, I had only a general idea what was in two-thirds of my luggage.

Getting everything properly unpacked could wait until I didn't need to be somewhere.

Deciding to imitate the formal apparel Shinohara had worn was an easy choice; between the packing that I had and hadn't packed, I had almost two weeks worth of outfits. The only thing I really lacked for was ties, mostly because I didn't own a lot to begin with. Which was because I was too picky.

After getting my tie knotted as symmetrically as I could, it was only a quarter to eight, which meant I had time enough to have a quick snack before heading down to meet Shinohara. Opening the last and heaviest of the bags, the dull brown shine of prepacked food winked up at me reassuringly. There was actually a lot here, I noted, attempting a quick count of the packs. At least I would have enough space to bring back a few souvenirs.

The food was exactly what I needed to wake up, despite having to munch down the last of the stringy slab in the elevator. Darn it, I realized, I'm thirsty.

Too late now; I was already in the lobby with no water fountain in sight. And there was Shinohara pulling up outside. At least I probably wouldn't have to run to the bathroom anytime soon.

It was obvious he was a morning person the moment I climbed into the front seat.

"Good morning!" He had changed his tie for a blue one. "How was your night?"
"Excellent, I slept like the dead."

Nakano chuckled, but there was another voice.

"You die when you sleep?"

I twisted to look at the back seat.

"Oh, pardon me," Shinohara explained, "this is Juuzou Suzuya, my partner."

"Nice to meet you." I extended my hand, though all the red stitches were...unsettling. "I don't die when I sleep though, that's just a..." somewhere in my head the Japanese word I sought laughed and hid.

"Metaphor!" Juuzou triumphantly finished. How he could be so energetic in the morning was more unsettling than the red lines crisscrossing his arm and face.

I nodded, smiled and internally kicked myself for forgetting the word before turning back toward the front seat. The ride didn't progress silently for long before Juuzou spoke again.

"Are you an Investigator?"

"The equivalent, yeah."

"Do you hunt Ghouls?"

"When it needs to be done."

"Do you have a Quinque?"

"Not with me, but I have one."

Juuzou kept asking questions all the way to the CCG building. I did my best to answer them without mangling the Japanese too badly. Shinohara kept mostly silent, except when he overrode a few questions on the grounds of them being 'too personal'. Silently, I thanked him; family life was not something I had much to talk about; unless he considered coworkers family.
Foreign Familiarity

The CCG building was what one would expect any governmental building to be; practical, efficient, and slightly dull. There were Rc scanners in the lobby though, an expensive touch. That said, when I had read about them in a magazine and mentioned them to a tech at BGA I had been laughed at. He used a lot of technical terms, but the gist was that they were incredibly expensive to buy, barely funded by their developers, and that trying to get the budget for them would be like squeezing blood from a stone.

I didn't know how true that was, but I wasn't going to make a mention of it. After all, I was here to observe, not advise. Well, unless I was asked.

There were introductions to make and hands to shake, in a never-ending line of new faces and formal friendly greetings. After that, I was treated to a tour of the building, going through various offices, a huge conference room and even down to the Quinque lab in the sub-basement. After that came the paperwork.

Bringing a Quinque across international borders was what I considered an overly complicated process. First, it had to be registered in an international database. Then the user had to travel to the actual country, complete paperwork with the local government and have them approved. After that, you then had to wait for the Quinque to arrive, and sign yet more paperwork upon receipt. Personally, I thought there had to be a better solution, but I was a decade of promotions away from being able to change that.

In this case, my Quinque had been sent on the same flight as I, so it was in fact in lockup at the lab where I was currently filling out the paperwork. There was little doubt the CCG had done the same for their man.

The main reason the BGA was hurrying this along as much as possible was the distinct lack of information on Ghoul activity in Japan. I found it unsurprising; social code here was not to talk about your problems to others, much less the entire world.

From the moment I had stepped in the door, to picking up my Quinque, I was impressed. As somebody who had spent a lot of time on military bases in varying levels of order and formality, everything I saw was...pristine. No disordered desks, no piles of paperwork, no drones dashing through the halls. Maybe the Germans and Japanese had been comparing notes on efficiency. The suits definitely helped that air of professionalism. If I hadn't known this was the CCG, my second guess would be that I was in a high-priced law firm.

I knew better though. There were case sheets pinned to corkboards, attache cases carried and sitting under desks, but most telling were the eyes of most of the staff—like the eye of a hurricane. I had seen enough of that look of to know that there was indeed a lot of action at this office.

For the time being, it looked like I would be working with Shinohara and Juuzou. I didn't mind that; Shin was friendly and laid-back, plus I had a good read on him as a decent guy, if a little sunny in the mornings for my taste. Juuzou was...odd, not just by value of the stitches all over him, and I wasn't sure if he had been questioning me out of curiosity or sizing me up.

Between the Quinque paperwork, the tours and the numerous introductions, it was afternoon by the time we could do anything practical. And by practical, I mean paperwork.

Paperwork in the BGA was all-electronic and had the alluring option of being able to dictate to
text. CCG paperwork was a stark contrast; distinctly-old school—all on actual paper—giving an almost noir-like feeling minus the typewriters and cigarette smoke. Shinohara was nice enough to pass over a few forms for me to look at and I had to admit, they were pretty thorough; meeting minutes, investigative procedures with interviews, Ghoul attack reports. Exhaustive and exhausting. I had never liked paperwork, even if it was requisition forms.

"It's quite a bit," Shinohara's voice derailed my train of thought, "but we get used to it."

"Paperwork sucks." Juuzou was hunched over a form, looking like a child being forced to eat vegetables.

"Military paperwork was worse," I noted, turning over a page, "they had a form for everything." Juuzou's eyes lit up at this admission. "Like what?"

"Almost literally everything," I began, "gear, ammunition, consumables. And they wanted a reason for everything."

"Why's that?"

"Eh, sometimes it made sense, for the sake of accountability or safety." I shrugged, then grinned
"Other times I think the supply officers like to be pests."

Juuzou laughed, a sound that made the hairs on my neck stand on end.

"What's your current investigation?" I tried to relocate the conversation to something less comedic.

"We've been working on the Binge-Eater case," Shinohara passed me a sheaf of field reports, "so far as we can tell, the Ghoul started the pattern in the eleventh ward before moving to the twentieth."

"I see." Literally in this case, as he waved my attention toward a map of the city on a corkboard with a spattering path of red pins.

"We've been running this for a while now, but she—at least we think it's a she—dropped off the radar about...I'd have to go back and check the paperwork to be exact, but coming up on more than a month."

"Might be dead." I noted, without thinking.

I quickly uttered an apology, but Shinohara waved it off.

"It's a likely outcome," he nodded, as Juuzou rolled his eyes. "but in any case, we still need to run down the leads and poke our heads under the usual rocks. We'll probably head to the eleventh district tomorrow to review more files."

Next to him, Juuzou made a noise that sounded like a dog being told he couldn't sit on the couch. He kept himself too busy to do much paperwork though, by way of taking it upon himself to educate me on the wards, CCG procedures and a long list of personal anecdotes. The kid spoke so rapidly that I lost him on more than a few phrases. I didn't have the heart to ask him to slow down.

In any case, the paperwork—mostly done by Shinohara—lasted until the end of the workday, at which point Juuzou was yawning pointedly. Shin took the likely hint, finished his sheet and the three of us left the office. Once again, I was invited to join them for dinner, but this time I had to
decline—jet lag was setting in and I couldn't guarantee that I would stay awake for much longer.

They dropped my off at the hotel, Juuzou waving from the back seat as the car pulled away, Shinohara promising to be back at the same time tomorrow. After the car disappeared around a corner, I wandered off in the other direction, into the city lights. Patting my pocket lightly, I made sure I had the city map one of the guys at the BGA had given me. With it, getting lost wouldn't be a worry. I knew this district, the twentieth, was mostly safe thanks to Juuzou's lecture so I had that going for me as well.

Still, mostly harmless wasn't a guarantee of not being dinner.
Even with that dark thought, the city still stole my breath away.

I found a café about a block away—small place, but not tiny—and ordered a cup of coffee to stave off sleep for a few hours. I had sworn off coffee after what could only be called a finals-induced studying binge almost led to sleeping through the actual exam. Plus, the flavor had never been too appealing. Still, so long as I kept to sane amounts, something like that was easily avoidable. I took a sip and winced. Still tasted like burnt paper.

This could've been any college café in the states; students buried in books, idly chatting over snacks, making doe eyes at one another. Except, it was all so far away from what I knew. Conversations went fast enough that I only caught half of them, reading a college level textbook here would be impossible for me and everything was just a little bit…different.

For a moment, this whole trip could've been a dream—but it wasn't—it was just as real as every wire I had cut or the shoes on my feet. I think everybody has had that feeling; where the world around you changes just subtly enough and it suddenly feels unnatural.

There was one thing similar, I noted wryly as the news came on the TV, every country styled their news the same way; jingle, telecaster at desk, little box with an image. The British probably started that one. I watched the news as best I could, trying to keep up with the newscaster and make sense of the language. Weather was easy, but the rest went mostly over my head.

Politics, science, local events, all oh-so-similar to how the news went back home. The last story on I only got bits and pieces of: a follow-up—I think—about a missing doctor and a scandal. Well, that was what I understood for sure.

After that story, I understood progressively less and less. It was all right though; I had time enough to get better at the language. Six months, actually, so long as relations didn't go bad. Well, that wasn't too much of a worry, and I could only think of a few things outside a declaration of war that would do that. Paying, I left the café and went back into the crowd, my mind suddenly on home and wondering how much dust there would be when I got back home. On the bright side, I wouldn't have to deal with nosy neighbors until I got back.

The coffee wore off more quickly than I expected, and I was sleepy to the point of almost fumbling my keycard when I got to the elevator. My room was just as I had left it, lightly illuminated by the electric constellation through my window. I put away my clothes as neatly as my half-asleep brain allowed, remembered to shut the curtains and flopped into bed. At eight pm. Nothing like early bedtime to make one feel old.

The next morning was a rerun with me appearing on the sidewalk as Shinohara's car pulled up. What was different was that now I craved a cup of coffee—or any morning stimulant—to ward away the morning blahs.

"Any plans for today?"

"Not really," Shin shrugged, "more paperwork to work through on the Binge Eater, then probably back on the beat tomorrow or late in the afternoon."

It was only then I remembered that he had mentioned going to the eleventh ward.

"Would I perhaps be able to look at some older case files?" I tried to keep the request as polite as I
"Yeah, I'll have somebody bring up a few carbon copies from the archives."

Juuzou met us at the offices, looking like a child promised a trip to an amusement park only to arrive at the dentist office.

Shin and I had different views on the word 'some'. That, or I had used the wrong word, because the pile of paperwork I was presented to look through was in the range of several reams of paper. But, it was a lot of cases, enough to see a few patterns. Legwork and informal interviews were a part of every case, not really unexpected, but each set of notes for said interviews were present in the file as well.

The origin points of the investigations were mostly the same as well; typically starting with a partially consumed corpse. Again, not surprising; the…appetite…of Ghouls was the same regardless of where one went. Most of my cases had started in the same manner. Though, one of the clearer separators between my experience and their files were the actual feeding grounds.

Evidence of Ghoul feedings were difficult, but not impossible to hide, which made the locations where the kill was found to be all the more unusual. Alleyways, construction sites, rooftops, parks…to me, it felt as if most of the Ghouls involved in these incidents simply didn't care about being subtle. Back at the BGA, the majority of the remains we found were in dumpsters or sewers. Either the Ghouls here didn't care about hiding their kills, or they were doing it as a challenge-slash-threat.

The final similarity between most of the case files was—ominously—death. The Ghoul always died, sometimes taking a member or two of the CCG in the process, but the Ghoul always died. Was this just a trend in the files I had? Maybe. Were the Ghouls in Tokyo rabidly violent? Possibly. Were the members of the CCG rabidly violent? I snuck a look over at Shin and Juuzou—they had been friendly thus far. Possibly.

Around midday, I was interrupted from a case involving a harpoon by Shinohara.

"Sorry to interrupt, but It looks like you won't be doing much fieldwork with us after all," he looked apologetic; "you're being reassigned to a different pair of Investigators."

"Well, it was an honor to meet you and Juuzou." I bowed to both of them. "If we don't have the occasion to meet again, I wish you both good luck in your work."

And now I'll never get to read how that case ended.

Juuzou nodded earnestly and smiled unsettlingly.

"I'm Junior Investigator Hasuko." The new person stepped forward and bowed. "I'll drive you over to twentieth ward and introduce you to your new assignment."

"After you."
We stayed more or less silent until we had buckled into a CCG cruiser, complete with police lights.

"So you're the Ami, huh? You're bigger than I expected."

"Oh... Thank you." I was slightly confused. "Ami?"

"It's slang for 'American.'" She quickly added, "It's not rude or anything like that, just shorter to say."

"Ah, I see; my Japanese is a little rusty still, so I wasn't too sure what it meant."

"Well, you speak it well, and your accent isn't bad."

We sat silently for a few moments. I got the feeling that she might consider me cute, but right now this car was stewing with informal awkward.

"Is there anything you can tell me about who I'll be working with?" I queried, "I had a file on Shinohara, but I'm walking into this kind of blindly."

"You'll be working with Kotaru Amon and Mado Kureo, two of our more talented investigators; both have extensive records in the field and spend much of their time there." She sounded as if she had memorized all this. "Command moved you to work with them because they wanted you to see a full case early on, and they go through a lot of them."

That's a lot of dead Ghouls.

She started again, this time about their past cases, but I cut in, "That's all good information, but what are they like? I'll be working alongside them in the field, but if I know their personalities, I can get along with them a little more smoothly."

"Oh, hmmm." She thought for a moment. "Amon is always serious about his work, but he's always friendly with the other investigators. Kureo is... eccentric, but he's one of the smartest Investigators on the force and also a genius on the subject of Quinque design."

"Hm." I considered, "Is that the good eccentric or bad eccentric?"

"I couldn't say," she admitted, "I've only known him through reputation."

The conversation died an awkward death after that. I wondered what Doctor Narrow would have been doing, had he not been dead from a stroke. Well, not truly dead, though I would consider being a vegetable essentially dead. I knew that being selected for the trip was less a matter of personal knowledge of Ghouls than me being possibly the only other person in the BGA who could speak Japanese. Basically, I was just a grunt. My place was the field, to be honest; I had never been happy doing desk work.

A bump in the road shifted my focus to what was out the windows. This area we were in appeared to be a quieter area than where the hotel had been yesterday. There were fewer cars on the street, and a lot more young people, most looking to be a few years younger than me. I almost asked another question, this one about where we were, but I thought better. That would probably get answered later.
We weren't at the same CCG building as yesterday. Granted, this one was much the same as the other one I had seen; austere exterior, serious atmosphere, Rc gates we passed by as we walked from the car park. There were no introductions to make this time and instead of going inside, I met the new Investigators by the front doors.

Amon was about the same height as me and would have not looked out of place modeling overpriced suits for a luxury brand. Whereas I definitely could not. He didn't look like he changed his expression much from his 'serious' expression.

Kureo had a face ringed by unkempt hair, resulting in an appearance resembling the recently dead except that his eyes were always moving. He could've passed for an undead Einstein. From the careless look his hair had, his life was his work.

Once Hasuko left, Kureo's first act was to ask to see my Quinque. I declined as politely as I possibly could; citing a proper time and place. The only response I received was a unconcerned shrug from Amon, though Kureo made a sound like a disappointed child. I could've sworn he gave an approving nod. Hoping to move past that, I asked what the plan was for the day.

"Hunting Ghouls, of course!" was Kureo's eager response. "We just stopped by to pick up some intelligence from the office, timed it to meet with you, so as to avoid slowing our work."

"You have field experience, I hope," Amon questioned, "we can't afford to look after your skin in addition to ours."

"I've got plenty of field experience, from the BGA as well as military. I'm far from helpless in a fight, though I'm not familiar with much of the procedure or local area."

For a moment, Kureo looked me over, definitely sizing me up. I'm not deadweight.

"Well then, it appears you've made up your mind." He turned abruptly back toward the elevator, continuing "We've got Ghouls to hunt, so let's not waste more time."

With that, Kureo abruptly nodded to Amon and marched out of the plaza. I doubted he would be interested in talking about the case we were currently working, so I matched pace with Amon instead and asked him. Boy was I wrong. The moment I asked, Kureo immediately slowed his pace to match us and proceeded to detail the whole case to me.
We were hunting Number 696, a Ghoul that—according to Kureo—had been on his list for several months because of his connections to several other possible Ghouls. Our destination, as I understood it, was currently a site where 696 had been seen. Assuming the info was correct.

The weather was about as cooperative as one would expect, steadily clouding up and then dropping a drizzle on our heads. Murphy's Law was an international traveler, it seemed. I didn't mind it too much; a drizzle wouldn't sandblast your face. Amon and Kureo didn't seem to mind much as well, Kureo remarking that the weather would prove useful in deadening the senses of any Ghouls out and about. Oddball that he was, he knew his stuff.

That was how I found myself rooting around on a soggy stretch along with the two Investigators, looking for anything that could help the case. So far, all I had found was either trash or soggy leaves. Amon looked to be having the same luck as I, peering into a storm drain with a blank expression on his face. Kureo was nowhere to be seen.

Until I heard a sound of discovery and turned to see a mop of corpse-white hair appear, waving around what looked like an piece of conduit. Followed by Amon, I approached, studying the object closely.

"That's Qinque steel." I noted, the mottled appearance obvious close up. "Looks like a sprue from a casting."

"Very good." Kureo's voice held a tone of approval. "And this is also an excellent place to begin our investigation."

Amon bagged the metal chunk and tucked it away in his coat.

"So," I asked, "what's the next step?"

"We interview Ghouls, of course."

There was a touch of darkness in Kureo's voice, such that the hairs on the back of my neck prickled. The last time I had this feeling was when an ambushes and booby traps were daily hazards. Right now, I didn't know if we were the ambushes or ambushees.

"When we go in," Amon warned me, as Kureo led us down streets glowing with sunset, "stay back. You might have experience, but Kureo and I have worked together and we don't need you in our way."

As it turned out, I wouldn't have been much help: as soon as Amon saw a Ghoul lurking in an alley, he wounded him, showed the sprue we had recovered, and asked him where it had come from. The Ghoul, in turn, frantically denied knowing what it was for. To their credit, neither Amon nor Kureo seemed disappointed by the lack of information. Then, in a movement much faster than his apparent age suggested, Kureo deployed his Quinque and slashed the unwilling informant across the chest.

I was left with a confused feeling as we left the alleyway. The force Kureo had used seemed… excessive, especially given the lack of context. If nothing else, it suggested that at least one of my earlier thoughts about the number of Ghoul deaths was right. In any case, we took up watch near the alley and to my surprise, the Ghoul Kureo had slashed emerged and stumbled down another side street.
We followed, unsurprisingly, like wolves on a hunt. Kureo adopted an excited tic as we stalked, his eyes wandering about excitedly. It didn't take long to hear voices, one identifiable as the Ghoul we had been following.

Amon and Kureo made an entrance again and produced their Qinques—no ambush this time—then produced the sprue and asked the same question of their eager informants. The new Ghoul knew nothing either. The line of questioning exhausted, Kureo ran the original Ghoul through with the air of one skewing an appetizer on a toothpick. Neither made any move toward the second Ghoul, who took the opportunity to run for his life.

I had an idea of what was going on now; they were running up the chain of information. I had heard of a similar technique while I was in the military; surveillance would watch couriers or saboteurs transfer packages from one to the other, until they reached a VIP or their final destination. Then we'd either bomb or raid the last stop. Kureo was operating off a similar chain; every Ghoul would likely know at least one other Ghoul, and would likely meet with one sooner rather than later. The only difference was that these guys were killing their way up the aforementioned chain.

We repeated the macabre process once more; track, show, question, kill, but after this, Kureo declared it too late to work properly and we began to walk back in the twilight. There was no talk, casual or otherwise, which made the walk back slightly uncomfortable. I felt like the third wheel on a date. Letting them lead, I took in the sights and watched the people in between stops.

Even with evening fast approaching and threat of Ghouls, there were still a lot of people out and about. Heck, some of them even were Ghouls. At that thought, I looked back to the Investigators as they effortlessly parted crowds. I knew how frustrated they might've been, surrounded by possible enemies who could turn on you at a moment's notice.
Arriving at the CCG, I saw it to be no less a hive of activity than when we had left. At the BGA, activity usually died down after dark, when the skeleton crew of the night shift took over. In Tokyo, at least, Ghouls were apparently worthy of devoting 24 hours to. Amon looked to be forcing back a yawn, though Kureo looked more disappointed than anything else. When I asked him what the matter was, he replied that he was disappointed that we had only killed three Ghouls and made little headway. The latter part was spoken as an afterthought.

Amon told me that I could head out for the night, as I wouldn't be much help with the paperwork, and told me where to find Inspector Hasuko. When I found her at her desk, she was moping over a heap of paperwork, but she perked up when I knocked on the dividing wall. I had never seen somebody finish up paperwork that quickly.

"So I guess you'll be the one driving me to and from the CCG." I commented, after she had bid her coworkers goodnight.

"That I am!" She sounded quite happy with herself. "I was one of the Junior Investigators who worked with Shinohara before being transferred to the twentieth ward."

"I've heard that term a couple of times," I replied, "is that a rank or something similar?"

"Well, it's more combination of an Investigator's rank and seniority." She began, "For example, Kureo Mado is a First-Class Investigator, but he's senior to many of the Special Class Investigators, his partner for example…"

She kept up the lesson all the way to the car park, acting as a veritable fount of information on rank, seniority and lot of bits of office life. I only understood three-quarters of what she said. Asking her to stop and explain a word or phrase would've been like trying to block a faucet with a finger…and I was kind of embarrassed to ask for help.

I finally received a turn to do some talking once we had our seatbelts on.

"So how was working with your Investigators?"

"It was…interesting." I replied, "Even though our organizations operate so far apart, the whole 'searching for evidence' thing never changes."

"I mean," she laughed, "how were they? You were asking me what they were like on the way over."

"Well, Amon is definitely serious," I deadpanned with a grin"I don't think he changed his facial expression once the entire day."

"That sounds about right." She smiled. "But what about Kureo?"

"He looks like he's married to his job, I'll say that."

"That's not half wrong," Hasuko shrugged, changing lanes, "after he lost his wife to a Ghoul, being an Investigator became pretty much the only thing he had."

"That would explain his enthusiasm." And his murderous glee.
I couldn't tell what she thought of my comment, but the remainder of the ride to my building was quiet. She dropped me off, saying that she would be around at the same time as Shin had picked me up. The moment the elevator doors closed, I let myself slouch; I wasn't going to admit it to anybody, but I was dead tired from all the walking. Soreness was inevitable, and I really hoped I wasn't going to blister.
Arriving at the CCG, I saw it to be no less a hive of activity than when we had left. At the BGA, activity usually died down after dark, when the skeleton crew of the night shift took over. In Tokyo, at least, Ghouls were apparently worthy of devoting 24 hours to. Amon looked to be forcing back a yawn, though Kureo looked more disappointed than anything else. When I asked him what the matter was, he replied that he was disappointed that we had only killed three Ghouls and made little headway. The latter part was spoken as an afterthought.

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Once again, we set out on another walk across the city, the two Investigators leading the way across town. There were more people out, this being rush hour and I found myself receiving many curious looks as we parted the crowd. Then again, I was foreign, and Japan was a mostly homogenous country, so I was probably an oddball. At least, I hoped so. And I hoped I wasn't being looked at as a menu item.

"Is there any information you could share about this lead?" I called up to the two.

"There's not a lot to go on," Amon admitted as he dropped back to match my pace, "Investigators noted a few suspected Ghouls coming and going from a building in one of the more run down areas of the ward, and Kureo pulled a few strings since it fits the pattern of 696."

"Bah." Kureo suddenly interjected. "We're the most experienced Investigators in the ward; the others here have gone soft. Twentieth ward is among the quietest in the city."

"Think we'll run into any trouble?"

"Likely." Amon replied with a shrug, his voice going hard, "these are Ghouls we're dealing with and justice will be served."

I fell quiet after that, slightly unnerved at how inevitable he saw fighting to be. The phrase 'plan for the worst' made sense, but that phrase was preceded by 'expect the best'. Was fighting really seen as the best case scenario here?

Fuck it. There was nothing I could do here; I was here to observe, not advise. Unless asked. Protesting wasn't an option; me speaking up would be rude, and be seen as talking about what I didn't know. Unless it was a test. The BGA didn't operate quite like this; I had been in the field enough to know that. Unless I was an exception.

By the time the two stopped, I was so deep in thought that I almost walked into them.

"This is it." Amon announced, oh-so-casually.

The place was what appeared to be a ramshackle metal shed, surrounded by derelict cars and assorted debris. I could hear traffic from the nearby highway and the dull buzz of power lines overhead.

"Definitely out of the way," I noted, "probably not many people head out here without good reason."

"They're Ghouls," Kureo sneered at the dwelling, "hardly surprising they live amid filth."

Not always. I made no reply to that.

Moving to the side of the building, we lined up along the wall, just to the side of a window. Amon and Kureo were listening intently to the slightly hazy voices wafting through the glass-less frame.

How many times had I stood like this, waiting just out of sight, encased in a full-body hug of equipment? Half or my mind was screaming that I was unprepared and naked, and that any second a gloved hand would thump down on my shoulder, signaling me to prepare to breach. Amon turned to me and said something and I had to blink hard to push back the memories.
"—Going to make an entrance. Move back to one of the cars and make sure we don't have any interference."

That was a nice way of telling me to stay out of the fighting, I thought, taking position to watch from behind a wrecked sedan. Amon opened his Quinque, which looked like the giant love child of a mace and a baseball bat. On the other hand was Kureo, who had something slightly more practical in size; a swordlike weapon that looked like a longer and wider version of a shortsword. It took a moment for me to register that Amon was being literal.
The blow would have smashed in part of the front wall.

Instead, the wall blew outward, launching papers, bits of shack and a man in a lab coat clear of shack.

It seemed like we were not the first people to this party. Or we were expected.

Neither Kureo nor Amon paid him any attention. Using my still-folded Qinque as a pole, I tripped the attempted escapee as he ran past and yanked him almost off his feet to join me behind the car.

"I'm not going to hurt you." I quickly hissed, seeing the terror in his eyes, "Just stay put."

I wasn't going to give up my standards just yet.

Either he believed my words or was too shocked to do anything besides obey, because he stopped squirming. Folded quinque still in hand, I knew that if Amon and Kureo ran into trouble I would have to drop the prisoner and step in.

On the other side of the car, Amon and Kureo were both locked on to the hole in the wall.

"That's Jason." Kureo spoke with a tone somewhere between warning and eagerness.

"I'll give you..." the other man, in a white suit that barely contained his figure, glanced at a golden timepiece, "one minute."

Huh; I had never seen a Ghoul with a Rolex before. Then the mayhem began.

Amon swung his Qinque around like a five year old who had been directed to break a piñata, taking out much of the remaining wall that been smashed and probably layng waste to much of the building’s interior. Any evidence we'd collect from there would be moderately mauled. Next to me, lab coat wrung his hands at the sight—presumably he was watching Amon wreck his home. Kureo was slightly more restrained, though no less destructive, like a toddler trying to be gentle with a dog.

The suit, the one Kureo had called 'Jason' was more or less the opposite, dodging Amon's swings either with leaps or by just weaving out of the way. What I found curious was that he wasn't making moves to attack, only to evade. He's toying with them. Then the second realization. This was not a baseline Ghoul.

He made a leap outside as Amon flattened a table, and landed on the roof of the other abandoned car. Just like his other swings, Amon missed his target and instead caused more property damage. He hit the car with enough force to collapse the roof into the seats. Undeterred, several more sweeping attacks were made, these with more finesse. Amon is not a baseline human either.

Jason—provided that was his actual name—ended up landing nearly in front of Kureo before his partner could hem him in.

Kureo advanced, though rather than taking a swing at the Ghoul, tried to capture him; his Qinque splitting into three tentacles that surrounded him in the rough form of a cage. It didn't really look like it would hold anybody. Jason's response was to reveal a very unusual Kagune and break the Qinque with a look that could only be described as unimpressed.
That was new; I had never seen a Qinque broken before. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised; they were just weapons after all. And weapons break.

"Well," Jason admonished with a second glance at his watch, "it's been fun, but your time is up."

He jumped and landed out of sight on a rooftop, thus ending the encounter. That was a level of strength and agility I had seen maybe once in my years at the BGA. I wasn't sure if he had even noticed me. Helping my charge to his feet, we stepped out from behind the car.
The two Investigators stared him down like a pair of hawks eyeing a rabbit. For a split second, nobody moved, and then several things happened rapidly.

Amon stepped toward us, eyes fixed and glowing with murderous intent. Lab coat popped his Kagune; a long, bone-white scorpion tail. I unfolded my Qinque, sweeping the legs out from my charge yet again as Amon's club whipped through the space where his head had occupied. By the time he hit the ground, I had my spear directed in the general direction of his face.

"Don't move!" I growled.

Then Amon's club whooshed in yet again, pulverizing his skull into the concrete.

It took a fair amount of self-control to not hit Amon over the head. Or do something even less pleasant. The only reaction I could make that wouldn't allow me to do something stupid was to stab the ground and growl one more word.

"Why."

"He was a Ghoul." Amon shrugged.

"He might've been able to tell us about the tool." I exhaled a breath of frustration to the cool summer air. "Or give us another lead."

"No matter," Kureo replied, "We confirmed and killed 696, survived going toe-to-toe with Jason and uncovered what might be a wealth of information on Ghoul activities."

I did my best to not look at the fresh corpse as I closed my Quinque.

Amon spared only a cursory glance at his mentor as Kureo ambled back over to the building, probably to get a jump start on rooting through it. Kureo cared more about killing his next Ghoul than learning about them. How the heck Amon was considered the amateur here was still in question.

"I'll call the CCG," Amon stated with a shrug "we can get to work on the shack while we wait."

The 'shack' was a fair sight more complex than that: hookups for water, natural gas with a backflow valve even a proper fuse box for the probably-illegal power lines. The entire building, while flimsy as all getout, was basically a lab, complete with clinic. While Amon rifled through a few notebooks stuffed with paper, I took a look at the clinic's stock.

In all honesty, it was pretty standard kit; painkillers, antiseptics, antibiotics, bandages, splints. Looked like Lab Coat might've had a doctor's degree to match his attire. Or not; I didn't know how much education one needed to prescribe this stuff. Kureo found something that caught his interest and immediately ran over to us like a kid who had just caught a firefly.

"Look here!" he held out his find to us; a rough chunk of metal, mottled in that ever-so-distinctive manner.

"That's Qinque steel," I noted, nodding at the object, "we might have the source for the tool you found."
"Right you are. You know, I had my doubts, but you're doing well to disprove them."

I wasn't sure whether Kureo was complementing me or not, and by the time I was sure he was, I couldn't thank him. Because he had already wandered off, probably to keep poking around where he had found the steel. The man was steadily nibbling away my patience.

"Is..." I kneaded my eyebrows, "Is he always like this?"

"More or less." Amon righted a shelving unit that had been toppled in the initial attack. "He expects nothing but the best from other Investigators; makes them prove themselves, but he'll eagerly teach. Find anything useful on your side?"

"Just medical supplies and a few groceries by me, haven't checked the desk yet though."

"Leave that to the techs," came the warning reply, "we've had a fair share of jury-rigged traps."

"Ha." I was already checking around the outside of the desk. "I disarmed stuff like that for a living back before I was in the BGA."

Amon looked me up and down like I had sprouted extra limbs. "You look young for knowing how to do that."

"I enlisted basically out of high school." Shrugging, I started going over the face of the desk. "Spent a few years doing device disposal, then joined the BGA."

I couldn't parse the look Amon gave in reply. Was it pity? Confusion? Irritation?
Distraction

Left in peace, I slowly and carefully began to work the desk; jiggling drawers, looking for wires, contacts and the dozen other tell-tale signs of so-named 'malicious alterations'. I was impatient. Waiting for a team to do something that I could do myself would've been infuriating. That, and it had been too long since I had been able to tinker with something potentially dangerous.

No. Most of that was a lie.

I wasn't impatient. Waiting for the technicians was just fine; it had been almost common to wait for support. I played around with possibly dangerous devices on a near weekly basis while I was in the field at the BGA, a game called 'is the espresso maker pressure seal functional'.

No, I was doing this to distract myself and drown my morality in a sea of caution and patience. To get the remains of the Ghoul killed by Amon out of my head. To keep myself of thinking about exactly what I had been a party to.

Being so absorbed in self-distraction, it was only when Amon knocked on the wall next to the desk that my mind returned to the present. I jumped, startled, then looked down. The desk—or more precisely—its skeleton now occupied about twice its original floor space, with drawers, documents, panels and office supplies strewn about the immediate area.

"That was certainly an impressive display." Kureo was seated on the cot on the other side of the room, notebook in hand. "And you certainly saved us time instead of waiting for the technicians."

With a gesture, he drew my attention to where two men were filling boxes behind us. The saying 'everything that wasn't nailed down' was accurate.

"I'm finished." The comment rang lamely, as I stood before my mess.

"Closet thing to a trap was this—" I dropped my hand on a battery and a buzzer, making it whine sadly. "—and two secret spots in the drawers."

I didn't know what I expected. What was unexpected were the cordial claps and incredibly unsettling grin from Kureo.

"Anything notable about the, ah, trap?" Amon bent down to examine the simple device as if it were a dead snake.

I shook my head. Everything there was basic; components built and sold by and at the thousands. Fingerprints were pointless; the layer of dust meant all the oils had faded away. Besides, the presumed buyer and builder was now being wrapped into a body bag by another pair of men.

There was, naturally, much more work to do. The shack was ransacked from top to bottom, with every nook scoured and every piece of potential evidence documented. Paperwork. So much paperwork. In all, we filled the a van to bursting with the contents of that shack. To be honest, probably a good third was definitely junk; and not the potentially useful stuff either. Or I was just overtired and preoccupied and just wanted to be done.

We drove back to the CCG building following our van full of spoils.

"What now?" I asked, as Amon pulled into the underground garage.
"Once we get this all moved to the one of the exam rooms, you and I will be done for the day."

"I, on the other hand," Kureo interjected, "will be heading down to the lab. Such a distinctive kagune, and it being a rinkaku at that. It will make for a fine addition to my collection."

Moving everything went quickly enough, thanks to a few assistants and a large handcart. Or at least I thought it did until Amon and I returned to ground level to see the sky dyed deep orange by the sunset.

"Didn't expect the day to move by that fast." I commented.

At first, I thought he wasn't going to make a reply beyond a nonchalant shrug. Then he asked me something, in a tone that demanded an explanation.
"You didn't kill the Ghoul. You had ample chance and yet you let it live." His last few words were nearly a growl. "Why."

"I told you." Why was I sizing him up? "We can't learn anything from a corpse."

When I got a whiff of whatever shampoo Amon had used, I realized that we were barely a foot apart. I could see the muscles in his jaw tense. Keeping a neutral expression was hard; he got what he wanted—a dead Ghoul—why bring this up?

Apparently, that answer wasn't enough. Amon kept silent and kept his glare straight into my eyes. For a moment, I thought we might come to blows, in the lobby of the CCG building, in front what felt like fifty people. Well, at least I had some idea how he fought.

"What if there weren't any notebooks?" I broke the silence, as much to try and avoid a fight, literally or otherwise. "What would've happened if we killed him, went into his house, and there was no collection of notebooks, no papers, nothing we could trace?"

That did it. Without a word, Amon turned and walked away, leaving me angry and confused. I followed him, through the main doors and out onto the sidewalk. We stopped by a board blanketed with offers of rewards for information on suspected Ghouls.

"I understand." His voice quiet, almost introspective. "It's a strange method of justice, but I can understand why it makes sense."

He pulled one sheet from the board and passed it to me: it had a photo of the lab coat Ghoul on it. Pre-mortem, naturally—and not a great picture at that.

"Just don't hesitate when the time comes."

"What's this for?"

"It's how we get some of our leads." Amon nodded to the board. "We won't need any more for this Ghoul, so there's no point in keeping it up."

"We do that at the BGA too. What should I do with this?"

"Keep it as a memento, recycle it, I don't mind. Used to be that I'd keep them as a souvenir when I was a Junior Investigator, but I grew out of it pretty quick."

I folded the sheet and tucked it into a jacket pocket.

"More paperwork tomorrow." I noted wryly.

"Don't remind me." His tone was almost joking. "I'd rather kill a Ghoul with a ream of paper than fill it out."

"Which would make for more paperwork."

Amon gave a mock groan. "Only if you told on me. Anyway, I've got dry cleaning to pick up, so
I'll see you tomorrow." He was walking down the street now. "Lets meet at the exam room in the morning. Don't expect to see much of Mado, though."

I could only wave back acknowledgment. Mastering the switch from grim to grin was still beyond me.

Chapter End Notes

Lore Note: While BGA stands for 'Bureau on Ghoul Activities', it has has been called by several less-accurate and less-polite names in domestic and foreign media.
As it turned out, working through the stuff from the shack took more than a week to complete. Well, less one day that Amon declared as a day to decompress. In that vein, Amon was also correct on how much—well, how little—Kureo would be around. He showed up for maybe an hour each day, grabbed some papers, and ran back to the lab.

"What exactly is he up to?" I mused one day, as Kureo hurried out the door with a stack of forms and a notebook.

"He's probably making a Quinque." Amon, nose deep in a yellowed notebook didn't seem perturbed. "He did find the one that Fueguchi had fascinating, after all."

Amon and I had decided early on that he would work on the written materials and I would start on the stuff. Which was just fine for me; my reading of Japanese tended to be mostly literal. Plus, even for being a Ghoul, Fueguchi Asaki had collected some very cool tools. Not that I had the skill to use any of them.

"Is he" I began, "the Mado? The one who basically came up with the idea for the Mado-Tasaki Procedure?"

"That's him. Never wanted the acclaim though, only new Quinques."

As we spent basically the entirety of each day working, we ended up talking. Not a lot, just small talk about what we were working on, and eventually got into work stories. I learned about Special Investigator Arima from him; a man with the fighting prowess of the grim reaper and the reserved personality to match. I told him the story about an East Coast crime syndicate who used Ghouls to dispose of bodies, and the chance leads that pulled it together. Simple stuff. We never talked about our lives outside of work.

I would come back to the room I lived in every night with ghostly images of forms dancing in my head. At one point, I had a dream about filling out documents with a foul-smelling permanent marker.

Conversations about life, however, I held with Hasuko while we commuted.

About halfway through the work from the Fueguchi case, the pattern was thrown out the window. Usually, Hasuko was serious, sometimes even grave, when she came down from the offices on the upper floors and only relaxed when we climbed into the sedan she drove. Today however, her face was bright, and there was a literal bounce in her step.

Still, she stayed quiet until we had closed sat down in the car.

"I'm getting promoted!" Her voice was somewhere between trill and an excited squeak.

"Congrats." I was always bad at this kind of thing.

"I've been putting in extra hours, managed to get some work in the field, improving my scores on the firing range and I got word this afternoon that two First Class Investigators had recommended me for promotion to second rank!"

Her giddiness was infectious, and I found myself grinning as I congratulated her again.
She was almost dancing in her seat at every red light. Partway through the ride, she dropped a bombshell on me.

"I'm going out to celebrate with some of my friends tonight," she was trying hard to sound nonchalant and not still absolutely giddy, "and since I can count you as one of the reasons I stayed sane through all that...maybe you'd like to join us?"

Hadn't expected that. Still, I wasn't going to say no; a change of pace was much needed before I dreamed of paperwork again. I really hope she isn't into me.

And that is how I ended up in a bright and boisterous karaoke bar barely three blocks from her apartment, surrounded by the happy and less than sober. I knew literally nobody there. That said, I did spy a couple familiar faces from the CCG office.

And Juuzou. Who ran over to greet me as if he had never expected to see me again.

"Mister Allen! This is awesome!" He waved his arms around. "Everybody is having fun! Are you gonna do the karaoke?"

"Me?" I sputtered. "Uh, no? I really can't sing... Are you?" Really hate singing too.

"Nope. I'm just here to have some fun tonight. And—" He leaned in close, "—see if any Ghouls try to follow drunk people so I can kill them."

Well, that was a pretty thought. "How'd you hear about this anyway?" I accepted a beer from one of the other almost familiar faces.

"Oh! Miss Hasuko has been working with Shinohara and I in the field." He nodded toward where she was laughing with a few other people. "Shinohara had a family thingy, but I came. She's got good instincts; she'll be great at hunting Ghouls."

"I see. She's certainly been working hard for it."

"Oh!" Juuzou's head snapped toward the door. "Somebody's leaving! I'll see you later."

And with that, the unsettling kid was gone. Well, 'kid' was wrong; he was probably just out of college. With a creepy love of killing Ghouls. Then again, I hadn't exactly lived a normal life either.

If Hasuko hadn't pulled me over to join a conversation, I might've stood there thinking all night. It felt good to do something that was just for fun. I told a few jokes, laughed at a few, bickered inanely with a Junior Investigator about the best tie knot. My personal low point of the evening came somewhere after choking down a second beer, when Hasuko pulled me on stage to do a sloppy duet of 'It's my life'. Only for a moment though, before the cheering crowd replaced my lack of singing ability with stage fright.

It ended quickly, but not quickly enough.

As people left the bar and the night rolled across the windows, it ended up being me, Hasuko, and a trio of other Investigators making boisterous small talk while slowly working our way through bottles of beer.

"You're not a fan of our beer, eh Ami?"
"Not really a fan of beer in general." I looked down at my barely touched bottle. "Never liked the fizz and taste."

"So what do you like then?" Another Investigator chimed in.

"To be honest, I've always been" I shrugged apologetically, "a fan of vodka."

"Never tried that." Hasuko chirped.

Two of the others voiced similar observations.

"Well," I carelessly drawled, "since this is Hasuko's celebration, I think I'll treat you all to a new experience. This is a lot stronger than beer though, so be careful"

So, I ordered vodka.

More precisely, I either misspoke, or something went horribly right.

I ended up with a full bottle of vodka.

You can't return alcohol at any bar, let alone one doing a roaring trade with drunk people singing karaoke. Was I nervous? A little; the full bottle was intimidating and the last time I had taken a shot was with Robalson, a world away.

I poured away my apprehension into the shot glasses. This was a celebration.

"To Hasuko," I raised my glass, as the others followed suit "may luck lead you on, and success follow your trail!"

I downed the fiery mouthful and thumped the glass back on the table before it had finished scorching its way to my stomach.

And then I woke up in bed.
For a moment, I was in my bed, back at the BGA campus. Then I remembered that I had been sent on assignment on the other side of the world, to Japan. Even then, this was not my bed there; the ceiling was the wrong color and the air smelled like confused fruit and humidity. And this was a futon bed, not the standard mattress I knew.

Then I remembered last night; Juuzou, the beer, the celebration, karaoke and a full bottle of vodka split five ways. It explained why my mouth felt like two strips of sandpaper sandwiching a cotton ball. I carefully rolled onto my side and checked my phone. It was early. About an hour before I needed to be up. One text, but I lacked the willpower to open the device and reply.

In other news; where was my suit coat? If memory served, I had kept it on all last night—at least according to the memories that weren't a drunken jumble. Currently, I didn't have a spare and it was pretty obvious that I was only in shirtsleeves. I didn't relish the prospect of admitting to Amon that I would have to go out and buy a new one on the lunch breaks we never used. Just as I was starting to actually get nervous, my eyes focused in on a new shape. It appeared to be a pile of blankets, with a black object draped over the top.

Thank my luck. That had to be it.

With inane questions aside, I could focus on the more pressing matters. For example; where the heck was I?

As if in answer, I heard a soft buzzing through the floor.


"Mhmmm." A soft and sleepy voice emanated from the blanket pile. "Late… I'm…late."

An arm snaked out from the heap, felt around for and retrieved a phone from under the sleeve of my jacket, then retreated back into its bunker of warmth.

"Late." This in a less sleepy tone. Then, in voice of purest panic; "Oh no! No, no, no, no! I've gotta get up shower eat drive—"

The pile—and my jacket—went flying across the room as Hasuko, also still wearing her clothes from last night, scrambled to her feet—almost falling back down in the process—and ran toward the door. The path to said door, however, was currently occupied by myself. In that way people about to get hit with extreme misfortune experience the slowing of time, I realized this about a quarter second before her foot made contact with my gut.

All the air in my lungs was basically punted out through my mouth, which left me too winded to make a sound. Hasuko went down and hit the floor with sound like a small explosion and a panicked squeak.

So much for a gentle recovery from last night. I thought as my lungs re-inflated. Hasuko was halfway through the door with the blanket I had been sleeping under snarled about her ankles. I couldn't see her face, but I could hear her, quietly laughing. We were both okay. I would've sighed in relief if I could have.

Five minutes later, things had reverted to almost normal. Hasuko had started apologizing before even standing back up. As she explained it, she had been waking up early to pick me up every day
and the morning alarm had overridden all of the events of last night. With me here after the
drunken night, there was now a considerable amount of extra time in her morning.

"Well, you can use the shower first, if you want."

I declined, politely. All I had were the clothes from last night; putting on the dirty clothes after a
shower was simply unappealing. Probably ironic for somebody who had spent as much time
covered in dirt as I had.

Sitting at the tiny kitchen table, I stared wistfully at the breakfast foods Hasuko had set out and
listened to the quiet hiss of the shower while trying not to let my mind wander anywhere indecent.
Well, anywhere too indecent. In any case, judging by the fact that she was an Investigator and the
impressive kick, she was probably pretty muscular—dammit this was not what I wanted to think
about.

To distract myself, I checked the message. It was from Robalson; a short sentence confirming that
Dr Narrows was dead and a longer one telling that I was getting a bonus stipend added to my pay
stubs. The two things, of course, were not related. I hope.

With a low whistle, I dropped my phone onto the table. Personally, I had never met Narrows,
outside of picking up my Quinque, but I knew enough about him to know he'd be missed. He was
one of the top researchers in research and development; part of the three-man team that created the
Q-bullet. I wondered what he would've been doing here, maybe working in the lab with Kureo or
working alongside the upper echelons of the CCG. Or maybe the aneurysm would've burst on the
flight over and life would've gone on here as if nothing had ever changed.

And I would still be traveling between major cities, apprehending Ghouls until I retired or got
promoted out of fieldwork. Why did that life sound boring now?

My mind returning to earth, I looked back at the table, where besides breakfast stuff Hasuko had
put out a glass of fruit juice for me. The full cup looked thoroughly unappetizing to my tongue,
despite just how thirsty I was, and guaranteeing that my stomach could keep anything down at this
point in the morning was not really possible.
Partial Recall

The drink swirled down the drain in an orange vortex and I rinsed the glass before filling it from the tap. It took two refills of the small glass before my tongue no longer felt like a strip of leather. On the bright side, I wasn't having too nasty of a hangover; this headache was more like colliding with a doorframe rather than getting hit in the head by Amon's club. *Ugh.* That was another thought I didn't want to have.

When Hasuko left the shower, the temperature seemed to jump in the apartment by ten degrees. I politely turned away when she passed through the kitchen on her way to the bedroom, but I ended up seeing a little. Dark-wet hair already pulled back into a ponytail and a shoulder delicately toned and contoured by—*good god, I should be past the immature stage of my life by now.*

Naturally, it was only after she had closed the door that I remembered my jacket was still in there. Dressed for the day, Hasuko emerged from the room we had slept in looking almost like she'd rather go back to sleep. Flopping down in the other chair at the table, she piled up a plate of food. "That…” she nodded, "was one hell of a night."

"I remember pretty much up to ordering the vodka." I wistfully admitted. "After that, it's mostly a blur."

"About the same for me." Hasuko rubbed her chin between bites. "I know Taiyama challenged you to shots and lost after three rounds."

"That sounds…” I rummaged in my memory, "accurate. I remember singing, was there more karaoke than just that one duet?"

"Yes." Her tone was a clear indication that she wished the opposite was true. "I can't believe we finished the bottle."

"I didn't think they'd give us a whole bottle."

"Ha, I remember the look on your face when you saw it."

"Was it any good?"

"It was strong, but not really to my taste." She shrugged, apologetically. "It was funny to see how you reacted to it though."

"I didn't do anything too dumb, I hope?" A million embarrassing and unpleasant possibilities danced in my head.

"You got funny, telling jokes and sounding like a British guy. When we headed back, you declared you would 'protect me from all your hungry peers'. It was kinda cute, actually. "

I had to cover my face for a moment as I chuckled at the embarrassment.

We kept piecing together the rest of the night all the way to the CCG building with moderate success. By the time we parked, most of the spaces had been filled in.

I had won a drinking contest with Taiyama in a short lived victory—short lived, because he had remained much more sober.
One of the other Investigators, Sosoka, who had never tried vodka, had been hit particularly hard by it and stumbled home alongside the remaining Investigator.

Taiyama, to seal and celebrate his victory, had gone home with the empty bottle as a prize.

That left just Hasuko and I, who were the last ones to leave, leaning on each other all the way back to her apartment.

As for what happened after that… Well, we didn't end up examining that late into the night. As we separated and headed to our separate workspaces, I had a thought. What if the she had said 'I'm chilly' last night and thus I had piled onto her every blanket I could find, but the reality was that she wanted to cuddle. Why am I overthinking this so badly; she's a woman, not an explosive device. As I dug into one of the last boxes, the little voice of bad ideas spoke up again. You're right; she's much more dangerous and unpredictable than any device you've handled. And you missed out on the chance to get up close and feel the heartbeat through her soft skin and the scent of—.

I buried that voice with a silent growl and a mountain of evidence and did my best to not think about it for the rest of the day.

"Late night?" Amon asked, sometime after noon.

"The Investigator who's been driving me got approval to move up. She invited me to join the celebration. Don't worry," I added, "It won't affect my work."

"Good to hear, wouldn't want a delay in finishing up the documentation, especially with us almost being done."

"Think we'll beat Kureo with his work in the lab?" I asked, zip-tying a tag to a pair of pliers.

"If we do, we'll probably have a free day, or at least part of one. Would you be up for visiting the gym if we do?"

"Sounds good." A potential roadblock loomed. "Will I need to bring workout clothes?"

"Nope, there's a kiosk where you can pick up shorts and a shirt and a bin for the dirty stuff."

"Nice."

As it happened, we got lucky; Amon got a sheaf of blank notebooks which put him neck and neck with me and my half full box of lab supplies. That day we came oh-so-close to finishing up the last of it, but alas, it took us till the end of the day and we still had just a little too much to justify staying late.

Which was good; I was dead tired. And so, I suspected, was Hasuko.
Chapter 17

We finished barely before two. Amon beat me to completion by less than a half hour and finished up paperwork that would accompany the boxes into storage.

"How long do you keep evidence for?" I asked, as we took a stairwell down.

"Paper stuff, we keep on hand for ten years. Objects and the like just half that time. There's been some talk about getting documents scanned in and held permanently, but it's still an idea at this point.

I didn't mention that the BGA had been scanning documents for several years now.

The locker room was better maintained than the one at the BGA, which had needed a fresh coat of paint-among other things—for several years now. The gyms were about the same, nothing special. What I did like as the outfit I had changed into; soft white shirt, gray shorts, and both had 'CCG' in big black letters and the organization's seal. Well, the shorts were a little shorter than I liked. Nothing's perfect.

"Got a workout circuit in mind?" Amon asked, as I stretched my back.

"Chin-up bars with core work, squats, maybe a few laps around the gym. Nothing too intensive."

"I was thinking on free weights and joining the group on the training mat. Meet for squats after you're finished up with your reps and spot each other?"

I nodded and we split up.

From the chin-up bars, I could watch Amon take his place against his sparring partner. Amon was impressively, well on his way to being ghoulishly strong; I had seen that in the field both with his giant club and his fight with that Ghoul Kureo had called 'Jason'. As far as I could tell, none of the Investigators he faces up against were really in his league. If there was one thing Amon lacked, it was finesse and patience. Well, one couldn't really be patient in a fight with a Ghoul, but he seemed to just charge in. Actually, his footwork wasn't that grand either. If I tried, I could probably trip him up when he made sidesteps.

_I wish I could stop sizing him up. If I was going to end up in a fight with anybody, it would probably be with Juuzou, or at a stretch, Kureo._

The running track ringed the sparring mats and exercise equipment. Taking my laps at a gentle jog, I stretched the stiffness out of my fingers from gripping the bar. On the straightaway, I watched as Amon quickly disposed of two more opponents on the mats. He was certainly at the top of his game—and certainly better than some of the agents at the BGA—if nothing else.

Even if I had zero plans to head onto the training mats, it was nice to not wear a suit for a while. Maybe it was because mine were just store-bought, but I seemed to be missing a few degrees of freedom in them. Glad to be in something more comfortable, I focused on keeping my pace measured and breathing under control. Three laps later, Kureo waved me down at the side of the track.

"We've got a meeting lined up with the ward chief in an hour, up on the fifth floor."

He held a new briefcase. Very new, actually; the plastic covering was still adhered to one of the
faces.

"New quinque?" I queried, nodding down at the case.

"Yes, indeed!" Mado's smile was like that of a child, which effectively made him more unsettling. "Bikkaku are difficult to work with, but the results are rarely disappointing."

Now, all the time he had spent at the lab made sense. Granted, I had no idea how long it normally took to make a quinque, but this could've been a rush job. Back home, one usually had to wait for about a month before getting a quinque from the labs. I dropped the question to Amon after hitting the shower, as we changed back into our work clothes.

"Did Mado need a quinque that badly?"

"No, he has—" Amon did a quick count on his fingers, "sixteen now, at minimum. He's basically a collector, but I wouldn't say he's too attached to them."

The collector himself met us in the lobby, waving us over to an island of small couches. Not interested in waiting in silence, I asked Kureo exactly what kind of report we were waiting on.

"Number six-nine-six, the Ghoul we exterminated last week, had been on my list for a long time. He almost eluded me, too!" He waved a finger scoldingly. "But every Ghoul meets justice and in the process of hunting him down, Amon and I came across two other possible Ghous; number seven-four-three and seven-four-five, connected to six-nine-six tangentially."

"When we determined that they were persons of interest," Amon took over the story at a nod from Kureo, "we decided to focus on six-nine-six and leave the others under observation."

"I see. Was there anything we picked up from the house that helped the investigation?"

"Nothing definitive, unfortunately. Hopefully, meeting with the others upstairs will provide new leads."
Unfortunately. That word was also what applied to the information collected by the other Investigators. The two persons of interest were—as described by the observations—socially withdrawn and very private individuals. In itself, that was hardly conclusive in either direction, and I mentally scoffed at the Mado’s concern over ordering coffee with a meal. I did agree with his assessment that keeping an eye on them was a prudent thing to do. At least until we knew for certain.

I did agree with one thing though; not getting the plates on the car the two were seen accepting a ride from was basically a cardinal offense, whether or not it would’ve led to any information. The fact that Japan had maybe two security cameras aimed at public spaces didn’t help. Then there was the grave site at ‘site C’ and why it had remained unchecked

“But that goes against my morals!”

A weak excuse. Amon thought so as well.

“Morals? With that ‘morality’ you won’t crush evil.” His voice cut through the protest like a crack through winter ice. “We are justice; that is our morality.”

While the two investigators opposite us quailed beneath the spoken rebuke, Kureo seemed unperturbed. Perhaps he was aware of some bit of information or greater pattern I was not, as his focus was only partially on the meeting; his gloved fingers stroked the edges of his new Quinque as if it was a lover.

“These Investigators of the twentieth,” Amon growled after the meeting had ended, “are so soft and careless. This ward makes unmotivated children instead of dutiful Investigators.”

“The license plate.” I shook my head in assent with him, a thing I thought I would never do, “How hard is it to take down a license plate number? Especially in a place where the plates are just black on white.”

“Indeed indeed.” Kureo still seemed unperturbed, “Don't let it cut too deeply. It's why the two, pardon me, three of us are here. If nothing else we can lead by example and inspire them to be better. That said, this has been a tiring day. Let's reconvene tomorrow.”

Watching the duo head back around to the elevators, I realized that it was only half past four and about an hour earlier than we usually ended for the day. That probably meant Hasuko wouldn’t be off for another hour either. For a moment, I toyed with heading back down to the gym. But only until I saw Amon coming back, toward the offices.

“Forgot something?”

“No.” He looked at me, but his mind was clearly elsewhere. “I’m going to check the grave site.”

“Oh.” Then, before I consciously thought it. “I’ll come along, if you'd like the extra set of hands.”

“Oh. Sure.” Amon seemed to be surprised by my offer.

“Are we walking or driving?”

“Driving; its rather far to walk and we’ll need a pair of shovels.”
I nodded. Since it was a grave, it made sense that digging was in the realm of possibilities.

“I’ll meet you there; I need to let Hasuko know I might end up being late.”

Doing that only took a few minutes, most of them spent on or in the elevator. Hasuko wasn’t at her desk, but her jacket was. I left a note on a scrap sheet of paper saying that I was working with Amon on an investigation and would find my own way back to the hotel tonight. Leaving the note in the middle of her desk, I privately hoped my grave robbing excursion wouldn’t take too long.

My timing in coming down to the garage was near-perfect; Amon was closing the trunk of a CCG-branded sedan.

“Shovels and a map,” I dryly commented, climbing into the passenger seat, “this has all the makings of a treasure hunt.”

“Don’t expect any treasure.”

“If we find something to advance the case I’ll call it a win.”

The sole reply from Amon was an amused snort.

Driving with Amon was a nearly somber experience. The radio was off, and he made only the bare minimum of movement needed to maneuver the vehicle through the traffic. Sitting where I was used to the driver’s seat being, I felt as if I was being conveyed in one of the self-driving cars teased by tech companies. Until Amon spoke.

“Pardon my asking, but what drew you to becoming a Ghoul Investigator after being in the military?”

“Well, after defusing and disposing explosives, I basically had the choice of teaching others to do the same, or slinking off to a desk job.” I blithely lied, “But by then I realized I liked being in the field. The BGA offered a spot, and I took it.”

“I’m still surprised you managed to fit in both, given how young you look.”

“Really? I’m 23.” I replied with a chuckle. “I worked my ass off, graduated a year early and when my engineering plans got sidelined, I ended up in EOD for three years. Then, joined the BGA and three years later, I meet you.”

I spoke basically the full truth there.

“What exactly does somebody in bomb disposal do that you’d be interested in the BGA?”

“Dispose of old munitions, defuse possible explosives, clear mines, investigate places where explosives may have been used and so on. Basically if it could go boom, we make it go boom safely.”

“Which applies how to working at the BGA?”

“Patience, caution, performance under pressure and a general healthy paranoia about anything out of place.” I listed off the traits on one hand. “Plus American ghous and the BGA both use explosive devices on occasion.”

“Explosives?” Amon tore his eyes away from the roadway for a split second. “Seriously?”

“Nice and conventional way to disable a ghoul. Remember, we don’t have the same Quinque
production quality as the rest of the world.”

“Oh, right.”

The conversation continued almost right up to the moment we parked. Amon knew the BGA was years behind the rest of the world in Quinque quality, despite the fact that we had been the creators of the Q-bullet. Conversely, Q-bullets were a rarity in the CCG, as he told me, due to quinque use and concerns over collateral damages. Which was why explosive devices were never used.

He didn’t say outright, but I had the distinct impression Amon wasn’t a fan of the BGA’s weapons of choice. I could imagine Robalson's amused reaction; ‘you're fighting combatants who specialize in close combat and you want to fight them hand-to-hand?’ right down to the raised eyebrow.

After almost forty minutes of driving, Amon cut the engine alongside the edge of a green wall. The forest was thick enough to block enough some of the dying sun, but some light wound through the trees and knifed into the ground. Amon reviewed his map, I grabbed the shovels, and we slipped into the undergrowth.
Discovery

Nestled in a clearing just out of sight of the road, the grave site was just a simple stone monument, just about waist height, rising from the underbrush. At least we wouldn’t be trekking through the forest. The only remaining question was where to dig. Amon found the answer to that; a wide spot where the ground was spongy beneath his feet; evidence of somebody backfilling a hole.

Calling this a grave site didn't feel accurate, maybe because I was expecting the cliché tombstone. This felt more like a forgotten trail marker. A signpost to the beyond, if one felt poetic.

“What motivated you,” I asked, as we broke ground, “to do this tonight?”

“After we dispersed after the… disappointment, I saw one of the orphans.”

“Orphans?”

“From the victims of a ghoul attack.” I wasn’t sure if his next words were meant for me or not. “This world is wrong.”

I couldn’t disagree. There were more than enough monsters pretending to be men.

“Why did you ask to come with?”

That caught me off guard.

“I believe in doing the job right.” I simply stated. “Doesn’t matter if it’s dirty or distasteful; if it needs to be done, it needs to be done. And digging up a grave; not the worst thing I’ve done in the line of work.”

“I think you missed a trait.” Amon grunted as he shifted a full shovel. “In why the BGA wanted you; determination.”

“Ha.”

Digging proved to be too strenuous for continual conversation. Privately, I wished we had a metal detector; we had dug down almost a foot in a space three feet square and having a way to narrow down the search area would’ve been nice. Amon didn’t seem to care though, digging with almost mechanical motions, despite the sweat dripping down his face.

The moon rose and painted the clearing silver. I took a pause to look up. Amon’s shovel made a grinding sound as it sunk into the dirt and both of our heads snapped earthward. The shovel was withdrawn and four hands of fingers searched where it had pierced the soil.

Tugged free from its earthy tomb, a dirty white object emerged, clutched in Amon’s grasp. And then he began to laugh.

“This! This is six-nine-six’s mask!” He raised it skyward, triumphant.

Of course, I had questions. How did he know that was the mask of 696—the ghoul I had prevented from escaping and set up for death? There were photos in the file Amon had brought along with the map; grainy, but good enough that I could match up the design to the now bagged mask. And, of course, what now?

That was less certain. Amon spoke eagerly of confronting 743, but he wasn’t totally sure on when.
Certainly it would have to be done quickly—we had made no effort to clean up our dig at the clearing—but arranging things like bring people into custody took time.

“This is exactly the break we were hoping for.” Amon’s face was illuminated by the streetlamps every few seconds. “And those idiots at the office couldn’t bring themselves to pluck it from the silver platter.”

“When they see that we did, it’ll be a learning experience.” Against all odds, I found myself agreeing with Kureo again; we had to lead by example.

“I…suppose so.” Amon spoke with a sigh. “Kureo was right all along.”

_Not about everything._ But I kept that thought to myself.

The city was both alive and asleep. We drove past dark and quiet buildings, punctuated by streetlights and the glow of neon. Briefly, my thoughts flitted back to my desk at the BGA office. But only for a moment.

“Damn, you’re going to need to get back to the hotel tonight.” Amon spoke as if he had only just realized I was sitting next to him. “Which building did the brass put you up at?”

“Uh,” I rifled through my mental flip book, “brass doors with oval windows, granite facade, red awning over the entrance. I think the number on the front was—”

“—eighteen, twenty, sixteen.” Amon finished. “They put you up in the one with the odd elevators. Spent a few nights there while looking for a place after getting out of the Academy.”

“I'll get this finished, then I'll worry about getting back to my place.”

“There's not much we have to do.” Amon brought the car to a abrupt halt at an intersection. “All we'll have to do is hand it off to get verified by the lab and then head out. The real work will start tomorrow.”

Reluctantly, but not too reluctantly, I accepted the offer. Waving at the car as Amon continued on to the CCG building, I walked inside with little regret. Driving with Amon was like being a salmon swimming upstream, where Hasuko was more of a 'leaf on the wind' style.

I peeled open another ration pack, gnawing down dinner as I changed for bed. Graverobbing was hard work, and whatever came next was likely to be even harder. Still, 696 wasn't buried there; he was probably a popsicle in the CCG's morgue. So the question was why pick there to bury a mask, rather than some other method of disposal. The only good reason I could dig up—_ha ha_—was that it was sentimental; a favorite place, a fond memory.

I could think of a few places like that.
Like on my first night, I slept like the dead. Minus the blinding ray of sunshine alarm clock at the crack of dawn; I had learned my lesson. Unfortunately, I still woke up before my alarm. This time though, it was just a run of the mill nightmare; the kind that seems to exist solely to wake one up in panic before realizing just how unfounded it was. I would never forget to wear pants when going into work. There were other nightmares though, and I was glad my subconscious had decided on irrational rather than realistic.

Unlike my first day though, there was still enough time for me to go back to sleep. Except my body refused to doze off. The switch had been flipped, and now I was in the state of being up an hour early and wide awake. Well, I suppose I needed a shower after the so-called rigors of last night.

Then, my phone rang. The math ticked over in my head—I was ten to twelve hours ahead of home, which meant that I was getting an evening call. As for who?

"Allen, Allen, how've you done for yourself?" I only had to hear my name and the inflection to know who had called.

"Kawana! Jambo, it is good to hear from you!" Kawana was an informant I had for the entirety of Chicago and the successor to a long family history of fighting ghouls.

"Little Gristle, your voice is pleasing to hear! I was afraid one of your hungry quarry had snapped you up, tender morsel you are."

"No, in this case the BGA sunk its teeth into me first," telling Kawana where I was might not have been the most prudent decision, but I did it anyway, "they sent me to Japan."

There was a slow intake of breath on the other line.

"Now I've got some words for you, Gristle." Kawana's baritone had deepened to a cautioning rumble. "I've a healthy soup of respect for you, so this is on the house: watch your bones in Japan. I and my father's brother have heard ill tales, and stories that would render fat from flesh. Stay far away from the cities my friend, else your sweet scent might never grace my establishment again."

"Thank you." I replied, knot forming in the base of my stomach. "I'll take your advice to heart."

"See that you do, morsel." And then, his voice was back to a jovial tilt. "Now, I've come into some information that the Gambino operation has brought in another Ghoul, courtesy of a young nibbler who provided me with a wallet. I won't ramble and distract you with the juicy details, but I would hazard a guess Robalson would chomp on this?"

"That he would. He should be in the office still."

"Excellent! I'll ring him at once. Now you take care, Gristle, and be sure you don't drop from the frying pan into the fire."

There was a meaty clunk and the line went dead. Kawana still loved his old rotary phone. More important though, was the free rumor. I had known him almost from the outset of my BGA career, meeting him while working in Chicago and had kept in contact with him and proximity with the
city ever since. For a man who ate most of his meals in a morgue, he was still the only person I could ever apply the term 'wicked cultured' toward.

Inaccurate however, was not a word I could apply to the man. All the information he gave me had turned out to be accurate, or at least pointed in an accurate direction. He seemed to have taken a liking to me though, which might've been why he gave me advice 'on the house'.

I couldn't afford to worry about his warning too much right now; I still needed to shower and get ready for the day.

Chapter End Notes

Hello readers, my apologies for the wait between chapters. I'll be posting about daily for a few days to make up for lost time, and then move back to a M-W-F schedule for the sake of consistency and avoiding hand cramps.
It did worry me though. All through the shower, the warning tapped at the surface of my mind like the water at my skin. It buzzed distractions into my ear as I dressed and it took two tries to knot my tie. Even if Kawana wasn't unerringly accurate with this information, that still meant he was only mostly right. There's enough to worry about, even with this warning.

My thoughts ticked away until I got out to the curb and saw Hasuko waiting.

"Sorry." I absentmindedly apologized. "Ran a bit late after last night."

"It's all right, I'm actually a bit early today. Speaking of last night," She wove the car into the flow of commuters, "you might have a few admirers in my office. Two of my cubicle-neighbors asked who the handsome gentleman was, leaving notes at my desk."

"Oh." Honestly, I had no idea what to say to that.

"Don't 'oh' me, you're not in trouble! Unless some of the others also take a liking to you."

Tell her she should claim you first. "Certainly not for you."

I probably overthought that all the way to the parking garage. Did she mean I would be in trouble if I distracted the other people, that I would get dragged into some kind of romantic polyhedron? Or would Hasuko be the one I'd be in trouble with? And then there was her last line. I wasn't even going to dig into that.

Thankfully, there was plenty to distract me at the office. Kureo was overseeing a busy planning table, and sorting through a sizable pile in an office on the third floor. He smiled at me and gave a brief wave. I nodded back, though what I really wanted to do was put a screen between myself and that unsettling grimace. At least with Juuzou, the childish glee was more believable.

"You and Amon did it!" He beamed. "You and Amon confirmed my hypothesis with your late night work! It is now officially confirmed that numbers seven-four-three and seven-four-five are connected and all but confirmed that the pair are ghouls."

"Where's Amon?"

"He's getting the Investigators who missed making your wonderful discovery together. With luck, we'll be ready to move well before noon."

This was moving faster than I thought. "Today?"

"Yes, yes." Kureo waved my attention down to the map he was working on and began tracing a path. "Every other day, generally between one and two, the subjects make a direct route through the suburbs here. If we use the ghoul sense of smell to our advantage, we can intercept them here."

He tapped his finger on a point, about two blocks from the middle of the route.

"Looks good enough. I'm guessing you picked there to block them in?" I guessed. Well, not really guessed; I knew what an ambush looked like.

"Indeed. While these streets are pedestrian only, this spot is an ideal because of the nearby parking
we can wait at, to subdue our scent while the chasers herd them into place."

"What if they aren't ghouls?"

"Then they won't notice the others and we can simply question them on the mask and odd… coincidences." Kureo had clearly thought this through. "But that's unlikely. Are you feeling doubtful as to the nature of our duty?"

"No." Yes. "Covering all possibilities is simply the best course of action."

"Good." He fixed me with a piercing stare. "I saw how unhappy you were after exterminating number six-nine-six. You cannot allow foolish sentimentality to take root in your heart. It will quench your flame and send you into darkness."

I was almost like we were reliving the meeting that had take place the previous day.

Same floor, same room with a wall of windows, same people, same seats. The only changes were the gloomy sky outside and the comparatively better news Amon shared. After Amon had finished with sharing his and my find, and subtly admonishing the pair, Kureo took center stage, laying out his map. Admittedly, while I kept my apparent attention on the map, I kept my attention on the gray skies out of the corner of my eye.

If I was lucky, any rain would hold off until tonight, when I could go out and sit at a little sidewalk place with an awning. Just to listen to the patter of water on fabric and the dancing reflections in puddles.

"—location will prove ideal for extermination; closing off escape routes and confining movement."

I blinked, attention suddenly back in the moment. "No capture?"

"Why show mercy to a monster?" Kureo looked at me as if I had sprouted extra limbs.

There was no reply I could think of that didn't put me in a bad light, so I simply kept my mouth shut.

Amon hardly spared me a glance, and went back to laying out the finer points of the plan.

"That's it then." Kureo spoke with a giggle. "The pieces are on the board; all we need to do is take our places. I can hardly wait to ask seven-two-three 'how does it feel'."

Once again, he stroked the top of his case as if it were a newborn. He desperately wanted this to end in a fight. And he may well do something stupid to ensure it.

After the plan had been disseminated, we rode down to the garage to pick up a vehicle, three of us in one elevator and the two in the other. We divided into cars the same way as well, with Kureo in the backseat with his case across his lap. At least Amon was driving more carefully with his partner in the vehicle.

"I will not pretend to understand your preoccupation with mercy, Allen. I would rather you explain it."
"It's not a preoccupation," I replied, turning my head so Kureo could hear in the back seat, "the dead don't speak outside of a morgue."

"You can't justify mercy because of the insufficiencies in an autopsy."

"I never said I was merciful."

"Fear then? Fear is no less of a problem, but it can be overcome."

"I've been elbow deep in devices capable of leveling apartment blocks, and you think I'm afflicted by fear?"

"All right," Kureo held up a hand in silent apology, "you've made your point. So what is your reason?"

"Say when we got into the shack with the other ghoul, there were no notebooks, no paperwork, no written stuff—he had memorized everything. We'd be totally reliant on the victim having some kind of information written down and lucky breaks from digging up graves."

"Ah. You're one of that type that wants to chase every possible lead. But what you're really doing is giving those insects too much credit."

"You're trying to dig too deeply, Allen." Now Amon broke his silence. "This isn't some complicated device; these are just ghouls, common trash. There's nothing below the surface to find."

So I shut my mouth and rode in silence. It wasn't just that killing every ghoul left information hidden, it was that killing everything only worked on wasps. Start killing—whether carelessly or with purpose—and you only make life difficult. When I had to kill, I did it because that was the only avenue open. Almost always.

Finally, our two-car caravan slowed to a crawl and squeezed ourselves into a tiny lot off a quiet street. One raindrop rapped on the windshield, then another and another. When we disembarked, the pair in the first car immediately set off toward their objective. Stepping out, I rolled my shoulders and was reminded of the few lost degrees of freedom. I left my jacket on the front seat, carefully folded in half and clipped my quinque onto my belt.

It seemed the rain wasn't going to wait, judging from the stray droplets staining the sidewalk.

"Raincoat?" Amon looked to me from over the raised trunk.

I shook my head. "Just an umbrella, if you have one."

"Just be sure you don't catch a cold." Kureo opened his umbrella with a swish of fabric. Playing the father figure right after you berate me? I don't know why I tried to understand that man.

The rain started as if a switch was flipped, making the edges of our umbrellas bounce and twitch. Above the crackle of raindrops on fabric, I could hear Kureo remarking to Amon how one couldn't pick better weather for hunting ghouls. He wasn't wrong. Rain deadened sound and washed away
odor—things every agent in the BGA knew.

I didn't like this idea of a broad-daylight action. Wandering in public, waiting in public, just made it more likely that we'd get spotted and our prey would catch on and hide. More unpleasantly, they might decide to spring the trap on us instead. Every umbrella-veiled passerby set me on edge, but only just a little.

It felt like we had been walking for too long, when Amon and Kureo stopped in near perfect unison.

"We're here."

"And now," the old man grinned, "we wait."

We didn't have to wait long.

They ran right up to us, legs soaked from splashing through puddles, though neither was breathing hard. It was just as Kureo planned; they ran directly into our crossroads trap. They: a woman, possibly in her thirties and child, a girl, hovering somewhere above ten-ish. The looks on their faces were consistent with people who had been chased into a trap made of black-suited figures. Well almost, considering my slightly damp shirt.

When Amon and Kureo approached, the woman's face slipped a few notches closer to terror. Understandable; Kureo's grin had quickly converted to something sadistic, almost inhuman. Still, to his credit, he did ask them to come in for questioning. In a tone of voice that suggested he wished very much for the opposite to happen.

"I was, miss Fueguchi, particularly curious…" Kureo's voice was soft and sharp; a knife pressing through cloth into flesh.

The girl clung in close to the woman, who drew her in protectively close.

"…about this."

Kureo, almost with a flourish, produced the mask and dangled it toward the woman.

A moment of stillness. Eyes widened and filled. Drops of water spattered on the ground.
"Hinami, RUN!"

The girl released her death grip on her mother's arm and ran for her life, back the way she had came. With a tear of cloth, woman's bone white kagune erupted and her eyes flooded black. The two investigators behind her, distracted by the girl, never stood a chance. One had his legs knocked out from under him, dropping with a splash. The other, still too slow, managed to draw his pistol before a return blow slashed him across the arm.

_Fucking idiot. You were even considering using a firearm with us straight downrange from your target. I hope that slash severed your tendons._

"That's the kagune." Amon could've been noting a color of paint.

Kureo only smiled and nodded.

In near unison Amon and I drew our quinques, but only he stepped forward. I was supposed to box in the target if needed, but given the reach of the woman's kagune, maneuvering around to block one of the other roads would've been near impossible. _We should've stopped her outside of an intersection._

Then, the woman attacked, the bone-white petals of her kagune whipping around in heavy arcs while Amon and I shouted at bystanders to get back.

Running on adrenaline, I barely had enough time to step back from a white blur…that would've missed me even if I had stood still.

"I won't. Let you pass." Was she crying, or was it just the rain?

"Don't get cocky, trash."

She was losing to Amon on the sole ground that she didn't know how to fight. It was painfully obvious; being tugged off balance by the momentum of swinging her kagune, the uncoordinated strikes, the disuse of her mobility. She was a kokaku—a calcifying-type, or calcifex, to use BGA terminology—which meant that she had an extra advantage defensively.

Amon was not swinging like a baseball player anymore. I imagined his strikes were fueled by his flawed justice, as he tried to weave through to land a blow on the figure itself. If he kept going at this rate, it wouldn't matter if he managed to hit the woman; a kagune—even a kokaku—could only withstand so much punishment before the connections between the Rc cells failed.

And they did. A parrying swing made contact with the one of the tips of her petals. It was like hitting a water balloon with a bat; the point of contact liquefied under the blow, sending a viscous spray across the pavement and a good ten feet down the path. The Rc cells were failing, millions of tenuous connections terminated. It was all downhill now.

Amon, despite my growing distaste, handled the fight like a pro. No risks, no overextensions, no chances. Caution served just as well as justice for him.

The woman was much worse off. Sharp bits of still-hard Rc cells littered the intersection, contrasting sharply with the mix of blood and liquid Rc displacing the puddles. Each step she took became a stumble. She reached her limit first, even with desperation behind each strike and block.
Her legs gave out and she collapsed, the chipped and cracked petals of her kagune fluttering weakly. For the first time in long minutes, it was quiet enough to hear the rain. Which was punctuated with a soft groan from one of the other men. And a quiet sob.

_That idiot better not think about picking up the gun._

Apparently discontent with the damage already dealt, Kureo was heaping insult onto literal injury.

"—disgusting, vile creature. Can't fight, can't even use its kagune. Even pretending it had human emotions; throwing its life away for its child."

He waved Amon back.

"Take a break, Amon. I'm going to take a turn, and finish this up. With my newest quinque."

I don't think he took his gaze from her once, from stepping forward and taking over, to pressing the switch on his shiny new toy.

Amon stepped back. He looked all right but was tired, given the limp slopes his shoulders formed.

"You all right?" I muttered, still transfixed by the investigator and ghoul in the crossroads.

_Fueguchi. He called her Fueguchi._ The adrenaline was draining from my system, and in its place was an unpleasant surprise.

As if through a tunnel, I heard Amon speak an affirmative. But I didn't hear the exact words.

I was as much transfixed by the new quinque as Fueguchi was. That bone-white segmented scorpion tail, last seen in a lot with two abandoned cars and a dilapidated shack. Beneath a corpse with a skull popped like overripe fruit.

No. The woman—_Fueguchi, remember_—was transfixed and oh so much more; her face twisting through an array of expressions, each more unsettling than the last. _No, not unsettling, pitiful._

Kureo was swaying like a man drunk.

"Yes...yes. Pain, despair, hate fear-rage-anguish! More, more! Show me more!"

Funny. I was feeling two out of that list right about now. Sadistic didn't even to begin to cover the tone passing through Kureo's lips. And yet, only one other person seemed to notice.
Stay down. I silently urged. Don't make this worse.

She didn't. Was it an escape attempt? A last spurt of fight? Trying to buy time for the girl to run? I didn't know.

Kureo seemed to have wanted that. As she tried to rise, he brought the spiked edge of the weapon around, slicing deeply into one leg before lazily repeating it on the other. Then he did the same to each of her arms, putting too long a pause between each strike for them to be wounds of necessity.

A scream twisted towards the rooftops.

A whimper stumbled across the crossroads.

A gasp crawled across the pavement.

A dead silence curled about our ankles.

And I didn't know which I found the least disturbing.

"If you had come along and answered my questions, this could've been over easily." Kureo paced a circle around her, his quinque forming a long dragging tail through the blood and rain. "Instead, you let me disassemble you in the middle of the street."

I knew what was coming. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Amon helping the other men, apparently having checked out of the spectacle. I could stop this. I had to stop this.

"If you have any final words, you'd best speak."

I had to go now; I had already been party to one questionable kill, and I wasn't going to be party to outright murder. My mind screamed at my body to move, but all I did was take a single step forward.

Fueguchi locked eyes with me for the briefest of moments. I couldn't read the look on her face.

"Hinami." There was no black in her eyes. "Li—"
"Time's up."

The quinque didn't cut as much as perforate and tear. The head went flying in a crimson spray and a sound like tearing wet cardboard, smacking ground with a dull, meaty thud. But for the disapproving hiss of rain, the intersection was dead silent. Now my body wanted to move. In two swings, I could have Kureo at kneeling height and his head ten feet away. And then I'd probably have to kill everybody else. Easy enough. Kureo distracted, Amon exhausted, the other investigators injured. Wouldn't be too hard.

Breaking my gaze from the corpse and the sadist, I turned to look down one of the side streets. I needed to get that thought out of my head. They were deserted; the rain and ghoul had seen to that, but for the briefest of moments I could've sworn a feature by the next intersection shifted. No. I was wrong there; stress and sudden murderous impulse must've been messing with my perception. Probably.

I clipped my quinque back onto my belt, pushing out a breath through my teeth with a hiss. Maybe I saw something, maybe not. In any case, assisting Amon and his mostly unhinged partner was no longer a priority.

Now, taking down Kureo on the other hand... That thought was shoved back down into the stewing hate in my chest. Being mad at either of them was out of the question, not unless I wanted a vicious and possibly lethal reprisal and an international incident.

So I vented at the other investigators, particularly the one who had apparently forgotten basic firearm safety. No wonder they handed out melee weapons like candy. Making sure the clod knew just how acute my disapproval was involved a minute-long rant at as loud a volume I could maintain while not sounding like Kureo.

"—Now. Pass me. The firearm."

"I—I—" The man looked more scared of me than he had of the ghoul. "o-ok."

I took it, pulled the magazine and ejected the round in the chamber. "Here."

I flipped the safety back on then passed him back the gun and pocketed the munitions.

"When we get back, we're going to talk with whoever gave you this."

"Let's head out." Amon had packed the corpse into a sizable black duffel; a more public-friendly version of a body bag.

"Is there any cleanup we need to do?" I queried, retrieving my umbrella.

"The rain is our cleaner today!" There were several notes of afterglow in Kureo's tone. "It will wash what little we left where it belongs—right into the sewers."

Well, he wasn't wrong. At least I didn't have to carry the bag, which Amon carried like it was filled
with feathers.

The drive back was quiet, apart from Kureo humming a tune on the final leg of the trip. There was one buzz from my phone though—a text. Rather than being from Robalson, this one was from Harvey, the office lawyer. It was a picture of a man sitting at my desk with the caption, 'went to find you, instead found your replacement. How about I call you at lunch in a day or two?'.

That was hardly unusual. Harvey ran anywhere from four to six cases at a time and was notorious around the office for keeping vampire hours and unannounced visits. I had one case open with him currently, but it had been on the back burner as we waited on a trial out west.

Still. I couldn't believe they just gave him my desk. And that I was irritated by that fact.

Naturally, the first thing we did after parking was bring Kureo and the body bag down to the lab. I suppose the old man wanted another quinque. The next thing, naturally, was wait to be found by the other investigator.

"What are you going to do with him?" Amon asked, as we waited near the lab.

"Maybe yell at him again." I shrugged. "Definitely going to tell the whoever's working at the armory what he pulled and get him signed up for a safety class. And hopefully get his weapons privilege revoked until he does."

"If he dies because he didn't have a way to defend himself, it'll look bad in the papers."

"I'd rather not get shot."

Amon's mouth opened and I expected a sardonic response. But his jaw snapped shut and he only shrugged.

Once Handgun Moron found us, it was a short elevator ride of shame to the basement and the quartermaster, who listened to my story with roughly the same irritated speechlessness that Amon had. Silently, he accepted the firearm and the rounds with a look of disapproval. Somehow, that silent treatment put every drill sergeant roar I had suffered to shame. It was as simple as signing a pair of forms, and that was it. We walked out one firearm lighter and one idiot disarmed.

Chapter End Notes

There might be some bonus chapters soon, I have some world-building stuff that I've been moving out of notebooks.
Impatience

"Now the girl?"

"Yes." Exactly the response I didn't want to hear.

"Why didn't we stick around and canvas the area?"

"Kureo's call, not mine."

He leaned over the map-strewn table.

"We'll either find her in the next couple days," I predicted, "or not at all."

"What makes you say that?" Amon glanced up from a map.

"Small kid alone in the middle of a city? This isn't urban warfare; she'll get noticed quickly by some concerned citizen," *Who probably wouldn't be too concerned with what Kureo would do to her,* "and we'll get a tip, whether or not she tries to hide for a day or two."

"And if we never find her?"

"Two options there; she either flees to another ward—unsurprising, after our meeting today—or gets killed by another ghoul because she's easy pickings.* Or her family had some kind of support network and she disappears into that."

"I had considered about the same, minus the last option. We'll have to work fast to spread the info before she can disappear; I'll get some materials together for a poster if you want to start on figuring out a search radius."

I had actually liked working with maps, once I had started seeing them as huge wiring diagrams, with each street a breathing circuit of a city. The other investigators had sketched out their diagrams of Fueguchi's movements into long wires of red marker and soldered points of interest into place with bits of tape. It wasn't perfectly recorded; many places looked more like perforated lines than actual pathways. *Perforations.* The bone-white quinque tore into a tear-stained neck. I bit down on the inside of my cheek.

With a quiet squeak of hinges, Amon was back.

"No posters?"

"Printed, and given to the others. They'll post them around the spot where we made the intercept and in a radius as well as the other areas where they were spotted regularly."

Posting where we made the intercept was a forgone idea, in my opinion. It was basically in the middle of a residential area, meaning no good places to hide unless you started kicking in doors. Most of the places on the map were likely dead ends as well; coffee shops and assorted boutiques, subway stations and bus stops. No location that could be 'home' jumped at me. I had to applaud Fueguchi posthumously for her secrecy.

"Any ideas with the map?"

"Not many. The records are incomplete and what is there doesn't point to a permanent home." I couldn't resist a dig. "We should've stuck around and canvassed while the trail was fresh."
Not rising to the bait, Amon only grunted.

"In any case," I mused, "since this happened during the lunch hours, we'll probably have to wait for evening for more people to come through and see the posters. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Luck. I hated that idea of relying on random chance. It was a philosophy that had kept me out of poker nights. But now? Luck was all we had: it was too late to go back and canvas the area and far too late to bring more people to the intercept. Personally, I considered out chances of getting a tip to be maybe forty percent, though certainly more if the kid had started crying while fleeing. Now, all we could do was wait for the odds to play out.

I should've been the patient one and after three years of disarming stuff, I thought I knew how to be patient as a boulder. That was Amon's role; he did a few things, but mostly sat back and read the case files. After what felt like a silent hour, I turned to him, halfway through a new sheaf.

"I need to go down and walk the track, clear my head."

"All right." Amon nodded, "Let's swap numbers first: if anything comes up, I'll give you a ring."

Five minutes later I was walking the track in the basement. This time, I had opted to keep my suit on, just in case Amon called in with something time-sensitive. On the bright side, I was basically back to being bone dry. In contrast, the minutes in the rain were just impossible to wring out of my head. Especially the last few. My feet tapped out a rhythm on the rubber-grit surface. *Ther-mite, ther-mite, get the ther-mite.*

**What were you up to, Fueguchi?** Shopping, coffee, visiting, collecting frozen limbs from a fridge? Perhaps the better question was where she had been coming from. Rebuilding the map mentally, I couldn't remember seeing much in the area where the path started. But then, that was only the first sighting; not necessarily where they had started walking from. I needed to take another look at the map.

**Where were you coming from, Fueguchi?** Hunting could be ruled out; only a few days between hunts would peg her as a binge eater and would've given an outsize impact to match. Socializing then? That was the most likely possibility, at least from my experiences back home. While the popular vision was of ghouls as solitary creatures—and in some cases, they were—the reality was that was mostly untrue.

Didn't stop the occasional mob from attacking the local recluse though. Agoraphobia accounted for some of the false calls we got as well.

**Who were you visiting?** Hunting partner was a possibility, given that she really couldn't fight, but that made it odd to bring the kid along—too young to properly learn to hunt. The much more American option was that she was paying respect to whichever ghoul had set himself up at the top of the hunting hierarchy. That I wasn't sure about at all as I had no idea how ghoul society here functioned and even if it did, several trips a week was much more frequent than anything I had encountered. Old friend was another—and in my mind, most likely—possibility and explained the frequent trips.

That left more options. Coffee shops were one possibility and were nice and easy to spend time at without raising eyebrows. Restaurants were another possibility, given that she could eat human food without triggering a gag reflex and would be perfect if she was a normal human's 'ghoulfriend'. Private dwellings were another matter entirely; near impossible to get into without a warrant, *though here it would probably be much easier.* Fueguchi was very probably not visiting a lover, what with bringing the kid along. Hm. Lover.
Wait. What was that Kureo said? I dredged up that conversation from a short eternity ago. What had he explained as we had headed out that day? Remembering conversations was harder than remembering maps.


His name was Asaki. Asaki Fueguichi.
Photography

It took me twelve minutes to calm down enough to be able to walk, back up to the office instead of walking to the lab. It took me another minute to open the door without slamming it. Amon glanced up at me briefly as I picked up a sheaf of papers and slumped into the remaining pleather office chair.

"You alright?"

"Call it a spark of inspiration."

I had to pretend that I was reading my way through the files. Daily routines, compiled and heavily annotated tips, evidence tags referenced with lab reports. It was useful junk. I didn't want useful junk; I wanted one piece of paper, maybe three, out of the piles of files. Hard work with zero chance of paper cuts paid off and I held my answers on a sheet that still smelled faintly of the printer.

I wasn't vindicated, wasn't surprised, just party to the elimination of a family by parts.

Six-nine-six, seven-four-three, seven-four-three; Asaki, Ryouko, Hinami; father, mother, daughter. Dead, dead, alive. Nor was I blind to the fact that this meant, technically, Kureo had killed the wife with her husband. It was funny, in a twisted and creatively perverse way. Kureo probably found it hilarious, simply because of the psychological hell it inflicted. Hell, he was probably doing the same to the mother, just for the eventual double feature of fucked up comedy.

Minutes ticked toward hours as my pretending to read became actual reading. Amon stretched, annotated the map and briefly left the room only to return with a box of notebooks collected from the shack. Eventually, I took another turn at the map but only traced my notes with a fingertip. I wasn't going to make this any easier than it needed to be.

As I saw it though, there wasn't too huge of area she could've came from; my probable area was a vaguely teardrop-shaped zone with the point at the end of the route. Half of me wanted to go and walk the area when I had the chance, while the little paranoid voice told me that would only invite the ire of whoever knew Hinami and her late mother. Still, I took a picture of the map. I didn't have to make a decision now, but this map probably wouldn't have easy access forever.

"That's a pretty good idea."

Amon pulled out his phone and documented the map as well, with a tinny click from his camera.

"How'd you manage to mute your camera sound?"

"Probably a manufacturer thing," I shrugged, "even with the sound on it's still a silent camera."

"Nice. Don't recognize yours though."

"This one is agency issue." I spun the flip phone between two fingers. "Stripped down as all getout, but the battery is nice and it can work on multiple bands."

"Exactly what a field agent needs. Any grand plans for that picture?"
"Nothing really. Probably stare at it when I have free time and see if any inspiration hits." *And maybe go and have a look around later.*

Hasuko came to visit our little waiting room later on, which made for a healthy change of pace for me. She knocked twice, cracked the door wide enough to make eye contact and waved. Telling Amon that I'd be back, I met her in the hall.

"I heard Kureo was down at the lab, so I assumed you three had bagged a ghoul."

"That's the short version, yeah." I didn't quite feel like sharing the long version.

"What's wrong then?" She levered her head out in front of me as we walked down the hall. "You look like you came back from a funeral."

The glass wall of the common area loomed up as we turned the corner. *You mean besides the fact that I witnessed an execution in street?*

"Oh, I know! You're sulking because you wanted a chance to fight and you had to sit on the sideline."

"Well, it would be nice to fight something, but-" *but witnessing that was more involved than I wanted to be* "-I didn't mind being in the background."

"Speaking of the background..." She waved toward the window, where the buildings rose up like teeth. "I should show you some of the city—once you finish up with this case."

"I'd like that." *Anything to take my mind out of the CCG.*

"Wonderful!" She beamed, as if making up for the missing sun.

But all I could see was Ryouko's face.
We regrouped as the sun slunk closer to the rooftops, Kureo officiating a meeting with the other two investigators. At this point, I was less than interested in learning their names.

"—with no tips today, that means that we'll be hitting the ground hard tomorrow for some good old fashioned detective work. At this point, the Daughter ghoul is no longer our sole objective. Work our way from the bottom and we'll hook something big, perhaps even the Binge Eater or the Gourmet! "

One of the pair, not the one whose pistol I had confiscated, asked if we would be interested in getting dinner. Amon, like myself, balked. I wanted to get out, ride with Hasuko back to my room and find some way to forget the events of today. Possibly with alcohol. Kureo straight up passed on the offer, saying he had things to do. But when Amon finally said yes, I found myself walking out a side entrance with the other three.

"On a final note;" Kureo had warned, "our faces were seen in this investigation, so exercise caution until we squish that last little bug."

A pleasant note to end a meeting on.

At least I didn't have to hold everybody up by going to tell Hasuko I would be going my own way back tonight; we had traded numbers in the common area before heading back to our offices. I also had another text from the lawyer, asking if I would be up for a quick, on-the-record chat. The whole time we walked, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Of course I was. I was a foreigner—a tall foreigner—in a country that was about as homogenous as it got. But. After military life and the events of today, being watched was an intensely uncomfortable feeling.

Taking a look at the group, I re-determined that I really wasn't up for food, and made my excuses as they ducked into a tiny restaurant like the one Shinohara and I had visited. Standing across the street, I dialed a window back home. Even with small talk being impossible, it was nice to hear a familiar voice again.

The conversation, of course, centered around the Aztec case. The Aztecs were a Central American cartel-slash-cult which took their name from the ancient civilization of the same name. And the upper levels of their organization—so far as we could tell—were dominated by ghouls. They had pushed up north to take a slice of the crime economy and had come into conflict with basically all the crime syndicates, most of all the Canadians.

Canadian crime family. Even now I couldn't help but grin at the phrase.

Unlike the European and Asian groups, the Aztecs didn't have to spend a fortune on covertly importing hired ghouls, and more unlike the others, the ghouls they brought had some semblance of training. In total, the BGA had been gunning for this group for almost six years before I had joined the bureau. The whole affair had come to a head at an otherwise quiet port in Louisiana; a forty minute 'incident' which was a more press-friendly term than calling it 'forty minutes of all-out war and two hours of mopping up the mess'. I had been involved in the event, having been shipped down specifically to help deal with any ghouls or booby traps.

Unfortunately for my nostalgia, the lines of questioning were restricted on the aftermath and cleanup, not the fight itself. Most of them consisted of verifying evidence collected initially or supplying extra details missing from the reports. The rest was centered on collecting on-the-record
statements, as me appearing in court was not in the realm of possibility. As for why this was becoming such a massive court case? Two of the foreign ghouls had valid US passports, and the operators of the vessel that brought the whole group had done so knowingly.

"All right, that's everything I've got on my docket for you."

"Nice." I still felt as if I was being watched, and the fact that this street was deserted didn't make it less unnerving.

"Unless some new evidence gets dredged up, feel free to consider yourself finished with this case until these guys appeal."

"You think they will?"

"With the sentence I'm pushing for?" His chuckle came out more like a cackle. "You better believe it! All right, I'm in need of my morning tea, and kept you for too long."

"Good morning, sir."

"Goodnight, Allen."

The line clicked dead. The feeling of being watched remained. I brought my gaze upwards and started scanning the rooftops, half of me expecting to see someone with a Kalashnikov. Amon and the others emerging from the eatery brought my attention down to earth long enough to say and wave farewell.

"Sorry about that." I apologized, as Amon adjusted his tie.

"It's all right. Duty above pleasure, after all."

"Yeah..." I turned to watch the pair continue down the road. "Is it just me or do you feel... watched?"

"No more than usual. You might be getting it because you're the odd one out and everybody's staring."

_But this street is empty._ My head swiveled back the direction we had come and then back to where the words of the two investigators bounced idly off the buildings. It felt as if I was breathing in ice. Beneath my shirt, I felt the hairs on my arms stand on end. The last time I had felt like this, I had been wearing a much different uniform. As if staring through a tunnel, I swiveled back toward two men approaching the intersection.

There was a blur.
At Last

I was almost halfway to them when the arm hit the ground. Ghoul? That fast, that quick? Ghoul. Had to be. Didn't think the fight I wanted would come so soon. Thank you, universe.

As one man fell, I reached the other. No time to be gentle; I tackled him before a return strike came back across where his neck had been. Maybe it was just the adrenaline, but I could've sworn I felt the wind from the miss.

Amon came up from behind, placing himself between us and the blur. The other man was down, not moving, bleeding from a line across the head. Slow ooze; his heart had stopped; he was dead. Beneath me the other man stirred and groaned. He was alive. At least for the moment

One good look was all I got at the ghoul; longcoat, white mask, blonde hair. Proportions suggested female. Was Amon unarmed? He didn't draw a weapon. Idiot. Points for effort didn't win fights to the death. Still, he took a few blows: long enough for me to get up and long enough for him to get a thorough beating.


First thing was to get her attention. I swung low, catching an ankle and yanked. Off balance, she retaliated with slash that hissed past my head.

And a sudden kick. It was like being hit by a steel pipe. There would be time to hurt later. With raw speed like that, this had to be a crystalline type. An ukkaku. What a coincidence.

Responding to the kick, I sidestepped and slashed low. She was still resetting her feet. My grin renewed itself: her own momentum kept her in the line of my strike. No good; I was off balance. My reach wasn't far enough. A thin string of blood whipped from the speartip. Bad strike. Not deep enough to sever anything important.

She dodged back, popping her kagune in the process. A swarm of spikes razed the pavement, forcing a retreat. Crap. Between the spines and her own speed, she'd have an easy time picking off Amon or the other investigator. She realized it too, making a beeline toward the latter.

Bad angle to bring the spear into play, even if I was in in range. My turn to play the fool. Missing by inches, my spear whooshed past her head. My fist followed, but she was already staring me down. And driving a knee into my stomach. I much preferred when Hasuko did that. This time, I did a better job of not being winded.

Before she could pull her leg back, my fingers snapped around her ankle like a steel trap. I could've used the leverage to toss her away from the defenseless duo, but right now being offensive was violently appealing. With her distracted and yanking free, she didn't realize what my left hand was up to until it hammered into her mask.

Watching her tumble to the ground was the best thing I had seen since stepping off the plane.

Naturally, she recovered with only a few seconds spent on the ground. As expected; even with the force I could bring to bear, I still couldn't concuss a ghoul bare-handed. I had messed up her mask though. The blow had shifted it upward, enough for me to see the lower third of a face and a shock of black hair before she shifted the cracked rabbit back into place.
Still not a good situation; couldn't grab my quinque without leaving the other guy open and leaving it embedded in the wall meant I was half-disarmed. Adding to the trouble was that this was a crystalline type, one capable of launching a hail of shards. Reciprocal force regulation meant that I could respond in kind—

And then a white blur split the distance between us. Close enough to cover me with chips of concrete. I blinked grit from my eyes. Did the man have zero caution?

"Very good, Allen." Kureo. The unwanted rescuer. "Amon should take notes, especially on keeping his quinque on his person."

He made a second swing, forcing the ghoul back. Not for the first time, I wished I had a quinque like that. Every move he made, every swipe he took, was amplified by the skeleton-like weapon. And then Kureo opened his big mouth, taunting, jeering, aiming to cut where he his weapon was failing. How the hell did he have the focus to mock somebody and try to cut them up.

Taking my eyes off the fight for a second, I looked to Amon. It was basically a reversal of his fight with Ryouko, except his beating was applied with fists and feet rather than a quinque. Definitely would have a impressive black eye tomorrow.

"—weak, once you drag the fight out. Which is exactly what my associate did, right?"

I probably had. Either that or the ghoul was getting sloppy. Shut up, Kureo. Your voice makes me want to hurt something.

"Why don't you tell me where that little ghoul is? After dealing with her parents, I shouldn't keep the child waiting for her extermination."

"Shut! Up!" Each word was punctuated by an unsuccessful blow.

Sloppy, sloppy: she didn't notice that she had overextended. The scorpion tail now stretched behind her. Mado was now wearing that same sadistic face. All it took was a twist and a flick of the wrist for the quinque to spring erect, right in her blind spot, and perforate.

I could hear the wet tear, and wrenched at my own quinque, working it free from the wall. If he wouldn't end this quickly, I would.

"If I could erase you from existence, I would." Another sweeping strike, another miss. If Kureo could stop running his mouth this fight might've been over already. But that assumed he wasn't playing the sadist again. Having his 'fun'.

"I do wonder how much trash like you I've buried over the years. You won't even be a footnote."

Another scorpion strike and the ghoul retreated, clutching at her arm. With a growl, I ripped my own quinque free of the wall. This was not going to be drawn out. However, the ghoul disengaged, making a leap onto a low wall, then onto a rooftop, and then she was gone.

"Guess she realized she couldn't win." Kureo's shoulders adopted a disappointed slope.

I waited five minutes before agreeing.
Blood and Plastic

Cleanup took time. Call an ambulance for Amon and the other guy, bag the one-armed corpse, document the scene. I waved away the paramedic twice; all I had were bruises, even if I did have a shoeprint on my shoulder. There were more interesting things to do than get patched up.

The darts thrown at me were still embedded in the sidewalk, though their edges had softened. They were all roughly uniform in size, roughly the length of my hand and with a cross-section just a bit larger than a nickel. Definitely a healthy ghoul, if very much untrained.

The other worthy object of note was the blood spatter, or more accurately, the lack thereof. Granted, I wasn't expecting a flood from the slash to the leg, but there was a surprising dearth of blood from Kureo's bait-and-perforate attack on the ghoul's arm. Neither of us had gotten in great hits. I had thought he had hit on of the veins on the inside of the arm, but the attack must've missed the mark. In any case, the strike had probably left a ragged wound and would be much slower to heal. Even with a ghoul's regeneration abilities, an injury like that from a quinque would likely take a week to get back to par.

I had a profile to work off, or at least a simple one. Female, dark hair, slender build, about two heads shorter than me—which described basically every woman I had seen since stepping off the plane. But I had a bit more I could add: possibly limping from the leg wound, definitely injured upper arm, big bruise on her jaw.

Then there was the evidence Amon had bagged: that white bit of mask. Up close, It looked less like porcelain and more like...plastic. Two layers, one glossy shell over a matte inner layer, this was good work—professional work, even. Granted, the whole rabbit motif looked goofy as heck, but dang, it was a wonder I had managed to crack off a chunk of it.

After Amon and the other investigator had been shipped off to the hospital, it was just Kureo and I in that now silent street.

"Once again, I stand impressed with your BGA. Do your fellow agents also keep their quinques on them at all times."

"Usually. Probably easier for us though, since ours are smaller."

"It certainly invites a larger risk of being recognized, but it seems that it paid off in this case. Well, I'm tired. See you tomorrow, Allen."

I didn't like him, but that didn't stop me from agreeing with him; after navigating the subways and streets to my room, all I wanted to do was flop into bed and sleep till dawn.

There were things to do before that, though. Wiping the dirty footprint from my jacket came first. The dress shirt and t-shirt underneath was a total loss. Imprinted in the shirts—and my skin—was a near-perfect impression of the tread the ghoul had worn, and each edge had broken the skin so that a sticky film of blood had adhered the shirt to me. It was an impressively painful branding, but at least nothing was broken. I ended up hopping in the shower so I could take the shirt off without too much suffering.

My stomach was another matter, where a beautifully purple and blessedly painless circle had emerged below my rib cage. On the bright side I looked like a superhero, if one were to stand far away and squint.
"Here's..." I struck a pose in the mirror, "Bruiser-man."

My shoulder gave a disapproving opinion in the form of a bolt of pain.

I needed to eat before I passed out for the night. So I compromised and ate in bed while thinking. That attack today had to be connected with that little show we had put on in the morning. Had to. The coincidence of the timing was too solid to explain away and even if it was just a coincidence, whoever had attacked us had too little training and foresight to be a ghoul who preyed on investigators. And if it wasn't a coincidence what else could it be?

Territorial behavior was possible, but that was almost always a ghoul-on-ghoul thing, plus everything I had heard suggested that the twentieth ward was a relatively peaceful district. The other option was that this was an initiation for a gang. Possible—I had dealt with one impressively messy case before—but unlikely; taking on multiple investigators instead of one was risky. But, she hadn't stopped to claim any kind of proof.

With a sigh, I rolled onto my side. There would be time enough for more thought tomorrow. Unless somebody called in a tip.

Robalson held his face just a few inches from my own.

"Wakey wakey, mister bomb. Time for you to make a frieeeeend."

He hoisted me upright on the muddy street like I was a feather, as the tarps and corrugated steel of the shantytown danced and howled on a cinder-laced typhoon hovering in a flame-red sky. He faced me down a flame-kissed street and dropped that helmet over my head. My mask, my shield, my fetters.

With a slow spin, Robalson cut into my vision.

"Your tools of trade, oh wise one."

He raised a duffel bag in front of my face, bulging with the tools of my trade. By the time I had gripped the strap, he was laughing in that funny way. His crisp suit smoldered into a bloody uniform, smoke rising from the seams.

"And maaaaaybe be successful this time?"

He made that awful laugh ring through the helmet as he collapsed into a cloud of cinders and ash. One way from here; up the street and deeper into the storm.

What was this feeling, that gripped around my like a vise?

Was it the pain of stray cinders sizzling through my clothes?

Was it the uneasy weight of winds squeezing skin?

Was it the ashen air etching my throat?

No, something else.

My foot caught on something and I almost fell over. Half-baked in a crust of ember and ash, it was a corpse, looking more burnt steak than human. Smelled nauseatingly close to the same thing. I had seen worse, I had done worse, I had survived worse. Pulling my leg free, I continued the long walk—I had to. I was required to follow this to the end.

The wind howled defiance to my face, and the shantytown shuddered. Bits of burning buildings flew free, spitting embers and splinters. Bits of fire and steel pinged and rapped at the wall of glass covering my face, as the gale yanked at the bag in my hand. Through the armor and padding, all my ears could discern was a rumble of the wind.

I didn't see the metal as anything but a blur until after it had hit. And by then, it was a black wall slicing deeply just above my left eye. Dropping the bag, I tore the helmet from my head and fell to my knees, pressing both hands to my face as the blood trickled into my eye. Like a stopped pulse, the air went dead. I raised my head, and could only watch as the fires, the shantytown, and even the ground it stood upon fell into something emptier than an abyss, leaving only me, the bag...and the
road. I collected myself and stood again. My left eye burned and stained my vision red, but I continued. I had chosen to see this through to the end.

It felt like both an eternity and an instant, but I stood before it; a device, a bomb, a killer born of chemicals and steel. And dropping my bag, I knelt before it as if in perverse prayer. I tore my gaze from the device, and unzipped the bulging bag...to reveal a single needle and thread. My fingers trembled as I lifted them free. The feeling around my neck had a name now: helplessness.

Hesitantly, I turned back to my subject—Ryouko Fueguchi, brutalized and kneeling headless, just as she had at the moment of death. At her side was her head, eyes staring sightless toward the abyss into which the shantytown had fallen. Knowing the why was impossible, but I felt the compulsion push me to act.

Each stitch I made was wide and crude.

Each stitch I made bridged shredded skin and mutilated muscle.

Each stitch I made felt as if it pierced my own neck.

On the last stitch, I dropped the needle and knelt again in front of the corpse. Helpless, powerless, useless. I had the chance to save her, to save the dead investigator, to save my conscience and I had done nothing.

"Evil prospers when good men stand and do nothing." The words fell so quietly from my lips that I almost didn't believe them.

With a silent shudder, she looked me in the eye, just as she had before. Her lips moved without a sound, but I knew what she said. Exactly what word.

Chapter End Notes

I could not save her I could not save her I could not save her I could not save her I could not save her I could not save her I could not save her I could not save her I could not save her I could not save her I could not save them
That word bounced in my head, an uneasy prayer for atonement. I deserved that much at least, if not forgiveness.

There wasn't a tip for us today day. Kureo sounded mildly disappointed as we walked the streets and asked questions but Amon looked somewhat relieved. He had a pad covering one eye, though I could see the outlines of what must’ve been a monster of a black eye around the edges. His gait was a bit funny too, like he had spent the night on the world's most uncomfortable bed.

As for hitting the streets, all we had gotten were a pile of apologetic negatives and a few old stories Kureo probably knew by heart. We got friend-of-a-friend stories from old people and hyperbolic anecdotes from the young. Dead end after dead end after dead end after dead end.

As the sun slunk lower, we made the shift to asking ghouls. Well, trying to find ghouls: the ward had seemingly gone silent. Alleys were silent, underpasses vacant but for pedestrians, old buildings silent as tombs. Like the city before a blizzard, activity had simply evaporated. I was glad for that. I knew exactly what Kureo's mode of questioning was, and I hated it.

The emptiness chewed my nerves raw, leaving my companions untouched. Every ghoul in the ward had to know what we had done. Were they trying to wait us out? Or waiting for a slip-up? My knowledge of ghoul sociology wasn't academic-tier, but I knew that ghouls who operated in the territory of the 'big fish in the pond' were subservient—to a degree, of course. Had the big fish ordered this? Or was I being paranoid, and this was only a series of puddles.

That the unnerving quiet continued into the next day didn't help. Neither did the talk of funeral plans. I didn't eavesdrop. Not intentionally, of course; I had attended several back home. It was just the eerie similarity. On the bright side, we didn't stay long enough to hear much of it: Kureo wanted to work, which meant Amon only had a few minutes to talk to the surviving investigator while Kureo and I waited. I felt like too much of an outsider to join in, even if I had been on the scene when Kusaba—I only learned his name when I heard it sobbed by his partner—had died. Kureo probably didn't even care. For his part, Amon marched from the conversation looking as if he had collected enough righteous indignation to recharge his sense of justice.

Maybe Amon got an incomplete charge, maybe Kureo was tired of not having any ghouls to torture, maybe I looked like an overwound clock. We ended up coming back to building well before the evening, with Kureo deciding we'd take a late start the next morning. Thank god. I don't think we had taken a day off since I had met the duo a short eternity ago. And I had absolutely no idea what do with myself.

Naturally, this meant the first thing I did was meander up to see what Hasuko was up to, which turned out to be also basically nothing.

"Allen!" She put down her book. "You're here early. Did something happen with Mr. Mado?"

"Literally nothing. The past two days of fieldwork have been mostly just field and no work. Absolutely eerie."

"Well, you Americans say 'when the cat is away, the mice will play', and you, Amon and Kureo are definitely cats. We haven't had much to do the past couple days either; guess we can thank you for that."
"Mado called it quits early today, so I thought I'd come up and say hi." I was suddenly very aware of all the eyes poking up over cubicle walls and burning holes in my suit.

"Oh!" Hasuko stuffed the book into a bag. "Come on, I know something you'd probably like to see."

She shouldered her bag, looped an arm around mine and half-marched me to the elevators. *Guess she was claiming me, at least in front of her coworkers.* From there, we went to the ground floor and out a back door, into a tiny parking lot.

"Where are we going?" I asked, ducking under the arm blocking the driveway entrance.

"You'll see."

Up one street, down another, around a corner and then under a old red arch. It was a garden. Or a shrine. It didn't matter; all I could do was stand and gape at the miniature forest I had been led to.

"You should see your face." Hasuko teased, wandering over to a bench. "I found this on my second week here, since then it's been my little island of green."

"Yes." I listened to the the gentle rustle of leaves. "Yes it is." *I gotta explore this.*

I could guess why she liked it so much; the trees, the wood shrine, the way layers of leaves muted the city. I didn't know how she knew I needed this, or if she just wanted to share her secret hideaway. Regardless of why, I owed Hasuko one thing at least.

"Thank you." Sitting down next to her, I leaned back and watched the leaves dance in a dry breeze. "I needed this."

"After the bustle of the city," she spoke with a quiet smile, "being here just recharges my batteries."

"The quiet gets to me, but this is the best kind of quiet." *The kind with good company.*

"I would've thought a military man like you would've been used to noise."

"What I did was bomb disposal. Never really saw much fighting. But it had the worst kind of silence."

"What do you mean?"

"Whenever we'd drive out to a call, we knew when we were getting close when the noise died down. People would avoided the streets, hidden themselves at home, made a break for safer places. Nobody would drive a vehicle close, so we wouldn't hear cars. When we spoke with the guys on the scene they'd be all quiet—as if the ordinance would hear. Then I'd suit up, with a big old box of a helmet, so that all I could hear would be the radio in my ear and my own breath. And the whole time, It would just be this...awful waiting."

"What for?" Hasuko had edged closer.

"Would the device explode? Would it fizzle? Would it crack and give me its secrets? Would it explode? Close, where I would liquefy from the blast? Far, where the blast would hit like a hammer across my body? In-between, where the shockwave ruptures organs like wet paper by a hose?"

It was only then I realized that my body was sitting bolt upright on the bench. Hasuko pulled her hand from my shoulder. I should've felt embarrassed, sharing all that with somebody I hadn't
known for more than a month. But the cliché was true; it felt liberating to have it out in the open.

"That's terrible!" She was oh-so-close. "Why did you join the BGA after all that? Did a ghoul kill somebody close to you too?"

"No, no. Besides, the BGA doesn't let people like that do fieldwork." I gingerly touched my shoulder. "After service, it felt like I didn't have much of a choice; doing other stuff might've felt dull. What about you?"

"My mother was eaten when I was thirteen. Father put me in the schools the Commission offered since they made it easier to make ends meet, so I figured out what I wanted to do before I got close to the university. I don't think he really approved of what me working for the CCG, but at least he hasn't been eaten or disappeared. Can't imagine your parents were too approving of you going off to disarm bombs."

"Well, my dad always encouraged me to follow my namesake relative's path into the air force, while mom just wanted to celebrate every achievement, but by the time I was doing that they really didn't have a leaning toward anything."

"They just accepted it?"

"Kinda." I shrugged, stiffly. "The dead can't complain, right?"

"That's awful." Then, "How can you talk so candidly about it?"

"Bit of survivor's guilt, bit of acceptance. Being in the ICU for the whole aftermath probably helped. In the end, I made the choice to keep on living."

"After mother…passed…father cashed in his vacation time and we spent a month out of Tokyo, just living in a little place up north in the Hokkaido area. The distance helped us recover, I think."

"…We aren't going to win any awards for cheery conversations."

That elicited a laugh.

"Hey, you started it!" Hasuko nudged my—thankfully uninjured—shoulder.

"Ok," A grin jumped unbidden to my lips, "different topic: what were you reading back at the building? Looked like you were pretty absorbed."

"Oh, that." Shades of pink curled across her cheeks. "Everybody's talking about Sen Takatsuki and telling me to pick up her horror novels. But…uh…I like smutty books."

I couldn't think of a good reply to that. Was there a good reply to that?

"…Like what?" Was the only thing I could think of.

"I've been reading this one by an American author, which is nice because nobody here knows what its—" belated realization filled her eyes, "—aaand I've said too much."

"Probably." I cast around in my head for the most transgressive works I had heard mentioned around the office. "It couldn't possibly be Fifty Tiny Bites, could it?"

She didn't say anything. She didn't have to. Her face was roughly the shade of the arch at the entrance.
"Isn't that book banned by..." I tried to recall the firestorm the novel had whipped up, "basically every country now?"

I was pretty sure it was. Writing books involving ghouls was inviting controversy, and going so far as to *fetishize* them... That was a topic I wasn't going to touch with a ten foot quinque.

"Out with it." She demanded.

"Out with what?"

"I know you're sitting there judging me, so out with it."

"Eh, it's not a book for me. Heard the intended audience loved it though."

"That's it? No rant, no lecture on ethics or morality?"

"Each to their own. Though, I did hear a lot of steamy talk about" I turned to look her dead in the eye, "chapter forty-two."

It was like looking at a tomato with eyes.

"You—you stop that." She smacked me in the shoulder, just hard enough that I knew not to try my luck any further.

"Okay."

So, we just sat. In silence. *Was this a 'date'?* She just wanted to show me a place she liked. *Yeah, her secret hideaway, her isolated private place.* I wasn't even going to dig into any meaning here. This silence wasn't so bad, like the space between words.
"I remember when you asked me about Mr Kotaru and Mr Mado. Think you've got a better idea of them now?"

"Amon I think I know pretty well. He's a little idealistic for my taste, what with all his 'for justice' attitude." I shrugged, thinking back to working on the evidence with him. "Likable guy, once he stops being dead serious."

"Rumor around the office is that he doesn't have much of a social life."

That rumor was probably true.

"What about Mr Mado?"

"He...really only likes killing ghouls. That's all I've got on him. How the hell he hasn't been Section nined is beyond me."

"Section nined...?"

"BGA procedural regulations;" I shifted my back on the bench, "keep a strict set of rules on how we are allowed to respond in the field. Section nined is what we call it when somebody gets pulled from duty for being too violent in the field, among a few other things."

"Too violent?" Hasuko's jaw hung open for a moment. "They're ghouls, not human. It doesn't matter how we kill them, only that they die!"

"Once one side says anything goes, do you really think the other side will keep to any rules? I worked with rules like that for three years, and I never once heard of any BGA agent getting cut down in the street."

"You must live a sheltered life." She spoke with a disdainful sniff.

And just like that, the conversation ended. Could've been worse; she could've been hostile rather than just disdainful. It still hurt, which was confusing because I wasn't trying to get her to like me.

Not consciously, at least. I got up, paced the garden again just to sort my thoughts, and got a text. Robalson, as usual.

'I know Harvey needed to talk with you about the Aztec case, but you don't need to do a remote logon to keep up to speed on the happenings."

Snapping the phone shut, I sighed and completed my second paced circuit around the tiny forest preserve. I had too much on my mind to even want to consider what hidden meaning Robalson was trying to impart. And the phone buzzed again. Hasuko this time.

'Sorry, I've gotta run. My dad locked himself out of his apartment, and I need to bring over the spare key."

Yikes. That was an excuse right out of a bad novel. Then my phone buzzed again: Hasuko.

'This wasn't the outing I wanted to take you on, but knowing that you like greenery gave me a few ideas. I'll let you know when I've got it planned out!"

So maybe it wasn't a fake excuse, just an unusual one. Not entirely believing it, I checked the
bench just to be sure. Unsurprisingly, she, her book and her soft scent were gone. Now the question was what to do with the rest of my day: I still had some hours left before I needed to head to bed. It couldn't be anything too time consuming though, since even with Kureo declaring a late start for tomorrow, I was still going to show up at the usual time and hit the gym.

Retracing my steps, I soon stood at the entrance back into the twentieth ward, which still left me with that one question; what to do now? Well, I was already in the twentieth ward and I did have a dangerous idea of what I could do in my free time. Memory, map, pen; my mental map was still good, finding a paper map shouldn't be too hard and finding a simple pen would probably be stupidly easy.

Time was what I had in abundance, time enough to take a look at where the mother and daughter were coming from.

+++-Expanded Look-+-+-+

A brief overview of the BGA.

-Motto:

We slay Monsters

-Regional Offices:

Chicago, IL; New York, NY; Las Vegas, NV and Atlanta, GA. Main headquarters in Chicago. State offices are placed in the highest population center within each state.

-Founded:

1861, under its original title; Bureau of Identification and Recovery, tasked with recovering Union remains from Civil War battlefields.

1865: placed under the direct control of the newly formed Secret Service as the Department for Ghoul Identification.

1910: Formally became an independent agency under its current name; Bureau for Ghoul Affairs

-Total Employees:

Approximately 48000 individuals, including lawyers, scientists, field agents and inter-agency and international liaisons.

-Notable Achievements:

Prototype and eventual first production of Q-bullets, beginning in December of 1899.

Fermi Cytological Imaging: low energy x-ray scan capable of observing internal function and structure of an R-sac (Kagune) in real time.

Hargrave-Morley surgeries: [DATA EXPUNGED]

-Standard-issue armaments:

.45 or .50 caliber handgun with Q-bullets

.50 submachine gun with Q-bullets or untreated bullets
7.62 or .50 battle rifle with Q-bullets or untreated bullets

Quinque steel armaments: restricted to experienced agents and Tactical Response Squads

-Employee Tiers:

N: Noncombat, non-fieldwork employees, placed due to specific internal role or evaluation results: lawyers, doctors, armormers, etc.

E: Workers who perform duties in the field but are not expected to interact with Ghouls: forensics, drivers, medical examiners, etc.

C: Field Agents, trained to interact with and confront with Ghouls on a regular basis; equivalent to First Class and Associate Special Class Investigators at the CCG

Cx: Highly experienced Field Agents, both in investigative and combative terms, taken from either the top of the C-class or poached and trained from other agencies or the military; equivalent to Associate and Special Class Investigator Ranks at the CCG

Cb: Field Agent-in-training; expected to take a minimum of 2 years of training under at least 2 different C- or Cx-Class Agents. Junior Investigator equivalent.

I: Agents specializing in integrating into and collecting information from ghoul groups. Primarily an intelligence and noncombat position. Special Class Investigator equivalent.

T: Tactical Response Squad; Agents specializing in ghoul combat to a much greater degree than other agents. Special Class Investigator equivalent.

Tx: Expert-class TRS member. Rank is rarely achieved by human BGA members.

N: Individuals charged with running a BGA office. While no longer in a combatant role, most if not all possess considerable field experience.

-Ghoul classification:

Ghoul strength classifications are done as a direct or estimated measure of Rc factor

0: Rc of 200-500
1: 500-1000
2: 1000-3000
3: 3000-5000
4: 5000-7000
5: 7000-9000
6: 9000+

-BGA Identity Numbers:

All members of the BGA are assigned a unique ID in the following format:
[sex]-[employee tier]-[home office code]-[DOB month/day]-[biological status segment]
For example: Allen Grissom, BGA-ID; M-T-CHI-1007-Hm5
Bad Choices

This was a crazy idea. Back home, digging through case files on your off time was considered borderline obsessive. Actually going into the field and checking leads off the clock would definitely end up with an inquiry into possible 'obsessive behavior' and possibly even lead to section nine proceedings.

This wasn't obsessive though—at least, I hoped it wasn't—I wanted to understand exactly what was going on. The laws that governed the CCG were borderline militant, with Kureo and Amon acting less like law enforcement and more like, well, secret police. And after what Hasuko had said, that attitude was starting to sound like the norm. All that made where I was walking now, the twentieth ward, an ill-fitting puzzle piece.

Obviously, it was peaceful enough that my partners regarded its investigators as soft, but definitely not devoid of ghouls. Between all the things that had happened since I had started working here and the stories I had overheard about the Binge Eater and this 'Gourmet', that was an easy observation. Still, this ward was quieter than the Midwestern cities I had worked in by a long shot. The question, of course, was why. The answer I would've looked to back home would've been that the area was held down by a group of older 'Alpha' ghouls, who held the majority of the territory and forced out newcomers. If one of them was displaced, violently or otherwise, that usually led to a sizable uptick in attacks as newcomers flooded in, which was why the BGA rarely interfered with Alphas in their territories.

It was also possible that the ghoul population here was rebounding after what I could only call a mass extermination. But that didn't fit with what I had heard about Kusaba being the first investigator to be killed in the ward in years. Ghoul populations had a habit of bouncing back quickly on the local scale.

Option number three was probably the most unlikely here, but would've been the second most likely at home. The ward did house its carrying capacity of ghouls, but they obtained their food from 'morgue masters'. It was the most expensive way to live as a ghoul, but was probably the safest; go to school, learn basically any trade that involved working with corpses—mortician, coroner, undertaker—get a job where said corpses were stored, and thrive. A corpse could go into the ground or undergo cremation missing its legs or even more, with nobody being the wiser. The best part was that these necrophagic ghouls still kept territory, which meant there were huge zones that ordinary people considered ghoul-free.

The irony was that those areas could contain an abnormally high number of ghouls; on average, a city morgue would get a body per day. That's a lot of meat, even if only half of it could be taken. The higher-ups at the BGA worked hard to keep those little 'ecosystems' stable. After all, if you cut off a food supply, chaos and a sharp spike in killings is but a few steps away.

I honestly had no idea if that kind of system was possible here. It would certainly be easier to avoid the CCG living like that. On the other hand, I could see the CCG monitoring morgues and the like with a microscope. All I knew was that I didn't know enough.

In any case, the map was easy to find but I lost patience before I could get a pen. Hmmm, mabye that was for the better. Not having a marked-up map would make it easier to hide my intentions if I found Kureo out doing the same thing or got into trouble with the local police...or ghouls.

Actually, if I saw him out here it'd be a toss-up on whether I'd walk the other direction or start a fight. Seeing him wasn't likely though; even if we had drawn up the same area, it was still a sizable
area to canvas. The streets seemed to be an indecisive mix of houses, shops and shops with what I could only assume were apartments above them. Almost like there had been a local battle over zoning. Did Japan even have similar zoning laws to back home?

Nothing really helped clear up what the Fueguchi duo were doing here. Residential suggested visiting indoors, away from prying eyes, though the infrequency of the visits said this wasn't their personal residence—the evidence suggested the shack acted as that. Had acted as that. The more I walked, the more this felt like a dead end. Doubt it would've been the same for Kureo; he had a knack for accurate hunches that was more predatory than human.

Until I happened to see the little blackboard. My reading ability might've been rather literal, but there was no mistaking the artistic rendition of a coffee cup. Ghouls could drink coffee. Hell, ghouls took coffee drinking more seriously than most coffee drinkers. I could see a ghoul doing a bit of traveling for a good cup of coffee, though I really couldn't stand the stuff. Assuming Ryouko was a coffee snob was a stretch, but was the best lead I had at this point.

So I feigned being lost and asked passerby if they could point me towards the fancy coffee shop I was meeting 'my friend' at. Thanks to the helpful nature of random citizens, I found four.

Two had all-glass windows, so I could count them out; if the patrons were that visible, Ryouko and he daughter would've been tracked to there, rather than just a wide area. Another was posh, but more of a bakery than a coffee shop; getting coffee from a bakery was...suspect, if you never bought pastries. The fourth fit the criteria, but I caught a glance at one of the coffee machines and saw they were just the kind that ended up bathed in grease at a diner.

That made me zero for four. I had already passed the baseball strike limit; might as well try one last time. I tried my luck with a college age girl; I was still young enough that it wouldn't be weird to ask somebody that age, right? Good god that thought sounded wrong.

"Oh! My friend works at a fancy coffee shop! Its called, um...shoot." she frowned, briefly, "I'll just write down the address for you."

"Thank you." I lent her a corner of the map to write on.

"No problem! Hope you find your friend!"

Shame you're not meeting Hasuko there. After hanging out with her for an hour or so already today, I was probably Hasuko'd out. Plus I really wouldn't be setting a good example, wandering a ward where somebody had been offed just two days ago.

I looked down at the numbers, then over at the map. It didn't look like I was too far away, just a few blocks and then--.

All the streetlights went on with an imaginary pop. Crap, was it really that late? I needed to get back and sleep—even if that was an old person thing to say. But the coffee shop. I drummed my fingertips off my thumb as I considered my options.

Could I wrap this loose end up easily? No, right? That kind of thing only happened in contrived novels and crappy romance flicks. And what if I did figure it out, the question would be what to do with the information. Professionally, passing it to Amon and Kureo was the right thing. Actually, being professional would've been doing basically anything but this. Ethically, the right thing to do would be to—put down the rabid—bury the truth. Personally, I really wanted to know, like in that way kids stare at Christmas presents a week before the big day. Despite being tired out from walking and an impatiently empty stomach, the feeling was electrifying. There wasn't even a good
reason to know, just this...unprofessional desire.

I had made my choice before I started walking.
Did I regret it? Worse than not asking for that dance at prom. But...if I had to pick between the mixed drink of regret that was willful ignorance and being professionally obligated to share information that would lead to a child's death, I could survive the hangover.

My alarm went off nearly an hour after I had gotten out of bed. All through getting dressed and riding with Hasuko, a dark cloud hung low over my head. Another bad dream. This one was less fanciful and much more realistic. Borderline memory. I needed this out of my head before it ruined my head, even if I couldn't get the feeling of being slapped by a shockwave out of my skin.

I went straight to the locker room, grabbed a shirt, shorts and gym shoes, and claimed a few coat hangers for my suit. Hopping on one leg to get my foot through the hole, I banged my shoulder into the open door of the locker.

Hmm, that would make for an easy distraction and there was a mirror right there.

Stretching out the collar of a nice workout shirt was basically a crime, but I couldn't resist. The bruise was nigh invisible now, with just a dark patch from where the skin had been crushed between the shoe and the collarbone. Checking the one on my stomach was pointless; it had been basically gone yesterday. I couldn't happen but smile a little, and the cloud slunk a little higher.

Running around the track helped strip it down, but I was still in a funk when Amon waved at me from near the free weights. He joined me on my next lap.

"You've been jogging since I got in." He fell into pace next to me. "How long have you been at this?"

"I got here. Same time as usual." I spoke between breaths. "So, since then. Minus maybe. Twenty minutes."

"You mean," Amon twisted to look at something, "you've been keeping this pace for almost two hours?"

"I had. Shit stamina. Once. Never again."

"Fair enough. Kureo told me, he'd be in around noon." His voice had started to match his breathing. "That gives us around, three hours, less that for recovery. Probably even less, for you."

We continued on another set of laps. Despite the early hour, there was a bit of activity and walking traffic. Finally, Amon decided he was done.

"All right, dammit. You win."

We both slowed to a walk.

"Phyrric victory." I gasped. "I can. Barely walk."

"Well, we never got around to doing squats the last time we were here..."

I made a noise that accurately summed up my feelings on doing more leg work. Maybe in an hour or three; jogging was the kind of thing that left me feeling like a desiccated husk. Had to keep walking though, stopping to sit would only invite cramps. Which meant more laps around the track,
this time at the same speed as everybody else. I was surprised at just how many people were in their work clothes here, like this was just a place they hung out to walk off stress. My legs were still a little shaky, but I had to leave the gym before Amon, so after I finished my cooldown, I told him that I'd meet him up in the office.

Before I could do that, I had to change. Actually, given the damp state of my shirt, I had to shower before I could put on clothes with a clear conscience. Figuratively clear, at least. I had been party to way too much with Kureo for it to be literal. On the other hand, the showers were communal. Why was it that no governmental agency valued privacy? I did my business as quickly as I could and got dressed.

Even my fanciful nightmare of being stuck somewhere without pants had come to reality.

Kureo wasn't up at the office, which probably meant that we hadn't gotten any tips. Or he was downstairs playing Dr. Frankenstein in the lab. Eventually Amon showed up and I thought I had to look busy, but he just deflated down into a chair.

"You… all right?" I asked, putting down a paper I had been pretending to read.

"Just winded." He waved away my concerned tone. "Never was much of a distance runner."

Since he wasn't doing anything, I guess pretending to be doing anything was kind of pointless. With a casual flick, I sent my paper drifting halfway across the map on the desk.

"Hey." I glanced up at the clock. "Didn't you say Mado was going to be here around noon?"

"Huh. Five after. Not like him to be late."

"Could he be down at the lab."

"Maybe, but let's go check down at the lobby. They'll know if he's here and where he is."
Tip-off

As it turned out, Amon had the right idea of finding his partner via the lobby, albeit not in the way he thought.

Instead of needing to ask anybody about his whereabouts, we found Kureo by the civilian entrance, pulling a student through the Rc gate while a second student stood near the entryway. The gate remained cold and quiet as the pair passed through, despite the kid looking inches from outright panic. Even from the distance we were at, I could see the disappointment flicker across his face. Noticing us, our team sadist released his victim and made his way over to us. With the boy scampering back through the gate, both students departed in a hurry, presumably to do...whatever teenagers in Japan did in their free time.

"What are you doing down here?" Amon queried, and followed up with the question on my lips; "And what was that all about?"

"Those two," He jerked his thumb toward the entryway, "they said they had information to offer up on the Daughter case. Was hoping I could get both of them through the gate for a scan, but I only got the nervous one, and he didn't set it off."

"Did we at least get some of their info?" If the answer I got was a yes, we'd have something approaching a lead.

"We have a written statement, but I was hoping to get something a little more substantial. Of course, I doubt they were merely students trying to do the right thing." Kureo led the way over to the front desk as he spoke, collecting a sheet from the receptionist.

"You think they were ghouls." Amon made it less of a question and more of a statement of fact. That was a sketchy assumption on Kureo's part, to put it lightly.

"What gave you that impression?"

"Sometimes," Kureo shrugged, moving to the elevator, "all it takes is the slightest contact with the enemy to know what they are."

Sounded more like 'ye olde uneducated guess' to me, but I kept my mouth shut. Kureo had been eerily right about more than one thing before. The only read I had on the students was them being nervous; hardly surprising, given that the old man had been giving me a steadily growing sense of ill will since the day we had met. Maybe Kureo had a bit of ghoul in him, and caught a whiff of something or someone.

Outside of Kureo's guesswork, I personally couldn't see two ghouls coming in to share intelligence with the CCG. Even back home, where the BGA was decidedly less homicidal, ghoul informants were a rarity and crackpot conspiracy theorists on the tip line were much more the norm. Here, where it was probable that there were hundreds of Kureos working the streets, finding a ghoul willing to share a coffee shop with a member of the CCG would probably be a challenge.

"Seems unlikely they'd take that risk," I mused, watching Kureo look over the map in the office, "not much to gain for the chance of death or capture."

"Allen." Amon deadpanned from his spot next to the door, "You're overthinking it again."

Tracing an outline on the map, Kureo emitted a quiet chuckle. "Aha. Here we are!"
Now all three of us were crowded around the desk.

"So, the information our suspicious students gave us was that they saw the at the riverside by Kasahara elementary school. Given that they claimed to be students of Shuuyuu high school, the distance between the two places isn't too out-of-place. The area itself is rather close to the edge of the ward though."

It was also within the probably boundary I had mentally denoted. Between that and the border, it would've been a toss-up as to whether she was trying to escape the ward or was simply spotted because she went out instead of staying in hiding. After three days, she could've been on the other side of the city by now, so long as her mother had taught her any survival skills. Or...she was just waiting to die.

"—head out and see what we can find."

Apparently, I hadn't been paying attention. Again. Granted, it wasn't like I was missing some master plan; head out to the area, scour for clues, find new leads, rinse and repeat. No surprises, just the probable chance of more depravity.

Amon let Kureo lead the way, dropping back to walk next to me.

"What do you think of all this?" He asked, quietly enough to be out of his partner's hearing range.

"Honestly," I tussled with how much to share, "I can't see ghouls risking an in-person tip to lead us on a wild goose hunt. That leaves us with two—make that three—options. Bad intel, good intel, prank."

"Prank."

"People fuck with law enforcement here too, right?"

"It's sickening, but...yes."

"The location is interesting though." I shrugged. "This close to the edge of the ward might suggest she's trying to get out of dodge."

Amon only gave me a blank look.

"Leave." I had tried to do an idiom in literal Japanese. "Trying to leave the ward."

"It's been three days though."

"Exactly. Either she's been moving painfully slow—"

"—or she's given up." Amon finished my thought.

If she had given up, the question was on what. Running? Unless she was the one who had been protecting the family—unlikely but possible—that would be suicide by investigator. Suicide by Kureo, who would probably do so gleefully. Messily.
The 'riverside' looked more like an open-air storm drain than river; it was sunk down in a trench about ten feet below street level and was only accessible via a set of metal bars embedded into the concrete.

Descending, I felt something...unsettling. Was it knowing that this would end in yet another death? Was it the yawning cavern created by the nearby bridge? Was it knowing I'd be working in close proximity to the socially acceptable serial killer?

Too close of a race to call. Kureo was steadily becoming a bigger burden on my being able to stay detached from this case.

"Guess we'll each take a bank." I noted. At least the water was mostly clear.

"Rock paper scissors, loser takes the far bank?"

I had to do a double-take; that was a sentence I never expected to come out of Amon's mouth. Also unexpected was the swift loss he handed me.

Now I had to cross ankle deep water. Eh, its not all bad, these aren't my best shoes anyway—but you should've brought boots instead of dressy footwear. I went through the underpass first, following Amon's lead. The banks were about three feet wide on either side, so I doubted we'd find anything as overt as a campsite or even a bedroll. Under the bridge was even more confined, with a row of fat columns spaced out across the middle of the current. The whole space was almost like an urban cave

The whole space was oddly barren; no graffiti on the concrete, no mud on the concrete riverbank, and not a single wrapper or any other trash. Lack of garbage items wouldn't be an indicator of the child's presence; ghouls didn't exactly need to stop at convenience stores for a snack.

"Anything on your side?" Amon's voice bounced weirdly off the concrete.

"Not even trash."

We emerged on the other side into a much more pedestrian-friendly area; wide and steep but accessible banks, with walkways up top. This would've been an easier way to get down to the river for a child and certainly less conspicuous than climbing down a maintenance ladder. The river itself here was about twice as wide, but still quite shallow. Looking up for a change, I noted that it had gotten a bit cloudier since we had descended to the river.

"Is it usually this low?" I called across the trickle.

"The river? Usually, but when it rains it gets high really fast."

Which meant that she couldn't have been down here the day Kureo…happened.

"I'm going to make a second pass and head back" Amon declared.

I gave him a thumbs up and followed his lead back in. finding nothing again wasn't a surprise; this space was confined, yeah, but there was basically nowhere to hide unless somebody squeezed up against a pillar and hoped for the best.
Next, we followed the current down in the other direction. Again, nothing. After watching divers retrieve evidence from the Chicago river, the cleanliness felt weird. This wasn't even a river. It was just a glorified storm drain with barely three inches of water. Maybe I was spoiled a bit from working in a city with a shipping channel.

"Find anything?" Kureo queried, as I sloshed across the stream to rejoin the duo.

"Not even trash." I repeated.

"So, as expected then; a prank." Amon gave a rock a halfhearted kick. "The student's identities were fake and the information was bullshit."

"That may be true." Kureo shrugged, as if finding out his clothes needed a bit more drying time. "Better to check and be disappointed, rather than miss out on a good lead. My apologies about getting your shoes wet, Allen."

"They'll dry out fine. Should've brought boots for this trip anyway." I probably should buy boots at some point.

"Still," Kureo continued, "you and Amon can go ahead and head out; it's getting late."

He was right there; it had gotten darker since we had arrived, between encroaching cloud cover and dusk.

"What are you going to do?" Amon looked up from buttoning his jacket.

"I have an idea."

Four words scarier than 'the explosive is unstable'.
Play the tourist

"What about you?"

Amon and I were back at street level, standing a few feet from the top of the ladder.

"Me?" I shrugged, leaning on the railing. "Are we actually done for the day?"

"Pretty much." He took a spot next to me, though not leaning back. "Kureo is probably doing some extracurricular activity, which means we're more or less off duty for the night."

"All right." I glanced up at the rooftops. "So kinda like being on-call then."

"Yup."

"That's not too bad."

Nothing was said for a few moments, apart from the murmurs of a conversation between the only other people on the street.

"You missed the funeral yesterday."

What was he talking about? Oh, right, Kusaba's funeral.

"How was it?" I queried, not able to think of anything else to say.

"No reason for the guy to die like that, and his partner's taking it hard. You don't get many funerals in the BGA, I hope."

"More than none. Most of the deaths are in the municipal ghoul agencies. Most of which are so rabid they barely even care."

"Isn't that the BGA?"

"No, no, no." I verbally backpedaled, "MGAs are single-city agencies, limited to local areas, whereas the BGA is a federal organization. We're almost international, if you count the agreement with Canada."

"That...is weird."

"They're a godawful pain to deal with and clash with us over anything, but they defer to us...mostly. The BGA is big, but not to the point of being able to keep an eye on everything."

"Why would you fight with a sibling agency?" Amon queried, shifting uncomfortably against the railing. "Surely you have the same goals?"

"The BGA takes the long view in managing ghouls, while the MGAs are more extermination groups than anything else."

"So...what's the difference?"

"It's a long story." I lied, realizing I didn't have the patience to explain. "What I really could go for is a burger."
"Well," Amon nodded his head down the direction Kureo had scuttled. "There is that Big Girl burger chain somewhere down there."

"Not like some chain burger. Like a half pound burger, with sweet grilled onions, thick strips of bacon and a half melted slice of cheese, all topped with an egg benedict and barbeque sauce. With a pretzel roll instead of a bun."

"That is…very specific. You could probably find something like that in the second or third ward though."

"Nah; even if I found it, I couldn't eat it." I stood, taking my weight off the railing. "Made a few choices that led to me getting in this kind of shape and swearing off food like that was part of it."

"You make it sound like a deal with the devil."

"Given all the good stuff I can't eat, it feels like it." I stepped away from the railing. "All right, I need to get food out of my head, so I'm going to go play the tourist and stop wasting your time."

Except, I didn't really play the tourist. I wandered until sunset—poking my head into shops, absorbing the sights and sounds—before settling in at a bar where the televisions were showing baseball, of all things. If not for the language, it was eerily like a sports bar back home—minus the noise made by the hardcore fans. Not for a lack of trying though; there were a couple patrons with jerseys for a team I had never heard of. Just a couple sips into a vodka on the rocks, my eyes drifted off the screen and out the window.

I caught a glimpse of a white coat and long hair; could that be Kureo? Leaning back, I caught a better view as he walked away. Three briefcases? Had to be him, based on Amon calling him a quinque collector back at the gym. If nothing else, he was going to be prepared for…whatever crazy idea he had cooked up.

Hm. If I didn't know better, I'd put money on him heading back to the underpass.

What he was up to wasn't my concern. I was only here to observe after all, and if the rabid dog needed my help, he'd ask. Or he'd ask Amon who would then ask me. Though if it still for that one ghoul he was obsessed with, he could count me the hell out.

Hinami. The girl's name was Hinami. And you know what he wants to do to her.

Was this why I had stuck around? To see what Kureo had planned, or just to confirm what I suspected he would wanted to do? I didn't have to take part in this; I could just sit here and let whatever was going to happen, happen. There wasn't any shame in being a bystander; I could just claim ignorance and say I didn't know. But I would know.

One and a half innings later, I paid for my mostly untouched drink and started walking back.

Back to the river.
Sunset had passed; leaving the streetlights to provide puddles of light for the pedestrians. Well, pedestrian: the street running along the river was quiet as a tomb. It was only when I felt my folded quinque bouncing against my ribs that I realized I had been jogging. This was the place we had been, or at least close to it, I realized, forcing myself to a walk. Wait. Was that...blood?

I stopped, breathing deeply through my nose. Definitely blood, had to be; nothing else had that distinctive coppery tang. What the hell was going on? Was I too late? Waiting those extra minutes at the bar was a horrible idea. The quinque was bouncing against my chest once again as I bounded through the edges of the puddles.

Then I heard shouting, interspersed with what sounded like a sledgehammer on concrete. The sounds themselves were slightly distorted, meaning that something was definitely happening under the bridge. Noise was good though; that meant whatever was happening was still happening; which meant I wasn't too late. Jogging was out of the question now; the ladder was approached at a dead run and the rungs were ignored in favor of dropping down to the riverbank. There was too much adrenaline flowing through my system to feel anything but I felt the shock of landing bouncing up to my shoulders.

I cursed in English several times stripping off my jacket: the noise from the underpass had gone quiet, but for ear tearing screams. The scent of blood was heavy in the air now, with a whiff of something familiar that I couldn't quite place. And now I only heard voices. With Kureo, I knew what that meant; endgame. My jacket was flung into a heap and I ran into the concrete cave.

"—makes you think you have any right to live—Allen!" Mado's voice went from mocking torturer to confused child in just two syllables.

"Mado. Seems you've won."

"Almost, almost. It was a good plan, if I don't say so myself. Lure the child with a piece of her mother, and I find I've drawn two bugs to be stomped." He gestured grandly, an artist showing his work.

I followed his movement, biting down disgust and hate, past the gouged walls and crimson spatters, to see what he had lured.

He was right; along the opposite wall was the littlest Fueguchi—the only Fueguchi—curled up in a ball, four cold and gray fingertips visible under her chin. An arm. He lured her here with her mother's severed arm. I had to fight to keep my expression neutral and from ripping into Mado in the literal sense.

He had brought more of the mother along than that though; her kagune lived on as the new quinque in Mado's grasp. He held both now; the mother's petals and the father's tail. It was the exact fucked-up family reunion I had predicted.

Pinned on the pillar just next to me, by said kokaku, was the other fish. She was not in great shape, going off of the clothing sodden with blood and the gasping for breath. Her leg was bleeding rather heavily as well, despite the lack of visible fresh damage to the limb. I suppose I had cut more deeply than I thought. Still wanted to fight, judging by the look on her face and the way her eyes narrowed when she stared me down.
Not much chance of that. Going off of all the blood and the shake in her knees, the quinque was the only thing holding her upright.

"So, you've won." I repeated.

"We still get to squish the bugs." Kureo flashed his twisted grin. "I'll let you have the little one. Or, if it's more your style, you can have the big one. I still get ownership of the kagune, naturally."

I blinked, startled and more than a little disturbed at the proposition. Was this a test? Some twisted proof of loyalty like out of a mob movie? Or some kind of sick initiation to 'prove' myself?

"You know what?" The tail clattered and splashed through the water. "I'll carve the little one. I can tell you're more one for an even match."

_I don't think I could properly call going up against either of the fish here a 'fight', Mado. You'd be the only one to qualify as a close match for me._

Almost next to me, the big fish pounded her fist into the bone white petals, letting out a scream that the walls seemed to amplify. I expected fury and defiance; a last refuge I had heard all too often. Instead, she only sounded to be in pain, and oh so very helpless.

But I wasn't.
"No."
I was done. Done with being passive, done with being voiceless, done being a bystander.

"Allen?"

"We take them in." I stated, keeping my voice level. "Take them in and and end this quietly."

"You really are soft at heart, aren't you?" Mado chuckled, "All your talk about wanting to know the 'whole story' was just because you. Can't. KILL."

He cackled again. I hated his laugh, hated his face, hated the way his eyes shifted as he stared me up and down.

"I had the wrong read on you all along. Smarts, skills, instincts; but underneath all that you're just another American ghoul-lover. No matter. I'll have more fun doing it myself."

"No."

The repeated word bounced off the walls a little more harshly. My folded quinque had found its way into my hand and the grip creaked as I clenched my fist around it, my thumb brushing the activation toggle.

"Pardon?" For the first time, Mado seemed surprised.

"You have no forensic proof either of these ghouls are the one that attacked us. You have zero proof that either of them has killed to eat. You want to convince me otherwise, get them down to forensics and give me a positive result. We're here to hunt monsters, not murder everything."

Staring down the madman, I fervently hoped he realized my last words were directed at him.

"You? Defending a ghoul? How rich! Seventy years and the Americans still haven't learned their lessons." With a snap of his wrist, the tail came to heel by his ankle. "Article one-one-nine. 'Humans protecting, harboring or otherwise preventing the extermination of a ghoul are to be subject to the death penalty'."

"What." He was kidding. He had to be kidding.

"It's a beautiful solution; weeding out the race traitors and ghoul-lovers is just as much a benefit to society as the ghouls themselves." Shit. He wasn't kidding, or at least, he believed what he was saying. "Now, Allen, I'll give you one chance to stop interfering with justice and step back to where you belong."

"I am standing exactly where I need to be." It had clicked for me; the big fish had been fighting for the little fish.

"Then you stand with both feet in the grave." The tail made a sound like a sharp laugh as it shifted at his feet.

"I hunt monsters." I growled, the activation toggle sinking home with a click. "Why should I be scared of what they say?"
Mado's sole response was a low-to-high slice with the tail, deflected toward the ceiling as my own quinque buzzed to life. Outright blocking the tail was a losing proposition; it could simply fold around my defense and perforate me then. The petals would be another issue; while primarily a defensive type, they did have a fair amount of offensive capability—the skewered fish proved that.

There were a few things I had on my side though. First was location: while the underpass was great for an ambush, the confined nature and tightly spaced pillars worked against the tail. Even if that wasn't the case, he still was hampered by the fact that would probably be unwilling to unpin the fish.

Said fish was then flung against the wall near the little Feuguchi with a splat and splatter of blood. A tandem strike from the petals forced me to dodge behind the pillar as bits of concrete showered into the water. So much for Mado being immobile and unwilling to free the fish. On the bright side, he couldn't strike at the others unless he left himself open to me. And I couldn't see him doing that; the man was unhinged, not suicidal.

So, I was willing to kill him in the worst case. At least, that was that last observation told me. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that; with luck, I'd be able to disarm or at worse, disable the man.

I peeked around at the pair. The older girl had barely moved from where she had landed, while the little one was shaking her shoulder, tears still falling. Just behind her, the arm laid upon the gravel, momentarily forgotten.

Of all the things I was feeling right now, I didn't expect that scene to fill my head with rage. I had nearly a month of festering hate and murderous thoughts for the man, but that scene was the one that snapped the little mental brake line of restraint.

There wasn't a moment where I became conscious that I had left cover, only a moment when I heard the roar of water from the tail landing inches from my feet. Mado had the petals up to defend himself, but I wasn't planning on trying to pierce his defense. I was planning on hammering it. Just like kicking in a door, my foot met the petals just outside of the center. It wasn't going to knock him across the room, but it did knock him off balance.

The tail went wide as Mado fought to regain his balance, but I was already inside his guard. This close was too close to properly use my spear properly, but I brought the sharp ends of the crosspiece to bear and stabbed into white jacket. And hopefully shoulder.

And then the petals came back around, striking like sledhammers. I rolled once. Twice? Before I came to a stop almost under the water. Almost had enough time to get to my knees in order to block the barbed edge of the tail from doing to me what it had done to the mother.

Mado was playing for keeps. That made two of us, I realized, deflecting another hammering blow; taking him down was looking like the only way to stop this. Which was just fine by me.

If only I could get within striking distance again. Mado's jacket sported only a small rosette of red; the thing had to be reinforced. Two more swipes; one from the tail trying to take my leg—jump over it like a murderous skipping rope. Number two being a thrust from the petals—catch in crosspiece of spear, deflect high. Taking a probing step forward only resulted in the petals widening into a shield.

The fucker was trying to wear me down. Keep me at a distance, force me to be on the defensive constantly, cut me down when I became to too tired to continue.

Stay calm, Allen. I had the means to outlast him, even if he was as young as you. Focus.
Assess. Disassemble.

Two weapons, with combined offensive and defensive capabilities. But—I dodged behind a pillar as a petal smashed loose bit of concrete—his attacks are limited on his left and defense is limited on his right. The size of both weapons together are unwieldy, and the spaces here hamper their range.

I closed on his right and was rewarded with a brief expression of panic and a long cut up the sleeve of his jacket. Shame, I was aiming to take the arm at the elbow.

Mado didn't know his weapons then, probably because he had never actually fought with them outside tormenting a helpless woman with one and impaling some untrained kid with the other. I wasn't any of those things; I was trained, armed and knew my weapons as extensions of my own body. All I had to do was stay coldly calm and not get hit again.
Three Strikes

The next hit, from the petals, was hard enough to knock the wind out of me and slam me into one of the pillars. That was what I got for assessing my foe. Two spots had condensed into points that felt like brandings. Given how it hurt to breathe, my money was on cracked or broken ribs.

Instead of following up, Mado had decided to let me stand up in peace and had opted to peel off his formerly white glove, tossing it onto the bank with a wet slap.

"Very impressive, Grissom. You managed to get first blood." He glanced over to the pair on the riverbank. "But you've traded your survival for theirs."

And then he moved to bring the petals to bear.

I didn't have time to think if he was trying to goad a particular outcome in mind when he said that. Between the pain in my body and the rage in my heart, I was beyond thinking rationally. But not beyond still trying to save them. Just like with Amon, I threw away my weapon again, albeit with much less restraint.

The blade crunched into the petal like breaking bone, hard enough to force Mado off balance and keep him from striking at the pair on the bank. But he was already swinging the tail at me. Was I beyond caring? No, I knew I was lucky when the lunge passed entirely too close on my left side. But I also wanted him dead dead dead.

I landed one cathartic punch before sweeping his legs and dropping him into the shallows. I wasn't going to drown him—too slow; would leave me vulnerable. Instead, I raised myself up for an elbow to cave in his neck.

And then I hit the water like a skipping stone.

That god damm kokaku quinque. That was the third time I had been blindsided by the damn thing. And then the tail came down. Dodging it properly was impossible this time, and the spikes tore through my shirt and into my shoulder.

Biting back the urge to scream took everything I had; the tail was going to make a return stroke and I couldn't be distracted when it did. Still flat, I rolled toward the nearest pillar while the tail perforated the water on its way back to Mado's side.

Breathing much harder than I had a need to be, I hoisted myself upright against the pillar.

"Allen. Alllllllen?" I could hear a lot of splashing on the other side of the pillar. "That's two cuts now."

Two?

"You can't drag this out forever, Allen."

I risked a peek around. Mado wasn't doing so hot himself; the rosette on his should had grown a tail, and his torn sleeve was dyed silver-red in the poor light. On the other hand, the state of his kokaku brought a smile to my cheeks and a tickle to my side. In swinging it to get me off of him, the motion had worked my blade around enough to sever the petal.

As for the weapon itself, it was partially buried in a mound of black mush near the bank. Out of
reach, for now.

"Fast, strong—you're certainly more than a match for most ghouls. But falling for the same attack three times? You have more in common with them than I thought. Step out, Allen and I'll make it quick."

My performance hadn't been solely talent. Not entirely training either. But the taunting me wasn't enough to mask the splashes of a re-positioning monster. The way things were right now, I had to reach my weapon whether it was out of reach or not. Why did my side still tickle?

Mado was still fixed on me; he aimed another blow with the intent of a fatal haircut when I risked a second peek. He had shifted away from my weapon though; now all I had to do was make it past him, the pair of ghoul girls and another few feet. Home free.

_Yeah right. Run out there unarmed and you'll be as good as dead. Besides, you still have your other weapon, remember?_

Ignoring my inner voice, I dropped a hand down to my side. Oh, that wasn't good. My hand came away wet and sticky from the tickle on my side. Wet was expected; rolling around in the water had left me thoroughly soaked. Sticky was...less expected. I touched my tongue to the heel of my palm. That was definitely blood, definitely _my_ blood. On an unwise instinct, I looked down at my side and brought my eyes back up almost as quickly.

That was a big red spot. A really big red spot minus some shirt and a lot of skin.

_See? This is why only idiots fight fair._ On the plus side, I didn't really feel it. Probably due to a combination of adrenaline and sudden nerve damage, but hey, at least my left leg was kind of warm.

With a bony clatter, the tail whipped around the pillar. Well, I knew the first and has to guess at the second: I was halfway to my weapon, and sound was the only indication of whatever Mado was up to. At least until I stumbled. Instead of being able to pick up my quinque mid-stride, I ended falling over it and having to turn around on my hands and knees to grab it with my good arm.

Was that Mado's work? No. He was still in the process of getting the tail unwound from the pillar, and the petals lacked the reach to hit me yet again. Which left it between my clumsy and injured self and the girls on the bank as the only ones to blame. Definitely couldn't blame them, though the big one was starting to move. That left...me.

_Figures I'd trip over my own feet in the middle of a fight._ Now—

I couldn't get up.
Oh no. No, no, no.

My arms had been filled with sand, and at this point my arm and my side felt like they were both wrapped in razor wire. Worse was the nausea coiling in my gut tempting me to dry heave. This was bad bad bad; nausea was in the second stage of blood loss, meaning I was about halfway to the point of bleeding to death.

"Poor Grissom. Seems you thought you were the bigger fish, but you had as much chance against me as I would against that upstart Arima." The cockiness was enough to make what blood I had left boil. "I suppose the question now is whether you'll die on your feet or on all fours, eh?"

I tried again, and my body screamed until the water on my skin turned to molten lead. Kureo's panting was audible even through his taunting, and yet I was the on the ground. Unwilling to stay down, I tried to rise, but all I could do was howl in chorus with the pain.

The only blame for how this had turned out was mine. Trying to stop this peacefully. Facing down a foe with two quinques while only using one. Falling for the same ruse not once but thrice. Not fighting all-out from the beginning. I was better than this—supposed to be better than this.

Mado was sloshing closer, probably to finish me off before moving on to the others. Or vice versa, I couldn't guess at which. I couldn't let him, but could I even stop him at this point? The simple answer was that I had to: I hadn't survived the last six years to die under some nameless bridge because of my weakness.

Restraint. My instructors had said I had always shown too much restraint. And now I was losing because of said restraint. But against a human, how could I not? All I wanted to do was kill Mado—even if it would kill me—but he wasn't a ghoul, no matter how much I hated him.

No, he's a monster, a rabid beast no better than the binge-eaters and cannibals. Monsters were made by their deed, not their diet. Monsters were destabilizing elements unable to see the big picture. And you know the motto of the BGA by heart, don't you?

"...We. S-slay. Monsters." I felt a tic in my eye start as I hissed those words through gritted teeth.

And to kill a monster—send a monster.

Or become one.
Endings

My left eye itched and burned. I could feel the exhaustion fall from my shoulders fall away like the blood dripping from my side.

Using my spear, I shakily hoisted myself upright. I could thank the blood loss for that, and for the vague sensation of dizziness dancing in my ears. All the hurts Mado had dealt; slices and contusions and cuts, were dipping down to a throbbing burn. At this point in the fight, ripping a hole in the back of an already ruined shirt was hardly an issue. I should've done this from the start; sacrificing a shirt was a small price to pay for victory and the pair of lives sitting on the riverbank.

In the twisting twilight ahead, I could see the monster's face twist with the revelation. Surprise, frustration, fear, fury? *What a welcome change from the creature.* Mado would've mocked the expression he now wore, but I didn't particularly care what he was feeling: I just wanted him dead dead dead. Now though, I was just like him; a creature with two weapons at its disposal. I knew both of us would call the other an abomination.

*Watch closely, Mado. I'm going to show you what a properly-trained killer can do.*

The monster dressed as an investigator whipped its tail around, perforating the air and sailing harmlessly past my head as we met in front of our captive audience. But letting something like that roam freely to slice and maim? That would be foolish. And so, with *one* and *two* and *three*—I nailed the tail to the concrete wall, where it could do little but twitch.

A second later, I had closed out the distance. The petals were up, appearing to be a shield, but I knew better. One swooped in, trying to catch me a fourth time—after all, monsters never learn—but this time I was ready. The very tip of my quinque flicked downward, as I ripped my quinque into another petal and slashed through to the water at my feet. The impact sent a shockwave dancing up to my shoulders and it felt *oh so good.* Calcified Rc cells cracked and failed, and a second petal fell away in a crimson splash.

This close, the sweetly metallic scent of blood and Rc was *absolutely wonderful.*

I grabbed him by the lapel before yanking him back the way I had come. I saw my opportunity as he stumbled, and finally managed to do what I wanted: I took his ungloved arm off at the elbow with a slash that sung the most beautiful vibrations up my wrists when the blade sheared bone. No perforation, just amputation. And then the follow-up. *One*; to the chest, *two*; to the shoulder, *three*—went wildly off target and sunk into a wall with a sound like a chisel on concrete.

*Two in the chest, none in the head, makes a monster almost dead.* The thought sounded like children's song, the way it bounced through my head.

From his spot halfway under the water, Mado spat blood.

"One eye..." he gurgled, spitting more into the crimson current. "...seem to be cursed with one-eyed foes."

His statement only made half sense, as I trudged the distance to the future corpse. The words of a dying monster meant little, and I had no intention of recording this for posterity.

An arm reached out. Was he trying to retrieve his severed limb? No, *that* had flopped onto the bank like a dead fish, almost landing on the leg of the older girl. Half-submerged in a reddening the two remaining petals twitched and splashed. Using that mutilated thing wouldn't even prolong me
taking his head off.

*But he could easily take off theirs.*


I punctuated each word with a sharp spike of Re. One skipped off the water and bounced past the white pincushion, but it was still enough. More than enough. The petals sunk back into the water like some primordial beast. The monster was dead. I wanted to mix joy with relief and laugh, but all I managed with a bitter sigh.

*No speculation. Confirm the kill or regret your death.*

I bent over the pincushion—if I knelt, my legs might not let me stand up again—gripped its neck just below the jaw, and counted to ten. No pulse: that confirmed Mado the monster was dead. A breath I didn't know I was holding wooshed out of my lungs.

What now? When the knight killed the dragon, he rescued the princess, claimed the treasure and lived happily ever after. The only treasure I had here was survival—at least for the short term—and the ability to look myself in the mirror and feel like less of a failure. There weren't any princesses here either, but I still had some company to figure out what to do with.
In the Dark

Straightening as best I could, I looked over to the other two living souls in the underpass. The little one's face and eyes were cherry red from sobbing and she sniffled quietly from her spot behind her injured companion. Even battered, impaled and unsteady on her feet, it was hard to tell if the girl had ended up in better or worse shape than me. I was too tired to compare injuries. She still sized me up, stony-eyed and fists balled.

I had a hundred questions I wanted to ask, to understand the world on the other side of the divide I straddled. Maybe she would've had a question, even if it was just a flat 'what the fuck'. There were more pressing issues though; Amon was probably making his way here and I had to be gone by then. As for these two, the line between duty and doing right was a little tenuous.

Based on all my experiences at the CCG, it was pretty clear they held to a 'salt the earth' kind of strategy that even extended to those who kept some common decency. On the other hand, the CCG's regs were crap, and I certainly wasn't eager to help after Mado had tried to kill me. BGA regulations were also clear; the older ghoul was a person of interest in the killing of an investigator, meaning I had a duty to take her in and determine if she was indeed the one—and given how much of this case seemed to revolve around family and revenge, she probably was the perp. But that only applied back home and in Canada. Besides, I wasn't in the greatest of shape to do much of anything until I healed up a bit; I didn't even have handcuffs because I had been forbidden from taking them and my sidearm to Japan in the first place.

You are what you are in the dark. I let my kagune dissolve back below my skin.

"Go," I croaked, "get out out of here."

All I got was an uncomprehending look in reply. Idiot, you're speaking English.

"Run, dammit." This time, I used the correct language.

Still no movement. Fine, if they wanted to stay and see what happens next, they could. I, on the other hand, needed to leave. My quinque folded with a quiet hum, and my legs sloshed me back toward the ladder. Just turning my back on a killer who had tried to kill me a few days ago might've been foolish. I did it anyway; yet another bad decision to tack onto the night's record.

The list was already long enough that it didn't matter. Staying near the river. Letting my curiosity get the better of me. Following Mado to the underpass. Getting involved and trying to stop Mado. Fighting with restraint, getting beaten, duped and nearly gutted. Killing Mado. Turning my back on a killer might've been one of the less-idiotic things I had done since the sun went down.

Probably wouldn't get stabbed in the back though. Maybe a twenty percent chance. After all, I hadn't exactly hidden how similar we were.

Two murderous peas in a pod, right down to the type of Rc cells in our blood. Ha. Ha. Ha.

By the time I had made it to the ladder, the pain had come back. Worst of all were the lines of fire etching my ribs with each breath. You'd think the pair of messy gashes would've been the more debilitating wound, but no, it just had to be the broken ribs. Instead, the wounds from the tail had gifted me with unhealthy blood loss and an unpleasant tilt on my balance.

Why. Why did I have to leave my jacket on the ground? To my battered body, the piled cloth looked to be a mile away. Would it have been so hard to have hung it on a rung of the ladder?
I couldn't just leave it. Wandering the streets wearing a ripped up shirt soaked with blood and river water would paint a target in my own blood for basically everybody, ghoul or investigator. Staying down here wasn't an option, for obvious reasons. Given ten minutes, I probably could've planned out something, but right now I didn't know if I could spare two. So, the hardest part of of putting my jacket was dealing with my sliced arm, as I could barely lift it. I didn't even bother with the doing the buttons.

Last bit now; the ladder. Ten feet of ladder and I was in the mostly clear. Then all I had to do was find out how to get back, actually get back to the hotel room without getting jumped because I smelled like easy prey—and remember to take things one step at a time. Having to climb a ladder wasn't so bad, right? Two rungs later, I had realized that after being mauled by quinques and bleeding all over the place, climbing a ladder was like climbing a mountain. My legs gave out between rungs three and four, whereupon I dropped back onto the bank, lost my footing, and fell backwards into the river.

Great. Broken ribs, blood loss and now I was flat on my back in the middle of the river. Not like tonight could get much worse. With a watery growl, my stomach brought forth the idea that I was unpleasantly hungry after the fight under the bridge and jump-starting the healing process. Okay, maybe it could get worse. With what my diet had been so far, I had been hungry basically every day since stepping off that plane ride. Now that there was something nice and fresh upwind, my stomach was pressing its case hard.

I swallowed hard, telling myself no. *I mean, where would I even start? I didn't even have a fork.*

The sky seemed to widen into a gaping maw over my head, each faint star looking down at me like a accusatory jury. As for for my crimes, there was a list longer than the gash in my side to pick from. Murder, betrayal, impeding law enforcement, abetting a killer. Then there was reckless endangerment, creation of unlawful destructive devices, and the eternal crowd-pleaser; improper use of a quinque—but those three had been back home. Provided Mado hadn't been lying through his teeth, I knew that at least one was a death sentence. Probably all of them were, and between the general attitude at the CCG and, well, me being me, said death would probably be neither quick nor humane.

Mark Watney said it best; I'm pretty much fucked.

If I was going to survive long enough to make it back home, I'd have to watch every step I took. Calling the BGA for help was out of the question; they wouldn't betray me, but I knew well enough that they'd leave me here to finish the PR stunt, even if the Operations Head stepped in on my behalf. Which he wouldn't. And if I did tell, I'd have hell to pay when I got back in every sense of the word. So that was definitely off the table and made this the a thing I'd have to take to my grave.

*I'd have to go native to survive this,* I realized, shutting my eyes to the heavens, *covering my face with my bloodthirsty mask Kureo and Amon wore with such ease.*

This trip would've been so much easier if I was as pitiless as Robalson was in the field.

If my lungs didn't hurt, I could've laughed. I could remember his exact words; 'you're a proper bleeding heart monster, aren't you? They don't call your tactical squad to save lives, only to —'

An unearthly howl filled the riverbed. Please, not another ghoul. Then I realized who it had to be, the only other person who knew about this underpass. Amon. Why couldn't have been another ghoul. Why, why, why.
"No, no, no, come on Allen, stay with me." Amon pulled me onto the bank, leaning me up against the concrete.

I blinked hard at the face barely a foot from mine. The last thing I had remembered before this was him screaming under the bridge. I had blacked out for a bit, then. Breathing still hurt and him moving me to the bank was profoundly painful.

"I'll live." Despite the best efforts of your partner. In the distance, I could already hear sirens.

"Kureo…Kureo is dead." Amon numbly stated, and I noticed that his shoulder was bleeding.

I know. Even if I hadn't done the deed myself, his wet cheeks were a giveaway.

There was no avoiding being checked out by the paramedics this time; Amon helped me up, and we supported each other up until we made it to the island of emergency lights. Thanks to me being thoroughly soaked in the river water and wearing my jacket, I was able to lie through gritted teeth and say I was fine, when in reality I needed stitches and a quiet place to curl up and heal. Playing the liar only got me out of the more invasive checks though. Pupil check—normal, blood pressure—unsurprisingly low, heart rate—elevated, body temperature—little low. Nothing too abnormal for a human, so I was given a blanket to shiver some heat into while the paramedics worked on Amon. When one came back to the ambulance I was warming up in, I asked how he was doing.

Amon had taken a few hits—presumably in a fight on his way here—and had also gotten nibbled on by his assailant. One more to add to the cycle of revenge. I had to silently thank the ghoul for buying me time, but I couldn't overlook the irony of searching for ghouls for days and then finding three on one night. Well, four, if I counted as a whole ghoul.

From my seat on the ambulance bumper, I could watch as a pair of coroners bring up my kill, bagged and presumably tagged. The bag poked up in odd places, no doubt due to the bits of me poking out of the corpse. Monster I was, I had to raise the blanket just a little, just to hide a grin—I had done some good for the long-term tonight. Then came the funeral procession of technicians, each with their little bits of evidence.

Funeral offerings for the dead. The perverse thought wound through my skull, as Amon's ride to the hospital drifted off into the night. The coroners and technicians had departed first, no doubt returning to the local CCG building with the take from the underpass.

Which left me. I signed a few lines on a waiver, returned the blanket, and my ambulance had departed to help somebody else. Somebody who needed it more than I did, hopefully. Tonight had been the biggest fuckup I had survived before Louisiana—probably even since Minneapolis. Both of those had been fun fuckups though; big romps with easy moral lines. Taking one last look back at the underpass, I cursed under my breath and started my long walk back.

All that and I had barely accomplished anything except for getting injured. Amon and the whole twenty-first ward would be screaming for more dead ghouls after this, and so the cycle of revenge would roll on. At least until one side was gone. That was if they didn't figure out that I was the mystery ghoul. It was unlikely though; I wasn't in any system, except for back home and having worked with Kureo and Amon, I knew the CCG would never allow even half a ghoul into its ranks. It was still the highest risk for the littlest of rewards.
You stood true to your beliefs, though. I had stood true to my standards and nearly died for it. Six years ago, holding that kind of stubbornness would've been the death of me in that ICU.

Look at the little picture. You saved her. I guess I did. Maybe not forever, but maybe just for long enough for her to learn how to save herself.

And then there was the other one, the unmasked rabbit. I had saved her too, though I wasn't sure what good that had done. If she turned out to be more than just the ghoul I had fought in the street, then maybe it was another bit to be proud of. But I doubted that: I didn't know enough.

Puzzling over the implications of that was only useful as a way to distract from just how much it hurt to move. I still didn't know enough by the time I stepped into my room. I had more important things to do now: keep my body on the road to recovery and dispose of the evidence. First I opened ration packs, then opened my shirts.

Between the holes and extensive bloodstains, both the dress shirt and undershirt were total losses—which made two pairs of shirts I had lost over this trip. As a result, I didn't feel bad about tearing them up to take them off the easy and less painful way. Actually, the whole outfit was probably a loss, maybe minus the suit coat with dry cleaning. The pants were only soaked with blood on my left side, but it was still a fair amount of blood on a nice pair of dress pants. My boxers—I wasn't attached to my boxers. Probably for the best.

On the bright side, my shoes were only damp. The only bright side.

I had been nibbling as I got undressed, but once I was down to my boxers, I wolfed down the remainder. Three meal packs, and I was still oozing stripes down an arm and a leg. And my back. It had never healed quickly, but this...I could still feel the sear of torn skin and a slow trickle down the center of my back.

Dammit why? Ghouls were—I was—supposed to heal faster than this, even if I wasn't entirely one of them. What was the point of having this body if it didn't even work properly? I glared down at the packages for a moment, considering the possibility that they had been spiked with a low dose of Rc suppressant. Unlikely. Robalson might've been a hardass, but he wouldn't let me get sabotaged.

The fact remained that I couldn't sleep in the bed, unless I wanted to wake up glued to the sheet. Bed. Was it the blood loss or the hour of night that was making me woozy? What time was it anyway? Rifling through damp pockets, I recovered my phone and discovered that it was about two thirty. So it was both reasons then, and I had to be awake in less than six hours. There was still so much to do though; I had to clean myself up, hide the evidence, figure out an exit strategy.

Naturally, I did none of those three things. Shambling into the bathroom, I let my phone clattered into the sink and eased what was left of me into the tub, spent to the last drop.
Yawning, I swiped my keycard and the door opened with a buzz. My desk was in the middle of the office space, covered with supply forms, after-action reports and pens that occasionally worked, but that wasn't where I was headed; Robalson had a proper office along the room's perimeter, with bookshelves on every wall. It didn't strike me as odd for a moment that the normally bustling office was quiet as a tomb.

"Allen!" He looked up from his monitor as I closed the door to his wood-paneled workspace. "Take a seat! What can I do for you?"

Still standing at the door, I spoke my piece. "I quit."

"I see." I was waved to the chair. "Sit."

The pleasant look never vanished, but his eyes were two chips of flint. I felt like a puppet, being dragged into place.

"So." He spun around a sheet on the desk. "You want out."

He spun the paper toward me so I could read it. A resignation form—with my name at the bottom in red. For the briefest of moments, he glanced down at the paper, before fixing me with a look that seemed to melt through my skin like thermite.

"Awfully curious that you'd say that." He touched a button on his phone, not even looking away from the paper.

"—or choose to come out of it a changed man —" My voice repeated the words spoken in the park.

"You already made your choice. Six years ago in a hospital bed." Robalson calmly pushed his monitor from the desk. It hit the floor, scattering bits of plastic. But noiselessly, like a movie set on mute.

"I—I didn't agree—" With a wave of my hand, my mentor cut off my argument.

"You didn't agree to go to Japan? That's correct, but that's the pain of duty; we don't get many choices." He leaned back in his seat, the chair squeaking just like I remembered. "You learned that when you were playing at disarming bombs and again when I taught you at the BGA."

He made a second glance down at the paper on the desk, sliding another paper toward me.

"Or are you talking about picking off that child's parents?"

_Her name was—is—Hinami. And saving her made killing him worth it. Or was she the justification and the bonus for killing Mado?_

For the briefest of moments, the Fueguchi parents flickered into and out of existence, on either side of my mentor.

"Do you really think there was that big of a difference between you and...him?"

Yes. Like night and day.

"The only difference is that you're not married to the job, and let's face it, that's barely a difference
at all." The resignation form started to smolder, as if held over a flame. "We both know how much you enjoy fieldwork. We both know why you applied for and was accepted for the Tactical Response Group."

I opened my mouth, but words didn't come. All I could do was glare at the man across me. Robalson's only response was to crack a smile larger than a shark, and flash a knowing stare.

"We know exactly how you enjoyed yourself at that 'otherwise quiet port in Louisiana', your 'fun romp through Minneapolis' and let's not forget that apartment building in the Middle East. You see? You're no better than who you killed. In fact, I've seen you with a vicious streak darker than his."

"That is a twisted view and you know it!" My accusation rang off the walls in an eerily mocking chorus. "We don't kill for pleasure or revenge; we kill monsters to keep others safe, no matter who they are or what they eat!"

Robalson kicked the desk aside like it was paper, crossing the space in a violent blur. My arms were batted aside like toys and I was slammed into the wall with a crack of splintering wood. Fingers wrapped around my neck like a frozen vise. But the face that was inches from mine—that was mine.

"I think you can safely say that's barely half the truth." It was Hasuko's voice that flowed seductively from my doppelganger's lips. "You like the fight, to be able to use your body as nature intended and ride the flow of death and destruction until spent and drained."

My vision blurred as my doppelganger raised me off of my tiptoes. My hands clamped down on wrists cold as a corpse.

"For all you do hiding your nature behind a veneer of honor and lip service to a 'greater good'—you know I love to fight just as much as Kureo did." Now the face matched the voice, with a grin that would've looked even prettier spattered with blood. "You can't deny that. After all, our humanity isn't even skin deep."

Without warning, the horrible pressure on my neck ceased and I dropped, past his feet, through the floor, and into an icy abyss. I hated just how right I was.
My eyes snapped open. I could feel my pulse in my fingertips and pressure on my throat.

In the dead silence of dawn, my morning alarm was a jackhammer to my ears, a fact not helped by the vibration accompanying the alarm sounded like an actual jackhammer. I tried to roll over and grab the phone before I was reminded that I had passed out in the tub, which meant that I had to stand up to turn off the alarm.

Quietly groaning, I rose and collected the device. One text awaited my attention, in addition to the alarm. From Amon.

'Will be overnight at hospital. Take tomorrow off.'

Since he had sent the message at one in the morning, it was pretty clear that I had today off. Naturally, this meant that my next duty was to send a text off to Hasuko before she started panicking about being late. Should I call her, tell her what was going on? No. What would I even say if I called? 'Hello, I've got the day off because I killed one of they guys I work with last night, so don't bother dropping by.' Phone calls were not my strong suit. I went with the safest choice; 'no need to pick me up today'.

Disposing of stuff was more of my strong suit, which was good, because I had a bunch of stuff to get rid of. Almost everything I had worn was stuffed into a garbage bag pulled from the can in the bathroom and then stuffed into the bottom of one of my bags. Okay, maybe I wasn't the best at disposing of the evidence. But the only other option I could think of was to try and dissolve it all in a mix of industrial cleaners and I was better at making chemicals explode rather than clean.

Next was the bathroom, where I had left the tub looking like a serial killer's version of a Jason Polluck, with smears and clotted trickles everywhere. Probably looked somewhat close to a murder victim myself, with all the dried blood covering my torso. As for my injuries, they didn't exactly hurt, but that could just be pain tolerance. At I flipped on the showerhead to rinse out the tub, but I eventually gave in and just took a shower, tossing my phone back in the sink. Just because I was technically a ghoul didn't mean I enjoyed being covered in blood.

No shower could wash away guilt though. Or the sense that I was screwed.

I tried to imagine just how precarious a position I was in as I did a final rinse. This wasn't Europe or Canada, where I could sneak off to an embassy or Canadian BGA office and get transport with relative ease. Nor was this Mexico or Brazil, where all I'd have to do was find a military base and take a military transport out. There wasn't a single American diplomatic building in the country, period—barring the CIA having any secret spots, which was unlikely. Relations between Japan and the US had been downright frosty since our big secret had gotten out in the early fifties—politically at least; there was a lot of cultural and mercantile trade—with my PR trip probably being a big thing into improving relations. Not that it would save my butt from either side. Here, every bad scenario ended with 'and then I got killed in the street' while back home the death would first be metaphorical and possibly followed by literal. A secret to take to the grave indeed.

Wiping condensation off the mirror, I checked myself over. I wasn't concerned about my back or shoulder; those were relatively shallow and had their full range of movement, if a bit stiff. The real concern was my side, where Mado had gone deep enough to perforate organs. Even allowing for the fact I really couldn't get sepsis , this was not gonna be a fun healing process. In the healing hierarchy, vitals came first, followed by nervous tissue, then muscle and finally the 'less-pressing'
organs; intestines, liver and the, uh, family jewels. What this meant was that I was physically up to par, but eating any human food would be risky.

God. I would kill for the chance to eat something that wasn't preserved corpse from a bag. Ok, maybe not kill.

The thought was impossible enough that I had to laugh. Ending up like me was a one way street; the only way back to human was in old fairy tales better suited for nightmare fuel. And those tales had been pretty thoroughly debunked. Besides, if I was discovered, I might end up not eating food from bags and making the transition to eating like the other ghouls at the BGA did.

They had their own break room, brought their own lunches just like everybody else at the office, went out for coffee in the mornings and hit the bars in the evenings. But without me. Always without me. I hated coffee, and unlike them, I wasn't that good keeping down anything that wasn't vodka on the rocks. The stereotype of ghouls sticking together seemed to only apply to the purebloods: to them, I was just one of a string of nicknames; 'coffee and cream', 'half-snack', 'MRE'. The first one was only one on the list to really make me irrationally angry; just thinking it made me want to punt one of my bags across the room. After three years, I knew exactly what it referred to and every innuendo it could apply to me.

We worked together, we trained together, we fought together. But god, they knew every single way to push my buttons.

They let me train with them at least, and I could hold my own with them there at least. Hitting the mats was a wonderful way of working through frustrations. Pulling on the BGA's version of the CCG's gym outfit, I finally flopped into the actual bed, still dead tired from last night. However long it was until I was able to go back home was far too long, and I would rather have taunting nicknames than taunting foes. Amon probably meant to take this day as time to mourn his loss. Poor guy. But if I kept working with him, and he ended up just as evil as his partner, that would be a special kind of hell.
I was pretty sure I had dozed off, because the next thing I heard was my phone. It took a couple seconds of groping around on the bedside table before I remembered that I had left it in the sink. With several muttered curses, I had stiffly walked to the bathroom the phone was retrieved from said sink. Four texts, and it was half past five—honestly, the late hour was weirder of the two; I wasn't much one for naps, let along letting them run through the whole day. Well. It wasn't like I had any other plans for today.

The newest message was a pay stub, which made today a Thursday if I remembered right. Probably. Robalson hadn't been talking through his ass either; the 'travel stipend' was rather sizable. Hell, this was probably enough bribe a couple cops—actually, that probably wouldn't work here. The whole damn country was as inflexible as the bedrock this building was sunk into.

That left the remaining three: Hasuko, Hasuko, and Hasuko.

'Ok, let me know if you'll need a ride home!' Right about seven ten.

'I'm so sorry, I just heard what happened if there's anything I can do, let me know!' That at nine twenty-six.

'Allen, you've got me kind of worried... I hope you don't mind me checking on you.' Half an hour minutes ago.

Wait. I looked back down at the timestamp on the message; thirty-two minutes ago, if I wanted to be exact. Drawing back to the last time Hasuko had driven me back from the CCG, my best guess was around...twenty to twenty five minutes, depending on traffic. Hopefully, that meant she had decided not to come over after all; I liked her—at least I was pretty sure I did—but having her around right now would not be my first choice of company.

And then there was a knock at my door. Only one guess as to who that was. Dammit. Hurrying out of the bathroom, I closed my bags before unlocking the door. It was indeed Hasuko, not that it was a surprise, one hand up to knock again.

"Hey." She looked dead on her feet. "Come on in."

Instead of coming in, she wrapped me in a very tight hug, reminding me that I had a few ribs broken the night before. All I could manage was a pained and high-pitched squeak.

"Sorry." She stepped back, her cheeks reddening.

"Don't be." I cleared the doorway. "Come in, take a seat."

She did, taking a seat at the table in the kitchenette. Between my diet and my bad habit of eating on the run, I had probably sat there only once or twice since my arrival. There was another bad habit of mine, neglecting hospitality.

"I was going to make some coffee," I really wasn't, but she might want some. "it's only the hotel brand, but you look like you could do with a cup."

"Thanks."

It had been a while since I had operated a coffeemaker, but it wasn't too hard of a machine to
operate. Closing the water reservoir, I replaced the pot and turned to lean on the counter.

"I imagine it had to be quite the rumor to get you so worried about me."

"More than one, actually." She said, a flush still in her cheeks. "The lab folks spread it to the junior investigators, and everybody in the building knew by noon. Is it true Kureo was killed by a ghoul?"

"Pretty much." Half a ghoul, actually, and he's standing right in front of you. "Amon should be doing all right, though he had to stay over at the hospital."

"What about you though? You're so pale, and I was so worried after hearing that you…" Her voice trailed off, as if embarrassed by the admission. "…got jumped by a ghoul."

"Yeah, I did get into a fight with a real monster. Between you and me, I kind of walked right into that one though."

From directly behind me, the coffeemaker gurgled and I started at the unfamiliar noise. I decided that now was a good time to join my company at the table. Mostly because it was probably more polite than standing six feet away, partly because she just smelled nice. Like really nice.

"Must've been quite the fight, think it was the one that got Mr. Mado?"

"Maybe." Probably, certainly. "If nothing else, the one that got him and the one that got me know each other. But that's just a thought. What about you though? You look like you've been chasing somebody all over the city."

"Ugh." She rolled her eyes. "We've been trying to track this ghoul that's been scavenging off kills for the past week. We finally spotted it on a body on the northern edge of the ward; just some juvenile ghoul, so my partner decides to just go in and kill it. we barely got halfway to him before the little shit noticed us and ran."

I grimaced, most of my sympathy going to the kid.

"So what did you do?" I asked.

"We chased it for five blocks before we lost the damn thing in a subway crowd."

"And what if," looking her dead in the eye, I leaned forward in my chair, "what if you had caught him? What was your plan?"

"My partner—"

"Not your partner." I waved away her statement. "What would your plan be?"

For a moment, Hasuko couldn't meet my eyes and fidgeted like a child caught with a hand in the cookie jar. Behind me, on a poorly lit counter, the coffeemaker gurgled nervously. What kind of person are you, Hasuko?

"It's stupid and weak... but I couldn't kill it. Even if it is a ghoul, thinking about doing that..." Her voice trailed off and she started fidgeting her fingers again. "I'm sorry. I barge in on you, complain about my day and then show myself up as just another greenhorn."

"I don't mind it. It's actually nice having you around." And I honestly did like it. Sure, I hadn't been jumping for joy when she knocked on the door, but now having her around was nice. "I'll always be willing to listen, even if you think you're just making a fool of yourself. Here's my advice on
what you're feeling; being a little hesitant about the lethal option is always good."

She was still fidgeting, though she was making eye contact again.

"Because once you hit the point where you kill without a second thought, you're not much better than a monster...or a ghoul. Take your time, overthink things a little, go that extra mile and try to see the bigger picture. I'm not saying to go soft, just that the first option doesn't always have to be violence."

"I suppose you're right." She said with the verbal equivalent of a shrug. "It's what we've got prisons like Cochlea for, after all."

That at least put the CCG ahead of MGAs in the states, which were more like anti-ghoul militias than actual law enforcement.

"It's funny." Hasuko spoke with a small grin, "I wasn't expecting you to take such an interest in me with your mentoring. Is that how Amis flirt?"

Wha—. Now it was my turn feel a blush heat up my face.

"Wow." She giggled mischievously, leaning toward me. "You're cute when you're all flustered."

"Um. I think the coffee's ready." I really needed the opportunity to try to unscramble my thoughts.

Searching for mugs did little to help. This was ridiculous on so many levels, at least for me. I had literally killed my coworker in a storm drain less than twenty-four hours ago, yet here I was, making coffee and being flirted with. Probably being flirted with. Finding and filling the cups did little to ease the just how surreal this whole scene felt. At this point, I wouldn't have been surprised to wake up in bed.

"Anything with your coffee?"

"I'm okay, thanks." She smiled again and I felt my cheeks heat up again.

That was good—not needing anything with her coffee, I mean. I didn't want to keep getting flustered. I had no idea if there was any sugar. I certainly hadn't gone out and bought any cream. At the very least, I doubted the free coffee supplied with the room would be too bad.
"So, if this ward is so quiet, there have to be more dangerous ones, right?" I tried to steer the discussion away from anything that would make me change color again.

"Well, the eleventh ward has a reputation for being a deathtrap, but all the wards are kinda dangerous, not counting the first four."

"Deathtrap? Really?" That was an unexpected term.

"Yeah. There's been this group, Aogiri, that's been targeting investigators and even field offices."

That would've been unthinkable back home, partly due to relations there not being that horrible and mostly due to the threat of the BGA and military conducting joint operations.

"We don't have much like that back home. Closest we have are groups that'll lay claim to a few square miles and some international syndicate-group-thing called 'Dragon', but that's waaayy over my pay grade."

"Sounds pretty safe."

"Eh." I shrugged, not wholly agreeing. "We've got problems with 'seeds of evil' all over the place and medium groups of ghouls in the cities, but not much in the way of big organizations. Mostly because the larger organizations were headed by morgue masters like Kawana or we had excised out their more violent elements."

"Ah, your ghouls have a different mentality. Makes sense." Just from how she was toying with her coffee mug, I knew her mind was elsewhere. "Are you single, Allen?"

Wait wait wait. The fuck? I paused from fidgeting with my own mug. Well, I didn't so much pause as have every train of thought screech to a halt and then explode. I was probably a luminescent shade or red right now. Eventually, I managed to squeak out a reply.

"Pardon?"

"Well... I realized that us doing all this stuff would be really awkward... if you were seeing somebody back home..."

"Oh." It took me a second to realize that I should give a proper answer. "Pretty much all I've got waiting for me back home are a couple of training manuals and my coworkers."

Minus the ghoul ones, anyway.

"That's a relief." Her face was looked more excited than relieved. "I didn't want to put you into some kind of unpleasant situation."

"Ah, don't worry about getting me into trouble." I was good enough at getting into that and worse unassisted. "I guess you figured out where you wanted to take me, then?"

"Uh-huh! We'll go three days from today, but I'm gonna keep it a surprise till then."

"That's just devious." I couldn't help but roll my eyes.

"Ah-ha! I knew I could get a smile out of you." Her own smile seemed to brighten the room, just a
bit. "Now I need to get home and change out of this sweaty outfit."

I walked her to the door, and she waved before disappearing down the hallway. Leaning against doorframe, I had to smile again. She was too much of a ray of sunshine to be hanging out with me, though that had felt like she had been aiming a little higher than the 'good friends' mark when she asked me if I was single. Thankfully that had just been avoiding potential awkward situations.

Or had it?

_Had I just been asked if I was single in the smoothest way imaginable?_

I locked myself back in my room with a groan, then thumped my head on the door hard enough that the door rattled on its hinged. Figures my life couldn't be simple. I couldn't see this working out well, even in the absolute best case. And the best case of me going back home in March—when my six months were up—would only end in tears. The other option—the hopefully less likely option—would probably involve blood, more tears and sizable volumes of violence. Probably more death, possibly mine. Both cups of coffee sat on the table, untouched.

Hoisting both mugs again, I dumped both down the sink and followed up with dumping the rest off the pot for good measure. Even with a cloud of coffee scent drifting around my head, Hasuko's scent was still lightly perfuming the room. If I had known how to do so without it sounding weird or incredibly awkward, I would've asked her to stick around for a while. It would've been nice if this—if a 'we'—had a chance of working. That said, I definitely knew I didn't have the guts or a peanut-butter smooth tongue to ask her.

Plus, I couldn't remember what peanut butter tasted like.

Realizing that, and not having much of anything to do, I flopped back into bed. There would probably be a service or funeral somewhere in the next couple days. Kureo's, of course. Hopefully only his. Amon would be getting a new partner as well, which could prove to be interesting. Back home, experienced Agents would swap between trainees and peers, to make sure that the next generation was just as apt as the previous. Here, things felt as if they'd be much more glacial, based off of what Hasuko had described with her promotion. My personal guess was that he'd probably get set up with a peer this time. The bigger guess would be if I would still be working with him after the dust from this fiasco settled.

Hopefully I could keep working with him. Despite being the one who offed his partner, I _was_ genuinely fond of the guy after working, talking and occasionally pretending to eat with him for . It was like an absolutely sadistic game of 'screw, marry, kill' set up by the universe—or possibly Hasuko. In any case, guess I had become a ghoulfriend to two people instead of one.
Almost Normal

For all the blood and madness of the past few days, today almost felt normal. Sure, I was the proverbial American hornet walking into the Japanese beehive, but I had been doing that since my first day. And if I did get exposed out, I'd probably find out pretty quick. My mood was probably a few shades brighter than it should've been, thanks to Hasuko. She has been bubbly this morning, which was a cheery change from her usual morning mood—plus, the whole car had been pleasantly Hasuko-scented. I had to take a moment and make sure I looked dour enough for work on the elevator up the office. Amon was already there, gazing out at the papers across the room with a thousand-yard stare.

"I hope I'm not late."

"Hm?" The circles under his eyes spoke loudly of sleepless nights. "…No, I just got here myself. Just a little overwhelmed with what to do next, that's all."

"Well, figuring out what happened under the bridge would probably be a good place to start." I picked my words carefully, not wanting to leverage out a reaction from Amon. Or from me.

"Suppose so."

He led the way back to the elevator, holding his shoulders stiffly. This was the least formal I had ever seen the man, either in speech or act and was a world away from how he had seemed on that first day we had met.

"How'd you end up down in the river in the first place? And where's your jacket?"

"It's not a long story." It was a long story, not that I'd ever be sharing it. "An embarrassing learning experience. Which is why my jacket smells like a storm drain and I'm here in the nicest dress shirt I have." And because it's got dried blood all over the inside.

The elevator announced our basement arrival with a generic ding. So this was the lab Mado had spent so much time in. Judging by how expensive everything looked, I couldn't be too surprised by that; the stuff here made it look like the CCG didn't have so much of a budget as a blank check. While I took in the sights and got in the way of technicians, Amon got us signed in to see what had been brought back with Kureo. That was how we ended up in yet another evidence room, but only with two boxes of stuff this time.

Neither box was full, nor even close to being full. Instead, they were split between reports and physical evidence. Paperwork and artifact, or if one wanted to be dramatic; my testaments and my acts. I wasn't particularly eager to start digging through the lot and pretend to look for evidence. It wasn't the dishonesty that gave me pause: offing Mado had been one thing, but reading through the postmortem was another thing entirely. The way I saw it, there wasn't much of a choice; if not to keep my own cover then to give Amon some kind of support.

This time, we didn't talk about our findings, or what we did on slow days, or at all. We sat at the same table, going through pictures, papers and sealed evidence bags. Every item seemed to be photographed from several different angles and while it was probably useful, it made seeing arm Hinami had been cradling harder than I thought. Trying to look unhurried, I reached for a different pile.

"There were two."
"Under that bridge. There were two ghouls; one only left blood to go off on," That would be the rabbit. "while the other only left wounds and Rc fragments. Here."

Well, at least I had kept my bleeding in the water.

He slid a picture and a form across the table. I knew the form; a typical Rc analysis chart. One plot was that of the Rabbit, and the other—evident by the low Rc count—was mine. The photo, however, I knew like the back of my hand—or to be more accurate, like the back of my kagune—because it was one of my shards, set onto a white background with a ruler for scale. Granted, it was kind of beat up, but it was undeniably mine. Only ten centimeters long though, putting it just below four inches. What an embarrassment. Once upon a time I had been able to do twice that length, easily—and without having trouble healing.

"I'm actually not certain about the lab results for the second ghoul." Amon reached over and tapped his finger on the report's Rc level. "There is a tolerance range for these values, but I'd consider the high end still too low, considering all that ghoul…did. I'd say it's far more likely that this was done by some A-rank, or possibly even an S-rank."

Thank you for the confidence booster, Amon. Though I'm very sure I'm not that great.

"What do you think, Allen?"

"Useful to know, but I wouldn't call it much of a lead." I resisted the urge to twirl the photograph on the tabletop. "What about the two students? He seemed to be under the impression that they were ghouls."

And he had been half right, probably. The rabbit-mask ghoul was the same one I had seen at the river, going off the wounds Mado and I had inflicted. What I had been thinking back to, however, was that incident with the students. Just too many strings, and the only thing I could see as the knots between them was—

"Revenge."

"Pardon? What does that have to with the stolen uniforms?"

Do you know what a 'vendetta' is, Amon? Even looking him in the eye, I couldn't keep my mind from drifting. "I was just thinking how much of this we could trace back to revenge."

"Just like always." Now Amon was looking distant. "And world is made all the more wrong because of it."

My mind drifted back to the present in time to regard what Amon had said. It wasn't the first time I had heard those words from him, was it?

"Jeez. We're really in no shape to be doing this." He kneaded his forehead with enough force to make me wince.

Me even more so than you, partner.

"Let's call it a day for now." He started replacing papers into their boxes. "Kureo's memorial service is in the first ward, and I need to be there for at least part of it."

"I'll come." Should I have said that? The words were already out, so that was a pointless thought.
"You sure? You don't have to come, you know; I'm the only one expected to be there."

"I'm sure." I nodded. "I'm your teammate. We're supposed to stick together." Even if I get outed.

"Allen. Thanks."
In memory of

All that about us not being in a state of mind to work, and he still brought a folder of papers along when we drove over. His driving was just as aggressive as ever, unsurprisingly, though at least he didn't park like a maniac.

The mood at the memorial was strange to me after attending services at the BGA. 'Somber yet energetic' would be the best way I could describe it, as opposed to 'gloomy silence' back home. If I didn't know better, I'd say everyone here was used to it. Amon picked a table well away from the majority of the people, in a back corner next to the window and began looking through what he had brought.

Investigators milled about, filling the hall with the murmur of conversation. Not for the first time, I wished I could comprehend Japanese better. A couple pairs rushed out, probably called on some sudden lead. A couple new faces arrived, either via the elevator or the front doors. To me, this memorial service felt less like an actual service and more like—

“Oi, Amon!” The man in question started. I almost jumped out of my chair. “I see you managed to drag your American to something besides work.”

Shinohara. I recognized him by the volume, if not the sound of his voice.

“Please don't tease me, Instructor.” Instructor? Shinohara didn't look that old.

“Then how about I tease Allen?” The big man turned to me. “I can only imagine what you've been up to to earn enough bad karma to end up here.”

“Ahh, I've got a list I could dig through.” Six years worth; a long list by any standard.

“Oh, you're starting to sound like my partner, the walking disaster area. Speaking of which, I should probably find him before he causes more trouble.”

Juuzou. After spending a few slivers of time with him, I could agree with that assessment.

“Oh, and Amon,” Shinohara turned back to my teammate, “I think Kureo was proud of you.”

“Same here.”

I had to excuse myself. Sentimental stuff like that made me uncomfortable as hell. So, I waded out into the social event. That was what this memorial really was, so far as I could tell; a place for busy people to socialize under the pretense of remembrance. Or this was just how they honored his memory and I was looking at it through the lens of an outsider. I had until February to figure this—and all the other little things—out. Or I'd end up dead before then. I'd say it was kind of a toss-up still.

“A-ha! You must be the American I heard transferred over on an exchange.”

“Guess I'm keeping it a poor secret.” I held out my hand to a man with long-ish hair and the slightest hint of a smirk. “Allen Grissom, BGA Tactical Response.”

“Itsuki Marude, Eleventh Ward commander. I must admit that based on the rumors, I expected you to be older.”
“Rumors?”

“When an exchange investigator takes on a ghoul without backup, naturally, rumors spread. Everybody in the CCG talks, despite how much we try to keep secrets.” He shrugged and sighed, but I didn't feel the nonchalance. “How long have you been working in your BGA?”

“Three years, and three more years before that in active duty as Ordinance Disposal, I did work in Iran, Kazakhstan, and a bit in Brazil.”

“Working in war zones, eh? You should come visit the eleventh ward then. That place is on the verge of becoming one!”

“Mr Marude,” Even in Japanese, a flippant tone still was sandpaper to my ears. The other half of me really wanted to go see if this war zone would be fun. “While I have experienced open warfare both with ghouls and humans, I believe we have quite different definitions of ‘war zone’.”

“I suppose that's true enough.” He backpedaled, switching to a placating tone, “I also suppose you get a lot of use out of your Q-bullets in those, eh?”

“Yes. Just like everybody else after the Germans stole the tech.” The actual theft had happened more than fifteen years ago, but I knew enough to be irritated. “Feels like the national agencies play espionage with each other as much as they fight ghouls.”

“Ha!” Marude flopped a hand on my shoulder, barking out a laugh. “It's just friendly competition between the higher-ups to keep us on top. Grunts like you and I don't need to fret: we'll never get touched by a few harmless spy games.”

“Everybody pays a price in this job.” I tried hard to keep the ice out of my tone. “Spy games only end with somebody getting burned. Might be you, more likely to be me, but somebody gets hurt.”

*Very likely to be me rather than you getting burned by some espionage.*

Seemingly at a loss for words, Marude only nodded before making his polite exit.

Internally, I sighed. That was closer to losing my cool than I had wanted to be: if I was going lose my temper, I'd much rather it be on somebody close to my rank and not somebody who made probably made several times what I did. Either Marude had told people I was here, or I really did stick out like a sore thumb, because I ended up introducing myself to new people what felt like every other minute. As it was, I was already bad with names—even if that was partly due to apathy—and trying to keep them all straight was enough to make my head spin.

After extricating myself from yet another curiosity-seeker, I decided to leave the middle of the hall. I had never liked making introductions, let alone being treated like a curiosity. At least back home I could avoid attention by just avoiding my doctors and coworkers. Amon was probably doing the same thing at this event. Unsurprisingly, he was still exactly where I had left him and still had papers covering most of the table.

“Any epiphanies?” I quipped, making him jolt out of his slump.

“Not even trash.” His tone made him sound as if he had just rolled out of bed. “Nothing seems to be falling into place.”

“Sounds like you might need another day to clear your head.”

“No. No, I couldn’t do that. I’d be letting everyone down if I did that.”
“And if you keep working in a funk, you won’t be a help to anybody either.”

Amon’s eye roll showed he didn’t particularly like my suggestion. “I suppose you have a point. Haven’t really slept since…”

He didn’t finish the thought. We both knew exactly what event he was referring to. *I didn’t need more reminders of that.*

“Well.” Amon closed the folder quickly enough to make a slapping sound. “Much as I hate to be not doing anything, I suppose getting rested is the best thing I can do right now. You need a ride back?”

I almost said yes, probably really should’ve said yes, but I declined the offer. Spending time with him outside of work at this point was feeling closer to a guilt trip. Watching him leave lifted a guilty weight from my shoulders, and I couldn’t help but sigh. This was going to be a tough few months, but at least I could survive it.

My phone buzzed against my leg. Well, I had that to entertain me; my phone with all twelve of my contacts, and unlimited games of snake. Who was getting in touch with now? The fourteen hour difference put the time back home around two in the morning, and none of the people back home kept that kind of hours. So that narrowed it down to two options—scratch that—one option. Flipping open the phone confirmed it; Hasuko.

‘I hope you're ready to take full advantage of your weekend, Allen!’

And suddenly, I could forget all about the past few days, the doubts and evils filling my head, and and smile for what felt like the first time in a long time.
There was a second thing I realized, leaving the building through the car park. If Hasuko had referred to her plan for tomorrow as a weekend adventure; meaning this would be the first weekend I'd be free on since stepping off the plane. No wonder Amon seemed like he was so overworked.

'What time should I be ready?' I really hoped I wasn't mauling the grammar in these texts.

'I'll come to pick you up at ten thirty!'

Ten thirty was a couple hours later than our usual drive. *Probably a good thing*, I reflected, remembering her morning panic about being late to pick me up. Despite getting punted in the gut, it was still a pretty damn funny memory. Or was me being punted what made it funny? Having a few extra hours tomorrow morning was nice, since it would mean that I could sleep in. Or I could stay out late, not that I had any idea of what I would *do* if I went out tonight. Drinking was an option, but that was just an unhealthy coping method and I knew all the ghoul and non-ghoul hazards that drinking alone entailed. Checking out that one coffee shop I had the address for would've been an option if I had been in the mood to walk a few miles, but I really wasn't in the mood to be in public.

Frankly, I couldn't think of anything to do that sounded interesting. Not like I could go out and enjoy the local cuisine. I wanted to go out, but at this point the idea of roaming for the sake of seeing the city had soured. That was something I could probably thank Mado for—or blame on myself for not being a good little bystander. This time, I took the easy choice; ride the subway back to my room, flop down in bed and watch TV with my translation dictionary in one hand and a ration pack in the other.

Being alone was pretty nice, despite playing out the stereotype of the lazy American.

I'll admit it, I probably spent more time just surfing the channels than just watching any one show. Not the best option for expanding my vocabulary, but it was entertaining. Up until I heard *that* word: ghoul. Flipping back three channels, I found the source; a talk show in which ghouls were the subject. Now I was no longer entertained, but fascinated; though one could find tons of the stuff online, finding mentions of ghouls on the airwaves back home was an uncommon occurrence.

Sure, the media would swarm the big happenings for the duration of the public's attention span, but that was about it. What I was reasonably sure was more common were idiot wanna-be journalists trying to make ghoul contacts and then getting eaten.

As for the actual content discussed by the show—assuming I wasn't misunderstanding anything too severely—I'd have to put it at 'accurate but incomplete'. Nothing was outright wrong as far as biology was concerned, but—and it was a big but—were the omissions. Granted, there was a fine line between informing the public and causing panic, so I could understand the evasion on some of the answers. At the same time though, I had lived through enough lies by omission, not to mention that the sheer quantity of overlooked material was enough to make me question whether this was actually an expert or an enthusiast. Or just some moron with good instincts and better charisma.

Fascinating in its own right was the talk on ghoul psychology, since I didn't know much about ghouls here. Even then, I couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't getting the whole story. But after working with the CCG, I couldn't really be surprised by any of that. It was easier to do basically anything to a group when you set it up as something less than human. Not that it was hard to figure
that out, given how much of human history was written in blood.

With half a strip of dried cadaver hanging out of my mouth, I flipped through my dictionary. _There it was._ I now was familiar with the word for 'mass panic' in Japanese, though how well I'd remember it would be another matter. It didn't really matter, though. Whether it happened sooner or later, I'd be done with all things Japan and the CCG eventually.

Directly after that was some actual news, courtesy of the CCG's media division. This was a little more difficult to parse, due to it being a little more technical in terms of language and a much faster speaker. The general gist I could infer was that the eleventh ward had been declared 'dangerous' or 'hazardous'. I wasn't entirely sure on which word they used; the speaker seemed to bounce over it quickly, and I couldn't find a word close to what he said in my dictionary. _Ugh._ I was fluent enough for everyday use, but I was still near hopeless if I wanted to have a conversation about anything technical. Quite the coincidence though, hearing about the eleventh ward from its commander and then seeing it on the news.

Under the wrapper of the meal pack, my phone buzzed.

That was odd. Taking a moment to think, it would only be seven in the morning back home, since it was nine here. The message was from Hasuko, and I had to sigh. It wasn't that hearing from her was becoming a chore, but I wanted to hear from back home. As it stood, I felt like I was being abandoned—or I was being left alone to 'have fun'. Because working with nutcases qualified as 'fun', right?

'Hey! You should come join us!'

_Join her—us—where? Who was the us? Me and her?_ I reread the text, just to be sure I hadn't missed an address. Then, the phone buzzed again.

She had forgotten the address. Well, at least I hadn't misread the text. If my knowledge of the surrounding area was correct, the place was pretty close, maybe within four or five blocks. I checked the map for the exact location—little more than five blocks, close enough to call it a win. I didn't need to be told twice—I had nothing else to do, and learning more words tonight was getting close to the idea of 'homework'. I finished my mouthful and tossed the wrapper in the trash.

What I was wearing from work was probably enough, though I left the tie draped over the back of a chair.

If I had to guess, this would probably involve drinking. Hopefully, she and I would have a bit more restraint than last time. _Meh,_ not like this would end up like last time, with me sleeping at her apartment. I sent a message.

'I'm on my way, see you soon.'
Finding the place Hasuko had mentioned went better than I thought, thanks to a pair of helpful citizens and me not taking any wrong turns. The bar—because of course it was—looked like it straddled the middle ground between the 'party bar' I had gone to with Hasuko to celebrate her promotion and the quiet bar where I had sat the night I had killed Mado. At least this place probably wouldn't have karaoke.

"Allen!" The door hadn't even closed behind me and I was being waved at. "Back here!"

I wound my way between tables and noise to a corner booth in the back, where Hasuko and a quartet of companions were waiting. I recognized one as one of the curious sets of eyes from when I had visited Hasuko's cubicle. As for the others, I had no idea.

"Hey, welcome!" The guy sitting in the aisle seat shook my hand. "You must be Allen. Sit down, have a beer."

"Allen isn't much of a beer man, Kouma." Hasuko said, a smile crossing her lips, "Shoot, I forgot to get you a drink! Take my seat, I'll be right back."

"You must be the American that everybody at the CCG's been talking about," The lady sitting next to Kouma nodded, "and even then, I didn't expect you'd be so damn hot! Whoo!"

"Heyheyhey, Aiko, I thought we were dating."

It was only as Kouma spoke again that I realized just how many bottles were on the table. A lot of bottles, actually: we were approaching the quantity that crossed the line from comedy to concern. Now that I looked at the other couple, they were looking pretty flushed...and failing at hiding the game of footsie they were playing under the table. I knew they were because I got kicked in the shin.

I was frowning through the table at said kicked shin, when an impressively full glass was placed down in front of me.

"Vodka, on the rocks." Hasuko sounded very pleased as she sat down next to me. "I wasn't too drunk to remember what you liked last time."

"I guess so." The size of the glass was slightly intimidating.

Her only response was to laugh and wiggle just a bit closer.

"So what's the occasion?"

"Ah, we've all been friends since our Academy days." Kurona nodded, taking a swig from a nearly empty bottle. "When we've got free time—which is rare as all hell, let me tell you—we get together, and catch up."

"Nice." I didn't do much of that back home. "What's the deal with the lovebirds there though?"

Next to me, Hasuko snorted through a sip of beer. "Those two lovestruck fools got married last year and still act like they just met yesterday."

"Well, at least they aren't making out at the table." I honestly couldn't figure out if that was a snort
of laughter or derision.

"Give 'em another hour." Hasuko muttered darkly. "They'll be slobbering all over each others faces."

Across from me, Kouma laughed in that overly long manner favored by drunks and the nervous. The couple next to me either didn't care or were too intent on each other to notice.

"Don't worry about Hasuko," Aiko fixed me with a knowing stare. "She's just angry because she's been the fifth wheel at these for a while now."

"Maybe that's because you scare off your suitors with your Amazon physique." Unexpectedly, this came from the female of the lovebirds.

"That's their loss then." I took a sip from my glass and discovered it to be stronger than I expected.

The conversation wasn't quite as lively as the last bar adventure I had been on, mostly due to this being as much a time for the others to catch up as much as have fun. I got to listen in on most of it; mundane office stories, everyday gossip, shared rumors about investigators. That third one was what really grabbed my attention when I heard Aiko bring up the name 'Arima', a name Mado had referred to as an upstart

"Who's that?" I butted in as politely as I could.

"Arima? Geez, you've been here for this long and you don't know who Arima is?" Kouma stared at me like I had shown him my eye. "He's only the most effective investigator in the country! He's killed enough ghouls to pile up a small mountain."

"That many, huh." Wonder how many of them could fight back.

At least the vodka was strong enough to take the hair off my chest, not that the scars had left much anyway. It helped keep my mind numb to the less pleasant bits of the conversation. Also helpful was that Hasuko had basically nestled up to me as a soft, muscular, and very warm distraction.

"You're getting a little close to Allen, Hasuko." Aiko fixed her—and possibly me too—with a sly grin.

"S-shut up. He's warm."

"Warm? How could you be cold when you've been cooking my left side for the past hour?"

Kouma and Aiko both laughed. Kouma looked me dead in the eye, pointed at me and Hasuko with his first two fingers, then snapped them together like a scissors. Or, I suspected, implying that we were a pair. Fortunately, he didn't say anything; my cheeks already felt warm, and I didn't know if it was from the drink in front of me, or the crush sitting next to me. The very pretty crush with large brown eyes.

"You've probably got the most field experience here, what's the most dangerous ghoul?"

"Huh?"

"Stop staring at the girl, you're making us lovebirds look like amateurs. Besides, with most of us being transferred over to the eleventh, we could use a few nuggets of wisdom."

"The most dangerous ghoul…" I echoed, dragging my eyes free from Hasuko, "The most
dangerous ghoul is an old ghoul."

From there, the conversation lapsed into an inebriated argument over whether short ghouls were more dangerous than tall ghouls and further devolved into bickering on whether a ghoul could use their kagune to pick up items out of reach. I certainly couldn't, but then I was tall enough to not have much out of my reach. At least I was sober enough not to say all that aloud. Checking my drink—which was nearly empty—I could consider myself surprised that I was still somewhat sober.

"Oh crap." I quickly moved to cover my eye, but it was only one of the lovebirds looking at his phone. "It's almost midnight! Hun, we gotta go if we're gonna do anything."

Unsurprisingly, the discovery of the hour spelled the ending to evening, though the fact that the two couples wanted to 'do something' probably helped it along. Not even Aiko and Kouma were being too subtle about it, and they were probably the closest to sober at the table. Apart from me I guess; I had only had that one drink, but that had been like seven or eight shots.

The wild card here was Hasuko. She didn't sound like she had been drinking, though I could smell a whiff of alcohol on her breath. Her face had been tinted a lively shade of pink, but that might've just been because she was in the process of barbecuing my torso with her body heat.

"Hey." I nudged her gently. "Maybe we should get going too."

"Mhmm." She was looking me in the face, a possessive look flashing across her eyes. "Let's."

She grabbed a drawstring bag from under the table and scooted out of the booth, freeing me to do the same. Almost: as I turned away from the table to stand, she stepped forward, blocking me.

"Uh..." She had to know she was in my way right? "You're—"

That look flickered through her eyes again. One hand reached down and cupped my chin, tilting my head back, while the other gripped my collar just enough to make my heart race. In the back of my head I knew what she was going to do, before she leaned in, before I felt the heat of her breath on my face. It was only when her lips brushed into mine that reality clicked in my head.

She was a bomb, full of heat, light and life. Caught in the shockwave, all I could do was yield to her force.

I woke up in bed—my bed—slightly hungover and incredibly warm.
The blinds were open just a crack, painting the room with a faded sunrise. Just for a moment, I felt like the only person on the planet. Granted, I hadn't looked outside yet to make certain I wasn't, but I knew I wasn't the only person in the room.

That was because Hasuko was next to me, cuddled up close enough to feel the muscle tone in her back.

It was more than a little surreal, because I could've sworn that I had dozed off in one of the kitchen chairs. Still more surreal than her kissing me last night; just the thought of that made my lips tingle with the sensation of her touch.

After we had paid and left the bar, Hasuko had attached herself to my arm and I had decided to try and take her back to her home. This decision was partially because I was too chivalrous to let her go alone and mostly because she refused to let go of my arm. The 'try' portion came in when I tried several times to get her address and only got what might've been gibberish or a face that expected a kiss. So, I basically had only one choice; put her to bed at my place and wonder if this meant the plans for tomorrow were officially derailed. At least I didn't have to worry about her wandering off on the way back. I put her in bed, changed into shorts and a t-shirt and dozed off on one of the chairs in the kitchenette, leaving Hasuko with the whole bed to herself.

In theory, at least, that was what I had done.

Obviously, something had gone very wrong in the whole execution of that plan, because I was acting as the big spoon and had one arm pinned under her pillow. Was it bad that I wanted to stay like this for a little bit? I could feel her chest rise and fall with the steady rhythm of her breathing and I could smell her scent with every breath I took. God she smelled so nice. Closing my eyes again, I decided to live in the moment for a little bit; after all, my job meant that I could end up dead tomorrow, and that was before I factored my being partially a ghoul. Take the moments when you can, right?

The only issue was that would probably need to use the bathroom soon and my free arm was half asleep. I tried to give it a wiggle, but it didn't have much effect and made me realize that the limb felt to be twice its usual weight. With a little more effort, I managed to raise it up just enough to realize that Hasuko had a two handed death grip on my wrist and forearm. If my arm didn't feel like static on a tv screen, I might've found it endearing. But still, her scent!

Hasuko yawned and wiggled in place in that way done by everybody who wants just a few more minutes of sleep. Even through my shirt and shorts, I could feel her flex and relax. Then, a little wiggle against me to try and get even closer. One of her hands left my arm and reached up to run her fingers through my hair. I wasn't sure if I should be concerned or contented.

"Allen." Her voice was soft and sleepy.

"Mhm." I wasn't sure what to say.

She let my arm go, rolling over to face me, and I realized that she was topless but for what looked like a sports bra.

"Morning, cutie." She came in close again and touched her lips to mine, making my heart bounce off my ribs.
"I…" getting her out of my head was nigh impossible. *That scent, those eyes!* "Where did all this come from?"

"When I went to the bathroom in the middle of the night, you just looked so uncomfortable. So I moved you over to the bed." There was one mystery gone, since she definitely looked strong enough to lift me. "Sorry if I confused you a little."

"It's, ah, all right." I shrugged as best I could. *Creepy, but the cuddling was pretty much worth it.* "I guess…you decided to make us the third couple that night."

Nodding, Hasuko wore the most contented smile I had ever seen. It didn't quiet mask the possessive look in here eyes, but I could overlook that. She leaned in again, and this time, I met her half way with my heart still dancing about my rib cage. Naturally, I ruined the moment, just a little bit.

"You know," I spoke quietly, as we slowly pulled apart, "eventually I'll have to go back."

"I know." she voice was tiny and she buried her face into the pillow for a moment. "I knew that from the moment we spoke on that first day I drove you. I wished I had the guts to snuggle up to you when you took me home after my promotion party."

She's been fix on me for more than a month. Then again, she wasn't exactly subtle, and I wasn't exactly good at picking up on hints.

"That's why I'm going to take every moment I can get from you and never let you go."

"Up until I get on the plane at least."

"I'll figure something out." She giggled, but there was an edge to it. "So what are going to do today? We can still go out like we had planned… but we could spend the day in bed…doing something a little more strenuous."

"Um. Going out sounds good." It took a considerable amount of mental effort to keep my mind from derailing at that proposition. At least outdoors I'd have a better idea of what to do, and be slightly less distracted by her. Maybe. "We should probably shower up first. I—Individually, I mean."

Probably a pointless offer; this was basically a more mature and reversed version of the last time we had ended up drinking, meaning that she didn't have any spare clothes. She still accepted my offer to use the shower first, hopping out of bed and revealing that she had only been wearing the sports bra and whatever the underwear version of short shorts were. A smug grin that bordered on a leer was rapidly added when she noticed me staring.

I turned away as she grabbed her bag and disappeared into the bathroom. I really hope that I had rinsed out the bathtub thoroughly enough to hide the blood. Also important; why was she in her underpants? Rolling on my back, I noted that probably should get up and get ready to shower as well despite wanting to shut my eyes and doze for a few more minutes on this truly surreal morning. I didn't know how I felt though. I knew I liked spending time with her—we had spent enough time driving and talking for me to know that. So why was I hung up over this?

Climbing out of bed involved a lot of wincing; sleeping on my side had provoked a round of protesting from my ribs. Either it was that or Hasuko had been a little less than gentle in moving me to the bed last night. Speaking of which, how much of a red flag was I supposed to see that whole event as? Granted, it was a little creepy, but the chances of her being obsessive were
basically nil, right?

Walking over to my bags, I could at least be content that I hadn't reopened any injuries last night. I wanted to dress casual today; an urge made more acute by the fact that I had worn mostly suits for the past couple months. What I really wanted to do was dress informally, but I drew enough looks in public without wearing shorts and a t-shirt—and a hint of fall weather was chilling the air. So, that left me with jeans—a navy blue pair I sometimes wore in place of dressier pants back home—and a gray polo shirt. Checking in on my sport coat hanging in the closet showed that it still had a huge brown blotch on the inside. Unsurprising, since I hadn't touched it since the night I had bled all over it except to pull my quinque from it.

With Hasuko still in the shower, that gave me a little time to do take care of a few things. First off was to make coffee, if only for her enjoyment and not mine. As I dropped my outfit over the back of one of the chairs, I noticed a small and neatly folded pile on the other chair. Well, that answered where her clothes had gone, if nothing else. Seeing that gnawed at my thoughts, all the way from starting the coffeemaker to the moment I heard the water shut off in the bathroom.
Planned

Folded clothes were not a signal of spontaneity, despite just how spur of the moment last night was. If anything, I’d say the clothes indicated premeditation. Or I was overthinking this again, as usual, as ever. I couldn't help it, honestly; to pay attention in the field was to survive, to pay attention at home was to know who wouldn't hate me on sight. I wanted to trust her, hold her, have her, let her scent sink into every inch of my skin.

The idea of something like that scared me. It wasn't like trusting the teammates I trained with, worked with, fought both with and alongside. This was grabbing a stranger's hand and dangle into an abyss—the abyss—with nothing but a promise and a dream holding our hands together.

Promises were scary things; the obligation to do, and potential to mislead. Blindly believing a promise was what American ghouls had done in two world wars; fighting against humans and their own kind for a promise. Instead, the BGA had led nearly a hundred thousand ghouls to unmarked graves across three continents. All we had to show for that was a lot of smack talk from foreign dignitaries and a distinct lack of a seat on the UN security council. Mado had been right when he had said we hadn't learned much in the past sixty plus years.

But all that was off topic; Hasuko wasn't a diplomatic power. Nor was she a bomb, despite how she had once scared me like one. Kneading my forehead as much out of indecision as morning blahs, I stifled a yawn. This whole thing was going to end in tears, no matter how good or bad it went—I'd bet my quinque on it.

"I'm finished!" Hasuko emerged from around the corner where the bathroom was. "Your turn, Allen!"

She was dressed in a wholly different outfit from yesterday—little more casual, little more color—which was strange, because I didn't think she had brought anything else to wear.

"Nice outfit." I said. Once again, I couldn't really think of anything else to add. Did you go shopping before or after you moved me into the bed?

"And you made coffee too?" She had this adorable little contented look on her face. "You're perfect."

I couldn't help but smile as I pulled out the same coffee cups we had used the other night. Washed, of course—just because I didn't need to eat as often didn't mean that I was a slob. After filling the two cups, I moved to grab my clothes and take my shower. Hasuko added another step, trapping me between her and the edge of the table before using her free arm to reel me in for another kiss. Getting back to thinking straight was going to take a very cold shower.

It took that, along with a fair amount of soap and scrubbing, to get her out of my senses enough to add up all the little details. She had a different outfit because it had been in the bag in her hand when she had kissed me; the bag she had collected from under the table at the bar; the bag she had carried into the bathroom. She had planned this, possibly from the moment she had decided to go out to the bar and carried it out like a freaking tactical operation. I wasn't sure whether to be impressed, confused or terrified.

Rinsing my hair for the second time, I noted that I was almost leaning a little more towards...happy. It was nice to have certainty. Hasuko obviously liked me—perhaps that was a sizable understatement—and I never would've had the courage to tell her that I liked her back
without this happening. She was still scarier than a bomb though, though now I couldn't remember why I had thought that in the first place.

*It didn't really matter.* I decided, pulling on my pants. *I was happy, and that was enough to be a welcome distraction.*

Hasuko made a little gasp when I emerged, quickly directing her gaze to the depths of her coffee cup. Whether the sound was surprise or awe was up for debate.

I sat down in the other seat, where she had placed the other steaming cup.

"It's all kind of surreal." With a finger on the handle, I slowly spun the mug in place. "If somebody had told me any one of the things that were going to happen before I stepped off the plane, I probably would've laughed it off."

"Like what?" Hasuko asked between sips of coffee.

"Kureo, Amon and their investigation, fighting a ghoul in the middle of the street, how different but similar the city is, and of course, you." She blushed, just enough that I could feel myself grin like a smitten fool. The list continued though. *Witnessing an execution in the street, trying to track down the path taken by Hinami and her mother via coffee shops, killing Kureo... and waking up with you cuddled up to me most of all.*

"Your arm!" Pulling my left arm out to the middle of the tiny table, she pinned my hand beneath her own and started tracing the scar on my forearm. "What happened?"

"Just an old burn." I shrugged, giving my hand a brief and fruitless wiggle to try and free myself. "It healed up quickly enough and it doesn't look too bad."

"I think it's pretty." She smiled, raising my hand so that they were palm to palm and interlaced our fingers. "It's like a little white armband that'll always tell me that it's you."

Somehow, I had the distinct impression that she had come close to ending that sentence with 'no matter how badly mangled you are'. Unbidden, that scene under the bridge came to mind, except it was Hasuko cradling my severed arm.

"Cuuuutie, are you okay? We still have to decide what to do today."

"I'm all right." I smiled, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. *So long as your smile distracts me.* "Let's go to that park."
Are we ready for some overtime? I did the section while building some storyboards for the next few chapters, and I hope it turned out sounding more interesting than the usual orientation talk you get while at work or school. I found it interesting to dig into the possible history of Tokyo Ghoul and consider what the past might have looked like. Anyway, are there any scenes you're anticipating to seeing in the future?

Staying in bed would've been her first choice. I might've lacked the guts to tell her I liked her, but I wasn't oblivious—there was I reason I still did work as an agent even after joining Tactical Response. Truth was, spending the day in cuddled up in bed with her would have been heavenly. Just being around her was hard to describe. It was the millisecond between detonation and feeling the shockwave, kicking off my shoes after a long day, curling up in bed and listening to a blizzard. Something had changed last night, beyond us sharing a bed.

Hasuko kept nudging into me 'accidentally' all the way to her car, in lieu of breaking the social taboo of public affection. I had no idea if the people on the street found us weird; I was getting about the same number of double-takes directed toward me as I did when I was walking alone. It probably didn't help that I might've been worn the shadow of a grin the whole way.

Once again, I was reminded of the possibility that she had planned this all out when I noticed that the car park she led me to was well within walking distance of the bar and my building. For a moment I again considered asking her if this had been planned from last night, but, I didn't. She was happy, I was happy.

Besides, ask obvious questions, get obvious answers. It didn't matter to me if she had planned this out to the letter or not: despite having no idea what she or even I was doing, Hasuko was enjoying every minute of it. Sitting down in what would've been the driver's seat back home, I almost buckled myself in right away out of habit. Almost—I decided that if the pretty lady next to me was having so much fun, I might as well join in.

"Hey," I leaned over the center console, drawing out her name, "Ha-su-ko."

"Hm?" She paused, halfway through buckling up.

"You," I tried to use my best suave voice "are a very good kisser."

What followed was several seconds of absolutely adorable but fully incoherent stuttering. Unable to help myself, I found myself grinning as her face shifted several shades toward ripe tomato.

"You're adorable when you're flustered." It was sweet payback for her doing the same to me.

"Tha—" Hasuko, bright pink as she was, couldn't hide a toothy smile. "Th-Thank you."

She looked to me again, and I saw that same possessive shadow in her eyes in her smile.

I smiled back. Her happiness made me feel just a little bit lighter as she pulled out of the lot.
"So." I dropped my quinque in the console cupholder. "Where are we headed?"

Adventure or not, I always traveled prepared; that being combination of six years of training and paranoia. Well-founded paranoia. On instinct, I tapped my pockets again. Phone, wallet, passport, map. In the last five minutes, none of the three had evaporated from my pockets. Yet. I really hoped this feeling wasn't that weird and-slash-or unique to me.

"There's a place, southwest of the city proper." That meant a long ride in a car filled with an intoxicating scent. "I'm gonna keep it a surprise though, so you will have to wait."

"That's all right." I was with you, and that made it okay. Even if that was the most vague description I had ever heard.

The drive seemed to pass slowly, even though there wasn't too much traffic on the roads. Even with—or perhaps because of—Hasuko and her scent, I was a little fidgety in my seat, resisting the urge to play with my quinque. The trigger was stiff, but not that stiff—accidental activation in a small car like this would be somewhat destructive, to say the least.

"Remember when I told you about the Eleventh Ward?" Now she had three of my senses occupied. "That's what we're driving through now."

"Oh." I stared out the window. It certainly didn't look like the war zone and deathtrap I had heard it described as. Except—the sidewalks seemed a little emptier, the people seeming to walk a little faster. More tellingly, I saw that scraps of trash had drifted into more than a few quiet corners. A war zone by a different definition, perhaps. Some of that I had seen before—deserted streets, nervous pedestrians—both were common in ghoul-troubled areas back home. Trash in the streets really didn't mean much back home though; we had a bad habit of not cleaning up after ourselves. Doesn't look like I know enough yet to make an accurate assessment.

"Why did we drive through here, anyway, instead of just taking the highway?"

"Every day we drove together, you were always staring at the city, even though you never missed a beat when we talk." Distracted by a lane change, she paused, the click of the turn signal filling the silence. "It was almost like there were two of you with me."

"Ah. Sorry." I tore my eyes away, looking down.

"Don't be." Her hands twisted nervously on the steering wheel. "That look in your eyes ...was the thing I found beautiful from the first day I met you."

It was like she knew exactly what to say and do to trip up my mind.

The only person who had managed to do that—back home—that had been...what was her name again? I had been away for too long and my brain was far too scrambled.

=--Bonus Section=--

BGA abridged transcript #35, taken from an orientation on Ghouls in history:

The idea of using ghouls for military gain is not a new one: Roman archaeological records suggest the possibility, as do accounts from the years of Mongol expansion. Similar accounts and legends exist about warriors and war gods, from nearly every continent, with incredible capabilities. On the
recognizable end, there are the stories of impenetrable skin, superhuman strength and inhuman
devaluation of life on the battlefield. More fanciful are the stories of demonic aspects, servants of
dark gods and pacts with unholy beasts in human form, but the sharp-eyed and open minded can
find them to be fair indicators of early ghouls.

Such knowledge is hidden from public eyes and jealously guarded. For example, the Vatican
archives has a specifically restricted section, the collection of British materials held by MI5 and of
course the documentation held by the BGA.

Now, before the advances in medical science due to the industrial revolution reduced the mortality
rate and increased human lifespan, ghouls could and did grow fat off of natural deaths and
scavenging. As these two factors changed, ghouls switched to other methods of feeding themselves
and their families. Some took the growing risk of living among humans, taking jobs at graveyards
and morgues; staying true to their ancestral history of acting as necrophages. Others adopted the
predatory behavior that is the dominant feeding behavior we seen today. Some ghouls however,
chose to enter military life, usually concealing their heritage in the process, though others did little
to conceal their nature.

It is very important that it is noted that the use of ghouls as bodyguards, both from assassins and
other ghouls is a fully distinct subject from this and will be touched upon in Advanced Ghoul
History, offered to those of you pursuing a position in intelligence.

The roles said ghouls took were as diverse as their human counterparts; infantry, artillery, doctors
and all the way down to camp followers and prostitutes—you may all stop snickering. No matter
the role they took, there was really only one goal; the aftermath of the battlefield—a literal all-you-
can-eat buffet. While most nations took a dim view of this, they generally remained either unable
or partly unwilling to put a stop to battlefield feedings. In a statement attributed to Napoleon at a
general's meeting, the thoughts of many in the military are cleanly summed up: "Better to lose the
dead than the living, and better to clean a battlefield than to risk pestilence". As covered in your
orientation, battlefield scavenging became such a problem during the American civil war that it led
to the formation of the our own BGA, which dealt with the issue by allowing ghouls to freely
scavenge on the condition that they leave bodies in identifiable condition; an pact later called 'the
torso agreement'.

So far as we can tell from our neighbors across the Atlantic, actually admitting ghouls into military
service was banned across much of Europe from the early 1700s onward via a mix of royal
decrees, treaties between nation-states, and rising anti-ghoul and pro-human sentiments. In
practice, naturally, the reality was much different. Many nations operated under a policy of 'we
won't ask, you don't tell', with the presence of ghouls only known to their immediate superiors and
those in their immediate proximity on the battlefield.

What there is no disputing was that until the second world war, no nation considered the thought of
maintaining an all-ghoul unit, regardless of at battalion, squad or even individual size. The primary
reason behind this was the ethical and logistical nightmare of keeping such a group adequately fed,
despite military debates suggesting everything from taking bodies from local morgues to simply
turning a blind eye to the unit's feeding habits. Secondary to this was the potential domestic and
international backlash when such a unit was discovered. Domestic populations saw ghouls as an
acute existential threat and were likely to withdraw their support for a government which appeared
to support such a group. To neighboring nations, such an act would also cause a breakdown in
relations and the mere idea of such a thing was responsible for several small wars in Eastern
Europe in the 1890s.

Then, the assassination of a Serbian noble sparked something you all probably learned to death in
school. With death on an industrial scale, you may think ghouls were welcomed into the ranks, but this was not the case: it was not until the optimistic early years had passed that the use of ghouls was considered, due to reasons nearly as varied as the nations involved in the war.

German and Prussian ghouls were quietly promised amnesty for some past crimes and French and British ghouls were rallied with nationalist slogans, to name the methods used by the major European powers. Those ghouls that enlisted were treated in much the same they were in the decades before the war, in the 'don't ask, don't tell' method; interspersed through companies, though always attached to frontline units. Ghouls only ended up concentrated via consolidation of decimated companies and when that occurred, the officers of said groups on both sides would claim them to be 'lazy and apathetic until faced with a fresh battlefield'.

During the war, only two nations that we are aware of fielded majority-ghoul companies: Russia and the United States. The Russian company, known as the 'Blackest Hearts' only became public knowledge near the end of Russia's involvement in the war, and their reveal to the public may have been one of the factors in leading up to the overthrow of the czar. In their short time in the field, they were known to be ferociously effective trench raiders and innovated the tactic of interspersing in no-man's land and ambushing German charges. While many official records were either poorly kept or destroyed during the Bolshevik revolution, the generally accepted strength of the group was between 200-400 individuals, with an estimated 1500 individuals having passed through the roster by the time they were disbanded. A six month gap in reports is commonly attributed to the near complete destruction and then rebuilding of the company. After the war, the company roster was cleared, another indicator that the political and ethical costs of maintaining such a unit was seen as untenable in many eyes.

It is worth noting that there is a small plaque commemorating the unit in St. Petersburg, a small proof that these ghouls received some recognition for their work.

Now, in the cases of unknown large-scale usages of ghouls, Germany was believed to have kept nearly a thousand ghouls on the fronts, though it is likely that any records relating to their existence were summarily destroyed for plausible deniability—despite the fact that the Germans were among the first to produce the precursors to quinque steel and a rudimentary version of the Q-bullet, all in the run-up to the second world war.

In the case of the United States, the Fourth Expeditionary Force, known as the 'Blue Stripes' due to the armbands worn by the group, were among the first American fighting forces to arrive in Europe. They were not directly part of the First Army, due to their arriving nearly a month prior to the first wave of human troops. The force was part of a plan by the current president Woodrow Wilson to gain as strong position as possible at the postwar bargaining table, via having an outsize impact on the end of the war, but history has since proven the effort moot.

 Thanks to this unit, the BGA was able to learn a great deal on ghoul psychology, including the effectiveness of certain chemical agents and overpressure from explosives in incapacitating a ghoul. Those of you moving into the armory and Tactical Response will cover these in greater detail.

I certainly hope you four in the back have been taking notes, because there is a quiz after this orientation. I kid on the quiz of course, but your training instructor will likely have some punishment planned for your lack of attention.

Yes, you in the back, I can see you. No need to wave your arm like a flag; what is your question. Ah a good one! Not many think to ask what happened to the Blue Stripes after the war. Originally, the plan set forth by the BGA was a simple one, but for the problem of...
-Transcript ends-
A difference of 14 hours

Chapter Summary

In which a change in perspective occurs, and Allen is unknowingly missed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Elise Mitchell was not, despite her hurry, running late this morning. Swiping her keycard, the electronic locks on the doorway disengaged with a buzz. Leaving the smell of the lake and the noise of the elevated trains behind, she stepped into the Chicago branch of the BGA.

The main office was open, split into a grid of desks, with the offices of the brass, break rooms and closets arranged around the perimeter. Such an arrangement wasn't outside of the old noir films Elise fondly watched; working amid the murmur of activity made her feel like being on a movie set and made the stares of her coworkers feel like that of adoring fans instead of judgmental jury.

She knew who was sitting at that desk in the middle of the room but she looked anyway, sighed, and swiped her card again at the door of the lunchroom.

"Elise! You made it!" That was squad leader Trisha Engle, seated with her bright blue lunchbox and a pile of files. "I didn't think you'd cut short gym time for eat with us!"

The door behind her slammed shut with a sharp snap of metal on metal and the whole room unconsciously flinched.

"Of course not, we only get to do this once per week: I can go to the gym any morning I want."

"And it's not as much fun without sweating it up with coffee and cream, right?"

This voice drifted over from the other table, where another squad member was nibbling at the contents of their lunchbox. If one were to look in from the doorway, they would've seen a pair of fingertips poking up from the container on the table.

"Zip it, Robert. Last I recall, Allen managed to wipe the floor with you, despite you touting your pureblood status out your ass." Robert paused, speechless, a half a finger poking from between his lips. "And aren't you a little behind on your paperwork for the Aztec case, still?"

Trisha had to laugh, both at Elise's outburst and the speechless figure in the background. Neither of the two would admit it, she knew, but they both missed Allen. Even if it was to have somebody to endlessly rib. In truth though, Robert had about the same amount of paperwork to fill out as Allen—mostly because Allen had been too tired to help with evidence after his shipping yard rampage.

"Besides," Robert discovered his voice again, "it's not like I have that much to do, compared to him; he filled more than half the body bags with Monica helping out."

The door clicked open again.

"Did somebody mention...snack bags?" Frank Stafford, the member of the team without an indoor
voice, stood in the doorway.

The snap of the closing door punctuated his statement. Everybody flinched again.

"Speaking of snacks, any word on Half-snack? I know Robalson said he had logged into his workstation a few times over the past month, but not much on that." He took a seat across from Robert, pulling a plastic container from his lunch bag. "Walking in every day and seeing that 'Wahoo' or something guy at his desk is gettin' dull."

All but one of the team agreed with that assessment. They had seemingly traded in their resident introvert for somebody with all the personality of a boulder. None of them had talked to the man, but between the office gossip and the fact that none of them had seen him even grin, the conclusion was easy to make. Making it worse was that the swap had come with basically no prior notice and no explanation, a combination of factors that made Trisha want to peel somebody like a banana. Ghoul or no, she deserved more warning than two days before losing a promising member.

What was worse for everyone was just how nonchalant Robalson had been about the whole thing, announcing it to the remaining members of the team as if reporting on the weather. Even Robert—the closest thing Allen had to a nemesis—had been pissed off, both about the change and losing his favorite target to needle.

Trisha's later confrontation on the matter had left a sour taste in her mouth as well; he hadn't seemed to care about that very singular dietary difference between Allen and Narrows, let alone the risks involved of shipping him to a country that purged information of ghouls from most of its news outlets. And that didn't even cover the CCG, an agency in some ways more secretive than the NSA. She hadn't told the team about any of that, not wanting raise any more disagreements—or fights.

"What is with you all and him today?" Robert's exasperation was evident even with his mouth full. "He never even comes to these, no matter how much Elise or Trish tries to invite him—that stuck up halfblood."

"Maybe if you actually were mature enough to eat with a utensil," Elise cut in as sharply as she could without using her koukaku, "instead of playing with everything you eat."

"I do not!"

"At the last meal, you stuffed your mouth full of fingers and then claimed you were Cthulhu!"

"I thought that was hilarious..." Frank muttered, earning him an approving nod from his tablemate.

Sensing further escalation, Trisha made the decision to change the subject.

"Robert, how's your daughter's situation?"

"Ah, it's give and take." He looked up from cutting up a chunk of meat into strips. "The wife still wants her to start looking at some marriage offers from a couple of old families out east, she still wants—and I quote—'men to woo their way into her pants, not buy their way'. On the bright side, she's got a pretty good idea of just how rare she is as a chimera now, so she's finally got some self-esteem."

"Remind me never to have kids," Trisha said with a mock shudder. "This job is demanding enough without some little terror chaining my ankles together."

"Speaking of terrors," Elise chimed in after hastily swallowing a raw mouthful, "any word on the
two Tx-class who popped up in Louisiana on the Aztec case?"

"Yeah. They were there on an evaluation."

The whole room leaned in slightly toward Trisha; evaluation from anybody in the Tx class meant that they were looking into adding a new member to their very exclusive club. Provided their prospective inductee managed to pass the nine month period of covert observations and checks, of course.

"Well, it's definitely not me, so stop leaving us in suspense." Robert was, in fact, the only one in suspense.

"It's Allen. Gotta be." Frank shrugged. "Monica took an interest in him back around Minneapolis. Granted, that was a bit more than a year ago, so the timing’s a little off, but since one needs three endorsements to get in…"

Elise couldn't see a reason to disagree; she was too young, Robert was too much of a hothead, Frank would've turned the offer down due to family life and Trisha's inability to evolve her kagune via cannibalism was presumably an immediate disqualification.

Except, neither Trisha nor Elise could think of a definite reason Allen would get a yes. Sure, he was really good at what he did, but so was everybody else in the room. The only thing that clearly set apart Allen apart from the others—besides him being too much of a wimp to eat meat not coming from a meal pack—was his time in the military. Working with bombs.

"I've got it." Trisha kept her voice down as she nodded in Elise closer. "Bomb disposal. Allen spent almost three years disposing explosives. He even got a medal for disabling a full ton of devices."

"So?" At the next table over, Frank and Robert were almost having a mature conversation until one regarded that they were both playing with their food.

"So? Think about it; heat, shrapnel, shockwaves that can turn a ghoul into a smoothie—but if he doesn't get hit with worst and keeps getting hit…" Tisha raised her eyebrows suggestively, "think about it."

"His Rc vessels... If he kept getting injured and healing, especially if it was frequently..." Thoughts whirling, Elise hit on the one parallel she had. "Shit. His Rc resonance scan must look like—"

"—Monica's."

"Sweet fuck." Frank's exclamation made them both jump. "Has anybody ever told you that you have the table manners of a three year old?"

Everybody turned to look at Robert, who had stuffed another three fingers halfway into his mouth before being caught like a deer in the headlights. On the opposite side of the room, the door unlocked.

In unconscious unison, five heads turned toward the door.

"Really, Robert?" Monica White, second in command, exclusive cannibal and the sole Tx-class in the state, was not amused. "You're going to play this game again? You're—"

The door hadn't slammed shut.

"—worthless American trash."
Nobody had time to do more than register the new voice.

A wide and mottled blade sprouted from Monica's sternum.

Chapter End Notes

A brief overview of the BGA.

-Motto:

We slay Monsters

-Regional Offices:

Chicago, IL; New York, NY; Las Vegas, NV and Atlanta, GA. Main headquarters in Chicago. State offices are placed in the highest population center within each state.

-Founded:

1861, under its original title; Bureau of Identification and Recovery, tasked with recovering Union remains from Civil War battlefields.

1865: placed under the direct control of the newly formed Secret Service as the Department for Ghoul Identification.

1910: Formally became an independent agency under its current name; Bureau for Ghoul Affairs

-Total Employees:

Approximately 48000 individuals, including lawyers, scientists, field agents and inter-agency and international liaisons.

-Notable Achievements:

Prototype and eventual first production of Q-bullets, beginning in December of 1901.

Fermi Cytological Imaging: low energy x-ray scan capable of observing internal function and structure of an R-sac (Kagune) in real time.

Hargrave-Morley surgeries: [DATA EXPUNGED]

-Standard-issue armaments:

.45 or .50 caliber handgun with Q-bullets

.50 submachine gun with Q-bullets or untreated bullets

7.62 or .50 battle rifle with Q-bullets or untreated bullets

Quinque steel armaments: restricted to experienced agents and Tactical Response
Squads

-Employee Tiers:

N: Noncombat, non-fieldwork employees, placed due to specific internal role or evaluation results: lawyers, doctors, armorer, etc.

E: Workers who perform duties in the field but are not expected to interact with Ghouls: forensics, drivers, medical examiners, etc.

C: Field Agents, trained to interact with and confront with Ghouls on a regular basis; equivalent to Associate Class and Rank 1 Investigators at the CCG

Cx: Highly experienced Field Agents, both in investigative and combative terms, taken from either the top of the C-class or poached and trained from other agencies or the military; equivalent to Associate Class Investigator Ranks at the CCG.

Cb: Field Agent-in-training; expected to take a minimum of 2 years of training under at least 2 different C- or Cx-Class Agents. Rank 2 Investigator equivalent.

I: Agents specializing in integrating into and collecting information from ghoul groups. Primarily an intelligence and noncombat position. First Class Investigator equivalent in intelligence gathering and data analysis.

T: Tactical Response Squad; Agents specializing in ghoul combat to a much greater degree than other agents. Special Class Investigator equivalent in combat ability.

Tx: Expert-class TRS member. Rank is rarely achieved by human BGA members.

D: Individuals charged with running a BGA office. While no longer in a combatant role, most if not all possess considerable field experience.

-Ghoul classification:

Ghoul strength classifications are done as a direct or estimated measure of Rc factor

0: Rc of 200-500 (Human)

1: 500-1000

2: 1000-3000

3: 3000-5000

4: 5000-7000

5: 7000-9000

6: 9000+

-BGA Identity Numbers:

All members of the BGA are assigned a unique ID in the following format:

[sex]-[employee tier]-[home office code]-[DOB month/day]-[biological status segment]
In the case of Allen Grissom; M-T-CHI-1011-Hm5
Disadvantaged

By the time Monica had hit the floor, everybody had taken cover behind Trisha's rapidly widening kokaku. Behind her, Frank kept the killer at bay, lashing out with his rinkaku.

"It's the CCG investigator!" He barked, wincing as the foe sheared the tip off one of his tentacles. "What the hell is going on?"

"Should we close the gap and bring him down?" An impact made the shield shudder and Trisha reset her feet. We brought an enemy into our own house.

"Too close of an area," Robert replied, risking a glance around the side of the shield and receiving a messy slash for his trouble. "His quinque keeps changing form between a sword and some kind of whip thing. "I can't engage with my ukkaku either—if I fire, probably half of the darts are going end up in the office area."

"T, bring your kagune to the wall, we're gonna break through and get some breathing room." Elise readied her bikaku and tapped her leader's shoulder. The conference room next to us will get Trish a reprieve, at least.

Gritting her teeth, Trisha complied, leaving a deep scrape on the floor and cracking the drywall. Frank signaled and switched positions with Elise; even battered, his rinkaku would make shorter work of the structure than her bikaku.

Elise might've had a more durable kagune, but her lack of multiple appendages meant her opponent now had enough breathing room to end his constant defensive posture, allowing the CCG agent to batter on Trisha's shield and her own bikaku. He's brave and smart, she conceded, Not a lot of people would consider going against more than one ghoul in a small space unless they knew they could lock them down. She deflected a slash high, and almost immediately was shoved aside by Robert.

He had kept his eye on the quinque as much as ghoulishly possible, following it leaving a deep slice on his face. Thus, when Elise had knocked it high, he had seen it twist into a spike and come lashing down. All he could manage was a yelp of pain when the appendage sheared into his arm. Spinning around, Frank took one look at him before grabbing him by the shoulders and putting him through the hole he had made, almost tossing the young ghoul into the conference room.

"Get out!" Robert yelled at the people sitting frozen at the table, "Code White! Get your asses out and hit the alarms! MOVE!"

Crossing through on his heels was Frank, who planted his feet and reached his rinkaku back through the hole to wrap around the last two in the lunchroom.

Light tug number one—both flinched; they knew this move, but nobody enjoyed it.

Light tug number two—Elise brought her bikaku in close, Trisha shrunk down her shield. The quinque lashed around the thinning defense, slicing Elise high on the shoulder and applying an unexpected haircut. Still was less damage than Monica had taken.

Seeing the hits, Frank didn't bother with a third warning; both were yanked through the hole like horizontal bungee jumpers. Trisha rapidly rebuilt her kokaku into the wall, closing off the exit. Above the door, a silent alarm started, with a strobe painting the room an urgent shade of red every
other second. Tactical Response might not be the most loved division in the BGA, but when they broke through a wall to get away from something, nobody was going to argue with them.

"Good pull." Trisha and Frank exchanged a fist bump.

"Rob, you've got a bit of an...arm problem..."

Most of the room looked at the arm in question. Robert raised it just enough to realize that his arm had been almost severed at the elbow, leaving the forearm twisting on a tenuous strip of skin. The squeal Robert then emitted was less pained and more shocked. Elise could only watch as the strip of skin chose that moment to snap, whereupon Robert barely managed to catch the limb before it hit the ground.

"If we're done with the comedy," Trisha was panting from her place by the hole; chips of Rc flying from her kagune as the CCG investigator battered from the other side. "We need to move, get him into the office area. Then, we'll have enough space to maneuver. We're gonna need it. Th-this guy feels less like a human, more—ghk—"

With the crunch of breaking kagune, the blade broke through to drive its first three inches directly into Tisha's neck. She staggered back, clutching at the bloody mess and spattering blood over the table and floor.

"Fuck!" Elise reacted first. "We gotta get pressure on that, move your hands."

Tisha waved her off. Not fatal. she signed, Can't talk. Keep to plan.

Everyone understood; keep moving or end up worse off than Monica.

Once again, more signs; a countdown

Three. Frank combined his two most battered tentacles, leaving himself with a total of three.

Two. All but one of the team was formed up by the door, but Trisha felt the pounding on her kagune cease. That meant he had either given up—unlikely, given the circumstances—or he had just had the same idea as they did. She shortened the countdown.

Go!

Everybody piled out of the room, coming face-to-face with the suited man from the CCG, confirming Trisha's instinct that both sides had the same idea.

His quinque came up, but he didn't have a window to use it; Robert filled the air with a swarm of Rc shards and forced him to dive behind a desk. It was only after he himself had taken cover that Robert took the moment to make sure that the office area was indeed emptied of people.

Out in the open space of the office, Trisha's team had the advantage of using the open space to maneuver freely while using the desks as visual and defensive cover. Watching the quinque nearly shear one in half, Frank noted that their opponent also seemed to have gained enough space to make better use of his own quinque. The simple description would be to call it a ribbon of steel, but that felt inadequate—the weapon seemed to whip through the air as if under its own power. His own quinque—currently folded and hanging in the armory—behaved like a lifeless piece of metal in comparison.

Now that was a thought. He watched it the quinque scribe a razor sharp corkscrew as the nutcase moved to try and take Robert's other arm. Lifelike. Almost like a...kagune. Bet the guys in the lab
would love picking that weapon apart. Then, a wayward few shards from Robert embedded themselves in his cover and the magic vanished. *That idiot.*

On the other side or the room, Elise was holding a one-sided conversation while taking cover behind her commander's shield.

"We're wearing him down."

An agreeing gurgle.

"We want him alive or in pieces, anyhoo?"

A growl.

"Both huh? *Works for me!"* She made another swat with her bikaku, only for Trisha to reach back and punch her in the leg.

"Ow. The hell?"

*Negotiate.* Trisha signed back. *If he refuses, we can always kill him.*

"And what if he surrenders? You'll ruin my fun, spoilsport."

The only sign she got in return was one finger that was all too easy to interpret.

Elise understood the why of the order, but that didn't mean she liked it.

"Fuck, fine." Those words were muttered, but her next lines were dialed up to riot control roar. "Attention asshat. You have no way out, whether you move around us or try to go through us."

Even with her voice box mangled, Trisha managed to squeeze out a groan. Frank would've been the best choice for this; he had the most social skills of the group—even more than Half-snack.

"Deactivate and kick away your quinque, lie face down on the floor and interlace your fingers behind your head."

Robert poked his head out in the direction of Elise's voice. She had started to pronounce her vowels with that Minnesota lilt, so she was definitely not happy. It wasn't much of a guess to say it was probably about the fact that Trisha had told her to negotiate rather than fight. As for his own opinion on the matter, the fact that his arm was sitting on a table in the other room was slightly more pressing than whether or not they killed this guy. Let Trisha and Elise make the decision—they were the alphas in the squad, after all.

*Especially since Monica was out of the game.* For all the legitimately creepy things she said and all the cautiously deferential treatment she got, it had only taken one stab. *Tx-class were supposed to be terrifying, but that had been a disappointment.*

Standing in the middle of the room, Allen's replacement threw back his head and laughed.
"Oh, this is just rich!" His laugh was a heady mixture of hate and mirth. "They teach you to parrot laws as well imitate their behaviors. Teaching a ghoul to use a fork! How crass!"

"Her offer still stands, Yahoo."

Trisha sighed in relief, though the air came out through the hole in her windpipe rather than her mouth. Frank was the best on the team at this kind of thing; this wouldn't be the first time he had talked somebody down.

"This can be over, safely, quickly, and we can get you on the next plane back home. Nobody has to get hurt."

Frank's voice might've been smooth as the peanut butter Allen had once described to him, but mood in the room was still very much pointed at 'violence'.

"Nobody, eh?" The man swept his free arm across the room. "I certainly don't see any other people in the room. I've already cut a deal. Once I swat the bugs in here, I'll be headed home. Just one loose end to cut after this."

*Already cut a deal?* That line was enough to set alarm bells ringing in Frank's head. *With who, and for what?*

Trisha didn't even wait for Elise to say anything, thudding a fist into her partner's thigh for a second time.

"The hell was that for?"

*Keep your mouth shut. I need a moment to figure*— Her hand froze mid sign.

Five heads cocked, the same thought crossing each. *What the hell was that?*

Pressed up in cover, Robert felt a chill dance across his shoulders and down his back. *Was that...laughter?* The sound continued, too faintly for his ears to source. Yet, the sound had been enough to throw a little uncertainty into the mood; even the CCG asshat was looking a little less like a smug snake.

Something banged on a door. Once, then twice. That, at least, was loud enough for Robert to source—back to the door of their lunchroom. But that didn't make sense. The room was empty but for their lunches—and Monika. But she was...

The door to the lunchroom was launched from its hinges as if it were a leaf, bouncing into desks and forcing Elise and Trisha to dive out of its path. The thing that passed through next took most of the wall with it. It was a lithe and elongated form, twisted over and over with bands of midnight and purple, and limbs possessed of too many joints and clawed fingers. A quartet of ribbonlike kagunes unspooled from its shoulders, spikes protruding from their edges.

The look it briefly fixed Robert with was possessed of several times too many eyes and teeth to be human. And to the terrified ghoul, its voice was nightmare spun into sound.

"Soso-oh. I missed some of the fffffun? Shameshameshame—I'll have to make my own." The thing that was Monica fixed the man in the middle of the room with an abusive look. "I owe you a few
stabs, hm-hm-hm? You failed to confirm your kill... now, you regret your death."

By the time the end of the quinque reached where she had been, the cannibal was gone and halfway around the room. Trying to not expose his back to something he thought he had killed already, the ghoul investigator instead saw Elise moving in, bikaku held low. She barely crossed half the distance before Monika pounced into her at a speed usually reserved for motor vehicles, scattering desks and sending a chair flying.

With both arms and her kagune pinned beneath unnatural limbs, Elise had little choice but to listen to the visage inches from her face.

"STAYOUT! HE-IS-MIIIIIINE!" Nearly each word was punctuated by her kagune swatting aside a blow from the prey in the middle of the room.

Convinced that her potential competition was suitably cowed, Monika turned back to her prey and brought her kagune to bear. Her first shot was a bolt the approximate length of a street sign, zipping low and almost taking off a leg at the knee. She held his attention fully now and despite holding his ground, the look on his face had slipped another notch toward uncertainty. Allen's replacement had one trait in common; he didn't back down, sending his quinque whistling through the air as Monica wound up for another shot.

The t-shaped spike and the razor ribbon passed in midflight. The monster jerked awkwardly as an attack bit through its weapon. Monica leapt to one side, claws firmly affixing her to the support pillar Robert had taken cover behind. Shifting her grip slightly, a drizzle of plaster fell. In the middle of the room, the CCG agent was trying to un-impale his quinque from where the dart had pinned it to a desk.

*She's my teammate, she's my teammate, she's my teammate, she's my teammate.* Robert repeated the mantra in his head as bits of drywall dusted him. *If I can't look her in the eye, how will I be able to fight a cannibal when the day comes?*

He looked up.

From its perch on the pillar, the thing whipped its head in his direction to regard him.

The fang-filled 'grin' that followed was the furthest possible thing from comforting.

Robert felt as if he was the one impaled, not the quinque.

And then the moment was over; Monica's head snapped back to her prey on the ground and readied her kagune for another shot. This time though, everyone caught the whiff of ozone. Frank shifted his body off the metal desk, plugging his ears in anticipation of what was to come.

*I really hope she doesn't miss.*
Disarmament

Elise knew the requirements for a ghoul to generate an electrical charge: genetics, food supply, kagune structure. *Put the three things together, give 'em to a government trained cannibal, and that's...* She felt the heat and light on her face before a wall of ghoul-made thunder shook the room and knocked paper from desks. In front of her, Trisha gurgled an approximate string of curses above the din of her now ringing ears. Frank and Robert were still out of sight, but their statuses weren't too hard to guess; Frank had probably anticipated the bolt and decided to wait out the event. On the other hand, Robert was probably scared out of his skin—the kid had never seen Monica in her current state, let alone generate an arc.

Monica, of course, was very probably having fun.

The scent of ozone was almost overwhelming, but even then Frank caught a whiff of burnt flesh. Something fleshy had gotten scorched, that much was certain. Robert looked like he just wanted to hide under a rock, but he still flashed the all clear sign when Frank got his attention. Poor kid was taking it a lot better than Allen did, even considering Allen had been warned more than once about what Monica occasionally...did.

To Trisha, Allen's replacement seemed unusually stoic, though that might've been a combination of medical and electrical shock. He was twitching a bit, after all. The bolt had blown off his quinque arm at the elbow, courtesy of the flesh-melting voltage and the shockwave created by the bolt. A few feet away, the forearm still had a grip on the weapon, looking more like a burnt chunk of wood than an actual limb. The smell in the air—minus the smell of electricity—was actually rather appealing. *Ah.* The smell, the charred flesh. *This must be what a barbecue smells like for humans.*

Monica dropped back to the floor with a crash and a satisfied growl.

"Come on, kiddo. I expected betterrrrr from you. Are you only good enough to attack from behind?" She cocked her head, showing another horrifying grin.

Robert recognized the taunt; he had thrown enough at Allen and every other ghoul he had fought. Deliver one correctly, and you could goad any opponent into doing something reckless. Allen had a bad habit of falling for them on the training mats, regardless of if the ghoul doing the taunting was fighting him or not. On the other hand, Monica never let up the pressure when she fought, let alone stopping to taunt. She did get a reaction though; the one-armed man dove for the quinque, despite it still being pinned to the wall.

He managed to rip it free and turn to face Monica before she brought her ukaku to bear again. The steel ribbon made a dull hiss as it transcribed a razor's arc, only to be intercepted by a limb twisted with black and purple. Monica's grin only grew wider as the blade wrapped and carved its way around and around her arm, sending trickles of blood to the floor.

She bounded to the side, placing the man between her and one of the supporting walls. The ribbons of her kagune whipped around in a blur.

*One.* The impact at the base of his ribcage was enough to send the man stumbling back a step and embed the first few inches of the spike into the wall.

*Two.* While two bloody hands grasped at the first spear, this one came in higher, sticking a lung dead center before making another hole in the wall.
Bone gave way to brain, gave way to bone, leaving a twitching corpse, propped up at an odd angle like an insect freshly pinned into a collection.

Monica crossed the now silent room, reabsorbing the kagunes twisted around her body, the quinque unraveling from her bloodied arm. When she stopped in front of her handiwork, her form was once again human, albeit minus any clothing and plus a wide bloodless wound between her shoulder blades. The transformation was never friendly to clothing. Thrusting her clean hand up to the neck of her attempted killer, she waited a long ten seconds before stepping back.

"Ahhh, all that and he didn't get me anything more than excited." Retracting her hand, she ran her tongue over it from wrist to fingertip before turning to the room with a toothy smile. "Anybody else not dead?"

The short answer was nobody. The long answer was that nobody was in great shape either. Everybody had chunks of kagune missing or splattered over the floor, Trisha still had a hole in her windpipe, Robert was cradling his stump with a sheet-white face, and Monica's arm was still trickling blood all over the floor.

"Permission to take over, Trish?" Monica waved her bloody fingers in the general direction of her throat. "Since you're not really in a...talkative mood."

Trisha's expression changed to a very much are-you-kidding-me expression, but she still nodded her assent. After all, the nude cannibal was her second in command.

"All right. Frank, get the all clear sounded and the damn strobes shut off. Now if not sooner."

"Right." He turned to make his way out of the office area. "Second part'll probably be easier to get done."

"Elise, I need you to go grab a couple of techs from the lab. Preferably from forensics."

"Got it." Her voice trailed back from by the elevators, "I'll try to pull Robalson as well!"

"Good idea—but grab the techs first!" She nodded approvingly to her superior. "Good head on her shoulders, eh?"

Then Monica's gaze turned to the last non-commanding member of the team. For his part, Robert was wholly and visibly unprepared for nudity; his face was inching toward a healthy shade of pink in addition to his eyes having a hard time staying north of her neckline. The situation was not helped at all by the only hair on Monica being too short to do much more than brush her shoulders and illustrate an amused eyebrow.

"You don't have to look me in the eyes, you know." Trisha kneaded her forehead in the background, her second in command giving her shoulders a subtle wiggle.

The only thing Monica enjoyed more than killing was making people uncomfortable. At least she had kept most of that aimed at the Allen, and the halfblood was too submissive to complain about it. Or he enjoyed it—that was always a possibility.

"Go get your arm from wherever you dropped it, and grab my jacket while you're at it."

Robert didn't even squeak an answer, inching around her to get back to the conference room while doing his level best not to look her in the eye or anywhere else.

"Forensics?" Trisha's voice barely had enough definition to be considered a hiss.
"He tastes...funny." Tracing her tongue over her palm, Monica left a red smear over her lips. "Not like a ghoul."

"Didn't fight like a human."

"Hm. Think I could eat him when forensics finishes up?"

Trisha could only roll her eyes.

-Background Feature-

Errata on Chicago's Tactical Response Team

Elise Mitchell:
- Born in vicinity of Madison, WI
- Recruited via a morgue master in Milwaukee, WI at the age of 19-22
- Current service time: 7 years
- Holds memberships with several Chicago theaters
- Scuba enthusiast, noted to mix her own Trimix
- Two family members still reside in Wisconsin, location and relation uncertain
- Logs and average of 8 hours per week in BGA training facilities
- Has failed driver's exam twice

Trisha Engel:
- Born in vicinity of Springfield, IL
- Applied for training program in-person at age of 18, failed first attempt, was accepted on second attempt
- Current service time: 14 years
- Presumed owner/operator of at least one ghoul-themed fetish website
- Noted to have participated in at least one illicit fighting ring in her first two years of service, with no action taken due to lack of evidence
- Suspected to be one of the editors of the novel 'Fifty Tiny Bites'
- Three siblings currently active in Springfield, at least two criminally so
- Highest rated CQC skills in squad

Robert Schweickart:
- Birthplace uncertain, presumably vicinity of Chicago, IL or Ontario, Canada
- Discovered during a joint BGA/FBI investigation into human trafficking, presumed to be 6 years
of age at the time

- Current service time, 4 years
- Placed into foster care with a family working through the BGA until age of 16
- Multiple reprimands for vigilante activity in the years leading up to his application
- Likely owner/operator of the extreme parkour video channel 'ghoParkour' with approaching 3k hits per week
- Canadian case files suggest at least three family members were once active in the Ontario metro area
- Electronics expert, noted to have assisted and taught Allen in producing detonators and similar electronic devices

Frank Stafford:

- Born in Miami, FL
- Applied for intelligence position at 19-21, later changing positions to Tactical Response
- Current service time: 9 years intelligence, 6 years Tactical Response
- Two children, one with a chimeric Rc factor nearing marriage age
- Older sibling noted to be a morgue master in New Orleans, LA; has played a keystone role in Aztec case
- High Elo chess player, estimated to be in the 2000-2100 range, despite not attending any events larger than local level
- Observed to act as a stabilizing force on team dynamics, due to laid back nature
- Recent automotive bill suggests installation of a V8 in family minivan

Monica White:

- Born in Marseille, France
- Family emigrated in order to avoid pursuit by GFG, age at arrival in the US was estimated to be 8-10
- Current service time: 23 years, service began before age of majority due to family circumstances
- Former family name is 'du mur Blanc', connected to a family of nobles charged with defending the southern coast of France from the 1100s to the 1700s
- Moved to an exclusively cannibalistic diet as of 14, at direction of her mother
- Suspicious deaths of both parents linked to GFG with 90% certainty
- Restored and drives a 1968 Shelby GT, with 27 tickets for reckless driving recorded in past three years
- Does not own a cell phone
"What are you doing?"

We had parked the car in the small lot down a road walled in by forest. My quinque had been left in the cupholder; when I had gone to grab it, Hasuko had given a look that clearly stated just how little she wanted anything attached to me that wasn't her. So I had left it—it wasn't like I couldn't fight off another ghoul with my own natural weapons. As for how doing something like that would change or outright murder our relationship? I'd wait to worry about that until it happened.

The air was crisp with the suggestion of cold and for a moment, I almost wished I had brought something beyond a long sleeve shirt. But only until Hasuko grabbed onto my arm and pulled me off along a wooded path; she was warm enough for both of us.

Fallen brush crunched underfoot, trees rustled overhead, Hasuko happy at my side. Was this a date? If this was, then it was my first one; I had barely stopped being awkward by time I had graduated high school. We had the forest all to ourselves for this little date, it seemed. Or so I thought until a jogger rounded a thicket. She was traveling in the opposite direction, fixated on something to the point of passing us without a word or glance. Ghoul? Or just a fitness nut out for a morning jog?

Once the sound of footfalls disappeared into the distance, Hasuko tugged me off the path. She lead the way, far enough that we couldn't be seen before pinning me up against a tree. There was just enough force to say she was being a little rough about it, with her hands pressing my elbows into the bark. With me held in place, she silently fixed her gaze on the ground so that I couldn't see her face.

"What are you doing?" I repeated, unsure if I should let myself stay pinned or break free.

"…Please don't look at them."

Her voice was quiet, soft, cold as nuclear winter.

"I—I know I'm not the prettiest girl, or the smartest, or have the best body…" Still looking straight down, she gently brought her head against my chest. I could hear her voice flicker. "But when I see you looking at somebody else, these thoughts run through my head a-and I just want to—"

I understood now, at least as best as I could. It didn't take too much to free my arms from her pin and it took even less to wrap her up in a hug. For a moment, she was stiff. Then she wrapped her arms around me as best she could and set her head on my shoulder.

Why did it hurt to see her like this?

The wind slunk through the trees and leaves crinkled underfoot. I could feel her chest rise and fall as her breath brushed over my neck. It would've been romantic had my clingy companion not been so unhappy. But then, cheering her up was my job.

"It's all right." I gave her a reassuring squeeze. "You may not think you're the best and brightest, but that's not what matters. The important part is that I do, and I'm as willing to make this work as you are. And if that means I can't look at joggers in compression pants, then I won't. Okay?" Difficult as that may be.

"Okay." The word left a tiny warm spot on the side of my neck. "But not just jogging girls, okay?"
"All right." I gave another gentle squeeze, and this time she squeezed back. "But maybe you could wear a pair of those once in a while then."

A giggle. "You won't need to worry about that." Lips tickled my neck, sending an electrified tingle down my spine.

*How was she doing this? I was leaning against a tree and yet she had me panting like I had been doing a marathon.*

"So long as you behave, you'll get to see me in a lot of things." She did that thing with her lips again, not that being prepared for it made it any less effective at what it did.

At this point, I was pretty sure she would've found some way to seduce me if we had stayed in the room. Granted, that might not have taken much effort for her.

"So..." I drew the word out, trying to reorganize my thoughts. "Do we want to keep going on our walk through the forest, Suko?"

It was a silly nickname. More like a mispronunciation, really; just cutting off the first syllable of her name to make something that rolled off the tongue easily.

"We could." It was indeed possible for a voice to sound cuddly. "But I'd like to stay like this for a little bit, Allie. If we could."

I guess that was a stamp of approval, or as close to one as I'd get.

On the other hand, 'Allie' was—so far as I knew about the English language—a girl's name.

"Suko? About that..." *Actually, I probably shouldn't tell her; that might kill the mood a bit.*

"Yeah, Al-lie?" Her voice danced over the name, oh-so-playfully and my heart danced along with each syllable.

"Ah," Now I had to say something. "I was just thinking that it would be my turn to make a confession next. Not now though, maybe later."

"Good." Hasuko gave me a squeeze and a noise of contentment. "Don't ruin the moment."

I could only agree in monosyllable; her speaking into my neck was both a huge turn-on and tickled like crazy, leaving me stuck between a gasp and a giggle. Between the tree being wide enough for my back and Hasuko warding off any wayward breezes, this was comfortable enough to do until nightfall—or until one of us had to use the bathroom. But I'd keep holding onto her until she let go.
Sacrificial Pawn

Chapter Summary

Is it sacrifice if one is unaware they've been chosen?

Despite being searched for, Robalson had arrived late enough for Elise to flash the back of his head a dirty look as he took in the scene of coroners, cleanup and techs. Then he waved over the five-man band.

“All of you.” He pointed, “Conference room. Now.”

With a soundproof door between them and the mess in the common area, the room was quiet but for the occasional sound of plaster from the hole Frank had torn through the wall. Robert took the seat closest to the congealed puddle of blood his arm had left on the table. The kid had used about half a roll of duct tape in re-affixing his arm. The job was crude, messy and definitely was a solo project, but Regis could see him wiggling the fingertips—guess Frank had taught him well.

But there were more important issues at hand.

“Congratulations Miss White,” Monica’s eyes narrowed at the obvious sarcasm. “You’ve just thrown another wrench in the works. And don’t give me that look! The fact that it still smells like scorched corpse out there is a dead giveaway next to your Rc spikes pinning him to the wall.”

For her part, Monica wasn’t giving an inch; she hadn’t sat down and her eyes were still black, giving the death glare focused on her boss unnatural weight. Even after Robert had retrieved her jacket, her only move was to sling it across her shoulders like a cape. Had she not been spattered with blood, the look would’ve been still been unsettling.

“That was self-defense.” Trisha didn’t try to hide her gravelly tone or the obvious neck wound.

“And that hardly makes the situation any better, considering the deal was to send Matsuri Washuu back home, tomorrow, alive, not in a fucking box!”

Frank muttered something to the effect of ‘so much for six months’.

“I’m sorry, did you just say deal?” A wave of Elise’s hand brought attention to the fact that only one person in the room was uninjured. “You mean to say that all this was part of the deal.”

“The deal...did not involve that.” Robalson kneaded his forehead hard enough to leave a red mark when his hand fell away. “As I was informed, Matsuri was to leave tomorrow, the CCG would retain the information they cracked from our servers and in exchange they’d keep their mouths shut.”

It took a moment for the team to process exactly what the heck had come out of their superior’s mouth. Then the questions started.

“What about the six months?”

“They cracked out servers?”
“What do you mean, keep their mouths shut? Regis?”

Monica started whispering a nonstop litany of French invective.

Regis Robalson wanted little more than to knead his forehead until he bruised himself, though that wouldn't deal with the five curious ghouls in front of him. In any case, they were stubborn enough that they'd probably trap him in the room until he gave them answers. He could give them some at least; worked in intelligence after all...and they had clearance for some of it. Probably best to start with the little things then.

“Yes, Frank, They did indeed crack our servers. At first IT thought it was Allen doing a few remote log-ins for the Aztec case because they traced them to Japan, up until they breached the Intelligence and Engineering divisions. As for the exchange program; it's over. Well, it was over before White offed Washuu, but that's besides the point.”

“And what about keeping their mouths shut?” For being basically the baby of the team, Robert had an unhealthy skill for being persistant.

“You didn't go to high school, so any explanation is going to be a history lesson and I really don't —”

“That's fine.”

Regis groaned internally.

“I'm still going with the extra-abridged version.” Choking back the urge to turn and thump his head against the wall was difficult. “Basically, at the end of the second world war, with the Manhattan project completed, two very new warheads were dropped over Japan.”

“I know how this goes.” Robert spoke confidently, not noticing the the looks flashing between his teammates. “It took two nukes and two cities leveled before we secured the surrender of—”

“Well that's outright wrong.” Telling people that was Regis' favorite part of working in intelligence. “There's one extra step in there. After the second bomb and before the surrender, they balked again. So, the brass in charge of the Pacific theater threatened to land a couple thousand ghouls on the main island to secure the surrender, and managed to keep it hidden for a couple years. Then it got out thanks to the post-war bullshittery on their part, burned half our diplomatic bridges, lost us our seat on the Security Council, and froze relations with Japan for thirty years.”

“Oh.”

“That was a lovely lesson.” Monica's tone said she clearly thought the opposite. “But I don't hear any mention of when Allen is coming back.”

The cannibal was absolutely single minded when it came to three things; fights, food and Allen—not always in that order of importance. Which was why Regis was not eager to answer that—not that he had much of a choice to do otherwise.

“Allen... Allen won't be on a return flight.”

The words hung in the air like a noose.

“Everybody. Out.” Murderously calm, Monica's voice chilled the room and carried the promise of murder.
“No.” Seated in front of her, Trisha looked ready to flip the conference table through a wall. “I think we'd all very much like to hear the reason behind this.”

And for that intervention, Regis could feel a little relief; it would be easier to explain this to a group, rather than one incredibly angry ghoul. Somewhat safer, also, with the others around to hold Monica back.

“It was passed down to me from above. Beyond getting most of the general information on us working folks like you all, they also got some details on Allen; just medical history and his bio file in particular.”

“So they know he's a halfblood.” Trisha spoke as if it was a statement of fact.

“Yes.”

“So he's a sacrificial pawn then?” As usual, Frank had looked at the event like a chess match.

“Except he's not a fucking pawn.” Monica was leaning over the table, voice still capable of chilling drinks. *He's the closest thing I have to a blood relative.* “He is my protege. I have been watching him for the past six years. I donated one of my R-sacs to make him. And now, you tell me to leave him for the wolves?”

“In the shortest possible answer, yes.”

Monica made a noise of barely contained rage. “They'll kill him! Or cut him open like a science lesson to see how he made it past the forty percent success rate! And you want *me* to sit here and let those *baiseurs de calmars* have their way?!”

“...Yes.”

At this point, should Monica lose control, Regis would be relying on her team to rein her in. Well, Trisha and Frank would try—they were cool-headed, understood the long game the BGA was working toward—the rest were either injured or looked uncertain.
And then, Frank started chuckling. Despite it not changing the mood of the room, it did get Monica to stare at him like he had exhibited several extra Rc types.

“I fail to see the comedy here.” Her voice cut through the laughter. “How about explaining the joke?”

“All Reg said they got was his bio and his medical file and nothing more, right?” He jabbed a finger at the human in question, who nodded. “They don't have his service record, his field performance assessments, and his medical record probably ends right after he got that surgery. So all the CCG knows is that he's halfblooded and worked—sorry, works—for the BGA.”

A knock on the door punctuated Frank's assessment, and a tech poked his head through the door, starting to make a query for some of Robalson's time. The words faded as quickly as they had started, with Monica giving the poor soul a look more terrifying than a death threat before fixing Robert beneath a glare.

“And your punch line?”

“The CCG is walking into a total shitshow if they try to snatch him.” Frank started counting off on his fingers. “It's not going to be a surprise attack; Allen's worked in war zones and with bombs enough to be surprised. He’s got as much training as any of us too—more if we count what he learned in Ordinance Disposal.”

“Meanwhile,” By now, Monica had shifted into a worried angry, “he knows basically nothing about ghoul society—”

“Which went out the window anyway when he left landed in Japan.”

“He’s never eaten meat that hasn’t come out of a bag, let alone hunted his own prey! He doesn’t even understand what cannibalism entails!”

“Monica.” Still sounding as if she had been gargling gravel, Trisha stood and dropped a reassuring hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Remember what you said about him while reading through his files from his military time? Hm? ‘He chose the surgery because it meant survival…’

…and if it comes down to it he'll keep choosing that same outcome.”

“See? You know he'll live through whatever.”

“I don't care how good his odds are!” Monica slammed her fist into the tabletop hard enough that something on the underside went pop. “We can't bring him back. We can't even warn him!”

“We have cell phones, you know.” Robert had found his snarky voice, holding up his own with his. “Not all of us are stuck in the middle ages. So who’s got his number?”

Trisha did, as dictated by her position as team lead, though her phone had been partially crushed in the earlier event. Elise also had his number, which wasn’t much of a help either because it had slipped out of her pocket via a slice that had gone through her pants and leg. That left one last person, Robalson, who could only shrug helplessly.

“Look, I hate this whole situation as you all, I really do. My hands are tied though; unlike you
guys, I actually report to somebody I find a little scary.”

There was another knock at the door, no doubt the thoroughly scared tech still trying to grab Regis for something while avoiding Monica.

“One sec, I’ll be right out!” Stripping off his sport coat, he turned back to the team. “I mean, you definitely can’t call him from my phone.”

Then he was gone, leaving only his jacket on the table as the sign of his presence. And his cell phone folded open on top of it. Trisha let the door click shut before giving Robert the nod to start digging through Robalson’s list of contacts.

With the team peeking over the kid's shoulders, Monica maneuvered Trish toward the edge of the room.

“How long” her words were quiet enough to imply some level of secrecy, if not calm, “would it take to get us passports?”

“Passports?” Trisha didn't even try to hide her disbelief. “Years, min-i-mum. None of us outside of you have the documents for that. And that assumes we don’t get shut down, or somebody figures out why I know you're asking me this.”

“Just try. Please.”

“Zero promises.” Did that crazy even know what she was asking?

Passports took long enough to get when a human applied for one, and that was even with all the paperwork easily at hand. Proof of citizenship? Birth certificates were right the hell out: no sane pregnant ghoul would run to a hospital or midwife when her blood broke. Naturalization forms weren’t an option unless one was a miracle case like Monica's family had been. Government-issue photo ID was easier; everybody in the squad had one of those and a badge, but even those made their ghoul status pretty obvious.

Then of course, there was getting the actual visa to travel there in something approaching a timely manner and without being found out as ghouls. Even before that, keeping the plan under wraps from the people above Regis would be near impossible, given how much surveillance they were under.

The door opened a crack. “Could we borrow Monica for a moment?”

“Go.” Robert didn’t even take his eyes off the phone. “I’m still trying to find Allen’s info and cursing whoever designed this interface.”

Nodding, she stepped back into the office area, now bustling with technicians starting cleanup and agents salvaging what they could from their desks.

*This had better take a pretty short moment.*

“What.”

“You’ve got a bit of mop-up to do.” Regis was used to being growled at.

He pointed over at the wall where the CCG agent had been pinned up like a cockroach in a collection, with forensics keeping a cautious distance. Cautious, because the cockroach was proving appropriately hard to kill; making weak swipes at anybody who looked close enough to be
in range. Whatever Washuu was, it was certainly not fully human.

“Merde, really?” I’m getting called to handle this? “Just put a bullet through its head and let forensics do their jobs.”

“He got killed in a ghoul attack in the field, remember?” He rapped a finger on the holster usually hidden by his jacket. “That means leaving bullet holes is a no-no.”

“Urgh.”

Punting a tech was out of the question—Monica knew she was on thin ice after wrecking the room. Which meant an innocent chair had to take the kick.

Regis wants it over, he'll get it over. The CCG takes something dear to me, I'll take something of theirs.
"If we had a few days to let him heal, we'd be interrogating." Regis shrugged, accepting a clipboard from yet another tech. "Be nice if we could get blackmail out of him, but that's what autopsies are. So finish up quick and let them get to work."

Shrugging off the jacket, Monica stepped around the techs photographing the dropped quinque and shoved aside two of the number milling outside the reach of the impaled man. A hand bounced off her shoulder—barely hard enough to bruise a human. She caught his arm with the next ineffectual blow and squeezed, feeling bone flex and crack.

"Bonjour...Matsuri Washuu." Slap at me all you like; you were dead from the moment you drew your kagune.

Planting a hand in the middle of his chest, she pushed him along the spines until he was pinned up between a wall and a nightmare. Reaching up, she prised open his remaining eye. It was flooded black. How amusing, how unsurprising. The little ghoul-hunter was just like the team he had tried to kill. And the one he had unmasked.

"Not that it's accurate about me, but if I'm 'American trash', would that put you several levels below me, mon ami? You're a special kind of hypocrite, aren't you?"

"Y-you-you're-"

"Hypocrites don't deserve a voice."

Her fingers ripped into his throat, coming away in a bloody spray. Monica savored the sensation; all she wanted was to make him hurt more the hole in her chest.

"Things like you don't deserve their sight."

Reaching back, she snapped off the end of the highest spike with a sound of snapping bone and prised the still-black eye open. The eye offered little resistance, popping like a ripe grape before the tip of the spike ground against the back of the eye socket.

"I hope you have a big family," Monica leaned in close, bringing her whisper right up to a bloodied ear, "with lots of aunts and uncles and itsy-bitsy cousins. Because when I get to Japan, I'm going to build myself a mass grave and salt the earth, just like the GFG taught my family."

His body twitched twice as she forced the spike through bone and into brain with the heel of her palm, wiggling it about as if mixing cake batter. There, now he had enough brain damage that regenerating around it was impossible. The alternate logical solution would be just to take his head off, but that was less cathartic—less enjoyable. And she needed both of those right now.

You better be happy with this Regis; I'm not coming back out here to play cleanup crew with more of this crap.

Nobody was gathered about the body now; Monica's messy little outburst had them pretending to be busy from a safe distance. They scurried in quickly enough to get working on the corpse, though; perhaps not as eagerly after seeing it being 'confirmed dead'. The killer in question didn't
care that they were hesitant, nor that one of them had left her jacket folded over the back of a chair—
the only thing she cared about was back in the conference room. Not running back was difficult.

"Do we have the number?"

"At least enter the room before you ask that." Elise didn't even look up from staring down at
Robert's work. "We need to keep this on the down-low, remember?"

Monica slammed the door, speaking through clenched teeth. "Do. We. Have. His. Number."

"I have it—made sure of that—along with a few other good ones." Looking up, Robert held up the
flip phone next to his smart phone. "Dunno if he'll pick up since he doesn't have my number, but
it's the best shot you've got."

With his good arm, he tossed the phone back onto its owner's jacket with a shrug.

"Here." Tapping at his screen, Robert held the phone out to Monica. "It's ringing, so don't touch
any of the buttons or you might fuck up the call."

Swiping the device, Monica pressed it up against her ear and resisted the urge to pace as the line
rang.

One.

Two. *Come on, answer.*

Three. *He can't be dead yet, they couldn't have moved that fast, could they?*

Four. *Or he is. They probably had his files for weeks and we're calling too late and he's already
been vivisected on a lab table—*

The line clicked.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the late update, work got in the way of life over the past few days.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Of all things that could've ended our little forest cuddle session, my thoughts were more along the lines of 'ghoul attack' or 'sudden leg cramp'. I was not expecting Hasuko's stomach to gurgle loudly enough for me to feel through my shirt, nor did I expect that I'd have to bite back a giggle.

"Al-lie." A reproachful look. "Don't laugh."

"I'm sorry," I couldn't help but grin, "it's not what I expected to break the silence."

"Does that mean we can get something to eat?" She adjusted her head to plant a kiss on my cheek.

"For you? Course—my treat."

It had been years since I had bought a meal. Hopefully my credit card wouldn't flag it as a fraudulent purchase. If I had to eat around people, I could choke down a meal for a little bit, like how I had done with Shinohara on that first night. Getting out of this without eating anything would be borderline impossible though; I'd have to order something full size and keep it down long enough to fool a ghoul investigator. Perhaps she'd be too infatuated to notice if I made a sudden break for the bathroom after the meal? I could do it though, since that was what it would take to make this work. Hasuko smiled the whole walk back and never loosened her grip.

On the edge of the parking lot, opposite of where she had parked, I saw a small building marked with the internationally-known symbols. That made for a welcome sight.

"Hey, Suko, could you let me free for a couple minutes? I'd like to run to the bathroom before we head back."

"Okay Allie! I'll wait by the car."

She bounced off happily, leaving my arm feeling strangely cold as I walked over to the building. I needed this—not the separation, though it felt good to be able to cool off just a little—but I had been needing a bathroom break for the latter half of the little cuddle session.

As I finished washing my hands, my phone vibrated against my leg. Abridging the drying, I wiped my hand on my pant leg so I could check out who it was. Not a number I recognized, though it did have the Chicago area code. Probably somebody who just fat-fingered my number, or a telemarketer. Or somebody from the office. My thoughts flickered outside for a moment. Suko probably wouldn't mind if I spent a few minutes on a call.

Unless she thought I was speaking with another woman.

I took the call anyway. "Hello?"

"Allen?"

"Monica? I thought you didn't own a phone."

"Are you doing anything right now, around anyone?" And what was that in her tone? Normally she bounced between parental and perverted.
"Yeah," Barring the possibility of Suko spying on me, "I'm alone."

"Good."

Wait. Phone call from an unknown number, asking if I was alone, strange tone of voice. I...really didn't want to suddenly receive kakuja pics.

"Allen, you've been burned."

"I—burned? Like a blowtorch? And like that, I was lost."

"They know. The fuck we traded you for did some bullshit science magic and stole a bunch of stuff—including everything about you."

Fuck? "Pardon, what?"

"They sold you to the wolves, Allen." How somebody could sound so serene yet so threatening was beyond me. "The BGA gets to keep its secrets secret and the CCG gets to keep you as a science project."

"So," I couldn't help but feel Monica was blowing this out of proportion, "if I have to get out, I'll just buy the first plane ticket out."

"Try. It." On instinct, I flinched away from the murderous tone. "They've probably stuck your passport on every watch list in every dock and airport. Wherever you've been sleeping has probably been cordoned off, ransacked, and stripped clean. They're hunting you down, Allen."

"So what's my exit, then?" That bribe-sized bonus in my paycheck was starting to look important.

"There isn't one, mon bien-aimé." Was I hearing sadness? "Warning you is all the help I can give, and passing out false hope is simply cruel."

"Why me?" The phrase came out more like a verbal eye roll than a complaint.

"Think about what you eat, darling." The term of endearment sounded more like a threat. "Do you really think they need an excuse?"

A rainy crossroads and bridge underside drifted to the surface of my mind. Mado. "No."

"Good. You probably shouldn't use your phone again, Allen."

"Right." If I started making or taking calls, I could be tracked all around the city.

"You should start running."

"Probably. Thanks, Monica. For everything." That could be taken literally. "I'll miss you."

"You'll be too busy surviving to miss me: I'll do the missing. Stay alive, mon bien-aimé."

She ended the call, leaving me in an uncomfortable silence. Mom—Monica had never sounded like that. Never ever.

Fuck.

How much further off the rails could this go? What was I even supposed to be thinking? No plan, no orders, no backup, not even an escape. I could see a stupidly blank expression reflected off the
blank screen of my phone. No bed, no extra sets of clothes, no meal packs, no cell phone.

*You probably shouldn't use your phone again.*

Popping off the back of the case, I pulled the battery and stuffed the two bits in opposite pockets. If I was stupid, I'd say I was free; no obligations, no restrictions, no rules. Nothing to tie me down, except for Hasuko, and how was I supposed to cut that? How could I cut that? She was still waiting by the car for me. If I spent too much time in here, she'd get suspicious.

"Allen!" Hauko had perched herself on the hood, waving to me the moment I stepped out of the bathroom. "You took a while in there, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm all right." *No I'm not.* "Just had to answer a call from my boss."

"Anything important?" *Wait, did she know?*

"Not...really, no."

"Sounds just like mine! He always calls to make sure I'm doing well."

Ha. Lucky you.

Chapter End Notes

So, due to my job picking up for the season, I'll be reducing my updates to 1-2 per week until roughly December, unfortunately. With luck, I'll be able to pick up the pace again before then. In the meantime, I'll still be around to answer any questions you may have.
Hasuko joined the loose throng on taking the highway back into the city. If she knew, she could've been taking me to a CCG facility and I wouldn't know any better. Maybe that would be for the best; I didn't know if I could survive in a city like this. I didn't have a place here, let alone any understandings of how ghoul society operated. I didn't even know how to feed myself, unlike the rest of my team, and being essentially marooned meant I'd have to...

Hunt.

“Can we stop up here for a moment?”

“Huh?”

“I’m feeling a little…” my tongue stumbled over the lie, “carsick.”

“Oh.” And then, with an appropriate level of alarm. “OH.”

She halted the car on the shoulder with enough braking force to squeeze me against the seatbelt. I exited just as quickly, dropping my hands on the concrete retaining wall. Despite how much my mind wanted to dry heave at the thought of obtaining food, my body had a very different opinion on the matter.

*Treat it as an exchange program, eh Regis? Fuck you for getting me into this mess and fuck you for not warning me.*

My first night here, I had called Tokyo beautiful. Now, I didn’t know what to call it.

Surrendering was right out; Kureo and Amon were evidence enough that would be suicidal even if I did it through a pacifist. Or Hasuko. Starting this whole thing with her had been an incredibly stupid idea, regardless of how heavy the mutual feelings, and yet I still wanted to finish the day with her. Suffer through eating dinner while making cheesy small talk, walk around and enjoy some of the night life, sleep over at her place and then vanish in the morning. That would be selfish though—dragging her into this further—and I didn’t want her to get into any trouble on my account.

*No avoiding heartbreak though. On my end and hers.*

With a sigh and a curse, I hung my head. Not knowing how to do something was one thing; not knowing what to do at all was another. Disappearing right here was another option. The buildings were built right up to the supports of the highway and there was a rooftop below me, with a drop high enough to make me nervous, but low enough that I wouldn’t hurt myself. Still an unappealing option.

Staying with Hasuko was the easy option. I could get away with one more night, leave a note, vanish before she woke up and delay all these decisions for another day. Probably not a healthy choice either. It would also keep her at the epicenter of whatever explosive shitshow was going to happen, which also made it unappealing.

Option three was to knock Hasuko out and take the car, which was more an exercise in how poor of a plan I could create. That idea assumed I could learn to drive stick in less than five minutes after never having done it before and that I would be able to actually be able to hit her without doing long term damage. At that point, the car might as well be a neon sign on wheels, blinking ‘here’s
the ghoul you’re looking for’ to every Investigator in the city.

Or, The little voice in the back of my head chimed in, you could just tell her what you are. She likes you enough.

Right. Like bringing up that in casual conversation wouldn’t lead to homicide—Hasuko hunted ghouls for a living, even if she read ghoul smut. A car door slammed and I heard the jingle of keys over the rumble of traffic. Guess I had worried her enough, not that she should’ve bothered.

“Allen?” She came up right next to me, dropping her hand next to mine. “Allen?”

I didn't bother raising my gaze, watching the sun dance along the car key she held.

“I'm fine.” Wasn't that the keystone lie couples told each other?

“Good.”

I owed her better than a lie, owed her better than anything I could give. I owed her, for better or worse.

“I’m a technically a ghoul.” Looking her in the eye to say that was harder than forcing out the words.

“I know you’re still carsick, but you have to work on your comedy.”

“It’s not a joke.”

Keeping one hand on the barrier, I wrapped my other hand around her occupied hand, soft enough to be nonthreatening, firmly enough that we wouldn’t drop the key. This was going to hurt, but it was the least threatening proof I could think of.

The tip of the key knifed down into my hand. It couldn't break skin, but it pressed a crater into the back of my hand and wound between bones. I almost wished it had been bloody when Hasuko pulled it away.

“W-Why would you do that?” She moved to cradle my hand, almost dropping the key. “You could've been hurt!”

“Hurt?” Weren't ghoul investigators supposed to be smart? The pitying smile across my face felt like a knife. “I told you already.”

It took the slightest bit of focus; my left eye burned and flooded black. “I told you.”

Dropping my hand, Hasuko stepped back with green eyes wide.

“Ghoul.” Even whispered, I could taste the poison in the word.

She took another step back, toward the car. Ever-so-carefully, I brought my hands up, palms facing her—I didn’t want to suddenly learn how well armed an off-duty CCG investigator could be.

“I’m only technically a ghoul. I started out human.”

“Liar.” She took another step back, almost bumping into the car door.

“Remember the park by the CCG? Remember what I said? ‘I could either let what happened be the end of me or choose to come out of it a changed man’.”
“You... you chose.” It was an accusation. “Monster!”

I tried not to raise my voice, failed, and ended up half-yelling my retort. “Are calling that because of who I am or because of what I eat?”

“We were going to be together forever. For-ev-er.” Now she was shouting as well. “And you lied to me every time you opened your mouth, you monster.”

Great. Now there were two emotionally compromised people shouting at each other on the side of a highway. I should’ve just jumped and left her.

“I never lied to you,” I shot back, “well, minus being carsick. Everything else though, I meant from the heart.”

“Everything?” Her hand pulled open the driver’s door and darted inside.

“Everything.”

“Good.”
Together

“Good?” This situation was pretty freaking far from being good.

“This makes it so much easier for us to be together!” Hasuko smiled.

At least, I assumed it was a smile. It would’ve been cute had it not been a toothy rictus of a grin while her eyes locked onto me in an abyssal stare. Exactly what emotion was fueling that look was beyond me, and the cautious side of me voted then and there to make the jump off the highway.

Instead, I had to open my big mouth. “Easier?”

“Oh-huh.” At least her voice sounded somewhat happy. “I’ll take you to a field office and they’ll take you to Cochlea and I’ll visit you every day, and because I’ll have ownership rights, once they’re done with you, they’ll turn you into a quinque for me. And then we’ll be together. Forever.”

I wasn’t familiar with the idea of whatever the heck ‘ownership rights’ were, but I understood the rest—especially how I would interact with quinque production. I hadn’t learned the technical details back at the BGA, but I knew that one never ended up with a finished quinque and a live ghoul, and I was far from ready to see if a partial ghoul could survive the process.

And then Hasuko’s hand slipped back through the door, with a white-knuckle grip around my quinque. I didn't doubt for a second that she'd try to use it if this started to unravel at the seams, and unlike with Kureo, I really didn't want to hurt her. Whether I actually could bring myself to hurt her if I absolutely had to was an open question; I'd probably be able to keep my cool so long as she didn't keep calling me monster or manage to stab me. Or she'd stab herself in trying to activate the weapon.

I chewed at the inside of my cheek, a habit I hadn't touched in years.

“Allen, please.” She held out a pleading hand, the smile evaporating. “This is the Eleventh Ward. The CCG is going to—”

“—try to hunt me down?” They'd probably be trying for the rest of my life.

“They're deploying every agent here, Allen.” Both hands were locked around my quinque now. “They're going to kill every ghoul and wipe out Aogiri. That's going to include you too, Allen.”

“I could've been dead six years ago. Could've been dead a few weeks ago. When I go hunting ghouls in the eleventh, it'll be the same risk.” I tried to look reassuring, but it probably looked as off as Hasuko's smile. “I won't let my story end anytime soon.”

It felt stupid to hear it in my own voice. Possibly related; Hasuko's dead-eyed stare seemed a little more...dead.

“Oh, Allen.” At least her voice sounded a bit happier.

Maybe this wouldn't end in blood and tears.

“It's not that you'll be dead.” My quinque buzzed to life. “It's that if you die in the eleventh...it means that I probably won't be the one to kill you.”

Oh, that's not good.
Despite a sudden flood of tears, Hasuko managed a natural-looking smile…and swung the quinque like a baseball bat at my head.

_Fuck. I was supposed to talk her down, make her understand, give her closure. Not get stabbed._

I dodged her first swing, retreated beyond the reach of a stab at my neck. The tip of the blade skittered into the road as she recovered. Clumsy. The next two strikes came in, a downward chop and an attempt to take my left leg off at the knee. Clumsy, but impressively fast for a human.

Fighting back was basically out unless I wanted to hurt her, and unlike Kureo, I really didn’t want to. At the same time, leaving my quinque behind was incredibly unappealing. I definitely could take it from her; my training and ghoul nature meant that it would be easy—painfully so, given that Hasuko clearly had no idea how to use it. On the other hand, doing so would probably involve broken bones; I was trained to kill ghouls and work with explosives, not restrain emotional trainwrecks.

_Fuck. I could think of worse people to leave my quinque with, even if the person in question was trying to kill me. That part had been basically self-inflicted on my end._

Scrambling under another baseball swing, I ended up back near the point where I had first noticed the rooftop twenty feet below. The prospect of dropping that distance was still quietly scary, but was more appealing than the alternative options. Hasuko must’ve guessed what I was doing; her eyes lost their dull appearance as I planted one palm on the barrier.

“Don’t.” She wasn’t even breathing hard, despite the wild swings and free-falling tears.

“It’s only a war zone. I’ve lived in a few, remember?” I gave her one last look, letting my eye turn back to its normal shade. “Take care, Suko.”

_Just like hopping any other fence; pivot on hand, toss legs over, drop to ground._

Telling myself that didn’t make the drop any less uncomfortable. Nor did it save me from the bolts of pain that zipped through my ankles upon landing. Hasuko wasn’t physically injured, something I could consider borderline miraculous given how badly everything had gone up there. And apart from the initial hurt, my ankles felt just fine.

My feelings though, felt as if they had been dropped from a much higher point. Why couldn't I have found a better way to tell her was self-evident—I was a soldier, not a negotiator. Which just meant I should've approached it like a bomb and not human interaction. Not that the idea sounded less bad.

Staying on the rooftop was not a viable option in my new game of staying alive, so I meandered around the edges, trying to find a fire escape; I didn't want to make another drop to street level. Mostly because I had my fill of long drops already for the day, partly because I didn't want to draw attention to myself. Unfortunately, I couldn't stop thinking about the lady on the highway above.

I had probably broken her heart with that revelation. Possibly a bit of her mind too. Either that or I had simply seen what had been lurking behind the curtain from the beginning. Given some of what she had said and did in the past twenty-four hours, that was a very likely possibility. Between Monica and Hasuko, I could almost say that I was cursed to end up crushing on unstable women—not that I’d ever admit any part of that to either of them.

I wasn’t _that_ socially inept.
Stepping out of the alley felt like an impressively sketchy thing to do. On the bright side, most of the people who witnessed it must’ve thought something along the lines of ‘oh, just another tourist’ because nobody panicked. Or they were just doing so in silence and calling the local CCG once they were out of line of sight. I’d probably be boxed in within an hour.

Or I was acting far too paranoid for my situation. Sure I was an odd one out, but if I actually started dressing like the locals, I’d probably be able to blend in pretty well so long as I covered my eyes. Probably. Also on that list was to grow my hair out from a military buzz and into something that didn't resemble a freshly mown lawn. Assuming I'd live that long, or didn't somehow get out of the country, I’d have to do a lot to blend in.

Not that I wanted to stay.

Getting out would be incredibly difficult, at best. No land borders to sneak over in the dead of night, airports probably had my passport on lockdown, and stowing away on a ship sounded like a game of Russian roulette. Imagine if I ended up in Russia, or Korea. That wasn't a pleasant thought to dwell on. Suppose I could always turn to organized crime to get me overseas; the Europeans definitely exported a lot of criminals to the States, after all.

It sounded like a great idea, up until I realized that I had absolutely no idea how to get in touch with the Yakuza or any other crime syndicate, not to mention that they'd have to trust me enough to actually sell me passage. There was also the risk that they’d try to screw me over and toss to the human trafficking shadow market—key word being try; I could always just kill enough of them to get my point across. Which brought me back to actually having to find them in the first place.

I did my best to act nonchalant as walked past a side street blocked off by police tape, resisting the urge to follow my nose and see what had been bleeding. Probably had something to do with that one group—whatever they had been called.

Aogiri. That was the name I had heard Hasuko mention as being the target of the CCG here, if I remembered correctly. I think what's-his-face Marude had referred to them as well, though I hadn't really been listening to him until he managed to irritate me. But back to the point; that group definitely wasn't a small band of territory-less young ghouls, considering that it had managed turn a ward into a supposed war zone. They were probably always recruiting.

Not like joining a violent ghoul group would be a complete betrayal of everything I had worked on in the past three years.

Ok, maybe I'd only consider them as an option if I had absolutely no other choice.

With a sigh, I fixed my eyes skyward for a moment and resisted the urge to run back into an alley. Here I was, surrounded by witnesses in a country that wanted me dead, and yet I couldn't decide what to do with myself. Not to mention I kept hoping that Hasuko would pop up next to me and latch back onto my arm. I couldn't even solicit help from ghouls thanks to BGA regulations, because I didn't have a partner.

Hang on. Monica said I was burned.

That meant I was out of the agency—among other things—and thus, I didn't have to follow their procedures any more. I was free. Well, in a regulatory sense. Still, realizing that was a bit of a
bright spot and gave me the thought that this business trip into hell had turned into a vacation. I
could go where I wanted, stay up all night, do things my job forbade me from doing.

Concerts, festivals, sporting events, national parks, amusement parks! No permission slips, no
forbidden places. I wanted to ride a roller coaster with Hasuko.

Wait. Dammit. I had to get her out of my head, not stuck in my imagination. If I couldn't keep a
distraction out of my head, it could and would cost me more than a few fingers or an arm. I hadn't
even decided what I was going to do next, apart from wander and burn daylight. Exactly how much
time I had was up for grabs, since I couldn't exactly check my phone.

I smacked myself upside the head—mentally of course; doing that in public would just look
sketchy. Safest thing to do would be to get the hell out of the eleventh ward. Probably. Though that
Aogiri group probably could lay suppressing force on the CCG to some extent, Monica had made
it sound like I was some high-value target. If that was the case, then I really needed to get moving.
Contradictory as it sounded, I'd probably be safest if I stayed in Tokyo; while there were enough
foreigners in the city that I'd be only a moderately unusual sight, I might as well tie a giant neon
sign to my head if I headed out to any small town.

Not to mention I had lived enough of small town life.

Playing the foreign tourist was another option, but I didn't have the funds to keep that going for
long—a couple months at best. But, I could use it as a way to get my feet set before really jumping
into the city. Spend a couple nights in a capsule hotel, plan my next move, maybe see a couple
sights, try to figure out where to get food without raising too many ethical red flags. For that last
part, I could always just eat other ghouls; Monica was a cannibal after all, so I definitely could get
my Rc uptake through them. Worst case scenario, I could just hunt the most homicidal CCG
investigators I could find.

I could hold off on deciding on that for a while; I had a couple days before I'd be dealing with
hunger pangs. I could worry about that after I had a place to rest, but first I had to figure out how to
get to the touristy part of the city.

Well aware of how much it made me look like an outsider, I pulled the map from my pocket.
Admittedly, I didn't have the best idea where I was, but I had a general idea. I knew that I was in
the eleventh ward and that I was right by a highway going northeast to southwest. That left a pretty
huge stretch of land to cover.

I nipped at the inside of my cheek again, weighing my options. While asking somebody for
directions would likely be the fastest way to get this figured out, I didn't want to leave any
impressions to be remembered by. I could use subway stations: I didn't have to know where I
was standing, I just had to know where I was going. Now I just needed to find a train station.

Flipping over another fold in the map, I noticed handwriting in a margin. An address, not in my
handwriting—I didn't write my fours like that. And it was written right in the middle of
the...twentieth ward. For a coffee shop.

No regulations meant I could pursue a bit of closure without appearing obsessive. No affiliations
meant I didn't have to share what I found with the CCG or the BGA. No rules meant that the only
thing stopping me was myself. The map was re-folded for a new route: playing the tourist was
officially on hold.

I had someone to find.
Fishing Trip

Finding a station wasn’t too difficult, thanks to ample signage and a lucky wrong turn. More heartening was discovering that my bank card still worked; back home we could have the FBI freeze a bank account and leave somebody unable to, say, flee the country and return to Germany. I still played paranoid and made an ATM withdrawal before getting on the train: just because I had access now didn’t mean that would remain true.

Since there were only a handful of people in the same car as me, the ride was pretty quiet. I could guess when we had left the eleventh by when people started getting off at the stops. They got off, probably happy to be out of the eleventh—despite not seeing much that would qualify the place for being a war zone. Admittedly, I was a bit on edge as well, looking for the same attaché cases Kureo and Amon had carried. If my luck held—and it probably wouldn't—it'd be maybe a week before every Investigator knew my face. So I had maybe three days.

After that; open season.

I was on the verge of thinking that I had taken the wrong train when I heard the stop announced. Yeah, even after triple checking to make sure before I climbed aboard, I was still paranoid.

*That was normal, right?*

Not normal was that I kept biting at the inside of my cheeks. It had taken me becoming a ghoul to kick the habit, and now I had started it up again in the space of less than an hour. Granted, it had been the second worst hour of my life, not that making excuses made me feel any better about it. At least I wouldn’t be able do much in the way of lasting damage, even with my healing factor being below average.

After my short walk in the eleventh ward, the twentieth had an almost boisterous air. Well, maybe; it definitely didn’t feel anywhere near as grim and hearing people talk as they walked was a good sign that nobody felt like they were going to die. On the bright side, it made me feel less conspicuous as I slowly made my way to the address, a process that would’ve a lot quicker if the addresses were based on grid coordinates instead of this hellish subdivision system. I hadn’t come this far to get stopped by an address system; it just took me longer to find than I wanted it to.

It was smaller than I expected: a two-story building on a mostly residential street, discrete enough to walk past unless one noticed the sign.

*An-tee-coo, huh. Probably was mispronouncing that pretty badly.*

The building fit all the boxes though; it was inside the area that the Fueguchi mother had been coming from, the windows had blinds to keep passerby from staring in, and it didn’t look big enough to be selling food. If not for the sign, I've thought it was just a house.

There were enough bean-filled jars on the wall behind the counter to remove any doubt that that this place did anything but coffee. Well, hopefully it did more than that—I was here to see if the two fish from the underpass were still around. Not that there was much chance of finding them here. The only possible way that would end up this easy is if one of them were to serve me coffee and that would be an event straight out of a crappy romance flick. Or a spy flick.

“Pardon me.”

It was only then that I noticed that I had been blocking the doorway.
I made an apologetic noise and backed off to a corner table. I had been overthinking again, as usual, as ever. Unless I wanted to be dead soon, I’d have to play this less like an investigator and more like living in a war zone; being a little less of a thinking man and being a little more reactionary. Plus it’d probably be a little more polite if I didn’t stop dead in my tracks every ten minutes.

“Ah, hello.”

Flicking my gaze from the ceiling, I noticed a server looming nervously.

*Oh come on, I wasn't even close to looking intimidating.*

“What can I get you?” Even with a work uniform that screamed professional, he sounded as if it was his first week. Contrary to every other example I had seen, the eyepatch did not help him look less like a kid out of his depth.

“Oh. This was a terrible idea. Investigating coffee shops when I couldn't stand the taste. “Something...light. Not too strong.”

“Hm. Ok.”

Well, this conversation with mister pirate was going about as awkwardly as could be expected. Kind of like the first day of basic training after my surgery, except less ghoul-filled.

Behind the counter was only one other suited figure; a guy with the build of a football lineman with a blob of a nose. Definitely not the big fish. Kind of expected more than two people on watch, but hey, this was the land of Japanese efficiency—and it wasn't like having only three customers was going to be taxing on the newbie pirate server. Yo ho ho. In any case, neither the big nor the little fish was here, obviously. Also obvious was that I had just wasted some precious time on what should've been a better thought out plan—taking a page from the page from the agents In intelligence and staking out the shop probably would've been the right choice.

Well, subtract one from that number of customers: a man who looked to be older than Stonehenge left a small pile of coins and very, very slowly made his way out from his seat next to the door. That left a pair of women at a corner table. I resisted the urge to slouch in my chair despite being a bit footsore. New shoes would have to be on my list of things to buy, or at least a pair of nice insoles.

Craning my neck around to look at the counter, I noted that there didn’t appear to be any coffee machines in the front of the shop, probably to save what little space there was. My money was on them being in the back, probably being operated by the currently-absent pirate boy. Unfolding the map across the table, I started the process of figuring out where the heck I needed to be. Blending in would be easiest in the metropolitan heart of the city, once I had a bit more in the way of a backpacker’s wardrobe. On the other hand, it would probably have a lot more in the way of CCG nutjobs.

The door snapped shut, not entirely unlike the door to the break room back at the home office. Half of me hoped that I’d see Monica walking in, but it was only the two women walking out.

*Great. There were few things more surreal than being the only person in a store. Though with only one customer, I'd think coffee would be pretty quick coming.*

Well, it wasn't like I was in any hurry to actually *drink* dirt-flavored hot water.

Still, waiting meant I could look over the map while nibbling at my cheek. It did however give me
the opportunity to bite a little too deeply and wince like a kid discovering spicy food. That was gonna bleed.

“Your coffee is going to be a little late.” That was not a male voice. I flipped my gaze off the map—an there she was, the big fish. “Not sorry.”

I wasn't surprised when she punched me in the mouth.
She wasn't surprised when I didn't go down, and I don't think she was surprised when I planted my foot in her stomach in reply. Disentangling myself from the overturned chair, I faced down the big fish yet again. She also had the element of surprise yet again, in addition to pirate boy, who had reappeared after presumably retrieving her.

Didn't matter. I had fewer fetters on me now than I had in our street fight and I hadn't ever had the opportunity to beat the shit out of somebody in a—

"That is quite enough."

There was more than enough authority in the tone to make me listen, but it was the edge behind it that made me stop dead in my tracks. Its source, an equally imposing old man, filled the doorway to the back of the shop. And not the ghoul definition of old; he looked like he was coming up on sixty, despite only really showing it in his face.

"I would remind you that this shop is a neutral zone, Touka." Now I had a name to apply to the big fish. "Wait upstairs, please."

She left, but before giving me another murderous glare and roughing aside pirate boy on her way out. And with that, I had three and a half sets of eyes on me, but I was really only concerned with one. Back home, the general rule was that ghoul lifespan was dictated by how smart or how strong one was. Half the Expert-Class in Tactical Response were in their forties, and being around them felt like having a knife to my throat—even when they were being friendly.

I was out of my depth. So very very out of my depth.

"Allow me to apologize for my employee's actions. Despite her growth, she can still be...somewhat hot-headed."

"O-of course. Sir." The 'sir' was an involuntary reaction, something I hadn't done in a long time. "It's all right. Sir."

"If I may ask, what brought you here?"

"Well, I had been visiting coffee shops, and this one—"

"Let me refine the question." His tone was still pleasant, but there was an edge behind his next words. "What was your reason for seeking out miss Touka?"

I nibbled at the inside of my cheek, deciding how open I could be.

"Since I'm...unaffiliated...now, I wanted closure." I didn't like how quiet my voice felt. "I had to—wanted to—be sure that the girl was all right. The little one."

Pirate boy was suddenly wide eyed, which made him the most expressive person here, since the only other action was a slow nod from the old man.

"I see. Please, follow me; a topic like that is best discussed in private." He paused, hand on the
"Kouma, could I ask you mind the shop solo for the time being?"

"You got it, boss."

Following the old man into the back of the shop was almost like visiting Kawana back home, if not for that I was reasonably sure agreeing to talk upstairs was the only way I'd be walking out of the building alive. If the Fueguchi girl was under his protection, then that meant he had probably known the parents as well—and I had been involved in both their deaths. Revenge was still a possibility, no matter how nonchalant appearances may be.

He led me into what could've been a living room back home; couple sofas, chairs, birdcage on a coffee table.

"Look!" The occupant chirped in my direction. "Another idiot!"

*Well, the bird wasn't wholly wrong; I was more of a grunt than anything else.*

The old man moved the cage to the side and covered it with a blanket.

"Please, sit."

I claimed a seat, noticing the big fish—the old man had called her Touka, I think—lurking against a wall. Pirate boy milled around in the doorway for a few moments before taking a seat on the sofa opposite the old guy.

He glanced to where the big fish was slinking toward the doorway. "Touka, I'd like you to remain here."

There was a grimace, but she obeyed, taking a seat next to eyepatch.

"Next, I believe that introductions are in order. You may call me Yoshimura."

"K-kaneki Ken." Pirate boy sounded about as confused as I felt.

Touka said nothing—I already knew her name, so her keeping her mouth shut wasn't a loss.

"Allen Grissom." Peeling those words off my tongue was hard enough.

"Forgive me for being so familiar," Yoshimura's tone did not ask for forgiveness, "but I believe there is a bit more to your story that needs to be told."

*Please don't make this into me telling a story.*

"For example; the first time I saw you, you had staggered from an underpass with what were certainly fatal wounds. Yet, you walked away in less than an hour looking more stiff than hurt."

On the sofa opposite the neutral face, there was one expression of surprised curiosity and one of hostile curiosity.

"So he's a ghoul then." I wondered if I'd ever hear a non-venomous tone coming from Touka. "So why the hell is he working in the CCG if he's just—"

Before she could say anything else, I managed to edge in a word before the old man could.

"I was only there as an observer. I wasn't *in* the CCG or *with* them."
"So what?" In spite of my restraint, her bad temper was getting infectious.

"They figured out who I am." It took all I had not to add 'you infuriating fuck' to the end of that sentence. "And what I am is probably much more interesting to the CCG, than you."

"You're...American, right?" Kaneki the pirate had finally found his voice. "Are American ghouls different than the ones here?"

Yoshimura was sitting back in his with an expression approaching contentedness.

"How did you figure..."

"Ah," He rubbed his chin with the slightest bit of a smug look crossing his one eye, "lucky guess."

And then Touka brought the conversation back down to her level.

"All right you Ami asshat, what the hell makes you think you're special? All you've done is kill an investigator—"

So fucking help me, I don't know how the hell she's pushing my buttons so effectively, but the old man is barely scary enough to keep me from punting her through a window.

"—after doing nothing when they murdered Hinami's mother!"

I was halfway to standing before I could clamp down on the murderous impulse dancing down my spine. Everybody was standing now.

"Don't. Fucking. Imply." I hissed the words through clenched teeth. "That you know what was going through my head."

Too late I saw the shock across her face, the fear across the boy's face and the calculating look on the man's face. My eye was burning. I had come that close—no, I had outright lost control. Like an embarrassed child, I dropped back into the chair and buried my hands in my face.

I was better than this, wasn't I?

Chapter End Notes

This was probably the hardest chapter to write: the first real interaction with the core cannon characters, and I went through a lot of iterations to get something that felt as natural as possible. First impressions count for a lot after all.
“Touka.” The name cut the air like a knife. “I would remind you that such rudeness to a guest is unbecoming.”

“Sorry Yoshimura.”

“As for you, Mr. Grissom,” now he sounded more like a grandfather, “Thank you for your restraint.”

I bobbed my head out of my hands at the unexpected words.

“Sorry, sir. I shouldn’t have snapped at her like that.”

“It’s nothing you need to trouble yourself over. On the other hand, I would like to trouble you to know what your plans are.”

“I’m not going to be talking to the CCG, if that’s what you’re asking; I ruled out helping them a while ago. Can’t go home either; my agency cut me loose once the CCG figured out what I was and even if they hadn’t, I’ve probably got a hold on my passport by now.”

“That is not exactly what one would call a plan.” How very obvious of you, pirate boy.

“I had a few ideas,” I admitted with a shrug, “but nothing concrete beyond visiting coffee shops.” My skill was more in reacting to situations, rather than planning for them.

Ah.” I had forgotten one thing. “I do have time to figure that out: I dropped off their radar in the eleventh ward, which means that they’ll likely be searching for me there to begin with.”

“I see.” Then, to the pair on the sofa. “Both of you may head back down; I believe that I have deprived Kouma of his coworkers for long enough.”

Touka left without a word or a look back—something I was perfectly fine with—but Kaneki looked like he either had something to say or wasn’t eager to get back to serving coffee. Probably the second option.

Yoshimura waited until the door was closed before speaking again.

“Incidentally, this isn't the first time we've met.”

“Sorry, sir, you might have to jog my memory of that a little.”

“Well, you wouldn't have seen me at the time.” He shrugged slightly at the admission, the lines on his face becoming warmer. “Certainly not with how focused you were about moving into and out of a certain underpass.”

“You...” My mind bent into a pretzel, trying to dig up the details of that night. “You saw...all of it, sir?”

“Little, but my curiosity lies with why you chose to intervene. You were not, as some would put it, making an expected choice.”
Well, I hadn’t been expecting to make those choices either.

“Mr. Grissom. To put it bluntly, this is about trust. Despite how your actions that night may appear, your involvement in previous events and previous affiliations will not be so easily overshadowed, unless there there is some context on which to build.”

“I understand, sir.” Which meant that being open would probably go a long way here. “In which case, I should inform you that Kaneki was right about me being and American, and up until a few hours ago I was employed by the Bureau for Ghoul Affairs. Sir.”

“I see.” Idly, he laced his fingers and regarded me with a faint smile. “I appreciate your honesty. During my slightly wilder years, I had occasion to meet a ghoul who had a history with your employer. To paraphrase, he described your organization was ‘tough but fair’.”

*Given what I knew of the CCG, that was probably a high complement.*

“My original question still stands.”

“It’s not the easiest thing to explain,” *Nor was I that eager to explain,* “but…doing nothing would’ve been the closest thing to evil.”

“And that you had to kill the Investigator you had been working with?”

“I had been acting as an observer, not a colleague, sir.” It may have been semantics, but I wanted as little to do with that particular monster. “He made his choice under that bridge, and I owned mine.”

*I had also enjoyed killing him, but that was probably best kept to myself.*

“It is the policy of this shop to assist ghouls in need; all ghouls, despite the—” He fixed me with a look that made me feel as if I had been caught with my hand in the cookie jar, “—previous affiliations of the ghoul in question. You however, posed a new question to me. Certainly almost as unique as the ones that the CCG must be facing with respect to you, to say the least.”

“Sir?”

“I digress, I believe we were coming to the decision on what assistance to render.”

Biting back a new question, I kept my mouth shut: this was the part of the interview where letting the big man speak was the safest option. Or scary alpha ghoul, as it were.

“I'll give you two nights, here, to find your footing to that extent. After that, you'll be on your own, barring any connections you make during that time. You have an idea of what will be expected of you during your time here, correct?”

“Yes sir.” I had stayed in safe houses before. “Avoid uncovered windows, stay out of the way of the others, and only leave the building if absolutely necessary.”

“Nothing quite so dramatic as that, though avoiding conflict with the others goes without saying. Should you need to leave the building to prepare for your next move, simply use the back door and common security sense.”

“Thank you, sir. Is there anything I'll be able to do to help while I'm here?” Not that it would start paying off what I owed him.

“If you're of that mind, Touka will be more than willing to give you some chores.”
Fifty cents says she’ll give me all the chores.

“Beyond that, there may not be very much unless you see something that needs doing.” The man—Yoshimura—if he was taking me in, the absolute minimum would be for me to address him properly. “Now, if you’ll follow me, I’ll show you where you’ll be staying.”

I was led out of the room and one more door away from the hall stairway, to what was very likely an impromptu living space in the midst of a storage room. Not that I was going to complain; I had slept in less pleasant places. Plus, this was a lot more interesting than the hotel room I had been considering and I had time to plan without threat of death now.

Well, given Touka and Yoshimura, no unexpected risks of death, at least.

Wait. What had I done with that map after getting punched in the mouth? It wasn't in my pocket, wasn't in my hand, which meant that it was probably still in the coffee shop. Crap. Going down to the shop was not something I could do, which meant I'd have to wait until somebody decided to take a break. Well, it wasn’t like I had some time to spare with the two nights I had been given.

Sighing, I began a slow pace around the edge of the room. I just needed to be a little patient about this, even if it wasn’t something to defuse.

“Excuse me, Mr Grissom?”

“Hm?” I turned, regarding who I was pretty sure had called himself Kaneki.

“Sorry it took a while,” he proffered a steaming cup to me, “here.”

It was probably meant as a peace offering, and I’ll admit, it did smell nice, but…it was coffee.

“Oh, and—” He pulled my map from a pocket and passed it to me. “I figured you might be looking for this.”

“Thank you,” this was worth a lot more than the coffee, “I was wondering how I’d be able to get it back without raising a fuss.”

“Also... Mr Grissom, is it true that you were...” His eye broke contact as his voice trailed off.

“...Human?” I finished warily, wondering if he was sizing me up as a snack. “Yeah. Once.”
My next words were probably unsurprising. "Why do you ask?"

"No real reason," He shrugged, rubbing at his chin with a shy look. "I don't know how something like that would work."

I shrugged. "I don't know too much about it either, to be honest. Just that it probably isn't easy; back home, I heard one was working in D.C. and another working in Vegas."

"Did you ever meet them?"

"No, just the word of mouth from my coworkers. That and I'd want more than a rumor before I'd drive eleven hours to the capitol."

I had wanted to, at one point after getting into the BGA, but I had chickened out. What if it was some prank the transfer agents were telling, or if I could actually get the time off, or if they'd end up being the much weaker ghoul of the two. Monica heard me out, laughed her ass off at the third reason and told me she didn't care if I went as long as I kept up my training regimen. So I didn't end up going.

"So… how did you get to the surgery?"

"Well, I was kind of in the hospital already."

Kaneki shook his head. "What led to it happening, I mean."

"That's kind of a long story, and I'd rather not get in trouble for keeping you up her for too long."

"Ah, fair enough," he nodded, "Touka is kind of scary."

We both fell silent. I was personally more scared of the manager than Touka, though it sounded like Kaneki had the opposite problem.

I owed everybody here though, and if some personal history was a way to pay back some of what I owed, I'd do it willingly. Even if it was uncomfortable.

I nipped at the inside of my cheek. “If you want, I'll tell you the story after you get off work, if that —”

“Hey, Kaneki.” Touka poked her head around the door, flashing me dirty look. “There's somebody looking for you downstairs.”

“Uh.” An alarmed look crossed his face. “Who?”

“Some girl.” Touka's tone made it clear she didn't particularly care about the who?

Kaneki slipped around her on his way out of the room, perhaps a little more quickly than if his coworker was in a good mood. If she was ever in a good mood.

“Are there any chores I could pick up?” I took my chance to keep paying down my debt.

“What?” Now it was Touka’s turn to look confused.
“No. If you fuck something up, I’ll be on the hook for it.” She folded her arms in the middle of the doorway. “Besides, Hinami might be by again today and I don’t want you making any more trouble for her than you already have.”

Yeah, but I got her out of trouble too.

"All right, all right." I shrugged in mock defeat. "If you don't want my help, I won't give you my help."

And with one final glare, Touka stalked away, probably to be icy to a few customers. She could compare my face to a rock, but her head had to be just as hard as one. I wouldn't even have a motivation to screw up a chore, given that I was here as a guest. On the bright side, I did have my map back despite Kaneki not giving me an answer about hearing my story. If he wanted to hear it, he knew where to find me—it wasn't like I had plans for this evening anyway and he knew where to find me.

I set down the coffee cup on the desk, fiddling with the map. Yoshimura had said that I didn't need to avoid uncovered windows, but with the desk being set right in front of one, I felt a little paranoid about the prospect. Being careful around windows was probably for the best, even if all this one overlooked was an alley. Leaning over the desktop to close the blinds and bring a bit of privacy into the room, I caught a flash of movement on the street below. Curiosity overrode paranoia, unsurprisingly, and I had to get a better look.

Sliding the coffee over to the far side, I leaned out a little further. Down at street level was Kaneki and that 'some lady' Touka had mentioned. I couldn't hear a word through the window glass and despite my howling curiosity, I wasn't going to make the jump from nosy to eavesdropper just yet.

Unfortunately, Kaneki's back was to me, so I couldn't see much of him. The lady—more of a college student, really—was easier to read; she was nervous or maybe furtive, playing with the zipper on her jacket. Perhaps not much as I thought, since she seemed to be keeping eye contact with Kaneki. I could probably rule her out as a stray ghoul; one of the many ousted from their communities either via politics or a crude form of population control—she was too young to be involved in ghoul politics and given the bloody swath Kureo and Amon had cut through the ward, the population had more than a few spaces free.

The other option was that those two were a couple. That was also a stretch, given how they were standing kind of far apart, but that could just be cultural or my lack of healthy knowledge on the subject.

In any case, Kaneki and his possible girlfriend seemed to work out some kind of solution, because the girl nodded, cracked something close to a smile and hurried off. After watching her go, Kaneki walked back inside and my time as a nosy neighbor ended. Relationship problems, perhaps, not that I was in a position to make guesses.

I didn't have to guess much as to what I'd be needing for life on the run from the CCG, though I based it off the packs I had carried around in the past six years. Extra clothes and a raincoat would be essential for obvious reasons, even if I only had one or two extra sets. And an electric shaver. I couldn't grow much that could be called beardlike and it would keep me from looking sketchy. More maps would be eternally handy, as would—if they even still printed them here—train schedules.

On the more technical side, medical tape and gauze would be borderline essential between the inevitability that I'd be getting into fights and my poor healing factor. The best option would be coagulant bandages or powder, but that probably wouldn't be in my kit unless I raided a military
base or trauma center.

Or I'd find it next to the more old-fashioned stuff. Japan was one of the leads in innovation, after all. I'd probably be able to find some pretty cool gadgets.

Monica would've laughed and socked me in the shoulder for my biggest concern though.

'Why would you need to carry around something less dangerous than you are?'

The answer to that was that holding a weapon had a reassuring feeling to it, regardless of how right she was. Everybody on the team carried a sidearm at minimum, but Monica was the only one who treated it like a paperweight. Not for the first time since starting the list, I thumped my head on the desktop. Having my quinque would've been wonderfully reassuring, except that particular essential item was in Hasuko's hands instead of mine. Eventually I might be able to stop kicking myself, but that probably wouldn't be anytime soon.

As for anything else I could use as a weapon, that selection was pretty limited. Firearms were not an option—I had no idea how strict the laws were after not being allowed to bring my sidearm. I could always go the hooligan route with knives, though walking around with kitchen cutlery was a good way to get in trouble. Sports equipment would be easier to disguise, if I actually made my way to do sports stuff. But I had never done much with sports back when I was human.

And the other weapons I knew best?

Yeah, that was a fucking joke. No way in hell I'd be able to get any explosives.

On the bright side, there were some items I didn't need; anything related to food for one and at least I didn't have any medical stuff I'd be needing. Except maybe morphine. If I was going to get ripped up much worse than my fight with Kureo, I'd need something in the way of painkillers. Something something imperfect success.

"Uh, Mister Grissom?"

I looked up from my mostly-completed list. "Oh, Ta—Kaneki, sorry. Whats up?"

"I was, well, hoping to take you up on your offer."

"Wait, weren't you going to wait until after work?"

"Yeah, sorry about that." Once again. Kaneki looked embarrassed. "Sorry about that. I got carried away in a book and I forgot until it got dark."

"Dark?" Wait, dark? Pulling open the curtains revealed that it was indeed, dark. "Guess we both lost track of time. Should we head to the other room?"
Invitation

Settling into the coffee shop's living room was a little easier with not having Touka and the big man around. It was helped by the fact that Kaneki was about the least threatening kid I had ever seen.

“So,” I dragged the last syllable out, “Where should I start?”

Kaneki fiddled with a book, suddenly looking shy.

“I guess...” Now I was feeling awkward; this was pretty personal stuff for me to share, after all. “How I ended up in the hospital would probably be the best start.”

“Okay.”

“It was a literal blindside, but a car accident, basically. You know how it is.” I couldn't help but slouch a bit. “The whole ‘that happens to other people’ thing. Well, I had that idea up until the hospital.”

“What happened to the other person?”

“He ended up dead.”

Kaneki, oddly, didn't look overly surprised. “How dead?”

“He got ejected through the windshield and was bisected by a tree. That's...” I couldn't help but let a wry look cross my face, “pretty fucking dead.”

“You must've been in pretty bad shape.” Kaneki nodded, a knowing look on his face. “Before the surgery, I mean.”

“Shattered bones, crushed organs, third degree burns and enough painkillers that I was barely lucid.” *Dredging up these memories was not going to help me sleep.* “They had to wait for them to wait for them to work out of my system before they could offer the transplant—”

“Wait.” Both of us spoke that word almost in unison, but I found my tongue just a little faster.

“How do you already have an idea of what this entails?” My idea of Kaneki being harmlessly curious went out the window. “And why exactly are you so interested in this anyway?”

Perhaps I had spoken a little too forcefully; Kaneki had a wide eyed stare for a moment before quietly echoing me.

“They...asked you.” Then, with a bit more confidence, “I don’t—why would you even say yes to becoming something like that?”

“Because if I hadn’t said yes, I’d be dead. This might not be that obvious to you as a ghoul; but humans can’t exactly shrug it off when our organs get badly damaged.” *Hopefully that didn't sound too rude.* “And I didn't want to be dead.”

“I—I guess that makes sense...but didn’t it freak you out?”

“It got easier.”
Kaneki didn't look contented with that reply, but he didn't do much beyond look as if he was deep in thought. I probably hadn't answered the question that well; not that I knew the the details of it myself. All I knew that it involved an R-sac transplant—or kakuhou, as I had learned while refreshing my Japanese—and that was basically it. The only quirk I knew about was that I had gotten blood transfusions before my surgery from the same donor of my transplant organ.

“Sorry,” I added, feeling more than a little insufficient, “all I really know about how it actually works is that there's a transplant.”

“Yeah.” Kaneki sighed. “I knew that much.”

More uncertain silence followed, Kaneki toying with the cover of his book and me still feeling out of place. Maybe going out and picking up some of the stuff on my list would be a good idea, but I made no move to stand up. For his part, Kaneki looked like he either wanted to say something or get back to reading, judging by how he was refusing to look at me.

Or I was just that much different than him.

A sharp rap echoed from the window and we both jumped.

Maybe not so different.

We both crowded up to the glass, trying to figure out what had happened. Back in the city, I would’ve guessed it to be either firearm or firearm, but I doubted it was either case here. Kaneki went a step further, opened the window, and apparently saw something because he hurried toward the door. Half of me wanted to play it safe, but this had piqued my curiosity as much as it apparently had Kaneki's—not to mention that it was better than sitting awkwardly above the coffee shop.

I skipped half the stairs on the way down in trying to catch up and almost ran him down at the back door. If I had to guess, this was where he had been talking with that girl from earlier. The odds of me following him to some lover's tryst were probably low. Hopefully.

Pulling off the eyepatch and stowing it in a pocket, Kaneki gave me an uncertain look as I followed him out into the evening cool of the alleyway. At least there wasn't anybody else—acting as a mood killer was not what I wanted to play as. Poor as the lighting was, I could tell that nobody was hidden away in some patch of shadow. Nor could I fathom why pirate boy had needed the eyewear—his eye was certainly intact—unless it was some kind of fashionable thing.

“What? It got my attention as much as yours.” Whatever it was, it looked to be long gone.

Or not.

With a look of concern, Kaneki picked up a sheet of paper folded around a rose. Somebody certainly had a thing for theatrics—perhaps I had been right about the girl being special. No, scratch that idea. Love letters didn't usually induce wide-eyed stares and color draining from one's face.

Maybe this group of ghouls wasn't as peaceful is they seemed. “What's...wrong?”

“Kimi.” Kaneki kept his eyes on the letter. “He took Kimi.”

“Who took Kimi?” She had to be the girl Kaneki had met earlier, not that I was going to admit to eavesdropping.
“Tsukiyama.” He passed me the letter.

*Tsuki-who?* Whoever this was, he was very probably a ghoul and also had some flowery handwriting. Probably would be the type to dot his i’s with little hearts if he wrote anything in English if the flourishes meant anything.

“And who is he?” I pressed, still trying to work my way through the letter. *Besides possibly unhinged.*

“He’s…hard to explain.”

“Well,” I stopped trying with the note and passed it back, “we could start with him being a kidnapper.”

Accepting the note, Kaneki nodded, though he seemed to be lost in thought. I wasn't sure if going after her was the wisest choice; beyond the obvious threat, this felt like a baited hook set specifically for Kaneki. It was almost a pleasant change not to be the one in the crosshairs.

*Eh, I was probably still in the blast radius for whatever this was.*

“We—” Kaneki tamped down on a waver in his voice, “we need to—”

Something inside the coffee shop made a noise as if somebody was pounding nails and cut Kaneki off mid-thought. I followed Kaneki again, through the unlit café area and to the front door. This time though, the person responsible for the noise hadn’t run off; slumped at the side of a door was a guy with dark circles under his eyes and a face whiter than a sheet.

“Nishio?” I was starting to think that nervous was Kaneki’s default expression.

“Kimi was here,” the man on the ground stated in a pained tone, “wasn’t she?”

Wordlessly, Kaneki passed down the note.

The street being deserted was good, because what we were doing out here definitely looked sketchy as hell.

“Think we could hurry this up a little?” I asked, making another visual sweep of the street. “Or at least inside.”

That thought was overridden by Nishio bursting into a long and angry string mostly consisting of the word ‘fuck’.

“Why, why, why did it have to end up like this?” He twisted the letter into a paper curl and his face into a suffering look.

“I’ll go...” Kaneki didn't sound eager, but at least he sounded convinced. “Tsukiyama wants me, and that’s the only reason Kimi got caught up in this.”

*Well, that was the responsible thing to say, considering how much that admission explained.*

“Count me in.” I nodded.

Nishio looked to me as if I had appeared out of thin air. “I’m...” he struggled to his feet with a grunt, “going also.”

Kaneki spared one look of total confusion for my words before turning back to Nishio and voicing
the same concern I had.

“Is that something you can even do in the state you're in?”

“You can barely stand,” I pointed out, “you'd be better off waiting for us.”

“I can't. I can't just go home and try to wait this out, and I can't just rely on you—both of you.”

Looking to Kaneki, my hopes that we wouldn’t have to bring any dead weight along were dashed when I saw him nod. The sentiment was of doing the right thing was there, not that good intentions would help much if this came to a fight.

Unsurprisingly, Nishio was slowest one when we set out, to the point where I dropped back, slung his arm over my shoulders and basically hauled him along. At least he didn’t protest the move, though he did seem noticeably pained about it.

“So.” The word came with a wince. “What exactly is a foreign ghoul doing at Anteiku?”

“I was in the area on business.”

“That’s far from an answer.”

“Also saved two of the Anteiku people,” I shifted his weight as I followed Kaneki around a corner, “so there’s that.”

“You’re the one who killed that ghoul investigator, aren’t you.”

“That’s me.” Not that it was the important part.

“Just in case, is Kimi going to be able to handle herself if it comes down to a fight?”

Nishio shook his head. “What’s it to you?”

“We want her out unharmed, right? If she can protect herself, we can cover her getaway.”

Another head shake, this one more vigorous. “I’m the only ghoul she’s known, and she’s… human.”

“All right. Worst case, I can just grab her and extract.”

After the hate from Amon and Kureo, it was almost heartwarming to see that the feeling wasn't universal. An example like that was worth preserving. It also further explained why the note had been called a dinner invitation. Speaking of which, we had to be getting close and I really didn't want to haul this deadweight through the whole city. Hell, there were barely any streetlights around.

“This is it.” Kaneki had stopped at a path leading between a pair of overgrown hedges.

Pulling free from my grasp, Nishio immediately staggered off into toward the shadowed entryway.

“This looks...theatrical.” I couldn't help but think of a B-list horror movie.

“Tsukiyama is like that.” Kaneki murmured, as we walked off the street.

“Is that,” I cocked my head at the doorway, “piano?”
It was indeed piano, played down next to the altar at the far end of the hall. Shadows danced from a dozen candles perched on the backs of pews. Scientifically, I could call this pretty freaking theatrical.

“Long time no see, Kaneki.” The figure—presumably Tsukiyama—stood from the piano. “I've been planning this for a very long time, preparing the location and getting the conditions just right.”

Now it sounded less like a dinner and more like seduction.

“Where's Kimi?” The tremor in Kaneki's voice bounced from the walls as an uncertain echo.

Even in the dim light, I could make out the smile on the face by the altar.

“Tsukiyama!” For being barely able to stand, Nishio was the one who went first down the aisle. “Kimi has no part in this, you smug bastard! Give her back!”

“Hm? Nishio, wasn't it?” Leaning idly against the altar, Tsukiyama certainly looked smug in his suit. “I certainly didn't invite you. Well, if you were planning to eat her—”

— I'm afraid that is out of the question. This woman is about to be the oh-so-delicately spiced appetizer for tonight's feast.

So this was dinner then, and not some theatrical seduction scene. Then again, Monica.

Next to me, Kaneki seemed to be more than a little concerned—unsurprising, since this was all directed at him. This was a huge amount of trouble to go through for a meal, to say the least.

“I want Kaneki at prime freshness. I want this meal to truly be something special.” His voice rose to a crescendo as he made a grand gesture toward the limp figure on the altar. Why was it that he sounded vaguely familiar. “I want to eat him as he eats her! It will be magnifique!”

“Motherfucker.” The muttered phrase rolled off my tongue quietly enough that only Kaneki gave me a look. That was definitely a French accent. Was it some kind of rule for French-speaking ghouls to be absolutely unhinged? I had a sudden and unwelcome mental image of Monica doing her special deranged laugh.

In front of us, Nishio didn’t take the news of Tsukiyama’s plan well, yelled something I couldn’t translate, and started toward the altar. He got two steps in before getting hit hard enough to break through two rows of pews and knock over a third.

“Take a load off, Nishio,” the smug man nodded, an aroused look across his face, “having an audience will only make this more enjoyable.”

Tsukiyama was fast, I'd grant him that. Faster than Frank, a bit slower than Robert, and unlike Monica I could actually follow his movements. Couldn't really gauge fighting ability—doing that to Nishio was more a show of force and was well within my own ability.

“And what do we have here?” Ghoulishly quick, he was up in my face. “You're certainly an exotic
face, made all the more sensual by the fact that you smell almost as alluring as Kaneki. I hadn't planned on having a second entree, but you've convinced me otherwise.”

And that was a statement I had no idea what to think of, let along figure out an answer to. There were some things the classic ‘what’ and its big brother, the ‘what the hell’ just weren't enough. But he had flitted back down the aisle to where Kaneki had taken a few furtive steps toward where Nishio had ended up.

“How...” I struggled to find the right words, “...incredibly fucked up.”

“How crass. I am a connoisseur seeking to find himself and the finest of dishes.” A French-speaking food snob. It was almost like he was trying to be a parody.

“Dinner’s canceled.” I shot back, taking a step toward Kaneki. *This is not going to end well.*

“Leave the girl. Walk away.”

“Walk away!?” Tsukiyama’s laugh took on a mocking air as it echoed around the room. “You could never appreciate the preparation I put into this grand event, and you expect me to walk away? I’ll make you a counteroffer: be a good audience member and I’ll eat you la—”

“Nobody's getting eaten!” Then, proving that he wasn’t the most harmless ghoul on the planet, Kaneki was the first one to throw a punch.

All I could do was internally wince when the poorly-thrown punch was caught. An amused look filled Tsukiyama's face before he landed a reply almost spun Kaneki like a top. The follow-up kick hammered him into a pew with enough force to shatter wood like cheap plastic.

I wasn't sure if Kaneki was weak or just totally unprepared for the counterattack. I did have enough time to close the distance thanks to that and take a cheap shot of my own. Unlike Kaneki, I didn't aim for a knockout, opting to hammer my fist into his sternum and send him skidding backwards.

As he staggered back and reinflated his lungs, I nudged Kaneki before setting back into stance and was rewarded with a grunt. A least the kid was capable of taking a hit, even if he couldn't quite give one.

“My, my, aren't you a surprise.” Tsukiyama gave me two claps of sarcastic applause. “Well, there is nothing like a bit of exercise to sharpen the appetite.”

“Fuck you.”

“Such a foul-mouthed foreigner.” Rapping a finger against a cheek, his eyes widened. “I'm going to guess you're American. I've never had occasion to taste one of you; I hope your foul tongue isn't indicative of your taste.”

I gave my wrist a flick. The angle on that punch had been pretty dead on, but he had taken it without breaking anything. That ruled out him being ukakau like me; he was simply too dense. That left three options of which Rc type I was facing, two of which I knew I take could on. The good part was that I had a whole vat of Touka-related irritation to vent beyond just some cursing.

Tsukiyama then made a mistake: he started to shrug off his jacket, as if this was a dinner party and not a fight. His loss, my gain. I crossed the distance fast enough that I his eyes were still looking at where I had been and sent him flying through a few pews of his own.

He sprung back to his feet quickly enough, though what was lift of his jacket was in tatters around his elbows.
“You inconsiderate…” His mouth worked in mute indignation for several seconds. “Do you have any idea what brand of clothing you've just ruined with your underhanded—”

Rather than complete the sentence, he started forward, only to stagger back as a blur flitted past his face.

“I dunno, underhanded works pretty well.”

Touka. Now that I heard her voice, I remembered she had used that same surprise attack to kill an investigator before our fight in the street. This time though, all her target did was grow a cold smile and dab blood and fluids away from a sliced eye.

“Why is it that everybody seems to show up when I try to prepare a meal?” Flashing a disappointed look at a now soiled handkerchief, Tsukiyama looked more irritated than injured. “You truly have a talent for being a nuisance, Touka Krishima. Well. You're quite welcome to join in my pre-dinner exercise.”

“Exercise? I’m here to beat the hell out of you after all the trouble you've raised around the shop.” I had to resist an irritated groan when I realized Touka was actually taking the time to stretch. “I don’t care about Nishio or Allen, but if Kaneki ends up dead, I'll be stuck with his work.”

“You’ve gone soft, Touka. I preferred it when you looked a little more…feral.”

The girl in question narrowed her eyes. “The fuck is that supposed to mean, mister creep?”

“It means that Allen the American is the only one here with murder in their eyes.”

Touka, possibly enraged by that last sentence, picked that moment drop any semblance of civility and close in on Tsukiyama. I followed her in on the opposite side of the aisle, aiming to engage on the opposite side she was going for. It was a good plan, up until she decided to dodge an incoming kick by moving directly into my path. Skidding to a halt kept her from ramming me into the pews, which was good, but it also made me a perfect target for a follow-up kick that launched me nearly back to the entryway.

The hit hurt, but didn’t do much beyond promise a nasty bruise—I counted it lucky that he had aimed at my stomach rather than a knee or my chest. I landed in time to see Kaneki get back into the fight long enough to land a coordinated attack with Touka, though the girl was almost immediately hammered with a high kick that connected with a meaty thud and seemed to suspend her in the air.

By the time I noticed Tsukiyama had Kaneki’s arm in an incredibly vulnerable position, I was on my hands and knees, too far away to do anything except hear the bone in his arm crunch like dry wood. Kaneki dropped to the ground with a scream. He’d live, plus, there were bigger issues at hand.

I stared down the Francophile with the hideous tie like he was another bomb, even as I got my feet under me in a low crouch. He turned to face Touka as she charged in again, his profile backlit by the lights at the altar. It was only thanks to the light that I saw it; the unnatural way the back of his shirt rippled.

Kagune, and with Touka charging in, she’d be in the perfect place to be hit. I didn't have to think it through as my eye started to sting; I just lined up the shot. This was not the time to miss.
Priorities

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Not the biggest shot I had produced, but perhaps my most accurate. The kagune came out, but the foot-long spike of Re cells suddenly protruding from Tsukiyama’s forearm provided enough momentum to force his blow to the side. With the kagune active though, he was fast and strong enough to launch Touka back towards where I had been standing. The key word was ‘had’, because after seeing the spike hit, I had launched myself in its wake.

Tsukiyama launched a predictable attempt to intercept me; a high-to-low slash with the timing to hit my head. Untrained, my instinct would’ve been to slow down, a move that would’ve gotten my chest sliced open, but I had six years of muscle memory to tell me otherwise. The correct action was to speed up and duck through where the blow would be and I was inside his defenses. Best of all, because he was a koukaku—the ungainly brick of the Rc types—Tsukiyama lacked the speed to do anything but look startled when my fist hit the bottom of his sternum.

This time it was his turn to leave the ground, getting launched between rows of pews and skidding backwards on his feet until he hit one of the support pillars. I followed up with yet another Rc spike, Tsukiyama only managing to avoid getting pinned by his neck by a matter of inches and a quick dodge.

With a safer distance between us, I could get in a good look at his kagune. I already knew it was a koukaku from the placement, and the coloring was an indicator that he had been eating well. The shape itself twisted around his arm protectively, looking like a huge red corkscrew. Great. All he needs to do now is start waving a baguette around and he’ll be the frenchest thing I’ve ever seen. Thankfully, I didn’t see any signs of him being a cannibal, even if he was coming off as a nut. Case in point; he was currently laughing like a loony despite his dear death experience.

On my end, laughing would end with a wince. Between the full tilt movement and the time since then, I was currently very aware of each injury Kureo had inflicted. If I was lucky, I’d be able to get through most of the remaining fight without reopening anything. At least Tsukiyama however, was laughing with an expression that had crossed the line into nightmare fuel.

“To think I blind enough that I considered you an exotic nuisance!” He dragged my first Rc spike out his arm, tossing it aside with a look of murderous bliss in his eyes. “Instead, you turn out to be a second delicacy drawn into dinner—and I fully intend on making you into dessert!”

“I don’t think so.” Recovered from her hard landing, Touka followed the words with a razor storm from her own kagune.

Her spikes were much smaller than mine and less accurate, but she made up those shortcomings with quantity. She took chunks out of pews and left a fair number of spikes embedded on the walls near Tsukiyama but didn’t manage to do much better than scratch damage against him, as he had turtled up behind his koukaku. Touka wasn’t going to be winner in that fight, unless this transitioned into a kagune fashion contest; Tsukiyama would simply soak up her hits and wait for her to exhaust herself.
Exhaustion was something I had to be careful about here as well; the last time I had eaten anything had been the night Hasuko had invited me to the bar, and that had barely been a snack. The last time I had eaten a proper meal had been almost four days ago, which made my five-day eating cycle seem like a big mistake. My limiting factor wasn’t so much having enough Re to use as ammunition, but having enough to keep the projectile size and velocity high. I gave myself four more shots. After that, I’d be trading the remains of my stamina for firepower.

Touka lunged at Tsukiyama again, interrupting my estimation. This time, I didn’t follow her in—I had learned my lesson the first time—and opted to step away from the pair making it their mission to fight with the maximum of property damage. Back towards Kaneki.

“That’s definitely a break.” I could tell it wasn’t a dislocation from the squeamish angle it was held at. “First time?”

The slightly glazed look in his eyes marked an affirmative before he shakily confirmed it.

“Moving it a bit won’t slow the healing, but—” I diverted my attention for a moment as the fight on the other side of the room violently relocated itself to the balcony, “—but don’t do anything strenuous with it for now.”

“We… we need to get Kimi out of here.” Kaneki winced as he cradled his arm.

“You and Nishio are going to take care of that, since neither of you can fight at his point.”

A sound of splintering wood and a shower of drywall dust seemed to apply delayed punctuation to my statement.

Blinking away a few specks of dust, I looked to where the other casualty had landed and only saw splintered wood. “...If we can find him.”

My first thought was that Nishio had taken advantage of the fight to make an exit, but that was because my first instinct was to think of him as a hostage. He had been the one most intent on coming, and had been wholly focused on getting back that girl.

“Hands off the appetizer, weakling.”

I turned in time to see Tsukiyama casually punt Nishio away from the altar. Incidentally, it was that imagery that made me realize that it was Kimi and Nishio who were a thing, not Kaneki and Kimi. Which actually made a lot more sense, now I had put it together. So much for me being a ghoul investigator, eh?

“Now, I don’t know what this one has been eating,” Ysukiyama stepped over to Nishio and brought his heel down on his ribs with a crack, “but as we are what we eat, I can only assume it was much like Touka’s recent meals: trashy.”

Likely taking offense at that comparison, Touka streaked down from her perch on the balcony like a missile. At least until I saw her target extrude a blade from his corkscrew. Then, in keeping with the theme of unhealthy foods, she looked more like a marshmallow flinging herself onto the skewer than anything else. At the very least, she wasn’t outright impaled. Maybe Tsukiyama miscalculated, maybe Touka managed to wriggle her way to the side, maybe the broken half of a pew I threw actually did distract the French nutcase. Maybe it was all three.

The result was still wince-worthy: Touka tore open her side on the blade extruded from the corkscrew, hit the floor with a howl of pain and crashed into the piano hard enough to raise a few discordant notes. Flicking blood from his blade, Tsukiyama regarded the squirming girl coldly.
before turning to me.

“And then,” he raised his blade toward me, “there was one.”

“Lot of trouble to go through for a meal.” I tried to buy a little time, picking my way through the rubble, trying to find an angle where I wouldn’t have anybody in my firing angle.

“But well worth the effort. Two half ghouls instead of one, mon dieu, fortune truly smiles up on me tonight.”

“And the others?” Bits of wood creaked and clattered beneath my feet.

“The strong eat the weak, naturally” there was no warmth in the shark’s smile that flashed across his face, “—and tonight my appetites have crossed with my natural duties.”

Tsukiyama was also using the moment to re-position himself, moving away from the space near the altar and into the clearer floor in the aisle. Both us were jockeying for position now.

Step.

I had four shots, probably three given my habit of juicing them a little too much. Not that pacing myself is much of an option

Step.

He’s fond of using that high-to-low slash, even if it keeps him from blocking properly. Not that blocking would help him much.

Step.

Come on, a little more to the left and you’ll make a perfect pincushion. Just one more step.

Something under my foot gave and my leg slid out of place like I was standing on fresh ice. I didn't fall, but I was off balance...and an easy target.

I was not surprised that Tsukiyama took the opportunity, nor was seeing him ready to bring down a slash across my chest. I would've done the same thing. What was surprising was that for the first time in my life, I managed to fire more than one shot—even if it felt as if Monica had jumped onto my shoulders at the same time.

Unfortunately, the accuracy of said shots was abysmal. One flat out missed, zipping away well over head height and too high to even be a distraction. One glanced off the side of his head, probably not even hard enough to concuss but definitely more than enough to irritate. The last one was the only one I could call lucky.

When struck with enough force, kagunes were more than capable of breaking. Ukakus tended to rip or crumple like cardboard. Bikaku could be sliced or stabbed with a consistency pretty much the same as a raw, half-frozen steak and had a bony center. Rinkaku had the consistency of a water balloon filled with ground beef and behaved basically the same when broken. Koukaku, as shown in a rainy alleyway, shattered, like glass enclosing thin layers of strawberry jelly.

This was important, because my other two spikes of the salvo hit the blade and the corkscrew respectively. Which meant instead of a sword, I now had a very large number of long, sharp Re shards hurtling toward me.
Chapter End Notes

My apologies for being so late on this chapter; between work suddenly deciding to devour time and plotting out future events for this work, I found myself more than a little behind. Currently, one of the more pressing questions is whether I should continue in a chronologically linear fashion, or whether I should follow the format used in the original work, and insert a flashback. Of course, this would involve Allen and not Rize.
Should any of you, dear readers, have an opinion on which you'd like to see, I'd love to hear it.
I must’ve passed out for a second or two, because I could’ve sworn that I only blinked, but I had
gone from stumbling to flat on my back. No visible sign of Tsukiyama either, though that was
probably because I was looking straight up at the ceiling. He was audible though, hurling accented
insults at Nishio over what sounded like a thorough beating.

Before I could do much else, I was reminded exactly what had happened in the moments before I
had found myself on my back by what felt like a number of small, white-hot weights. I had
accidentally turned Tsukiyama’s koukaku into an ukaku. It only took me raising my head to look to
confirm that; I had about a half-dozen shards of his kagune stuck in me, each about the size and
shape of a steak knife. At least nothing had ended up anywhere important. Well, nowhere too
important.

I needed these out; I still had to deal with their owner, and leaving them in would only cause more
damage in that fight. Raising one arm to start the process, I found that it had a shard cleanly
through the forearm, halfway between wrist and elbow. Moving my fingers was still possible
despite the hurt and the shard wiggling around in time with the movement, so at least nothing was
severed. These injuries weren’t as bad as the ones from the fight with Kureo, at least.

_These were basically shrapnel, too. Only difference was that these were able to puncture my skin._

More out of a sense of irritation than anything practical, I used my teeth to extract the one in my
arm before moving on to the others. The sharp bits of kagune weren’t the core obstacle for me
getting back onto my feet, though they were a big one. The real issue was energy. I knew I had
used all four of my shots in not getting slashed open, and even without that metric, I still felt as if I
had I had just sprinted a mile.

What I needed more than anything right now, was a boost—a proverbial shot of espresso, so to
speak. There was one big problem with that, apart from the fact that I couldn't stand coffee. Coffee
was a mental stimulant, not physical, and I needed Rc cells to keep both me and my kagune
running.

I was suddenly extremely aware of the shard of kagune gripped by my teeth.

_It couldn’t possibly be that easy, could it?_

'A kagune was a mass of Rc cells in a state of controlled differentiation.' That had been one of the
first things I had learned about ghoul biology.

I didn’t like it. It sounded entirely too easy, possibly because I already had some in my mouth,
possibly because I couldn’t think of a risk. Experience had taught me that everything had a
downside, and being unable to find one here was…troubling.

_Monica ate ghoul so she could have enough power on reserve to use that kajuka ability at will,
right? Right now, copying her was the only option I had._

The closest comparison I had to biting down on the kagune shard was to biting down on a frozen
Kit-kat bar; a crunch of resistance quickly followed by melty submission. After eating what was basically human jerky for the past years, the texture was a welcome change. On the other hand, the flavor was more than enough to induce a bit of regret. It was the nauseatingly sweet weight of melted Halloween candy, though after somebody had stirred in the contents of several freshly squeezed lemons. The overall effect was very much far from pleasurable, but after several years of eating the same thing, it was unexpectedly welcome.

Most importantly though, it did exactly what I had hoped it would. Eating two was enough where I could physically feel myself perk back up. Crunching down enough to total six might’ve been a mistake; I felt refreshed—which was already strange after being skewered almost a dozen times—but there was also a vaguely-tingly feeling creeping over my chest, like a radio tuned to background static. I could delay minor worries like that for later, after Tsukiyama had been dealt with.

I felt unusually light on my feet, standing up. The sensation was eerily close to how I had felt after that first sudden kiss from Hasuko—and I absolutely did not need her in my head at this moment. Ripping my mind away from the thought of her touch, I dragged my focus back to reality.

Still bleeding, not much though. Don’t want to risk this going bad again, so sticking to hand to hand is my best bet. Nothing really hurts, so at least that’s a plus.

Near the altar, Tsukiyama was kicking the crap out of Nishio, who seemed to have latched onto the former’s ankle with a death grip. The scene was winceworthy to witness, but it meant Tsukiyama was basically immobilized and fully distracted. Which was a shame, because I didn’t get to see any surprise on his face when I charged around the piano into the open space between the pews and altar, stepped over Touka’s legs, and hit Tsukiyama with a shoulder charge that would’ve left any hockey player envious.

It was oddly enjoyable to know that for the second time in this church hall brawl, I had managed to knock the Francophile airborne and into a wall. The next few steps were off-balance and almost qualified as stumbling before I could catapult myself after him. It was a repeat of my first launch, except I was following it up with myself rather than a spike of Rc.

Tsukiyama was a quick study, I could grant him that: he made an attempt to get clear of the wall almost from the moment he slammed into it. The reaction was fast enough to keep him alive, but not fast enough to keep him from getting hit.

My fist landed somewhere between his shoulder and elbow as he wriggled to the side. Had I been using my kagune to launch a spike, it would’ve been a pinning hit, but my fist was more of a crushing implement in this case. Presumably, there were two impacts—one from my hitting Tsukiyama’s arm bone and another from my hitting the wall—but the feeling was much closer to punching a water balloon filled ground beef. For the first time, I got to see something besides smug in the form of a howl of pain and a stumble away from me. Before he could get out of reach, I followed up with a heel into his shin.

The limb promptly folded with a crunch, as if the bone had been cheap cardboard, and Tsukiyama promptly dropped to put his head at the perfect punching height. With no small amount of pleasure, I spiked a punch into the side of his face hard that he bounced a little upon hitting the floor. Unlike when I took his arm, I really felt the hit this time. Trying to shake the impact out of my hand, I looked up for a moment, trying to catch sight of Kaneki but a noise down at floor level drew my attention back down.

Tsukiyama had tried to make a one-armed crawl closer to the altar, probably to try and make a meal of the one helpless person in the building.
Rather tenacious, are we? Well, I won’t let you get far.

I walked up to the side of the wriggling figure, making sure to stomp some extra trauma into the injured leg. Doing my best imitation of a football punt imparted enough energy to slide the mauled Francophile ten feet toward the rows of pews. And make his chest emit a number of solid-sounding cracks.

Between that and seeing his messily severed arm on the ground, I felt an odd sense of pride. My next thought was to pick up the arm and smack its former owner with it a few times.

I really should just kill him. Playing with my foe was impractical...if somewhat fun.

As if in response, Tsukiyama stirred weakly, murmuring something about ruined dinner plans. It was about then that I noticed Touka had regained her feet.

“Fuck’s sake.” she growled, unsteadily stepping between him and Kaneki. “Would you shut up about food already.”

In response to the continued noise, I stepped over and dropped my foot onto the back of his neck, almost losing my own balance, the Francophile falling silent with a soft grunt.

“We should kill him.” I noted, slowly realizing that my left arm—the one that that had taken his arm off—was steadily starting to tighten up.

“What? No.” She fixed me with a pained glare. “Aren’t you supposed to be smart or something? If you kill him, half the CCG would flood the ward to figure out who did the deed.”

Admitting it felt dirty, but I certainly understood; I had been on the other side, participated in the same kind of thing at the BGA after a big-name ghouls were killed. I should’ve thought of the long game, rather than just threat elimination.

“You’re...right.” I put my foot back onto solid ground.

“You should be more worried about how you’re still standing.”

“I’m fine.” The floor then seemed to wobble below my feet, as if agreeing with her. “...Mostly fine.”

Another glare. “Do you end every fight looking like you can barely stand?”

“Not usually.” I shook my head, privately embarrassed.

Even injured, Touka still could be irritating. I certainly wasn’t going to admit to her that my legs felt like balsa wood and jello, though I did lean against one of the few intact pews.

In truth, I was more worried about Kaneki than myself—I was pretty sure I'd end up fine once I came down off this funny feeling buzz. This wasn't my first time with human-fatal injuries, but Kaneki had the look somebody who'd rather be in shock. If it was like my first time, the pain was there, but the body's response was not; there was no mental or Rc-based block on the pain.

But Kaneki. Holy fuck, Kaneki. I felt stupid for not feeling more awed for being in front of the only other person I knew who was like me. That thought alone was enough to make me irrationally want to hug him as he meandered over to us. We could go out to fairs and drool over the menus from the vendors, reminisce about favorite foods, or just hang out and do...whatever ghoul hybrids did.
Meanwhile at the altar, What’s-her-face and Nishio were having a sentimental moment as he untied her. Granted, it was in one of the more symbolic places to share an embrace, but surely that kind of thing could wait until we were anywhere but here. At the same time though, the truth was that none of us was in a condition to head out just yet, thanks to Tsukiyama. Nishio actually looked like he might’ve been tied with me for the distinction of ‘worst injuries’, though his were more blunt trauma rather than my puncture wounds.

“We'll still kill someone though. Her.”

“What?” Kaneki's voice was pained, but mostly confused.

“You've been compromised.” Touka's voice was hard as winter ice. “If she knows who you are, she's too dangerous to let live.”

I could only shake my head; I understood, but I also knew it wasn't why we had gone here.

“She's just like Hide, or how Yoriko is to you, Touka.” Kaneki shot back, a note of strength in his own tone. “If that was Yoriko, would you still be able to kill her?”

“Shut—shut up. That's not the point.” Her voice spiked into an almost-yell. Kaneki bringing up those names had apparently touched a nerve. “I have to kill her now so I'll never need to make that decision, don’t you get it?! If some human reveals us to the CCG, then we’re all dead, human or ghoul!”

Not getting any response from Kaneki, Touka rounded on me. “You know how they operate, you bastard; you were one of them! Don’t pretend you don’t know why this has to be done.”

The worst part was that I did understand—it was the same motivation as me wanting to kill Tsukiyama—eliminate the threat. But this was a human who had tried to find help for a ghoul, and said ghoul had done his utmost to save the human; something I had never expected to see after meeting Kureo.

“That…” I chose my words carefully, not wanting to tilt this into another fight, “would go against why we came here. To retrieve her, alive.”

“So neither of you get it. Fine. Neither of you could stop me either.”

With that snarl from its owner, Touka’s kagune sparked to life; a living flame of midnight blue, shot through with bolts of red. This was going to be unpleasant, not in the least because her kagune was—

“…So beautiful.”

Everybody turned to look at the girl—Kimi, I remembered—the blindfold free from her face.

*What.*

I didn't know what I had expected her to say, but it hadn't been that.

Touka’s face went from white to red before she echoed me, her own voice quiet and uncertain.

“What does that…even mean…” I tensed, half expecting her to jump at the awestruck girl.

And then she was gone, bounding down the aisle and out of the building, kagune still out.

“Kaneki, Go check on her.”
“Me?” Now he was looking confused again. “Why? What would I even say?”

“You know her better than the rest of us, right?” I said, prompting a shy nod. “And you don’t have to say anything, all you have to do is offer to listen. That’s the important part.”

“A-all right.” He looked as if I was setting him up on a date with a monster, but he still hurried out quickly enough.

Only after he left did I let myself relax a little bit, since Kaneki would probably dampen Touka’s temper if only by proximity. I had to sigh, knowing I was relying on the world’s most timid ghoul. Plus, my shirt was thoroughly ruined, and I had about a dozen stab wounds. Still a better outcome than with Kureo.

“You’re like Nishio, aren’t you? And that boy as well.”

I looked away from the door, to where Kimi was propping up her probably boyfriend.

“Pretty much.” I nodded, regretting how the movement made my head spin.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I managed to make it to a pew and flop down before my legs gave out. “You doing all right, Nishio?”

“I’ve been in worse shape.” Gingerly, he wiped blood from his eye. “How are you this calm about what just happened?”

“I’ve done this kind thing before.”

Chapter End Notes

And I’m back, after a hectic holiday hiatus. Sorry for keeping you all waiting for the next installment dear readers, and as always, I’ll answer any burning questions that you may have.
This Kind of Thing

Chapter Summary

"I was born a human, I'll die a ghoul. But where I stand now is more important."

Before a one-eyed ghoul found himself stranded in Japan,
Before an Agent of the BGA worked with Investigators of the CCG,
Before an uncertain traveler stepped off a plane and into a land unknown,

Allen Grissom and five companions made up the Tactical Response team in Chicago.
Two months before the events in Minneapolis, five months before the event in Louisiana, and seven months before Japan.
Let us take a look at what Allen called "this kind of thing".

Chapter Notes

First and foremost to my readers: if you have read chapter #76 before February fifth, 2019, please be advised that the latter half of the chapter has been re-edited and rewritten to a large degree, as I was very unsatisfied with the conclusion of the fight between Allen and Tsukiyama.

The van bucked again as it hit a pothole at twice the posted speed limit. From the driver’s seat, Frank cursed audibly over the growl of the engine and weaved, probably to avoid yet another pothole.

“Run through it, we’re less than ten out.” I heard Trisha’s voice twice; once from the van’s passenger seat and a second time through my headset.

From the Ops center back at the CCG headquarters, Robalson rattled off the briefing.

“Op site is a shipping warehouse on the South side, near the dockyards. Thanks to the short notice, we haven’t been able to pull the blueprints, but the layout will be generally open with offices around the outer walls. From what the MGA passed on to us, it does not seem that the event has spread outside the building, yet.”

“How many are we looking at?” Monica cut in. “Anything good?”

“MGA claimed no more than fifteen ghouls total, ranging from class zero to class two.”

Monica didn’t say anything, but from next to me her disappointment was tangible.

“Likely they underestimated something,” Robert chimed in, “if they’re calling in us.”

“Likely. I dug into some of our local intelligence to see if anything had been brewing.” There was a brief pause, Robalson likely pulling the data back up, “The Vladvocek family reports suggest
things have been relatively peaceful, but we have some stray reports from around the area about late night activities. FBI did have an old report of a Quebec-based organized crime group. Nothing concretely ghoul-related, unfortunately.”

“They had enough to determine something was ghoul-related.” Trisha noted, referring to the Chicago MGA. “Not to mention that they don’t like asking for help.”

“We’ve got almost full control here.” Robalson cut back into the conversation. “The MGA refused to leave the site entirely this time, so you’ll have to make your entrance the boring way. After that, standard procedure applies. Clear it, document it, leave the bodies for the MGA. Since there might be a couple live MGA in there, you’ve been cleared to kill if they witness anything compromising.”

“Yo, Frank!” Robert poked his head in the path of the rearview mirror. “Betcha this is a ghoul gang.”

“On the north side or the suburbs, sure. If it was a new gang, we’d have heard something before this. Ten bucks says that it’s some stray that snuck into class three or four.”

Monica perked up a little at the assessment, but only to roll her eyes.

“Fraaaank, where’s your balls? Fifty bucks says this is something big.” Robert swapped seats to get right behind him.

“Well…” Frank shrugged. “Usually I’d feel bad about taking advantage of an idiot, but hey, you offered.”

I couldn’t stifle a chuckle at the comically offended look on Rober’s face. No skipping a beat, he turned to me.

“Howabout you, Allen? Wanna join the action?”

I waved him off. “I’ll pass. Too many question marks on this one.”

“Pfft. You’re a bigger killjoy than Frank, you know that?”

As the youngest member in our six man band jostled his way back into his seat, I leaned toward Monica.

“So,” I quietly asked, “what do you think it is?”

“I don’t know.” She had started leaning towards me in turn, until our shoulders were touching. “Much like you said, lots of question marks. But I think a ghoul family would’ve noticed that there was somebody on their territory. Or they’re just lying.”

Frank brought the van over a speedbump with a jolt. “Well, the MGA won’t be much of a help, but we might as well ask, since we’re here.”

Robert opened the rear doors and we disembarked into the spring chill. After being the in the windowless back of the van, I had to squint for a while before my eyes adjusted back to the light. We had parked up against a privacy wall, but I knew we had to be close to the warehouse in question. Trisha set out immediately set out towards the only other vehicles nearby; a trio of SUVs emblazoned with the seal of the Chicago MGA.

“I still have no idea how she gets along with them.” Robert looked up from retying his boots.
“Life is easier when you’re pretty.” Frank made the observation as he retrieved his light machine gun from its case under the seats.

“She can fill a bra too, as you’ve often noticed…Rob.” Monica earned a nod from Frank and a blush from Robert with her observation.

“No. I haven’t been looking.”

“Don’t lie about the obvious.” Monica’s face split into a huge teasing grin. “Now who’s got the better set, me or her?”

“I’ll be damned,” noted Frank, loading an ammo box, “he’s almost the same color as a fire truck.”

Adjusting my vest, I wasn’t about to get involved.

“Suddenly mute? Well, then I’ll ask Allen.”

Oh no.

Monica was suddenly close enough that I could smell her.

“So, who’s got the better bust?” She queried me playfully.

I wasn’t sure if she was thrusting out her chest a bit or if it was just her vest. I was sure that I was slowly turning the same color as Robert.

“No comment.” Was all I managed to squeak.

Then, Elise brought us back to reality with a thump.

“Ah shit.” She observed, grim irritation in her voice. “They brought their fucking dogs.”

That in itself wasn’t a real problem for us, since dogs weren’t specialized enough to differentiate between human and ghoul scents, and weren’t strong enough to any real injuries to us. It was just that Elise and I really hated dogs—Elise to the point where she had referred to police dogs as ‘rabid minus the rabies’—with bonding over said hatred being how we had gotten on good terms. I frowned down toward the clearly marked ‘K-9’ marked on the vehicle near where Trisha was talking shop.

It could get worse. I mentally noted, collecting my shotgun from its case. Could be that there were a couple dogs loose in the warehouse as well.

“Still using the KSG, huh.” Elise tossed me a box of shells. “Guess you like the two tubes more than full auto then.”

“It’s nice,” I admitted, slotting extra shells into my vest, “One tube for Rc buck and the other for breaching shot. I’ll save the automatic for if we—”

Frank warned us both silent with a gesture; Trisha was headed back.

“They didn’t share much with me, naturally, but I got some stuff. They only realized something was amok when the team went radio silent, so the site’s been hot for maybe forty minutes. Eight man team, checking out a report of missing local homeless, not that I believe the story. What I do believe is that they found something too hot to handle. The warehouse itself is just over the wall, with nobody in or out since they arrived. Allegedly.” She rolled her eyes as a clear indicator on her opinion of MGA intelligence. “I’m thinking we’ll enter at a single point and stay grouped until we
have a decent idea of what’s going on. Elise, you’ll take point once we’re inside, with Robert covering the rear. Allen, grab the charges since we’re going in blind. Probably a lot of close spaces, so be ready to use your quinque.”

Using the van as a ladder, we hopped the fence and made our approach.

“Fuck that’s big.” Robert muttered, regarding the huge building. “We sure they aren’t just lost somewhere?”

“Not likely.” Trisha gestured toward the trio of parked SUVs parked near the front door. “That’s a four-oh-four stuck on the bumpers. This call just got stranger.”

Squad four-zero-four was one of the more violently effective groups in Chicago’s MGA; not so much for investigations as for urban warfare. Despite their reputation, I had heard that they were about as good human BGA agents in a fight. I had an inkling that why the MGA had called us, rather than throwing more of their guys at it.

The door was closed but not locked, and held shut against the wind coming off the lake by one of those spring-loaded arms. We all packed into the tiny lobby, pointing muzzles at doorways.

“You smell that?” Monica inhaled deeply. “That’s a lot of blood. Human and ghoul.”

“I smell it.” Leaning down both corridors, Robert took a few more good sniffs. “Dunno where from though, kind of just…everywhere.”

My opinion was pretty moot here; I couldn’t tell human from ghoul by scent—due more to my biology than lack of trying—which meant I almost certainly had the worst sense of smell in the group.

“Left first.” Trisha ordered. “We’ll go all the way around if need be.”

Even though the walls were peppered with vents, the air felt stagnant; like a room kept closed for too long. It was as if everybody had suddenly gone home for the day, leaving the building deserted. But that was impossible; the offices we passed should’ve been occupied and somewhere in here were eight dead MGA troopers.

“Got something.” I hissed, as a sharply familiar smell wafted in from somewhere. “Spent gunpowder.”

Still facing down the hall, Elise gestured ahead to a trio of brassy glints in a doorway.

Monica rapped on Trisha’s shoulder and signed her assessment. *Somebody was bleeding over there; smells human.*

We crept over to the door, slightly more on edge than we had been five minutes ago. Close enough to get a good look, I could tell the cases weren’t anything used for fighting ghouls—not unless the MGAs had suddenly swapped to using pistol rounds. Trisha knew it too.

*What do you think?*

*Too many question marks.* I signed back.

The big one was naturally the question of who the shooter was. Between MGA trooper, office worker and ghoul, the most interesting possibility was last one. Or, Robert was about to find himself winning a bet because none of them were true.
In the front of the group, Elise waved, got our attention, and then gestured for us to take a look through the doorway. She had found the first MGA trooper.

He was definitely dead; one of the pistol shots had left a hole above his left eye and a lot of little bits of flesh stuck to the wall he had slumped against. It didn’t take more than a glance to realize that he had been looted after death either; his rifle was missing, as were all the spare magazines from his pouches.

“Shit.” Trisha’s muttered curse summed up the situation cleanly.

Now we had up to eight rifles with one hundred fifty rounds of Rc ammunition each floating around the warehouse, very likely in the hands of whatever group had offed their owners. There was no best case scenario for this and at ranges this close, it wouldn’t matter if they could barely shoot straight.

Frank grunted agreement and thumbed his safety off with a metallic clunk.

When we set off again, I had moved up to take point alongside Elise and Monica was covering the rear with Robert. It didn’t take long to find more bodies; a stairwell entrance had a dead ghoul and spent brass at the base, and bloody drips leading up to a carpeted second floor. Following the crimson breadcrumbs led us to two more MGA bodies.

One was barely recognizable, ripped up by what looked like a healthy-size set of tentacles from a hydraulic type and making a large puddle in the middle of a hallway. The other was missing a leg below the knee and had been forced halfway through a wall hard enough to split the wood stud. I made a note of the construction materials—useful, if I would need to breach a wall.

From there, Trisha’s nose led us to a long trickle of drying blood, and from there to a ruined office. There were three dead ghouls, a carpet of casings and a corpse with two rifles and a deathly grin. That left four MGA mooks unaccounted for.

“Looks like everything fell apart pretty quick.” Monica flipped over one of the dead ghouls with a foot, probably sizing up the body as a later snack.

“Mh.” Trisha looked up from checking over the sole human body in the room. “Guy downstairs was probably trying to get out.”

From my position watching the door, I listened in. Now that she says it, that makes a lot of sense.

“Seems pretty likely they went four-and-four.” Elise, watching the door with me, muttered her assessment. “Split up between the offices and the warehouse floor, got wiped.”

All six of us had squeezed into the office, which in itself was no great feat, but it kept us out of the hall. Which was why when somebody with a gun half-ran through the doorway, everybody was surprised.

He made it two steps over the threshold, a look of confusion reaching his face before I shot him on accident. Well, not truly on accident; I had meant to shoot him with Rc buck, but I didn’t have enough time to swap which tube I was feeding shells from. Still, if a slug of wax and powdered steel wasn’t enough to kill, then the three shots Elise followed up with were. He dropped like a rock, and Elise put a fourth through his head just to make certain.

It was only then I and the rest of the room noticed the MGA rifle in his hands and that the breaching slug hadn’t broken skin.

Trisha immediately rattled through a list of four-letter words before barking orders.

“Monica-Allen-Frank; get clearing the warehouse. Elise-Frank; on me to clear the offices. Go!”

We cleared the doorway and split up, Elise and her kagune shield leading Trisha’s group, and a suddenly-eager Monica leading mine. She lead us back downstairs, following signs to a metal door with a tiny window.

“This is it.” She said, giving the aperture the quickest of checks before delivering a kick that buckled the whole door.

“Damn it.” Regarding her failed attempt, she waved me forward. “Allen. Blow it.”

I sized up the job: steel door, steel frame, hinges on the opposite side of the wall and a keycard reader for the lock. Breaching shot wouldn’t be enough to knock the hinges out, and any slower method would carry the risk of letting somebody else set up an ambush for us. That said, for all security on the door itself, the walls were still just drywall and wood. After all, burglars didn’t carry breaching charges, nor were they trained in setting them up in less than a minute.

As a ghoul, I could ignore the warnings on minimum safe distance and taking cover to avoid flying debris. I stepped four feet back and planted my feet. Using a charge for this was probably unnecessary and definitely overkill—but triggering the detonator and watching the door simultaneously have its hinges blown off and get launched into the warehouse was gratifying.

Monica dashed through the blasted doorway before I could blink the dust from my eyes, with Robert hot on her heels.

“I smell them!” Monica declared, her kagune unfurling into a vicious shape. “Rob, get up on the containers and cover us!”

Robert popped his kagune, bounding up to the top of the double-stacked shipping containers like Spiderman with a crystalline mane. I unslung my shotgun, following Monica toward the mazelike array and scanning the openings for movement. My head returned to fix on Monica in time to see a crystalline-type ghoul charge out from the containers and lunge. Monica grappled him, the entangled pair skidding across the floor and into the wall with a resounding crash.

As if on cue, four more ghouls with active kagunes emerged hot on the heels of the first. That moved the odds to five against three. Nudging aside the straps on my own vest, my own kagune unspooled, spikes of Rc growing into place. Something tugged at the corners of my mouth.

What good odds.

Chapter End Notes

And hello again dear readers! I survived the polar vortex un-frostbitten and mostly intact. This flashback to Allen's time in the BGA will be short, but not the last we see of it. It's been indeed a while since we've seen Allen's five teammates, all the way back in chapters 57-60, and they are indeed fun to write; so we may very well see them again as we look into Allen's past.
As always, my inbox is open to take questions, read reviews, or hear your thoughts on the direction I'm taking. Happy reading!
Planting my feet, I pumped a shell into the chamber and picked a target. Two lumbering calcifying and two somewhat more agile hydraulic. I started with the quicker of the latter, firing a shot that took the closest one high in the thigh. This time I hit with Rc buck, the shot making a good attempt at taking the leg off at the hip. My hand worked the pump again, sending a second shot into the gut of the other hydraulic.

A small part of me wondered why Robert hadn’t opened up from his vantage point, but I didn’t dare look away to check.

My third shot hit the closer of the calcifying types, but due to him being the last target, he had time to get a defensive posture up and I only managed to crack his kagune. Not having time to make a fourth shot, I heaved the shotgun at the closest ghoul, gut-shot, who proceeded to try and catch it on instinct, failed, and was subsequently knocked to the ground by the impact.

Beyond all four of them, I saw the crystalline type fly back across from where he and Monica had ended up and hit a container hard enough to leave a human-sized dent. But that wasn’t important. There were only five important things to keep track of: the four ghouls—I dropped my hand to my hip—and my quinque.

The device hummed in my hand as it unfurled, but I was already using it to sweep the legs of gut-shot. At the same time, I snapped off an Rc spike at the cracked calcifier—it only glanced off a curve on his shield, but it was enough to keep him off balance. Dancing around a now-sprawling gut-shot, I swung around the business end of my spear to where the one I had shot in the thigh was up on his hands and knees in a puddle of blood. One wickedly fast upward swing and his head went flying.

Current numbers; four on one.

I used the blunt end of the quinque to stop the cracked calcifying type, using his momentum and my body weight to hammer it into his shieldlike appendage with a glassy crack of failing Rc. Not pressing the attack as he staggered back, a second and then third spike of Rc was directed at gut-shot, forcing him to turn a charge into a diving dodge that left him with a spike halfway through his calf. That left me with enough of an opening to block the downward swing from the uninjured calcifying type with the haft. I stomped on his foot, and when he recoiled back, spun the quinque in my hand and took his right leg at the knee. Behind me, somebody roared in rage, leaving me with barely enough time to dodge.

It was the hydraulic who made the swipe, tentacles whipping by close enough to nudge me with the wind in their wake. Had he struck horizontally rather than thrusting, I would’ve been hit, but between the mass of his kagune and the injury to his leg, he ended up leaving himself open to two more Rc spikes, one through the chest and another through the neck.

Current numbers; three on one.

The cracked calcifying type made a much more cautious charge, raising his kagune like a shield to cover his torso and most of his face. Rc spike number six went through his thigh dead center with a crunch of bone, dropping him in his tracks. Being flat on a concrete floor made for a poor defense
against a spear through the skull.

Gut-shot regained his footing, took one step toward me before reconsidering and turning to make a retreat—a fatally slow retreat. He made it two steps before I caught up and sunk my quinque between his shoulder blades, right up to the lugs on the spearhead.

Current numbers; one on one.

As I turned back to the one-legged ghoul, Robert finally did something and finished off the one-legged ghoul with a spray of Rc spikes from his own kagune.

“Ho-ly fuck.” Taking a knee, Robert surveyed me from his vantage point. “I hope there are cameras in here because Frank is never gonna believe you pulled off that shit.”

Before I could mention that it would’ve been nice to have a bit of help from my teammate with the high ground, there was a sound of pure happiness from Monica. She rushed up, pinned me in a blood-soaked hug and proceeded to hoist me off the ground and spin me around like I was a long-lost sibling. According to my doctor, I kind of was, now that I had received a kagune from her. Ignoring my squirming protests and still smiling like a loon, Monica set me down and pinned my face between two blood-slick hands before planting an entirely unexpected kiss right on my mouth.

Releasing me, she skipped away with her familiar lilting laugh.

“What has gotten into her?” Robert’s question was directed at nobody in particular as he dropped back down to ground level. “At least she went for you.”

“I have absolutely no idea.” I contorted my face, trying to ignore that the taste of blood in my mouth was neither hers nor mine.

Spooling my kagune back, I heard Robert fiddling with his headset.

“Trisha’s asking for us.”

Both of us were now watching Monica skip about the carnage, splashing the steadily-growing puddles and leaving blood-brown bootprints everywhere.

“Ah.” I pulled my headset back into place from where it had slipped during the fight. “Yeah? What is it, Trish?”

“You three are going to want to smell this. We’re in the back of the warehouse, by the loading bays.”

Finding Trisha and the others was a matter of walking between the shipping containers and warehouse walls—difficult in that we apparently took the long route around. Monica had retrieved the severed leg from the one ghoul in addition to her dropped rifle, and had munched it almost to the bone by the time frank waved to us from his leisurely lean against a shipping container.

Trisha regarded Monica’s snack with resigned sigh—she had tried and failed to keep Monica from eating on the job since I had joined the team—before querying our well-being.

“Everything smooth on your end?”

“Five ghouls,” Robert shrugged, not to bringing up my irritation, “no issues.”

“Just ghouls?”
“Yeh.”

“Had a couple humans on our side.” Elise explained, dropping from her vantage point on a container stack. “Fighting *alongside* the ghouls.”

That was borderline unheard of for me, apart from old stories the BGA had taught me about the resistance in world war two France.

“Yep, that’s strange enough to warrant us taking this from the MGA.” Trisha nodded, noting the surprised looks, then jerked her head toward a sky-blue shipping container. “But that there is what we’re more interested in right now.”

“A refrigerated shipping container?” I asked, giving the object a confused stare.

As if in response, there was a rattle from the box as its cooling unit cycled on.

“You probably can’t smell it, but that thing reeks of old blood.” Elise nudged me toward the door. “Try to get a whiff before you open it, get some practice using your nose.”

Obediently, I took a sniff by the front and then a couple more near the edges of the door. There actually was something there, faintly.

“It’s…” I paused, trying to find a good adjective, “earthy and a bit…salty?”

“There you go.” Elise gave me an approving nod. “Older stuff tends to get a bit of an acidic tang as well.”

Opening the container itself wasn’t looking obvious either; the only way to the lock was via a metal box welded to the container that only allowed access from the bottom. Presumably to protect the lock from people who’d otherwise break the lock easily—but then, locks weren’t designed to handle small explosive charges.

*Somewhere,* I reflected, cannibalizing an entry charge to make one small enough to fit inside the metal box, *there’s probably a key on one of the dead guys.*

My next thought was that none of us wanted to spend time searching bodies. Well, I knew I certainly didn’t.

Almost fully set up, I almost stepped on Robert as I unspooled an arm’s length of wire.

“Hi Al. Do you, uh, think I could…y’know…” With a nervous grin, he pantomimed squeezing a detonator.

“Ah, sure.”

Plugging in the wire, I passed it to Robert, who handled it as if it would rear up and try to bite his fingers off. More amusing was his posture; holding the detonator so as to put as much distance between himself and the blast as possible, standing sideways and covering his junk with his hand.

The blast itself bounced off the ground and was more like being kicked in the shins by a toddler than a proper impact. For his part, Robert tossed me the detonator while dancing backward to massage his legs. Sticking my hand up into the box that had done its best to protect the lock, it was quickly clear that it was gone.

“We’re in.” I nodded, slightly disappointed that I wouldn’t be needing a second charge.
Elise helped me out with disengaging the locking bars as the remaining four in our group covered the door. The two of us pulled the doors open on Trisha’s mark, making sure to not be in the line of sight through the door. As a result, we only ended up hearing the reactions of the others: a low whistle, a grunt, a curse.

“Well, we found the last four MGA guys.”

I poked my head around the door, my curiosity piqued.

The refrigerated container had been turned into a pantry-slash-butcher shop, complete with clotted puddles on the floor. Bodies in various states of undress and damage had been hung from the ceiling by their ankles along the sides of the box and a makeshift butcher block had been set up at the far end. The now accounted-for MGA corpses had been hung up right in the front, still in uniform. With the doors open, the scent of old blood was now amplified to the point of being nearly all I could smell. As Trisha dug in her leg pack, Elise leaned in, making a count.

“Twenty five bodies. These can’t have all come from around here; we would’ve noticed the missing person reports.”

“Yes.” Trisha hefted a handheld camera and fiddled with her radio. “Base, Robalson; you seeing this shit?”

“Tac Squad, I’m seeing it.” Robalson's voice crackled and snapped in my ear, forcing me to drop my radio's voice down a few notches. “Not pretty, but I'm seeing it. Any sign of the MGA team that went missing?”

“Four bodies up in the offices.” Trisha confirmed. “Other four are the ones closest to the front in here.”

“Day just keeps getting better and better. Any providence on the bodies?”

“Can’t be from around here, that’s certain.” Frank repeated Elise's observation, earning him a frosty glare from her. “That said, containers like this have to be transported by truck right? Might be a paper trail we can follow.”

“One other thing,” not about to be edged out, Elise cut in before Robalson could reply, “We had humans alongside the ghouls here. Not hostages either; bunch of wannabes with guns.”

There wasn’t any reply from Robalson, leaving the six of us standing around the open container of corpses. Could’ve been weirder; nothing was on fire, at least. Monica, clearly irritated, leaned back on a container with a deep roll of her eyes, but it was Trisha who broke the silence.

“…We still connected, Rob?”

“Yeah, just getting set up on my end. I want you all to sit tight for the next half hour or so until the forensics team gets on site.” The background noise was hazy, but I could make out voices—a lot of voices—and small tree of rustling papers. “We’re going to flex some regulatory muscle and pull this case from the MGA.”

“You want us to get anything set up before forensics shows?”

That was Trisha, always angling to find something to do.

“Beyond making sure the MGA doesn’t try to pull anything, no. This is something I want you to leave to the pros in forensics. Just make sure Monica doesn't eat the evidence.”
“Confirmed.” Trisha locked in a withering glare at a suddenly-innocent Monica. “We’ll head out when forensics shows up.”

Pulling jurisdiction from the MGA, a full forensics team and a shipping container full of bodies. It sounded like the setup to a particularly morbid joke or an urban legend, but the reality was that this was possibly a lot deeper than it looked. Whatever this all was, it was enough to settle the bet between Frank and Robert, as the former passed the latter a folded bill.

Monica left her spot and sauntered over to where Elise and I had remained after pushing the container doors shut.

“Maybe this’ll be finally be something big.” Dropping her elbow on my shoulder, I could smell the blood on her breath. “Been long enough since there was anything that turned out this interesting.”

“Hopefully.” Elise shrugged. “Last time something we had a big op was back...what, a year before Allen joined us?”

“That was Tennessee, right? With the vigilantes?”

“Vigilantes?” I echoed, feeling lost.

“Yah. Some idiots decided that they could do a better job than the MGAs and us at killing ghouls by just jumping sketchy-looking folks.” Rolling her eyes at the idiocy of the situation, Elise continued. “The whole thing kinda exploded when they beat the hell out of some moonshiner and reopened like six backcountry feuds.”

“So why’d we get involved then?” It didn’t sound like anything we’d get involved in.

“We didn’t at first,” Monica explained with a grin, “we were out until the hill folk started hiring ghouls to do the dirty work, at which point the whole party really started, ’cause the ghouls brought their own feuds to the game.”

“Oh.”

“Happy days. The fighting was magnifique.”

“We’d be driving through back roads between the big towns, trying to avoid getting shot at by trigger-happy hillbillies.” Elise even seemed nostalgic about the whole thing as she pantomimed driving. “Pretty fun, actually. But yeah, that was the last big thing we had. I can show you some pictures when we get back.”

After that, the only ones who spent much time talking were Robert and Frank. Granted, we weren’t the most talkative bunch to begin with, and being geared up kind of put a damper on socializing for all of us minus those two. Not to mention that I now had a big something to think about.

Tennessee sounded like it was bigger than Elise and Monica had explained, what with them having to drive between different towns. Between the whole vigilante group and the ‘backcountry feuds’ thing, they could’ve been pulling my leg, though that was more of Robert’s specialty than anybody else. So, they probably were telling the truth. But then—I looked back at the container just to confirm that it was still a thing, whatever this was turning out to be could well be the same deal. For all we knew right now, everybody in there came from a different suburb of Chicago. Probably not. In the end, I could think whatever I wanted—forensics would get the final word when they finished their work.

That said, we didn’t really stick around to see them work; they pulled up, declined any assistance
from us on the grounds that they would be going through the whole building with a fine toothed comb, and started unpacking their gear in the tiny lobby. We left the same way we had came, this time weaving around techs and parked vans on our way back to our own van. Forensic teams had already swarmed the trio of SUVs that the dead MGA guys had left out front, and everybody was too busy to give us a second look. Even I didn't get much attention despite being soaked with blood and sticky-sweet Rc.

Chapter End Notes

This all started out as a slightly longer chapter than normal for the simple reason that a lot that needed to be said. Then, I realized that it had ballooned to more than twice my usual length, so I needed to take a dramatic step in editing. What this all means for you is that there will be another chapter following this one as I finish polishing and planting leads. I can also promise that this will not be the last time we spend time with Allen's surrogate family.

As always, if I've left anything unclear, or if you have a query, I'll be on hand to answer it.

I'll see you all sooner than you think.
Family time

Our own ride back was quiet and sticky; most of us had been splashed with blood to some degree, though for the first time in memory I was the one with the most soaked into my uniform.

“Paperwork and then roof?” At a red light, Frank twisted in his seat to scan us all with an inquisitive look. “Been a while since we’ve spent some quality time.”

We met the proposal with a chorus of assent; it had been more than a week since we had gone up to the roof. The prospect was enough to make me a little motivated to dig into paperwork. Before we could do that though, we had to park, drop off our gear at the armory and clean ourselves up.

“Another day, another dent, eh Allen?” Running the pad of his thumb over the sizable new dent in the stock of my shotgun, the armorer shot me a wry look. “When you eventually take out the AA-12 you’ll have to remember not to chuck it like a baseball, ‘cause I won’t be able to fix that overnight.”

“When the day comes, I’ll do my best.” I replied with a grin, unslinging my partially depleted breaching kit onto the counter. “I’ll have to be down tomorrow to make a couple new charges, so you’ll be able to chew me out properly then. In the meantime, I can tell you that you won’t need to take a hose to Monica’s SMG this time.”

“Thank god.”

Next stop, locker rooms and showers.

Frank watched me march into the showers in full gear from his locker.

“That bad, huh?”

“I feel like the sleeves are glued to my arms.” I opened the valve and proceeded to drench myself from two different shower heads. “Looks like you got off pretty light.”

“Just a couple spatters. The uniform is going to need a day at the tailor’s though. Just don’t tell my wife.”

Pulling off the overshirt, Frank held it so I could see the light through a quartet of holes: somebody had attempted to give him acute lead poisoning. I responded with the appropriate ‘well damn’ expression. Emerging from the other side of the row of lockers was Robert, already stripped down to just a towel and a mesh bag with his shower stuff.

“Why are you showering though?” I asked. “You didn’t even get your hands dirty back there.”

“It’s called ‘having personal hygiene’.” Robert shot back. “You spent three years in the armpits of the world, but it’s something the rest of us do.”

“Apparently that also means letting Monica do the messy work too, eh?” Chuckling, Frank draped the last bits of his field gear over the top of his locker. “Monica loves her fieldwork and if Allen or little Frank tries to get between her and it, she’ll chuck you into the lake.”

“You called it.” I agreed, remembering that she actually had thrown me into the lake.

Stepping out of the rust-colored puddle my showering had created, I began stripping off my own
soggy gear on my way to my locker.

“Not today though.” An accusing finger was directed at me from the showers. “Monica got one, sure, but Allen snagged four.”

“Oh hey! ‘Grats on stepping out from Monica's shadow.” Opening the faucet, Frank started his own shower. “Wish we had that kind of action on our end, but all we had was a handful of humans and trio of featherweight ghouls.”

Almost undressed and unwilling to destroy a shirt, I had to resort to an embarrassing wriggle to get myself free. Frank might've had it easier back at the warehouse, but it there was less paperwork for a dead human than for a dead ghoul, even before the paperwork for the explosives. Pulling my own shower bag from its locker hook, I noted that I'd have to shower quickly to make it up to the roof before dark. Resigned to my short-term future, I turned the water back on over the rusty puddle.

God I wish could just put it all through the shredder and call it a day.

No such luck; almost all the paperwork was electronic. The sneaking temptation to frisbee my monitor across the office had crossed my mind more than once by the time I could hit 'submit document' for the final time and make for the stairwell. I wanted to spend time with my team—my family—not lurk behind my desk.

Technically, the roof was supposed to be off limits. In theory, the door to the rooftop was supposed to be locked unless there was some kind of maintenance going on. Probably, we were breaking some kind of rule by being up there. I had brought up those three points when I had been brought up there for the first time, and in turn I had basically been told 'nobody really cares so long as we close the door when we leave’. The feeling of being somewhere I wasn't supposed to be had lasted for a while until I realized that the other people in the office were more concerned with me being a ghoul than where I spent time after my shift.

The view never failed to be amazing, even on that first nervous day to when I pushed the door open into the evening breeze. From the vantage point on the gravel-coated rooftop, the steel and glass of the city seemed to tower over my head as it twisted the afternoon sun across its facets. Come nightfall, the buildings would be painted with the light from street level. What never changed was the constant wind sliding off the lake like a silk sheet.

Unsurprisingly, I was the last one to step out into the afternoon breeze.

“Looks like even Rob beat me this time.” I dryly remarked, watching Frank retrieve the cooler from under an air conditioner.

“Well, he had to beat you at something since you’ve been winning your bouts against him, mister half-and-half.” Elise gave me a mock punch in the shoulder. “I’m just glad it isn’t too windy today.”

“Hey! I heard that, you know.” From his perch on another air conditioner, Robert’s glower made him look a bit like a horse.

“Then you should try harder, Robbie.” A pair of arms settled on my shoulders as Monica’s voice felt as if it was coming from directly behind my head. “Frank, what’ve we got left?”

“We’re about fifty-fifty on the Reyka,” Frank set out the pair of bottles on a duct, “and about four shots left for the ever popular Smirnoff.”

Robert made the first move on the alcohol, dismounting from his perch.
“I’ll take the Reyka!”

Frank only shook his head and tossed our youngest member his cup. None of us really had proper shot glasses or tumblers for this; Trisha and Frank both had repurposed coffee mugs, though his fittingly had ‘Number One Dad’ marked on it. Monica had a strange copper cup thing and had gifted me one to match—and I was sure we kept switching them every time we drank. Elise had somehow gotten her hands on a graduated cylinder from the forensics lab and Robert had a mason jar from somewhere that I privately dreaded the prospect of him filling it to the brim.

Drinks poured, we gathered around in a circle as the lake breeze tugged at our clothes.

“To our miles walked and fights won,” Trisha raised her glass as she made the toast, “may our futures hold many more of both. To us.”

“To us!”

The five of us replied with enough enthusiasm to make up for Trisha’s solemn tone as we touched our cups together.

“You did me proud today!” I could see the glow on Monica’s face as she bounced her cup into mine with enough enthusiasm to risk a dent.

“Yeah,” I did my best to hide that I was still irritated about Robert not helping out, “that was definitely…unexpected.”

Before I could actually say anything else about the whole experience, Monica wrapped me in a hug tight enough that my ribs creaked.

“I’m just so proud of you!” She set me back down, looking all the world like a happy shark. “It feels like only yesterday you were still clumsy and couldn’t even pop your kagune without flinching.”

“...Ah, yeah.” I wasn’t about to tell her that I still had my clumsy moments. “I gotta ask Elise more about Tennesee.”

“No time like the present. It was such a fun time for me, but I’m not a very good storyteller and I’ve probably forgotten some of it over the years.”

And just like that, Monica was off and happily humming something under her breath. If I hadn’t known her before seeing her like this I would’ve called her an airhead. This was still better than her being her usual touchy-feely self around me.

“Guess you must’ve really done her proud dealing with those ghouls.” Elise noted as I walked over.

“Guess so. I was wondering more about Tennesee though. How big was it?”

“Well in terms of ground, it was like two counties, but the fun stuff was just in five or six good size towns and a couple of rural estates.

I was still unconvinced. “That still doesn’t sound too big. How many ghouls were involved?”

“Well, the towns supported something like three hundred each, not counting the transient ones, and we ended up confirming something like...” Elise waved over to where Trisha and Frank were engrossed with something on a cell phone. “Yo Trish, how many kills did we confirm in Tennessee?”
“For ghouls?” Neither she nor Frank spared us a look. “We got something like one twenty and they offed about fifty on their vendettas.”

That was a lot of bodies.

“That was over a week and a half of action though, and it wasn’t all us; the Tennessee BGA was there as well and naturally the MGA swarmed the area like flies. Buttload of state police too, trying to get the feuds calmed down with the humans. Monica loved it, since she got to be a total glutton.”

_Not a surprise there._ “Why were so many ghouls involved?”

“Grudges. All the ghoul families get really insular the further south you go, so all the bad blood just festers. I spent a year down in New Orleans as a trainee, and they had fights over stuff that went down in the fucking sixties.”

“So it was just a big mess.”

“Huuuuge fucking mess.” Elise motioned a circle with her lab equipment. “Ghouls settling debts in broad daylight, the Tennessee BGA was all jumpy around the MGAs, not to mention the feuding families being trigger happy on anything that wasn’t one of them. Monica took a bullet to the tit when we were driving between towns, and Trish and I had to pin her until she calmed down enough to not burn down the forest.”

“I...” A memory of Monica tossing me like a toy on the training mats flashed before my eyes. “I can actually see that. So how’d it end up?”

“Between their own infighting and us with the Tennessee squad taking out anybody we found fighting—about two weeks. After that, the state office was able to talk some sense into both sides and get them to settle down. We even got to hang out with their Tac Squad for a couple of days before we headed back.”

_Monica was definitely disappointed about it ending._

Undaunted by my thought, Elise proceeded to weave a narrative into a drinking adventure with the Tennessee BGA. Like the adventures we had here, it started out pretty much the moment everybody punched out for the night.

Robert watched Allen meander over to Elise as if he was lost, probably to ask about Tennessee. As to why, he had no idea; the event was ancient history by now, and history was one of those things human snobs loved. Allen was no full ghoul, but even after almost three years working with coffee and cream, Robert was consistently irritated by his more human habits on a daily basis. Today, that was his curiosity about the past. Robert could consider that a positive problem today, as it moved Allen away from Monica’s immediate proximity.

Worrying about the past might’ve been very much a human thing to him, but Robert also had a worrying question about what had gone on today. Something that would very possibly have an impact on his future was certainly worth digging into the past.

A quick glance over toward Elise and Allen confirmed that she had him good and distracted, Trisha and Frank had their backs to everybody else as they discussed family matters. This was something where confronting Monica in front of, well, anyone. A second check confirmed that the others were still distracted before he hopped down from his perch. The last part, approaching her, was probably the hardest part.
“Hey...uh...Monica?” Her head snapped around; a wolf regarding rabbit.

“Yes?”

Robert found the speed of her response unsettling; pretty or not, he knew that she was a cannibal—a fact reinforced after watching her eat a ghoul leg at the warehouse. Neither factor was a help to his train of thought. If only she was a normal ghoul, she’d be drawing a line of suitors around the building. He pushed ahead; getting an answer was worth being intimidated.

“Why did you signal me to not help Allen? I-I know he didn’t really need help,” he quickly amended, seeing Monica’s eyes narrow, “but we’re supposed to be fighting as a team, you know? And I just didn’t want him to stay irritated at me because of you…”

Fingertip brushing across her lower lip, the cannibal regarded Robert for an uncomfortable five seconds before making an answer.

“What do you think Allen’s biggest weakness is?”

“Like in general? He never eats enough, for one.”

“That’s one, but what about in a fight?”

“Uh. He doesn’t use his hand-to-hand enough when he has his quinque or kagune out?”

“True.” The twist of a grin on Monica’s face wilted before it reached her eyes. “But that’s not his biggest fault: he’s soft in his fights.”

Despite mostly tolerating Allen, Robert had spent enough time on the sparring mats with the halfblood to be certain he wasn’t soft in any measure. Nobody walked away from even the light bouts without welts and Allen usually gave as good as he got, having unusual stamina for a crystalline type. Saying that he wasn’t hardened enough didn’t sound right. The thought must’ve been plain on his face, because Monica’s head tilted again.

“Think about it, Robbie; every time he gets into a fight in the field, he spouts his silly ‘I’ll give you a chance to back off’ spiel—that’s him saying ‘I’m not interested in the kill’—cardinal weakness. We aren't called in because the situation can be fixed with pretty words and a negotiator.”

“O-kay.” That latter part made sense to Robert, at least. “So you didn't think he had killer in him?”

“I knew he could kill. After all, he's had me inside him for the past five years.” How Allen regarded Monica's smiles as anything more than shark-like was well beyond Robert's ken. “I wanted to test if he could be a little more like me.”

“And he passed.” Robert was fairly certain that Allen had done more than just pass her test. “So what now?”

“Allen's always been good at giving me ideas, even if he doesn't know it.” She leaned in close enough that Robert could smell the alcohol in her copper cup. Scary close. “After today, I think that I could change him a bit more to my liking.”

“Like making him a better fighter or...?” Or do you mean cannibal, or hunting partner, or...that other kind of partner? Ew, no. He did his best to quash the third option before he could fully visualize it, but there was enough circumstantial acts on Monica's end to make that option seem squeamishly possible.
“A predator.” The knowing smile crept up to her eyes like rot across a corpse. “Hopefully much more.”
Apologies

It was hard to tell which woke me up; the sun through the window or last night’s beating.

Nishio and Kimi had waved off Kaneki’s offer of help and opted to hobble off into the night without looking back. That left Kaneki and I—Touka had vanished—to limp back to the coffee shop and patch ourselves up. Asking him if he had managed to calm down his angry friend didn’t get me much in the way of answers, but at least he admitted that they did at least share a few words.

Once again on this trip-turned-exile, I had ruined a shirt, leaving the punctured and blood-damp clothing hanging in the bathroom. I could at least be relieved that I hadn’t been bleeding to the point where I needed to sleep in the bathroom again. My arm on the other hand, had yellow-green bruises on every joint below the shoulder, and a vague grinding feeling in my discolored elbow.

Sitting up but not really awake, I wrapped myself in the blanket and resisted the urge to yawn and stretch. Painful the lesson was, I had learned from my night in the bathtub just how unpleasant stretching with a torn up torso felt. At least it didn’t hurt to sigh. Yesterday I had woken up in a familiar bed with a familiar face, today I had woken up in a stranger’s bed, and I had no idea where I’d be sleeping after tomorrow night.

The only certainty of the future is its uncertainty. One didn’t have to be a philosopher to agree with that.

There was a knock. “Good morning, Mr. Grissom.”

My gaze snapped up from my feet to fix on the door.

“Sir! I mean, Mr. Yoshimura.” My eyes fell on the remains of my shirt in his hand. “Sorry, I seem to have ended up—”

He cut me off with a gentle shake of his head. “Kaneki gave me an abridged version of last night’s events when he arrived this morning.”

I braced, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Thank you.”

What? “Pardon?”

“In a situation like that, it would be anticipated that one in your position would’ve remained on the sidelines, so to speak. If you had, I would guess it would’ve turned out much less favorably than it had, and Mr. Nishio would not be asking for my assistance. This may be a paltry thanks, but I can replace your shirt.” He paused, a wry smile crossing his mouth “I would’ve had it washed, but alas, I’ve yet to find a soap that can remove holes.”

He passed me a white button-up, saving me a lot of time that would’ve been spent figuring out what do about my wardrobe.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You are most welcome. Ah,” Pausing in the doorway on his way out, the old ghoul spared me a sideways glance, “I probably don’t need to remind you of this, but please use the back door when
you make your excursions today.”

Once his footsteps faded, the knot in the base of my stomach quietly untangled. I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to feel at ease around him, not that it would be much of a factor past tomorrow, when I would be out of the coffee shop and truly on my own.

Well, in theory. I definitely wouldn’t be staying around the place, both because I was thinking of getting out of the city for a few weeks and also because being around would mean I could be seen as encroaching on the territory. On the other hand, Kaneki was here and wanting to get to know him better was getting dangerously close to overriding my wish to put my safety above all else. What my next step would be pushed back though, since I still had to get the gear to actually be able to do that.

Pocketing my list, I managed to make it out the back door without being noticed, though I did hear movement from one of the other rooms on the upper floor. My unnoticed exit was probably aided by the sounds of the crowded café. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk to anybody at the shop before I headed out on my supply run, more that I had no idea how I’d go about interacting with anyone besides the manager. Hell, I didn’t even know where to start with Kaneki; ‘hi, we both smell delicious to other ghouls and miss eating vegetables’ was too strange to do anything but think about.

I made conscious effort to not use my map as much as I could when walking between stores so I could look less like a tourist. Or at least look less conspicuous. On the bright side, finding the stuff on my list was more time consuming than difficult; the first aid kit and backpack being the fastest. Close behind that was duct tape to finish the medical kit and a multitool, though it took a couple tries to find a hardware store that wasn’t more about paint than tools. Hardest was clothing, not that it was difficult to find a clothing shop, but more that my fashion sense was somewhat…stunted. I had gone from the military, where the uniform was everything, to the BGA, where my dress swapped between semi-formal and tactical on a regular basis. In the end, I walked out with two shirts, a hoodie, and a sense of gratitude that I didn’t have to find a new set of jeans.

Also on the bright side, I could be grateful that my card hadn’t been declined anywhere at least. Robert had helped me open up an account through an Australian bank under the name Nemo Naught. Alliteration aside, it was the one thing I could thank him for in my current situation, because my American card had been declined when I had attempted to use it on that night when I had gone out for coffee.

Those first nights felt like it had happened years ago. Everything had felt subtly surreal then, with me being a fish out of water. Now though, even after the insanity of the past couple days, everything somehow felt more or less normal.

Making my way back with my shopping, I hoped I would look inconspicuous enough to not warrant a second glance. Hopefully with the backpack and hoodie I’d be able to pass as a student or backpacking tourist. Catching a glimpse of my reflection on the window of a passing bus, I had a sudden realization of one item I should’ve added to my list.

_Dammit, I should’ve picked up a pair of sunglasses._ Something to grab on another trip.

Going off of the noise wafting in from the front of the shop when I came back through the rear door, the shop was doing well. Then again, it was a coffee shop ran by ghouls—I wouldn’t be surprised if they had the best coffee in the ward. That would be an assessment I’d leave to people who could stomach the stuff though, since it all just smelled and tasted burnt to me.

_Frank would’ve liked this place. _I realized, unbidden. _He said he liked the feel of smaller cafes._
Not that he’d have the chance to try this one.

Trying to shake thoughts of home out of my head, I almost bumped into the guy from last night at the top of the stairs. I muttered an apology, my mind on the other side of the world, but he only shook his head.

“I don’t think we’ve properly introduced ourselves.” He held out his hand. “Nishio Nishiki. And… well, thank you for last night.”

“Allen Grissom.” I accepted the handshake. “Good to see you looking better after last night.”

“Al-len.” He let the syllables of my name loop lazily over his tongue. “You really are an American, huh.”

“Well, I do stick out.” Definitely should’ve gotten the sunglasses.

“But that much, but the handshake clinched it.” Nisho shrugged, as if it was elementary. “Anyway.”

And then he was headed off down the stairs, before I could realize I wanted to ask him what he was doing here or how Kimi was holding up. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, Touka emerged from the living room and fixed me with her general-purpose glare.

“If it isn’t the man himself.” She cocked her thumb toward the door she had just emerged from. “The manager’s looking to speak with you. Don’t keep him waiting.”

“All right.” Different day, slightly less acidic tone. Progress, at least. “I’ll drop this stuff in the other room and head over.”

I noted that she was in her work uniform as she huffed past, leaving me to wonder what was important enough to pull her away from the café. The who of that question was obvious—the manager—but the ‘why’ was a total unknown, despite it running the whole range from asking me to detail last night and up to telling me not to come back after tomorrow. Well, waiting around wouldn’t do anything to ease the nervous knot of not knowing forming in my gut.

“Hello?” I stuck my head through the doorway, not wanting to intrude if Touka was only messing with me.

“Ah, Allen, please come in. I wasn’t sure how long your excursion would last for, so I took some time with Mr. Nishio.”

“I can come back if you need me to s-” I checked myself before I could say sir yet again, “Mr Yoshimura.”

“No need,” he said, gesturing me to take a seat, “what I wished to discuss with you stems from my meeting with him.”

Relieved, the knot in my stomach unraveled. Well, that didn’t sound too bad.

“I was wondering if you could provide your impression of Mr Nishiki.”

“Ah, well. I didn’t really have the chance to sit down and talk with him, so I don’t have much beyond a few first impressions. Stubborn, perceptive, maybe a bit of a hothead.” The mental image of Tsukiyama trying to kick in his ribs surfaced in my head. “Tough as nails, at least where that lady Kimi is involved.”
“I see. And what of his relationship with Kimi?”

“What of it?”

“Your opinion of it. Touka brought up that you referenced her as the ‘objective’ when refusing to kill her.”

Well, that was a pointed question. “I don’t really have one, professional opinion aside. It’s really not my business who’s in a relationship with whom, but I wouldn’t kill her just because she’s a human. If the CCG taught me anything, she’s probably as much at risk of being hunted down by them as we are at this point.”

“That is unfortunately true,” Yoshimura nodded, a shadow briefly crossing his face, “humans who knowingly become involved with ghouls assume many of the risks we live with. As you mentioned it, I don’t suppose I could hear your opinion of their relationship as one involved in ghoul control?”

“Professionally, I’d want to help her. Well, her and Nishio. Back home, the BGA wanted to find a somewhat peaceful solution for both sides, and those two being a pair...” Shifting, I was suddenly aware of how poorly my next words might go over. “…If they can show others that we can get along, I think they’re worth protecting.”

“You consider them a bridge between ghouls and humans, so to speak.” He laced his fingers over his lap, giving me a curious look. “And you would do it for that reason despite being in a completely different nation than your homeland?”

“It would be the right thing to do, sir.” Forgetting myself for a moment, I glanced down at my knees. “At least, it’s what I’d like to do.” And after all the wrong I’ve been involved in, I’d need to do a lot more than that to make up for it.

Yoshimura made no reply but for a small nod of approval.

“I was also wondering if I had your leave to come back and visit.” I did me level best to not look anxious, but by voice probably betrayed me. “I know with me being hunted by the CCG you’re well within your right to say no, but…I’d like to get to know Kaneki.”

“Allen.” It was incredible how grandfatherly he could sound. “We are all being hunted by the CCG, and your actions regarding Hinami and Mr Nishiki have proven you are distinct from the investigators you associated with. You are of course welcome to come back and visit.”

“Thank you,” I said, relieved, “if there’s anything else I can do, please let me know.”

With a quiet chuckle, Yoshimura stood and I followed suit after a moment of uncertainty.

“There shouldn’t be anything; you are our guest after all. But...there may be something.” Instead of heading to the doorway, he faced me head on. “Did you make any plans on what your moves will be after leaving?”

That was an odd way of following up saying I was your guest. Definitely a good reminder for me not to get comfortable.

“I...had a couple thoughts on where to go.” A couple of really vague thoughts, to be honest. “Still nothing concrete.”

“And your plans on food?”
That caught me off guard. Then I realized that I had been thinking like a human about this; food had to come first, shelter second. Having a safe place to stay meant nothing if I was rabid from hunger.

“There’s morgues I can raid.” Shrugging, I hid the fact that I was kicking myself across the room for my idiocy. “Or I can go out and find criminals.”

“Not hunting?”

“It’d probably be easier,” I shook my head, “but I’d like to make as little an impact as possible. No offense.”

Another possibility was to go out and find troublesome ghouls instead of people to eat, but that sounded creepy to even think. Also left unsaid was that I had only eaten meat off of a corpse only three times—I had subsisted on the H-rations since, well, since I became a ghoul. There was something about the slick texture of fresh meat that was just nausea fuel despite my mouth almost watering at the thought.

“You are a wholly fascinating person to talk with, if you’ll permit me the unusual complement.”

“Er.” I wasn’t sure how to respond to that, or if I had mistranslated the phrasing. “Thank you?”

From the now-open doorway came a muffled exclamation. I couldn’t make out the words between the distance and language barrier, but it was definitely an unhappy Touka.

“Oh, if you’ll excuse me, it seems I’ll need to go see what fuss Touka is raising with her new coworker.” A look of confusion must’ve been written across my face, because Yoshimura added on an explanation before he left: “Mr Nishiki will be starting work at the cafe tomorrow.”

Well, that explained why he had been visiting the manager, though the coffee shop had to have more than enough people to run it. Granted, I had no idea how many people it took to actually run a coffee shop, so I really shouldn’t have an opinion, but there was probably an upper limit on how many people one could cram into a building. Back in the hallway, I could hear the indistinct murmur of voices from the lower level, probably Yoshimura defusing whatever was going on between Touka and Nishio. Or I was just hearing the ambiance from the café.

Ignoring the urge to go downstairs—my curiosity had gotten me into enough trouble already—I meandered back to my borrowed room. Now that I had been reminded that I needed to plan as a ghoul rather than as a human, I had to rethink most of my former plan to work around food.

The typical human ate between three and five pounds of food per day and around ninety to one hundred and fifty pounds per month. A ghoul could consume anywhere from eighty to two hundred and ten pounds of human per month, depending on activity level. Most ghouls ate in the ninety to hundred and ten pound range, with the highest end of the scale being exclusive to binge eaters or anything above class four. Living at the lower end of the scale was more than doable.

My best bets for consistent food supply were morgues, retirement communities, and if I wasn’t going to be picky, high-crime neighborhoods. Flopping into the bed, I reflected that those ideas would really only work if I was lucky—and if I had learned anything since leaving Chicago, it was that I usually wasn’t. If I absolutely had to. Or I was tired enough that the easiest option was appealing.

I kneaded my eyes with the heel of my hand. Nothing was ever simple.
Collection

A knock at the door brought me back to reality. My eyes flicked open to a room much darker than it had been a moment ago. Glancing at the darkened window on my way to the door, I put two and two together to realize that I had probably ended up dozing off. Shouldn’t have been a surprise after last night, but I never liked it when a nap snuck up on me. Flicking on the light and opening up, I was hardly surprised to see the manager.

“Good evening s— Mr Yoshimura.” Once again, I stumbled over the reflexive ‘sir’. It was evening, right?

“Indeed. I apologize for intruding, but I was wondering if I could redeem your offer to lend a hand?”

“Always. What do you need me to do?”

“Just some outdoor work. Typically, Touka assists in collecting food with one of Anteiku’s associates, but she has been recently unable to due to her studies, and Kankei is still somewhat squeamish on the subject of his diet.”

“Doing, uh, what outdoors?” I paused, one arm halfway into my new hoodie.

“Not hunting.” Yoshimura assured me, “Similar to what you said you wished to do, I—and by extension Anteiku—also seek to have as little an impact on the humans we live among. In addition to assisting ghouls in need, of course. To that end, we also have alternate methods of obtaining food outside of hunting.”

That was enough to set my mind to churning as I followed the manager downstairs. He really had to be one of the morgue masters like from back home. Granted, he ran a coffee shop instead of an actual morgue, but that was probably what the associate did. I imagined that one could make off with a lot more of a body here than back home; cremation was the usual in Japan, and when all one had to provide to the relatives was a box of ash, one could take a lot more from a body than just the legs and organs.

Yoshimura led me into the café, to my surprise. The space was nearly empty, but for us and a man in a long coat and shock of silver hair long enough to cover his ears. I wasn’t sure if the look on his face was intentionally a glare until he spoke.

“So. You’re the one.” I wasn’t being glared at so much as studied.

“Allen Grissom, meet Renji Yomo.” Yoshimura gestured toward the man, “My associate assists in managing the café, collecting food and filling in wherever he is needed.”

He and I exchanged a short bow.

“Allen isn’t quite as squeamish as Kaneki,” continued the old ghoul, “so you should be able to get more done tonight working with him than you did with Kaneki.”

“You can follow instructions?” Renji’s face shifted to inquisitive.

“Yes.” I had been in the military, after all.

After that, he was silent until we were seated in his car, a dark and stereotypical nondescript sedan
parked at the end of the street from the café.

“After hearing which dove you brought down, I expected somebody closer to my age.”

He had to be referring to Mado—was ‘dove’ slang for ‘CCG investigator’? Not to mention that everybody seemed to expect me to be older than I actually was.

“Well, I’m twenty-three if that clears up anything.”

He only grunted, leaving me with no idea if it did or if it didn’t.

“So...” I wanted to ask where we were headed, but the words trailed off; I didn’t want to appear overly curious or raise suspicions.

I ended up being the suspicious one though, as Yomo took us along winding cliffside roads and finally off a main road and past a sign faded by the fresh-fallen darkness; something-something-forest-park. This was not the morgue I expected.

Without the streetlights from the main road, the only light was from the headlights and the half moon overhead. The parking lot we found ourselves in at the end of this detour had a single lamp to cast an island of light on the ground and eerie shadows on the trees huddled around the pavement. We were alone, save for a second car tucked into a corner space. Renji parked a space away from the lone occupant and climbed out.

Following his lead, I watched as he came over from the driver’s side, and peeked into the semi-dark vehicle.

“Looking for something?” I queried as I trailed after him.

“Yes. They left their keys on the front seat. And as you probably noticed by now,” he held a finger skyward, “there’s a scent of blood in the air.”

I took a deep sniff of the air when he went to the trunk of his car, discovering that there was indeed blood in the air. It was faint, as if coming from behind the doors of a shipping container, though whether from distance or age I couldn’t tell.

Renji on the other hand, appeared much less confused than I felt, passing me an empty duffel bag and flashlight before heading into the woods with his own light tangling into the underbrush. The route we were taking was far too overgrown to be an actual path and the ghoul in front of me wasn’t deviating from his route, meaning he was either tracking something by scent or knew where he was going. My question of exactly what we were doing out here still remained due to a stop at a morgue still being the only thing I could think of. I felt as if I was missing a puzzle piece.

“What—” A low-hanging branch jabbed me in the forehead, “what exactly are we doing out here?”

“This forest has a history of suicides.”

“I see.” Now it clicked into place. We weren’t heading to a morgue: we were collecting the bodies before they would reach a morgue. It also explained the scent of blood.

Our lights finally managed to get more range as we moved into a stretch of ground that was much rockier than the more wooded terrain.

“There we are.” Renji’s light came to rest on a prone figure in the relatively open space.
I made a noise of assent, unsure of what to say.

The method chosen by the dead man became apparent as we got close; a hefty-looking chef’s knife driven between the ribs and presumably into the heart. Bending over the body, I looked it over mostly out of morbid curiosity, partly as somebody who knew how to examine a body on a cursory level.

“So do we just…” I couldn’t shake the feeling that either something was off or the whole scene was just that surreal, “…bag it and go?”

Dead silence. Pulling my eyes away from the corpse, I turned to look at Renji with the expectation that he’d be giving me a look of ‘well obviously’. Instead, his hands were clasped and his head bowed in what I could only describe as a silent prayer. Was it in giving thanks for our discovery? Was it for the man before us? I couldn’t guess; I had never known a ghoul to pray, and I had never done it myself.

After what felt like a short eternity, my near-silent companion raised his head and nodded that I could bag the body. Rigor hadn’t really yet set in, so between that and my strength I had an easier time than I expected. The whole weight was about on par with my disposal gear with its ballistic plates, so hauling the full bag brought back memories.

Brazil, Panama, Canada.

A short while later, we both cautiously emerged from the forest, making sure that nobody else had parked in the lot. If there was a bad time for anybody to see us, it would be between now and when we got the bag into the trunk. More reason to be quick about it. After closing the trunk, Renji made another quick glance toward the road and retrieved the keys from the dead man’s car, locked it, and placed the keys on top of the driver’s side wheel. With the key hidden, we climbed into our own vehicle, Renji tapping out something on his phone.

“What’s the plan with the car?” I asked, as we pulled out of the lot.

“I have a contact. He’ll take the car, and with the owner gone as well, it’ll be like he disappeared into thin air.”

“Wow.” I nodded, “that is legitimately impressive.”

“I guess so.”

“No, really. If the CCG runs like—” I had to keep myself from saying ‘my old job’—I didn’t know if Yoshimura had told him about who I had been associated with, “the agency I’m familiar with back home, then by making it look like somebody just drove off, then regular law enforcement doesn’t have a reason to pass it along to ghoul specialists.”

“Hm. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised someone involved in hunting ghouls knows how to outplay the hunters.”

“Ah…yeah.” *Looks like he had been told everything.*

“You’ve met your fellow one-eye?”

“Kaneki? Yeah.” Nervously, I followed up with something that had been gnawing at my thoughts. “Do you know how he, you know, ended up like me?”
For a moment, the silence was leaden. “That’s something he could tell you better than I can.”

*Meaning my asking you was a social slipup.*

I resolved to keep my mouth shut after that, and the ride remained near silent until we got back into the more city-like driving.

“You’ve become a bit of a mystery celebrity among the ghouls in the ward.” Renji remarked, easing the sedan around a corner. “And probably beyond, after killing that particular Dove.”

“And I thought what happened under that bridge was a secret.”

“Mostly. Everybody else is making do with the rumors.”

*Meaning Touka, Hinami, myself and probably Renji and Yoshimura. I couldn’t imagine the manager not knowing, at least.* A pang of guilt settled in my gut at the thought of Hinami. “It was the right option to take.”

With the car stopped at a light, Renji gave me a sidelong look. It might’ve been from the way the red glow from the light framed his face, but I had the uncomfortable sensation that I was being either sized up or judged. All I could do was pretend not to notice and try to not feel like a zoo exhibit. Fortunately, the light changed and Renji’s attention returned to the road before I was uncomfortable enough to tell him that a photo would last longer.

We were the only two people on the roads near the café, not that it kept us from both acting cautious as hell as we moved the body from the car to the building. Yoshimura met us inside as I passed off the bag to Renji, who subsequently stepped out of my field of vision—and more eerily, my field of hearing.

“Good evening, Allen. It seems that tonight’s excursion was successful.”

“I’ll defer to you on that, Mr Yoshimura.” I tried my level best to detect Renji, and failed. It was incredibly unsettling that somebody of his size to be so damn quiet.

“Something on your mind?”

“Uh,” *might as well be honest,* “is Renji always able to be that…stealthy?”

“He’s had plenty of time to practice.” Yoshimura nodded, “It’s a skill that has been of much aid to this café over the years in collecting information, among other things.”

“I see.” I really didn’t. Why a group of ghouls would need to gather intelligence was beyond me, when all they really had to do was hide in plain sight and keep their feeding habits spread out.

“Mr Yomo keeps a diligent eye on the happenings of this café. For example, thanks to his work, nothing Kaneki told me about this morning came as a surprise to me.”

All I could do was nod, as I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I take it everything went as planned?”

I almost replied to Yoshimura’s question before I realized that his eyes weren’t on me.

“Just so. He’s not squeamish, which is a plus.”

With a jolt, I realized that Renji had reappeared next to me. *The man needs to wear a bell.*
“Excellent.” Then, to me. “You’ll have to excuse us, Allen. I need to discuss a few café matters with Renji before leaving for the night.”

I nodded, used the appropriate pleasantries, and retreated back to my borrowed room. After learning from military life and work at the BGA, that comment back there was me being told to bug off so the adults could talk. See, Elise? I have some social skills. Untying my shoes by the door, the ghosts of a conversation floated up from between the floorboards. All I managed to catch were scattered syllables, consonants and possibly the word ‘useful’. Well, I hadn't expected to hear anything up here, so I couldn't be disappointed. Even so, the little voice in my head almost persuaded me to press my ear to the floor.

Laying in the bed and staring up at the dark ceiling, Yoshimura’s words drifted back to me; ‘nothing Kaneki told me was a surprise’. Nothing though. Did that mean he and Renji really knew everything that had happened in that church, right down to the crunchy kagune details? Perhaps that was overly dramatic. I didn't even know why I was concerned about this.

With a sigh, I rolled onto my side and head-butted the pillow into a more comfortable shape. This could wait until tomorrow to be properly worried about.
The sound of movement from the floor below brought me back to consciousness, but it was only when I sat up and got a wall of sunlight to the face that I truly woke up. Despite how effective sunlight was as a wakeup aid, buying an alarm clock would do the same thing with me suffering a lot less.

Today was the day; after this morning I’d be free and without any obligations or orders for the first time in six years. Well, as free as a ghoul could be in a city with the CCG. I’d also be technically homeless, but I could afford a hotel for maybe a month or two. After that I’d figure something out, I could put off that particular worry until it became a little more urgent. Definitely not the smartest thing to do, but at this point I really had to prioritize what to focus on doing. Also not a help was that I was less a leader than a highly trained grunt.

Pulling off the bandages covering my constellation of kagune-shrapnel puncture wounds revealed some good news; everything looked almost healed. Definitely strange, given that my healing was substandard. I poked at one and immediately winced.

*Definitely further along, definitely not fully healed.*

Digging out the duct tape from my backpack, I carefully stuck a small patch over each of the injuries. There was no point in taking the risk of one of these opening up and ruining another shirt, especially since I didn’t have the option of just buying more clothing. Taped up, I pulled on one of my new shirts and folded the shirt Yoshimura had given me yesterday. He had said that it was intended to replace the one wrecked by Tsukiyama at the church, but I just felt weird accepting-slash-taking somebody else’s clothing.

The shirt ended up in my backpack; I didn’t know if it would be considered rude if I left it and I wasn’t eager to offend anybody here—least of all the manager. Cracking the door open to check the clock at the end of hall, I heard the murmur of the café downstairs. With luck, the customers would be keeping the staff busy, which would leave me free to leave quietly.

“So you’re still here.”

*So much for that.*

Slinging my backpack over a shoulder, I turned to face Touka—because I could recognize that irritated tone anywhere now.

“I’ll be out of your hair in a couple minutes. Maybe even for good.”

My only reply was a glowering stare and a squaring of her shoulders before she snapped the door shut.

*And so much for the church fight changing anything between us.*

This probably wouldn’t be the last time though; I still wanted to get to know Kaneki, angry Touka or not. Maybe Nishiki as well; he looked like he was closer to my age, plus we had some common ground in that we both were keeping a relationship with a human going. Pausing in the process of making the bed, I squeezed the pillow between my hands, mentally noting that Nishiki was having far more success than me in that department. Knowing how they pulled it off would be interesting to hear, even if it was too late to apply it to Hasuko and myself.
I cast one last eye around the room; the bed was made, I hadn’t left out any used bandages out, and all my stuff was piled into my backpack. At this point I was more ready to leave than I had been ready to leave Chicago. Granted, I only had a very vague idea of what I was going to do once I left the building and it wasn’t like I could go home, but this at least hadn’t been out of nowhere. Slinging my new backpack over my shoulders, a few shifts were necessary to get it to sit comfortably.

Less comfortable was the realization that the last time I had worn a backpack was when I was human. That was a thought to leave behind when I left the building. Nobody in the hallway, nobody on the stairs, nobody in the back—from the sound of it, everybody was up front dealing with the crowd. I didn’t mind; didn’t want to deal with farewells anyway. Who’d miss my leaving anyway? Kaneki was a maybe, Touka definitely not, and I hadn’t met anybody else at the café who I knew as more than a face.

“Mr Allen.”

I froze, feet planted in the rear entryway. That was the voice of Yoshimura, all right. And just when I was ready to leave, too. Turning around, I wasn’t too sure of what to expect.

“Yes?” Personally I couldn’t guess if I was going to be given advice, admonished, or given approval.

“I’d like to discuss one final matter before you leave. Upstairs, if possible.”

“Of course.” As if he even needed to ask; I was in his territory, not to mention how I owed him for staying under his roof.

He led the way back up to the small sitting room by the stairs. This time, like the first time I had been in it, we weren’t alone. Renji was by the window, arranging a blanket over the bird cage. On the opposite side of the room, Touka alternated suspicious looks between me and said cage. Admirably, she cut to the chase first.

“So what the hell is he doing here?” My question exactly. Why the hell had I been asked here?

Yoshimura waved off her question, waiting until we were all seated before saying anything.

“Touka has decided to apply to a university,” the manager stated, probably for my benefit, “I am unaware of how such a choice works in America, but here such a decision requires an enormous deal of studying, advanced courses and tests.”

I nodded; it wasn’t too different than back home.

“As a result, Touka will be overworked if she continues to keep holding all her duties as a member of Anteiku in addition to her education.”

“Hold on, hold on.” Touka jabbed an accusatory finger at me. “This was what you meant? Screw this, I take it back, we don’t need to get him involved if that’s what it takes.”

She went on while I tried to make sense of what she was saying, hoping I hadn’t mistranslated anything. Not for the first time on this trip, the conversation had outran my comprehension.

“Touka.” Renji cut in when Touka paused to breathe, silencing her and earning him a simmering glare.
For a moment, I was reminded of how Robert argued with Elise back home, if only for a moment.

“Isn’t this why we agreed to bring these others on anyway? Or are Kaneki and Nishio just ornamental?” Touka even had the same angry squint as him.

I sighed internally.

“Before we get further off track, exactly what are we discussing here?” I asserted, becoming the second person to cut off Touka.

“Primarily, work.” Yoshimura interlaced and unlaced his fingers, still sitting at attention on the sofa. “With Touka’s workload in preparing for the university, she will be otherwise unable to carry out the full suite of duties she has in the past. To that end, I was looking to ask you.”

“Ask me…to work here?”

“Yes.”

Well, that was definitely blunt. I blinked. I needed a moment to process this—maybe several moments. “Why not Kaneki or Nishio?”

“Nisho, besides his motivations, is both a newcomer and unknown quantity to Anteiku. Asking him would be less than prudent—even more so given he too is a student. Insofar as Kaneki is concerned, well,” The manager made a gentle nod, as if stating the obvious, “he is not quite as acclimated to his new realities as you are.”

“How am I the better choice? I have to be more of an unknown than Nishio. Not to mention…” I couldn’t actually bring myself to mention my time with Kureo now, “…recent events.”

Touka didn’t say anything, though the look she shot at the manager screamed ‘see, even he agrees with me’.

For his part, the manager nodded acknowledgment.

“Nisho Nishiki is indeed less of an unknown,” he agreed, “and at the moment, what Renji and I do know about him does not make him an ideal choice for some of the duties you would be taking from Touka.”

“He’s an outsider you know, not to mention he’s been seen with the Doves already.” Touka spoke with the air of one using their last trump card. “Do you really think anybody at Anteiku besides Kaneki is going to trust him, let alone want to work with him?”

“Ghouls are already outsiders to society, Touka.” I had no idea how Yoshimura was this patient with Touka. Then again, I had no idea how Trisha was patient with Robert. “And as for your second point, Renji had no complaints to Allen’s company when they went to gather food yesterday evening.”

Which was probably as much an assessment on me as a ghoul as much as it was me assisting Renji.

“Fine.” Touka growled, standing up. “You’ve already made up your mind. But when he fucks up everything, you better not be surprised.”

With Touka storming out of the room, I was left with the uncomfortable impression that she might not be the only person in the café with that opinion. At least she hadn’t been livid enough to slam
“…Are you sure you still want me working here?” I broke what felt like a terse silence. “I don’t want to be the source of discord.” And I’ll understand if you retract the offer after that little tantrum.

“That was never in doubt—you’re far from the first potential member of Anteiku that Touka has disapproved of, and even Kaneki received her ire before he started.” With a quiet chuckle, Yoshimura regarded the doorway. “I suspect it’s as much a habit by now as it is her nature.”

From his side of the room, Renji made a slow nod in agreement.

“So, Allen, with the question of strife among coworkers laid to rest, are there any other items I can clear up to help your decision along?”

I bit at the inside of my lip. On the surface, this was almost everything I wanted or missed from back home: a chance to get to know Kaneki, a chance at doing some good, a possibility of camaraderie. Beyond making things easier on Touka, though, I didn’t see what this did for Yoshimura.

“There’s got to be some kind of catch I’m not seeing.” I kept my tone as diplomatic as I could.

“There would be a few minor ones;” the old ghoul confirmed, “you’d have to be inconspicuous when coming and going, some parts of your job would involve early or late hours, and you couldn’t be in the café area during opening hours.”

“That still sounds like a lot of risk for a small reward, given that the CCG probably is still very interested in bagging me like a prize at the arcade.”

“You would be among similar company here, in that case. However, you currently have no need to worry about people on the street recognizing your face from a poster. I asked Renji and two of the older members to see if your likeness had appeared on any postings by the CCG, only for them to turn up no results. A curious outcome.”

“Curious?”

“Indeed. In the case of Hinami, as with many others, one could find fresh posters with her description on the same day her face was revealed. Yet after two days, you still have no posters—highly unusual, given how relentless the CCG remains. It could be that they are keeping the hunt for you an internal matter.” His tone shifted from musing to serious. “Or that they have larger concerns—ones that parallel my own. Renji, could I trouble you to watch the door?”

Silently, the big man nodded and made a much quieter exit than Touka had. Yoshimura moved from his side of the sofa to the side closer to the armchair I had claimed, leaning in.

“I would guess that you heard word about the eleventh ward during your time with the CCG?”

I had—I knew that much—but racking my brain for anything beyond that it was making trouble for the CCG was fruitless after the past two days.

“Not much,” I admitted, “I heard a few things, but not enough to say I know what’s going on.”

“The eleventh ward is currently home to a group going by the name of Aogiri Tree, a group that has gained notoriety in the past months for their attacks on members of the CCG and their field offices.”
The name was familiar, now that Yoshimura had brought it up, as were the actions of the group. I’d seen this back home; a family, a gang or just random ghouls brought together by a vendetta making attacks on us or the other local MGA groups, usually for revenge of some kind, sometimes just because they wanted to hurt something. They’d be lucky on their first few attacks, then lose members as we hardened defenses and hunted. Sometimes they’d fight to the last man, other times they’d just disband and fade into the background of the city.

I nodded, deciding to keep the short half-life of groups like this to myself.

“Recently, they’ve began pushing out to expand territory and stepping up attacks on the CCG, who have in turn, surged their presence in the eleventh and surrounding wards.”

I nodded again; the CCG’s action wasn’t unexpected there, and I had participated in things like that back home.

“How big is the group?” I queried, not expecting a number much higher than a dozen.

“The main group likely ranges above three hundred, though this is split into distinct subgroups and various unaffiliated ghouls joining ranks.”

Holy fuck. That was easily three times the size of the larger groups back home—Monica definitely would’ve loved that—but still, everything related to ghouls in this country was bigger, from budgets to the groups.

“The primary hazard to this ward is twofold.” Yoshimura lowered his voice, enough to where I had to slightly lean in. “Should Aogiri gain a foothold in this or a neighboring ward, the surge in Investigators will result in life becoming more difficult for ghouls in the ward. Equally concerning is the prospect that Aogiri may see Anteiku as a target, as our goals are…incompatible. Needless to say, both cases are less than ideal.”

“And both would stem from Aogiri ghouls.” I noted. And both could be stemmed by eliminating Aogiri ghouls.

“Yes. With both they and the CCG casting longer shadows, you could say I’m looking for a few bright lights to ward away the dark.” Once again, he laced and unlaced his fingers. “You don’t need to decide on my offer today; take a night to think on it, and come find me tomorrow.”

He made to get up, leaving me seated and nipping at the inside of my cheek. Yoshimura saw something coming on the horizon: that was certain with all the ominous-sounding talk and tone. I was inclined to believe him—a bit more than I could believe anybody else at this point—because ghouls with bad instincts didn’t live long enough to have their hair turn gray. Not to mention that if he was this grim about it, it had to be something huge. The whole light and shadow metaphor felt cryptic as hell after suffering through classes on analyzing literature and would’ve probably made sense if I had actually applied myself in those courses. Having some kind of inkling of my job title would’ve been nice. Fixer, food procurement, café staff, peacekeeper, enforcer.

But does it really matter? I knew my answer already.

Staying solo reduced the number of connections I had with the rest of the world, fewer connections meant less chances of being revealed and meant higher chances of staying alive. Staying out of whatever was going to happen between Aogiri, Anteiku and the CCG was a safe choice to keep out of the way and avoid getting hunted down. Getting far, far away from Tokyo would possibly let me drop off the radar entirely.
“Mr Yoshimura.” I stood to face him, taking a final bite at my cheek. “When can I start?”
Unsurprisingly, I ended up starting the next day, bright and early as the manager had said. My duties at the café itself were relatively simple; keep the back of the building clean, the coffee-scented storeroom organized and generally make sure everything up front was running smoothly without actually showing my face up front. The remaining items I’d be doing were the body collection with Renji every other night, and what really sounded interesting; territory management.

In spite of all the uncertainty about the wisdom of staying in the city, part of me found this just so cool. I had only kind of learned about the basics of ghoul society at the BGA—the guys in Intelligence learned all the interesting stuff, probably—and I didn’t really have a chance to learn, since I didn’t have the family background and other ghouls didn’t tell me much or just gave me runarounds—probably because I wasn’t a natural ghoul.

So after Yoshimura gave me a tour around the building and explained my duties, I gathered the cleaning supplies and started cleaning while I still had the enthusiasm to clean. Bathrooms went faster than I thought, though that was a pleasant surprise.

“You’ve managed to throw yourself into your work.”

I looked up from where I was elbow-deep in the storage room’s sink.

“Feels weird doing it in a uniform like this though.” I replied, pointing out the outfits Nishio and I were both wearing, “I’m more used to my old uniform.”

“Well, better you than me doing the cleaning in any case.”

“Ah, this is nothing. Back in basic, they had us clean out our bathrooms with just our bare hands and sand.”

“Ew.” Nishio flinched back as if I was going to suggest we go do the same. “I’m just here to grab more of the dark roast. You wouldn’t know which that is, would you?”

“Not yet.” I flicked suds off my hand and surveyed the array of cans on the shelving units. “Yoshimura said I’d get around to that tomorrow.”

“God dammit. Touka said that it would be obvious.”

“I’ll lend a hand. Gotta let the soap sit on some stains for a bit anyway.”

“No, no,” he waved me off, “if I have to admit to her that you helped me, she’ll be even more insufferable.”

“Fair enough. How’s Kimi?”

Nishio didn’t say anything, but I saw him tense up.

“Relax, I’m just being a concerned friend. That night was rough on everyone, not in the least her.”

“No offense, but we’re barely acquaintances.” Nishio didn’t even bother turning away from scrutinizing one of the cans on a high shelf. “Plus, I don’t know anything about you, American Allen.

Please, please, don’t make that into your nickname for me.
I turned back to the washtub sink to check on the soap. He had a point; pretty much all he knew of me was from the fight at the church. If I had been planning to leave the city, that would’ve been fine, but we were going to be coworkers now. Just a few steps away from teammate. Which was basically family at that point, as far as I was concerned. Hands soapy again, I turned back to Nishio.

“All right. What do you want to know?”

His head bobbed up from where he had pared down his options to two very similar cans.

“What…do you mean?”

“You said you didn’t know anything about me, so I’m asking. What do you want to know about me?”

“You? Well.” Both cans were placed on the table in the center of the room and Nishio’s face ran through surprise and into confusion. “Why?”

“You said you didn’t know anything about me. So here’s a chance to learn something.”

“I’ll be right back.” Nishio replied, looking down at the coffee tins that I was distracting him from. “That offer doesn’t expire in thirty seconds, right?”

I shook my head, and he hefted the containers and left. Turning back to the sink, I scrubbed off the first of what would be likely innumerable coffee stains. Personally, I wished that I had been having that conversation with Kaneki instead of Nishio. It was however better than having nobody to talk to because cleaning alone was absolutely mind-numbing. Soaping up the remainder of the sink and faucet, I could take some solace in that I was making myself useful. If only useful didn’t purely mean boring myself to death in this case.

Nishio came back as I was letting the second set of sink surfaces sit, still clutching the two cans of coffee.

“Wrong roast.” Was his explanation, as he placed the cans back on the shelves. “Being trained by Touka is just being yelled at with more steps.”

“If it makes you feel any better, she tried to kill me the first and third time we met.”

“Well, it’s definitely not surprising.” Finally, a chuckle. Then, after leaning back on the table, “So why’d you end up in the Tokyo? Can’t imagine you just came here on vacation.”

“It was supposed to be an exchange program.” I kicked at the floor tiles, unhappily thinking of those first few steps off the plane.

“Exchange program, like for students and professors? For which university?”

I shook my head and gave Nishio the two-paragraph version of my story; general events, employers, where I made my exit. At least he didn’t flip out.

“Well, shit. There were rumors about a foreigner following a couple doves around. No wonder Touka wants your head on a stick after all that.”

“And you don’t?” Nishio was taking this a lot better than I thought. Maybe too well

“I’m not as stupid as her; if you killing that dove wasn’t proof you were done with them, I don’t
know what was. Still, holy shit. Who else knows you were involved in all that?"

“The manager, Touka, Kaneki, you.” I ticked the quartet off on my fingers.

“Better keep that circle small,” Nishio cautioned, “mentioning you worked with the doves on anything would probably be a good way to start a fight.”

“Yeah. Uh, why call investigators ‘doves’ anyway?”

“Mostly because of the white jackets.” This came from a new voice, belonging to the blob-nosed guy who had been in the café on the day I had walked in the front door. “I suspect there’s a component of irony as well, since doves are usually an emblem of peace. Nishio, the beans you want are on the top shelf over there.”

He pointed over at a shelf from his spot leaning against the doorframe.

“Got it. My apologies for taking so long.”

“You didn’t know and Touka didn’t tell you.” He shrugged off the whole situation. “That makes it more on her than on you.”

As Nishio collected the tin, the newly-arrived coworker turned to me.

“So, Kuzen has you on cleaning duties, I see. Works well for us; nobody was particularly eager for that part of the job.”

“Kuzen?” I repeated the unfamiliar name. “You mean Yoshimura?”

“Well, not that he uses it much. Ah, and before I forget my manners, allow me to introduce myself.” He bowed slightly. “Enji Koma, unofficial assistant supervisor, at your service. If you ever need a hand figuring out anything around the shop, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Will do.” I was glad he had gone for the bow rather than the handshake because my hands were still soapy.

“I was behind the counter that day you showed up, actually. Still don’t know what possessed Touka to slug you in the middle of the café.”

“We, er,” finding a phrase that fit was not the easiest thing, “we’ve fought before.”

“That would explain it. Touka’s a bit of a hothead.”

Which was like saying the arctic was slightly chilly.

“Well, I need to get back up front before the place burns down. I’ll check back in on you later.”

That was all well and good, but I didn’t need much in the way of check-ins to keep me on track with cleaning. Plus, I was hoping to see Kaneki more than Enji or Nishio. The thought that Kaneki had today off did occur to me as I cleaned into the afternoon, not that I was eager for that to be the case.

As was usual for my luck, Kaneki wasn’t working today, as revealed by Enji when he checked in on me cleaning up the meeting room on the second floor. The bird was active this time, chattering away a list of insults like a drunken toddler. Kaneki not being around wasn’t much of a disappointment though, I reminded myself; I was going to be working here for the foreseeable future after all. It also meant that I’d probably be seeing a lot of Touka as well. Every upside had a
downside.

Touka decided to pay me a visit as I finished up the last of the second floor hallway, drifting up the stairs like an evil look given human form.

“Well,” I heard her mutter after poking her head into the meeting room, “it certainly smells clean.”

As if in response, the bird chattered something, prompting Touka growling for it to shut its beak.

“You.” Lancing a finger in my direction, she definitely not happy. “Tonight, nine o’clock. Meet me in the back of the café; the manager wants me to show you around the ward.”

Before I could acknowledge what was said, she had turned and gone back downstairs. Great. Tonight I got to be shown around the ward by the person in the city who liked my presence the least.

Actually, I winced at the realization, if Amon learned that I was the one who killed Kureo and not Touka, he probably wanted me deader than dirt.

With that happy thought now in my head, it probably dampened my mood a bit. I could see the CCG telling him that regardless of whether or not they actually confirmed it first, given that they seemed to run on a potent cocktail of revenge and bloodlust. Anything to make him hunt me that much more eagerly, right?

Yoshimura showed up as I was putting away the cleaning supplies. He thanked me for my work, commended me for managing to change the coffee room sink back to a uniform shade of white, and asked me if there was anything I had questions on. Erring on the side of caution, I did get a confirmation that I would be getting familiar with the ward by following Touka tonight.

“While we haven’t managed to get you over to Uta’s for a mask just yet, and you won’t need one for tonight, it is something you will need when you take over for Touka.”

Uta? Mask? Like Halloween mask?

“Also, here.” He passed me a paper-wrapped package, no more than a couple pounds. “Between the events of the previous night and your work tonight, I’m sure you’ll have a bit of an appetite. Feel free to use the meeting room if you’d prefer to eat here, there are eating utensils in storage room’s cupboard. And should you need food in the future, don’t hesitate to ask myself, Renji or Touka.”

“Oh.” That explained why the package had some softness to it. “Thank you.”

I tried not to look uncomfortable as the package settled slightly in my hand.

No way was I going to walk back to the hotel holding something like this. Never mind the appearance, just the way it kind of slumped into my hand gave me the sensation that it was going to try and wriggle free. That left eating here.

“I think I’ll do that.”

In the space of a few minutes, I found everything I needed to eat; plate, fork, knife—a whole set of tableware collected from the storeroom and set out. The meat was…well, the closest equivalent that came to mind was a roast straight from a butcher shop except a lot bloodier and, obviously, definitely not from a farm animal. I was also kind of at a loss of how to proceed. How should I cut this up? Should I cut it up? Monica just tore into what she ate without much in the way of table
manners, though the rest of the group was more civil. Asking anybody here what kind of table manners were used was out of the question since I didn’t want to look like some kind of uncivilized moron.

Crap. I really should’ve switched away from the meal packs like everybody back home had been telling me. That and paid attention to how everybody else was eating when we ate together. Even Frank had told me that I should try something besides what he called ‘actual dog food’.

After a few minutes of uncertainty, I sawed the whole chunk into finger-sized bits and proceeded to choke down the whole pile a lot faster than I needed to. After my change, I had asked around if I was technically a cannibal now and ghouls from my drill instructor to Trisha laughed off the question. My doctors and Robalson nervously laughed off the question. To Monica though, the question was answered in her own oddly philosophical way.

_If you see yourself as human, then that’s the definition, yes?_ She had said, throwing an arm over my shoulders. _But until you start eating like me, nobody will have an easy time defining your diet._

I was pretty sure that she was telling me not to care as much. Or saying I should join her in eating other ghouls.

The one thing I was sure about was that fresh food was better than the dried stuff in the meal packs—kind of like week-old leftovers versus fresh food. On the other hand, the slippery texture was…off-putting. There was also none of the addictive sweetness that Tsukiyama’s kagune had, a disappointing discovery to say the least. In my experience, ghoul food—that is to say, human flesh—lacked most of the flavors I remembered as a human.

_Maybe,_ I reflected, washing the evidence of my meal down the sink with a shot of bleach, _just maybe, it’s just ghouls who have that sweet taste._

Hell, if Monica had told me that ghouls tasted like Kit-kat and Skittles, I probably would’ve been eating the same thing as her years ago, thanks to the huge sweet tooth I had back when I was human. Not that I’d be able to tell her that now. And now I also wanted Kit-kat. _Dammit. I was in the country with the best Kit-kat variety on the planet, and I couldn’t even smell one without the urge to gag._

Or maybe I could just go out and find a troublesome ghoul...no, awful idea.

Changing out of my new uniform in the second floor's tiny locker room, I paused and couldn’t help but make the first honest smile since I killed Kureo; I certainly hadn’t been expecting to find myself in another changing room. It was just so ironic—like I was a rookie again, learning all the ins and outs. Surreal indeed. Well, that kind of summed up my time in Tokyo. Between Hasuko, Kaneki, Touka and the city itself—it all felt as if it was a shadowy parallel world to what I knew back home.
Night Shift

I spent the hours before meeting with Touka wisely, I think. Did some shopping for shaving stuff and picked up one of the disposable surgical masks I had seen worn, since it was the closest thing to a mask I could find without finding a costume shop. After that, I meandered back to my hotel room, shaved the stubble off my face in the cramped bathroom with children’s TV shows playing in the background. The choice of television channel was less me not knowing which channel was what: I’d need improve my Japanese by a lot if I wanted to blend in.

Well, as much as I could without cosmetic surgery, at least.

Even so, I didn’t detect too many looks on my way back over to the café, though that might’ve just been due to the hour. It was about a fifteen minute walk from the hotel to the café, and I set out once the glow of the alarm clock on the nightstand read eight thirty. So why did it feel like I had waited almost a half hour before Touka finally showed her face? I had paced the alleyway, crossing back and forth under the sole streetlamp for a tense eternity, half expecting that I had been set up by her as some kind of joke. She certainly didn’t seem aware if she was late when she finally appeared.

“Well. You’re here.”

Her tone had downshifted from resentment into what felt like irritated resignation at my continued existence, at least.

“Yep.” I decided not to mention that she was very probably late. “Shall we go?”

“Yeah, sure. Can’t believe the manager wanted you starting on this without even getting you set with a mask, though.”

“Well,” I dug my purchase out from my hoodie pocket, “this might be of some use.”

Touka spared it a quick glance before declaring it barely adequate and telling me to follow her.

“Manager wanted me to start getting you familiar with our territory,” she began, once I had followed her down a few dark and desolate streets, “but the reality is that this ward is big enough that even I took a few years to learn the whole area.”

*Great. Going to be a rough few years in that case.*

“Wait, how big did you say the territory was? The whole ward?”

“Yes and no.” Touka hopped up to a rooftop without a look back, leaving me to follow. “In theory, Anteiku controls the ward: we distribute hunting territories to individual ghouls, food to ghouls who can’t or won’t hunt, deal with troublemakers. But, we don’t really have the numbers to keep an eye on the whole ward at once, so we also have to rely on the other ghouls in the ward to an extent.”

That was different from back home, where all the ghoul groups did their level best to keep as much direct control as they could to keep out unaffiliated ghouls. What Touka had described sounded more like being a landlord than a local power.

“See that out there?” Her finger traced a line under a row of lights. “That raised highway is basically the eastern border of the ward. Going further than that will get you in trouble with ghouls
or Doves in other wards, whichever see you first.”

“What about the other borders?”

“They’re less concerned, generally, but it’s easier on me if we don’t cross them. No need to stand so far back from the edge either.”

I glanced and noted that I was standing a good six feet away from the edge of the rooftop.

“I, uh, I’m not the biggest fan of heights.” I was fully prepared for the look of irritation Touka skewered me with. Particularly when there isn’t a handrail.

We made our way around the ward to the other three border landmarks for North, West and South being a school, a park and a railway line respectively. In the process of moving between the points, we moved surprisingly quickly, though by the time we reached the last point, a sheen of sweat was visible across Touka’s face, despite the borderline chill and light breeze. Touching my own forehead, I was surprised to feel that I had yet to sweat, despite being slightly warm in my new hoodie.

“This is a pretty huge area to cover,” I noted. Definitely more than a couple square miles. “How do you patrol it?”

“I don’t, and you won’t.” I took me a moment to realize that Touka was slightly out of breath and trying to hide it. “Splitting it into thirds and spot-checking each one is the best way to go about…”

Her voice trailed off into another reproachful look as she also noticed that she was the only one out of breath.

“…though you probably have the stamina to check the whole thing.” She finished, muttering just loudly enough for me to hear.

“Um,” A thought had just occurred to me, “How am I going to know if somebody is allowed to be in the ward or not?”

Retying a shoe, Touka didn’t bother answering until she straightened up, something I had the slight impression was considered impolite in Japan. Not that I was particularly concerned or insulted by that. If anything it was an indicator that I’d probably do well to pick up a book on etiquette sooner rather than later.

“Usually, most of the ward residents are pretty good about keeping their hunting quiet, so the best way to find troublemakers is to follow the noise, since even the humans are pretty quiet in this ward. If you’re talking about knowing who is a ward resident, that’s less of an issue.”

“Isn’t that kind of useful for knowing anyway?”

“Look,” Touka sighed, obviously irritated with something I was saying, “if you drop in on somebody making noise, the troublemakers are either going to run away or try to fight you. If they run, catch up, assert dominance, scare them a little. If they fight, feel free to beat the shit out of them.”

Simple enough; observe, patrol, confront. I had been the backup for people doing this back at the BGA.

For a moment, we were both silent. I could hear the distant sounds of cars on the highway and an even more distant police siren, but beyond that, nothing I could hear as suspect. My ears weren’t
supposed to be too below the ghoul baseline, but now there was this gnawing feeling of suspicion in the back of my head. The BGA had sent me off to Tokyo without a warning of what the CCG was like; it was anybody’s guess as to how much more had been kept from me.

“Oh, and one more thing;” Touka didn’t bother turning from her perch to talk to my face. “I know you’re probably the most bloodthirsty ghoul at Anteiku now, but don’t try to kill every ghoul you fight with. We’re trying to keep the peace, not wipe out the local ghoul population.”

“There’s a difference?” I deadpanned, then verbally backpedaled as Touka’s head snapped around to glare at me. “I kid, I kid.”

Yeah, that was probably not the time to make a joke. It was also very probable that I was not the most bloodthirsty ghoul in Anteiku, not that I had any inkling of who would have that place. Not that I was going say anything on either point.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence and scanning the area. Touka was the one to break the silence.

“Quiet night.”

“Is it usually this quiet?” I asked, not wholly sure if the comment was directed at me or just rhetorical.

“Only when Doves are around.” The reply was brisk as the night air. “We’re moving. Keep up.”

We headed south, this time using the rooftops as our primary thoroughfare and only dropping to ground level when we had to cross wider streets. Personally, I was not a fan of all the jumping between rooftops, first off, because of the height and no railings thing but also because of the noise. It was almost certainly paranoia, but I was sure that we were making a ton of noise. Touka had only rolled her eyes when I had brought up the concern, muttering something about human senses and the proceeded to grill me from our new vantage point on top of what was either an office or school.

“Where are we?”

“Southern part of the ward.”

“Where’s the border?”

“About two blocks south of us.”

“And Anteiku from here is?”

I didn’t know the cardinal direction, so I just pointed.

“Well, at least you learned something.”

“Had a good teacher.” I shrugged.

Touka said nothing in response to that, opting to survey everything south of us. That kind of made since, as the source of unrest, the eleventh ward, was in that direction. On the other hand, we did have a responsibility to keep our eyes on our own ward. Well, she did; I was still just in training. Touka’s head snapped to our left.

Without a word, she took off bounding over the rooftops leaving me to follow as best I could. Even
if Touka didn’t have as much stamina as I did, she was definitely moving faster than I could across the rooftops. Right now I couldn’t tell if the feeling in my stomach was from the prospect of a fight or because I privately found the prospect of hopping across rooftops more than slightly terrifying. At this rate, I’d have to get some of Robert’s fearless streak to do this job properly. Up ahead, Touka dropped from roof level to a narrow street between buildings. Presumably, she landed gracefully. I almost got caught on a lightpost jutting out from the gray stucco wall.

“What did you hear?” I asked, recovering from an almost faceplant.

“Didn’t hear it; smelled it.” Her voice was muffled by the familiar rabbit mask covering her face. “There was a fight here a little while ago.”

Scrambling to pull on the surgical mask, I nodded in agreement; the wet shine unique to fresh blood was very much obvious against the walls and concrete.

“Really recently,” I noted, looking at a spray on a wall, “nothing’s dried yet.”

“Must’ve just missed them. Dammit.” Touka kicked idly at the ground. “Been a couple of fights like this recently. Not going to learn anything from this though.”

“I can.” I said, then quickly amended it with, “If we have some time.”

The blank face of the rabbit mask regarded me for a moment before I was waved off with a ‘fine, go ahead’ gesture.

I started with the easy to examine stuff on the walls. Long sprays, uniform and small sized droplets—though the droplets and grew larger as I followed the spatters further back into the alleyway. It didn’t look like there was any blood on the ground, though I was pretty far away from the puddle of light provided by the streetlamp I had nearly fallen on. Now that I was close enough to touch, I could finally smell the blood—instead of from several blocks away, like Touka could. *Something I’ll probably never be able to do.* I noted, a pang of envy crossing my mind.

At least I had my tradecraft from the BGA as advantage of my own. It was that education that informed me that the spatters were uniformly inflicted by high-speed strikes—by an ukkaku type, probably. On the receiving end was probably a rinkaku, or maybe a bikaku with a high healing factor since a koukaku would’ve just blocked the strikes. Also evident was that the fight had either intensified or died down, as the spatters further back into the alley were made of bigger droplets—though I didn’t find much in the way of stray drops on the ground.

If I had to guess, the lack of mess meant that either both sides were good enough to dodge—or both were combat inept and whiffing hard on every swing.

This had to be ghoul-on-ghoul though: a human losing this much blood this fast would probably be delirious, if not passed out on the ground. Still, only one way to be sure. I looked up at the rooftop, where Touka was nowhere to be seen. *Good.*

Wiping the pad of my thumb over a few larger droplets, I painted the fingertip. Taking one more precautionary look up to make sure Touka wasn’t looking, I shifted the surgical mask up and took a cautious lick.

*Hm.* Better make a second check.

That was pretty conclusive. *I should make a third, just to be absolutely sure.*

It took a lot of restraint to not make a fourth. A tiny disruptive thought wound its way in the back
of my head, reminding me that licking the wall would be a more efficient method. Shaking my head to dislodge the notion, I hopped back up to the roof and summarized my findings.

“That’s it?” Unsurprisingly, Touka was not impressed.

Granted, I could understand why: she was probably expecting concrete information beyond the general details of the fight. Unfortunately, I didn’t know how to reconstruct a fight from blood spatters. I did make another discovery in that alleyway, though. One I'd be keeping to myself.

I liked the taste of ghoul.
Alike

There was some impressive irony to me spending the better part of my workday learning different roasts of coffee. At least my job wasn’t to drink the stuff. Even so, I struggled to give my full attention to the manager as he went through the details of the roasts and brands with Nishio and I. The root cause was less that Touka had kept me out late—though I suspected she had tried that as a sabotage attempt—and more that there were more than a couple of words I really didn’t know at all.

“I should’ve bought a notebook for that.” I remarked to Nishio after the manager had left. “Didn’t expect that this would be like a chemistry course.”

“As if.” He replied with amused snort. “Chem is harder than memorizing coffee could ever be. What kind of college did you even attend to think that?”

“Well, uh, really none.”

The look of confused horror Nishio gave me would’ve been hilarious had I seen it on a television show, but in the middle of a ghoul-ran coffee shop it was just uncomfortable.

“You can’t possibly be serious.”

All I could do was shrug.

“Uh, serious about what?”

Kaneki had entered the storeroom now, his eyes flicking between Nishio and I uncertainly. At least he didn’t have that deer in the headlights look now.

“Allen here didn’t get in any college education,” Nishio announced, before I could deflect the conversation away from me. “How could he hope to get a proper job without even going to the university?”

“Well, I suppose not every job needs a university degree.” Kaneki noted. “And Allen was working in the equivalent of the CCG, and in the military before that, which is probably a ‘proper’ job by most standards.”

Despite that being said, the way Kaneki said it made it pretty clear that he didn’t consider the former career to be ‘proper’. After Mado, I couldn’t really disagree with him.

“It’s not like I didn’t learn anything instead of being in college.” I managed to squeeze in before Nishio made a retort. “The military and BGA taught me a lot.”

“Yeah?” Nishio’s tone was…less than believing. “Like what?”

“Hand to hand, bomb disposal and demolition, electronics, firearm handling and marksmanship, basic field investigation techniques, small unit tactics. Y’know, kinda basic stuff.”

“And you used all that when you were—” At least Nishio caught himself before he said ‘hunting ghouls’. “—in your old job?”

I didn’t get much further than opening my mouth before my fellow newbie hefted a pair of coffee tins and marched from the room. It was just an inkling, but I had the feeling that Nishio was
somewhat disapproving of my lack of higher education. Trying to make conversation, I voiced this thought to Kaneki.

“Could be. Then again, you were involved with the CCG…”

He didn’t finish the thought, but I had a good idea why he had mentioned that.

“Probably.” Was all I could think of saying in reply to that.

“Uh…did they really teach you all that?” Now it was Kaneki’s turn to look uncertain. “The fighting and the bomb stuff?”

“I learned some of it early on, and then kind of just kept adding to it.” I couldn’t help but wince at some of the memories. “Especially the fighting. It took me almost four years to get used to what I could do, but it did get easier.”

I added the last few words more because Kaneki was looking nervous than any sense of pride. Hopefully I hadn’t put him off keeping his training going. He had a pensive look on his face, which was hopefully a good sign—maybe now might be a good chance to ask if he’d be interested in hanging out.

“I hope so,” Kaneki replied, rubbing at his chin, “I’ve gotten used to most of it, but Touka still beats me every time we train. …You wouldn’t happen to have any plans after you finish work?”

“No real plans, no.” Internally, I tamped down on the glee that made me want to do a little happy dance. I got to hang with Kaneki! “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I wanted to ask you a few questions about, you know…your, um, transition. I-I mean, if you don’t mind answering them.”

“Of course I don’t mind!” I did my best not to look or sound too eager. “I have some free time between when I finish working and meeting up with Touka for my night job. We can use as many of them as we end up needing.”

Kaneki’s whole visibly perked up at the offer, thanking me profusely before heading back downstairs to the café. Not even the disapproving looks from Touka managed to weight down my spirits when she brought up dirty cups and coffee making gear. The downside was that the shift seemed to drag on twice as long as it should’ve, thanks to all the anticipation brewing in my head. I wasn’t distracted to the point of forgetting everything though; every so often, I’d turn back to the coffee racks and quiz myself on which was which.

When I was finally done for the day, I changed back to my street clothes as quickly as I could, only to be met by Kaneki by the living room.

“You look eager.” He noted, a ghost of a grin in his eyes.

“I’ve kind of been looking forward to this all day.” I sheepishly admitted. “So, do we want to talk here or walk around the ward?”

We both mused on that question for a couple moments before Touka told us to stop blocking the hall like a pair of idiots. So we ended up outside. We’d just have to be a little careful of how we phrased some things.

“So,” I decided I’d at least be the one to break the silence, “How long have you…been like me?”
“Not too long, just a couple months. It’s too much to get used to. How’d you get through it all?”

“Distraction, mostly.” Briefly, I glanced through a shop window. “I tried researching ghouls at first, but what helped more was finding a hobby to keep me busy. Probably helped remind me that even though some things changed, a lot was still the same.

“Oh. What did you do?”

“Well, at first it was just me reading up on ghouls, though what worked was when I was talked into taking up running and weightlifting.”

“Haha, well I don’t think I could do much of those.” Kaneki’s laugh was less nervous than awkward. “I really don’t have the physique for that.”

“I didn’t either.” I noted, thinking back on those early days. “Back then I was about your proportions, a bit less fit than that, actually. But, exercise was a good way to put my brain on pause. Plus it did make the whole military thing easier.”

We stepped into a more busy stretch of street, our conversation trailing off into the crowd. Letting Kaneki lead, I alternated looking into storefronts and feeling conspicuous as the nearly sole foreigner in the crowds. Suggesting we talk outdoors was a mistake. Once again, I had been thinking as if I was back home, where the two of us would blend in and not be worth a second glance. Instead, I felt as if I was back in uniform, a target easy to spot.

A pickle ran across the small of my back. How uncomfortable.

After several far too long minutes, we finally ended up on a much emptier stretch of ground.

“What did you—Allen?”

I blinked hard, dully noting that Kaneki was still next to me.

“Allen? You okay?” Concern covers his face like a mask.

“I’m fine.” Not really. “What was your question?”

“What did you do about the, uh...” if looking uncomfortable could win a prize, Kaneki would win gold right now, “…special diet.”

“Suffer.”

“S-suffer?”

This was dredging up something I did my best to keep at the back of my mind.

“Yeah.” My voice sunk unhappily. “I miss all the stuff I used to eat.”

“Not that.” Kaneki shook his head vigorously. “I mean get through eating what you had to eat. The who of the food.”

“Oh. That.” I stayed quiet a moment, trying to set my thought to words. “You know how it—let me say that better—I have to look at it like a reversed perspective. If their place was reversed with mine, they’d probably be doing the same thing, right?”

“That doesn't make it right though.” Now his voice had hardened somewhat, with the slightest accusatory edge.
“No,” I agreed, weaving to the side to make way for a family with a stroller, “but there's no shame in doing what needs to be done to survive.”

There was no reply from Kaneki, and I ended up filling the silence just to stop feeling so judged.

“If you consider it a form of evil, then make it your responsibility to balance it out somehow.”

“Is that what you're going to do?”

“Well.” now I was just uncomfortable. I had been out here to talk, not so much to be judged. “I guess once I get on my feet, yeah. Right now, I still barely know what I'll be doing next week, let alone beyond that.”

“True.” Kaneki replied, with an understanding nod.

Not having anything to say, I remained silent. This whole conversation had gone darker than I wanted it to. Kaneki and I were alike, the only two of our kind in the country; surely we could get along better than this with all our common ground. Looking through the front windows of a restaurant, I had an idea.

“Hey, what was your favorite food before you started your diet?”

“Oh? Hm.” His face had an interesting look on it as he looked skyward. “I'd have to go with hamburgers, I think.”

“Pull the other one.”

“What?”

“That was one of my favorites as well!” I couldn't help but let a bark of laughter escape my lips. “I used to try and rate all the burgers I could eat, like some gourmet.”

Kaneki smiled at that, the look clearing the grim clouds from his face.

“I always had to get them fresh,” he wistfully replied, “the reheatable ones are okay, but getting one that was just fresh, where I could bite into one and the burger would be hot and the lettuce and rest would still be cold.”

“Absolutely nothing could come close.” I agreed. “I used to go to this one local pub with my family that had burgers like that.”

“Ah, I never really found any place like that,” Kaneki admitted, looking a bit envious, “my favorite place was a chain called—”

“—Big Girl!”

Both Kaneki and I turned, looking to the person who had jumped into our conversation.
Run and Hide

The conversational intruder was almost as much of a stand out in the crowd as I felt. Bright clothing, blonde hair—a big rarity here—and a voice that definitely not meant to be used indoors.

“Kaneki, Kaneki,” he jokingly chided, “you can be downright impossible to find, you know that? I stopped by Anteiku to see if you could drop off your Literature notes, but even Touka had no idea where you were. Almost gave up hope before I found you.”

“Oh, uh, yeah. I can drop those off later tonight.” It had only been there for a moment when he had turned to the newcomer, but Kaneki’s eyes had held a deer in the headlights look.

“And who’s this?” If not for the genuine smile and friendly tone, I’d feel as if I was being interrogated. “Trying to replace me already, eh, Kaneki?”

Slightly missing the tone, Kaneki backpedaled, throwing up his hands in what I couldn't tell was actual or mock defeat. Between the look on the newcomer's face and Kaneki's reaction, I couldn't hide a grin.

“It's not like that! This-this is Allen. We met at Anteiku a while back.”

“Anteiku? Well, any friend of Kaneki is a friend of mine!” He bowed, then held out his hand. “Hideyoshi Nagachika, at your service!”

“Allen Grissom,” I replied, accepting his hand with a bow “at your service as well, Hideyoshi.”

“Pff, don't call me that.” He waved off my attempt at formality. “You're a friend: call me Hide, and in exchange I'll drop the formality and call you Allen.”

“Works for me.” With charisma like that, this guy would have an easy time getting elected if he went into politics.

Then again, he seemed too friendly for that. It was also fairly obvious that however long this friendship had been a thing between the two, Hide had definitely initiated it. For his part, Kaneki had been checking his phone while Hide had added me to his phone book of friends and now had a look of somebody watching their train pull away from the station.

“Crap, I completely forgot I had that with her today.” His head bobbed between Hide’s face and my own, as if trying to size up our next moves. “I, uh, gotta run back to the café. I’ll drop off the notes by your place later, Hide.”

Kaneki left, hurrying back the way he and I had come, with only a nervous-looking glance back at us. I had the odd gut feeling that he wasn’t particularly eager about leaving us alone together, not that I understood why. If Hide was another ghoul—statistically, he had a less than a half percent chance of that—I certainly wasn’t going to start anything. Nor was I dumb enough to advertise that I was a ghoul. Well, I hoped I was smart enough to do that; I hadn't really practiced 'normal human' conversation in a long time.

If I was really lucky, he'd end up leaving now as well, now that Kaneki had ran off.

“So, how'd you meet Kaneki?”

Aw crap. I needed at least some preparation before talking to somebody this...upbeat. I shrugged,
biting at the inside of my cheek, trying to build an answer.

“Not much of a story there.” *Unless you count in all the ghoul related drama that happened beforehand.* “Met at Anteiku, and found we had enough in common to get along.”

“Heh, fair enough. Kaneki’s pretty easy for anybody to get along with since he’s so passive. Good thing you didn’t end up meeting the girl his age who works there, eh?” Hide was acting casual enough, but I somehow felt like a slide under a microscope. “So, what brought you to Tokyo? Can’t imagine you only made the trip to befriend the locals.”

“Well, it was theoretically a vacation when I left.” I bit at my cheek again. *At least that was how Robalson had tried to reassure me.* “By now, it’s more of a sabbatical though.”

“Niiice. For a full time student like me, a massive block of vacation time sounds like something out of a dream. Just getting to sleep in for a few weeks in someplace completely new…I don’t think it could get much better than that!”

“Careful there, you might start drooling.” Hide’s face was one of dreamy envy, no doubt imagining what he’d be doing on a sabbatical of his own. “Besides, most jobs don’t come with sabbaticals.”

*Unless you end up burned like a spy from the Cold War and stuck overseas on what was supposed to be a work trip.* Thinking about it like that made it sound like the setup to some kind of movie.

“So, what do you do?”

“Eh?” I rolled the words over in my head, unsure if I had misunderstood something.

“Your job! C’mon, you’ve got a job that has crazy long vacations, share some of that career path wisdom with me!”

I couldn’t help but snort with amusement. “Look, I'm a lot of things, but wise is probably not one of them. Actually, definitely not one of them.”

Hide’s response was to fix me with pleading puppy eyes that probably could’ve convinced Monica to try tofu. “Pleeease? I promise to keep it a secret if it’s something embarrassing.”

“All right, all right.” I conceded victory, trying to figure out a plausible enough lie to tell. “I work in law enforcement.”

Robalson had told me that the best lies were the ones that were mostly true.

“I didn’t know that police got that kind of vacation time.”

“Well, I don’t know about police—I’m more at the federal level for law enforcement.”

“Oh, that makes a lot more sense then. I should’ve expected that.” Then, after a pensive pause, “So how many crimes do you solve in a year?”

“Ah, I’m not exactly one of those guys, I’m more SWAT than detective, so I get involved for just the stuff too dangerous for the usual law enforcement guys.”

“I imagine it works kind of like how SAT and the police might work together.” Hide drew out an imaginary map as he talked. “You’re kind of like SAT, both in that realm of dealing with stuff too dangerous for laypeople and regular law enforcement, but while SAT is more regional, you’re federal…so that would mean you could operate anywhere in the country, right?”
“You figured that out fast.”

“It’s what I do.” Hide shrugged, sunny disposition dipping for just a couple seconds. “Law enforcement has been a recent interest for me.”

Hide changed the subject of the conversation a few more times after that, never returning to the topic of law enforcement but seeming to bounce ideas off of me at odd intervals. When I asked him why he was asking me—a foreigner he had just met—about all these things, he replied with that I was both a different perspective and was giving him straighter answers than other adults. It was a good point.

We ended up walking along another concrete-sided river walk, less by design and more by the fact that we were just wandering the ward at this point. I wondered if the spot where I killed Kureo was nearby. The thought wasn’t pressing, just an unsettling idea in the back of my head. Even then, that same part of me wanted to go back to that underpass and see what was left from that night, like a morbid tourist. Despite the good I could claim to have done, it was still not a very pleasant memory. Off to my side, I could tell Hide was firing off the odd glance at me. Once again I had the uncomfortable sensation that I was under a microscope, or at the very least, a curiosity. Hide was

“You want to grab some coffee?”

“Eh, I’ll have to pass.” I admitted. “Though I met Kaneki at a coffee shop, I’m really not a fan of coffee. I really only ended up there because I had no idea what the place was and felt like having an adventure.”

“Huh.” Hide turned to face me positioning his hands like a camera frame.

“What?” I asked, feeling slightly snarky. “Should I strike a pose?”

“Wha—no, no need.” The laughter that accompanied his response sounded forced. “You’re just a hard guy to read—I thought you were a dead ringer for a coffee connoisseur since you mentioned Anteiku. Shoot, speaking of reading, I gotta get back to studying. See you around, Allen!”

His exit barely gave me enough time to say a proper farewell. Whether I’d actually, be seeing him again was open to debate what with my nocturnal hours for Anteiku and the fact that I wasn’t really a social person. Not to mention the ceaseless questions being somewhat tiring. Seemed like a decent guy though.

With a sigh, I leaned on the railing meant to keep passerby from falling into the waterway below and restrained a yawn. Finding a hobby would probably be a good idea, otherwise I’d just end up wandering Tokyo and being an obvious public sight. And attracting curious passerby like Hide. Or more likely, since my luck had long since been established as bad, I’d end up attracting some ghoul eager to try foreign meat. Monica and some of the others back home had told me that there wasn’t a difference and subsequently tried and failed to get me to learn it firsthand, but the myth somehow managed to persist.

But, back to finding a hobby. Weightlifting was out of the question since I didn’t have the disposable funds to buy a gym membership, nor would it appear innocuous if the new guy at the gym was capable of benching more than his own weight as a warm-up set. Going shooting was even further out of the question, not just because of how much it all cost, but also because of just how tight I knew firearm law was. That left running and fighting, the eternal pastimes of man. Actually, the former was probably the most doable since all I needed was some sweats to run in, even though I’d probably get horribly lost while running around the ward.
It went without saying that I missed the facilities back at the BGA, but I did my best to force the thought from my head. Getting nostalgic wouldn’t help anything outside of dulling my senses. Better that I find something to do to keep me rooted in the moment. Hm. Getting running gear would work for now, and after that I could take a nap before heading out on patrol with Touka. Not the most complicated of plans, but I wasn’t the best at planning either. Still, it would work for today and I could go running tomorrow.

“Now,” I muttered to myself, “where could I buy a running outfit?”
Sparring

It only took a few days to find a pattern I could live with. Mornings at the coffee shop, afternoons after work spent running or talking with Kaneki, then a short nap and nighttime patrol with Touka. Routine felt good, probably because I was used to life with the military and BGA, and with the deliberations over my daily routine gone, I could start noticing little patterns. Nishio came in less early every other day, with pink marks on his neck mostly covered by his collar and was less irritable than usual. Kaneki brought a book every day and always had a coffee with two sugar cubes from a jar in his backpack. Touka had to hop on her tiptoes to grab cans of the darkest roasts from the top shelf—I made sure to move a can down to the table in the middle of the room after that.

Renji and I had now gone on a total of three trips looking for the recently dead and were getting along swimmingly. That is, we spent the trips in near-total silence and near perfect coordination. I was pretty certain that Renji hadn’t been in military service, but the man moved like a ghost and had an uncanny knack for just knowing things. If I had to guess, he would be a ghoul with a very good chance of growing old.

Touka though, did not like my routine. After only two days of me running, she complained that the ward, quote, ‘stunk like me’. When I admitted that I was doing several miles of running each day, her scowl indicated that she was less than pleased.

“What? I’m basically doing the whole thing at a dead run, it’s not like I can keep myself from sweating. Not like I learned some technique to keep myself from doing that in the years I’ve been running.”

We were perched on the flat roof of a storefront, letting Touka catch her breath. The ward had progressively gotten less quiet over the last few days, and tonight had been no exception. No fighting—at least none that we were involved in—for the moment, but we had a lot staredowns with a lot of Aogiri members. Typically, they just retreated back south. Touka and I however, were very sure that we’d end up fighting sooner rather than later. It was the first thing we had agreed upon.

“Yeah, well, you’re just stinking up the ward, you know that?”

“So what,” by now, the two of us regularly engaged in verbal combat when we were out of the café, “you’d rather have the ward stink like Kaneki then?”

“S-shut up!” I had picked the name at random, but the choice obviously touched a nerve. “For your information, Kaneki doesn’t stink when he sweats.”

“Waitwaitwait.” This had gotten weird quick and I had to take a second to process this bizarre revelation, “How do you know what Kaneki’s sweat smells like?”

Touka’s reply had been to turn bright red and sock me in the arm hard enough to leave a bruise. Not really surprising. I had a few ideas—well one idea, really—on why Touka would know something like that, but it really only made sense if Kaneki was less awkward and Touka had a side of her that wasn’t like low grit sandpaper. Stranger things had happened.

“I didn’t expect you to be so diligent.”

“Huh?” We had been in dead silence since the Kaneki thing, which had to have been an hour ago. It
had been quiet in the ward since, and became thoroughly creepy when both of us had heard faint screams from the ward to our south; not our problem. “About what?”

“The whole thing. You never show up late, never complain or really lose your cool. Hell, you even get involved with stuff you don’t have to.”

“So, what? You’re trying to figure out what angle I’m working?” I shrugged, mildly confused. With most of our conversations being bickering, it was hard to tell if Touka was being earnest.

“Nah, I don’t think you’re that smart.” Any rudeness the words implied was hobbled by a rare chuckle. “You tried to negotiate with that white-haired investigator, after all. Just dunno why you’re putting in all this effort.”

“Mh. Back after my…” I searched for the right word to translate, “…transition, I really didn’t fit in anywhere. Being around humans just felt…unsettling.”

“And you didn’t like ghouls, I bet.”

“The opposite, really. They didn’t like me.” I shook my head, resisting the urge to pace the rooftop. “Didn’t smell like one of them, didn’t act like them, didn’t know any of the social conventions. A lot of them saw me as an abomination and said it to my face. Sure I lived with ghouls when I was in the military, but it would’ve been more accurate to say that they lived together and I was just in close proximity.”

“Tough luck. They had it worse than you though.”

“All of them had a dead parent or sibling.” I agreed, not bringing up that I was also in the dead parent club.

Touka didn’t say anything, though she moved to sit at the crest of the rooftop we had been sitting on.

“Eventually I figured out that I could get a little respect by doing more of the stuff; take more cleaning details, volunteer duties, dirty work. It kind of worked. Still got called stuff like ‘half-snack’.”

“Sounds shitty.”

I nodded in agreement, taking a seat as well. “Real shitty. Got better at the BGA though; they were just wary of me.”

“So why is it that you sound like you’re missing them?” Touka queried, cupping her chin with a hand. She sounded as if she was actually curious.

“It was my squad leader who took pity on me, told me that I’d have to ‘throw myself into the ghoul life and treat the team as family; show them they’re important to you and they’ll do the same’. She said it better, but that was the general idea… and I did end up seeing them as family, I guess.”

“Well, she wasn’t wrong. I only want to kick your ass every other day now.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at the admission. “Well if you want a rematch sometime, you only have to ask.”

My offer had only been half serious, but Touka had been dead serious because she approached me the next day after our shift and told me to follow her. When she led me down to the basement of
the café and pulled open a trapdoor, the only thing keeping me from heeding the alarm bells ringing in my head was that Kaneki was rounding out our group. After an industrial light switch and another stairwell, we emerged into, well, somewhere.

“What is this?” I asked, peering around the lit space and down the yawning maws that opened at either end of the area. “Abandoned subway station?”

It was Kaneki who replied, explaining that this was part of the city’s storm drain system. *Probably part of the same system as the artificial stream I had fought Mado in.* According to Kaneki, he and Touka had been using the spot as a place to teach him to fight—successfully, if Kaneki’s performance at the church had been an indicator of his ongoing progress. Which meant Touka was serious about the rematch. I was actually…kind of eager for a bit of stress relief. The fact that it would be with the person who had directed a stream of snarky abuse in my direction only made it better.

Pulling off my polo—I didn’t want to mess up more than the t-shirt beneath it with this—I saw that Touka had already tossed her hoodie to the side and was stretching while staring me down like a wolf.

“So.” Bouncing a bit on my feet, I stepped closer to the center of the area. “How hard are we playing this? Soft touch? Bruises? Sprains?”

“I’m going to leave you with welts.”

“Uh, guys?” From the side of the room, Kaneki piped in. “Just don’t get too into it, you know?”

Both Touka and I turned our heads to look at him, and the kid took a step back as an intimidated half-grin crossed his face.

It was Touka who made the first swipe, unsurprisingly. She was fast, not too fast to track, but a bit faster than I could consistently react to. That said, I had no idea what kind of fighting style she had learned. There were no grapples or anything remotely fancy about what she was doing; it was all fists, feet and knees, which was probably some Eastern style, but then I basically only knew that I had been taught a modified version of whatever was taught to humans in the military. Which had then been even further changed by what my team had beaten into me on the mats.

After a short string of partially deflected hits, Touka managed to get in the first solid hit, a kick into my hip that pulled me off balance. When I grabbed her leg and almost dragged her off balance as well, I could tell that she wasn’t expecting the grapple. Mostly by her startled squeak.

The remainder of the fight was similarly inelegant. She nearly got me on the ground twice after that, though she wasn’t able to do too much of a follow-up beating. In exchange, I managed to wind her a couple of times and managed to launch her into the railing at the far edge of the platform. Touka, though, was breathing hard by the time I had begun to feel warm. Even so, she had fulfilled her promise; I was already feeling soreness wrap my forearms like a bandage.

She had also landed a couple of lucky hits on my not-fully-healed injuries from my fight with Tsukiyama, but I wasn’t about to show weakness in the middle of a bout.

Warily, Touka drew back with a look of irritation on her face.

“Yeah,” She sourly admitted between breaths, “you’re really good. Dammit. How’d you get that good anyway? You’re only a couple years older than Kaneki.”

“Military life, remember?” I shrugged, suddenly self-conscious. “Didn’t learn much out of books,
but for those three years I probably spent twelve hours a week on the training mats getting the stuffing beat out of me.”

“Can…can I go a round against you?” From the side of the room, Kaneki raised his hand as if sitting in a classroom.

“Don’t be stupid.” Touka retorted. “You haven’t even been training for two months yet. You’d get squished.”

“Well, maybe, but…”

“I can go a practice bout.” I offered: he was basically me if I had been thrown into the deep end after my surgery. “If you still want to do a round.”

“Sure!” Kaneki’s eyes lit up at the offer.

He almost bounded into the space as Touka took his place sitting against the wall.

“Ready?”

Kaneki nodded.

It didn’t take more than a few minutes for me to agree with Touka; he definitely was green. Not really the bad kind of green, more the kind that just needed to keep at it. That said, he was definitely trying to emulate Touka. After playing on the defense for a few long moments, I swept his forward leg out from under him and used the lost balance to pin him prone with one hand between his shoulder blades.

“First thing you need to do is stop copying Touka’s stance.” I reached down to help him to his feet. “She’s an ukakku—unless you can match her speed and reflexes, standing like her isn’t going to help you. What kagune type do you have?”

“R-rinkaku.” Kaneki replied, sounding a little shaken. I had brought him to ground at nearly full speed, though not really roughly.

“First rule of fighting as a rinkaku is to not be afraid of taking the light hits; you can out-heal any of the other types without worrying about the damage stacking up.” Finally getting some use out of that BGA course. I took my stance again. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

We started again, I still being careful about not hitting him too hard. I made the leg sweep again, and was gratified to note that he had shifted his stance enough that he could deflect it with barely a stumble. That said, he still had a lot to work on. I made another move when he directed a punch at chin height, deflecting it to the side before grabbing his arm and bringing my free arm out and tapping his elbow bringing him to the ground. It was the same maneuver Tsukiyama had done, though it would’ve broken his arm along the horizontal plane rather than the vertical.

“Two things,” I said, letting him go, “first is that I think you might be hesitating at the end of every punch, which is how you’re going to get caught like that.”

“He’s been doing that.” Touka interjected from the sidelines. “Trying to beat that mistake out of him is proving hard.”

“Think of it like this.” I ignored the comment from our audience and pantomimed a punch in slow
motion. “When you punch, think of it as a story; extension, impact, retraction. When you’re doing one part of the trip, you should be preparing to make the next part.”

“Got it.” From the way Kaneki was looking at me, I had the sudden impression of pouring water onto a sponge.

“Where were you aiming, actually?”

“Well, at your, uh, face.” Lightly, Kaneki scuffed the floor with a foot. “I guess.”

“If you really want to end a fight, you gotta go for the joints or the soft targets. Elbows, knees and the like will keep them from really fighting back and if you get a hit to the throat or gut you can disorientate or distract ‘em long enough to really hurt them.”

Kaneki nodded, his face pensive. “That explains how you brought me down do easily the first time. And, that’s how you managed to throw Touka into the railing, because you had her elbow locked out straight in the grapple.”

“Good eye.” I didn’t expect him to pick up something like that as a novice.

“Can we try going another few rounds?”

I hadn’t expected that request from the world’s meekest ghoul. I also certainly wasn’t opposed to helping him get better. That said, I was hoping for something, well, challenging. Touka had been something, but she wasn’t exactly capable of outdoing me in hand to hand due to her lack of experience, even if her speed helped cover that. Two versus one would probably be a lot better for keeping me in shape, but even then, bouts of that were basically required to be as close to full contact as possible.

“Yeah,” I replied, still trying to think of a way that I could get better, “we can go a couple more.”

“Actually, I need to collect Allen for an errand.”

The three of us looked up to the stairwell, where my evening companion had appeared like a rabbit from a hat.

“Renji?” I was surprised to see him while the sun was still up. “Yeah, let me grab my shirt. Kaneki, how about we do that tomorrow after we finish our shift?”

“Sure!”

I grabbed my shirt and met Renji in the back of the cafe floor.

“So,” I asked, redoing the upper button on my shirt, “what’s on the agenda for today?”

“One thing for today; need to get you set up with a mask. Know you’ve been using that surgical one for a while, but getting you a proper one is paramount with the ward being as it is right now.”

“All right. Where to then?”

“Fourth ward.”
As usual, the car that Renji and I drove off into the heart of the city was different from the previous ride we had shared. Also as usual was the wordless state in which we sat. I hadn't asked him where the cars were coming from, and I had no plan to; it was a question I suspected I already knew the answer to.

“Here we are.”

Renji brought the car to a stop at the opening to a pedestrian-only street, nodding pointedly in its direction. We were not where I expected us to be. I was expecting a little more like a noir film; cramped alleyway, dingy neighborhood, entrance as a metal door at the bottom of a dirty stairwell. Once again, I had the irrational suspicion that I was being played.

“Are you coming with?” I asked, noting that Renji had made no move to shift the car into park.

He shook his head. “The studio will be halfway down the street, on the left. Once you finish up there, I’ll meet you at the other end of the street.”

I nodded. *Fair enough, since we were probably sitting in a no parking zone.*

Climbing out of the car, I watched Renji pull away before turning down the indicated street. Clean, lots of white, little decorations by most of the doors. Yeah, definitely not where I expected a business that catered to and was possibly ran by ghouls to be located. It looked—what was the word—too cheery-looking, though I knew I shouldn’t be judging any books by their covers. At least the name of the place made it apparent that it was where Renji had expected me to end up.

“HySy Artmask Studio,” I muttered in English, reading off the name on the signage “not leaving much room for mistaken interpretation here, are we?”

The door was unlocked. The interior of the shop was theatrically lit, recessed lights bringing the tapestry of masks on the walls into sharp relief and leaving little islands of lights for the display cabinets arranged about the space. On the side of the room, a pair of masks sat on mannequins and despite my caution, my curiosity prodded me closer. One was of an ape, using metallic strips and accents to look like something out of science fiction, while the other was a dog’s head, done over in a shiny black paint. I looked it over, watching the reflection of my face twist and swirl across the contours. It reminded me of—shoot, what was the name of that Egyptian god…

“Boo.”

I took a quick step back, looking as the other mask turned to look at me.

“Told you he wouldn’t jump.”

I was pretty sure knew that voice. “Irimi?” Granted, I hadn’t really heard much of that voice.

Hands rose from the pair of figured, pulling masks from faces.

“Accurate guesswork, Mr Grissom.” Irimi’s voice was wry, even if her face was still serious as ever. “Though I suppose that shouldn’t be too surprising from you.”

She was also one of the two people at the coffee shop who insisted on calling me by my last name.
“You must be Allen.” The second person, a man, looked me over as if I was a painting. “I was beginning to wonder when you’d arrive.”

Now that he was in something approaching proper light, I could see that the man had covered most of his exposed skin in tattoos, a rarity, given the difficulty in tattooing a ghoul. More unusual was the line of unreadable text looped around his neck. His eyes were the biggest draw though: flooded black. Or perhaps not—I didn’t see the veins around his eye as standing out. A tattoo? Special contacts? Incredible amounts of personal discipline? I didn’t know.

“Now that I’ve made sure Allen made it here, I should be heading out. Thank you for the touch-up, Uta. Allen, I’ll see you at the café next week.” With that, Irimi took her leave.

Uta watched her go, a ghost of a smile on the edges of his mouth.

“I suppose nobody could ever accuse Irimi of talking too much.” Tapping a finger on his jawline, he circled me like a shark. “You must be here for a mask, of course. Please, take a seat.”

I was pointed to a stool next to a small table nestled against the wall, upon which Uta arranged a notebook and a spooled measuring tape. It was not a surprise to see that most of the table was covered with various tools and fabrics. Almost immediately after I sat, the maskmaker was already scratching down something in the book with a pencil.

“First, the basics; full or half face?” When I hesitated, he continued as he unwound a length of the tape. “Full face provides the most coverage and is generally more popular, but if this will be the first time you’ve worn a mask, half face is usually more comfortable.”

“I’m used to headgear, so either should be fine.” I think.

“Kaneki made the same choice as you, you know.” Uta noted, swapping the notebook for the measuring tape. “Half-ghouls of a feather, I suppose? Also, allergies? Latex, copper, that kind of thing.”

“No allergies. How did you…?”

“Well, even if Irimi hadn’t told me,” a chuckle escaped his lips as he regarded my troubled expression at the admission, “your scent has a very similar pattern to your matched pair. The two of you would make quite the attractive duo.”

I sat uncomfortably for a few moments. Guess no secrets were sacred in the ghoul world.

Uta was moving between the measure and the notebook, leaving me to look at the walls.

“An impressive body of work, is it not?”

“I could only nod, the measuring tape tight against my jawline.

“Beyond just ghouls, I do work for kabuki theatres, musicians seeking mystique, underground culture scenes, even ghoul imitators—though actual ghouls make the majority of my patrons. Some of those even tattoo their eyes to look like mine. As I told Kaneki, I always get a thrill whenever a human customer comes through the door, even if they’re only around to browse. Now,” the measuring tape was placed back onto the table with a tap, “what brought you to this city, besides to have a mask made by yours truly?”

“Ah, well.” Small talk was not my best skill. “It kind of just happened. Wasn’t supposed to be the one who made the trip, but, I did.”
“Hmm, fate is a fickle mistress. I suppose at least you’ve managed to make acquaintances along the way?”

I thought of Amon and Hasuko, then of Kaneki and Touka.

“The first were nice at first, not so much once I got to know them. Kaneki and the people at Anteiku…they’re not hiding who they are.”

Uta marked something, then peered at the side of my head and made a few more scribbles in his notebook.

“An interesting perspective. I heard a rumor from a white rabbit that there was a foreigner wandering the ward with a pair of investigators.” Oh crap. He knows. “I would think your description bears an interesting parallel, hmm?”

So much for keeping that particular chapter of my life hidden. Not that it was really hidden to anybody who had kept a watch on the CCG anyway.

“Now isn’t that an interesting look. Don’t worry,” he shared a conspiratorial wink, “I won’t judge; I’ve done a number of distasteful things in my day to fit in.”

The imagery of what ghoul could’ve done to make collaborating with the CCG a nonissue was unpleasant consider. Back home, ghouls that collaborated with BGA were toeing a fine line. Suspected collaboration with us or the much-less-peaceful municipal ghoul agencies was justification for outright mutilation and murder.

“The big question is if you feel as if you’re fitting in.”

“Eeh.” I shrugged as much as I felt I could. “I blend in with them, and they made me feel welcome, but I just can’t get over the feeling that sometimes I’m more of a ghost in the building than an actual member.”

There was a sound of vigorous erasing from where Uta sat, and he made another pair of measurements along the side of my face. “So if it came down to a fight, would Anteiku’s resident specter be willing or unwilling to lend aid?”

“Willing.” The speed at which the answer came to mind was perhaps unsurprising. “I’d fight an Investigator or ghoul if asked. For some of them, I’d be willing to set a few fires and flip the city on its head.”

Not that I’d admit it to Uta, but I was mentally prepared to leave a trail of bodies if it came down to protecting Kaneki or Hinami. The former I was having a hard time not seeing as a sibling. The latter, well, I had done enough to her already.

“So, the ghost has fangs, eh?” The maskmaker chuckled, pencil still working to and fro on the page of the notebook. “And here I was thinking the dead Dove might not have been at your hand after all.”

“Guess that isn’t exactly a secret either.”

“Oh hardly; what happened that night is hardly a known quantity. Most ghouls only know that Kaneki managed to survive a fight with a Dove, and though they also know another Dove was killed…well, the speculation is rampant.” Tapping the pencil against his chin, Uta pensively rolled his eyes to the ceiling before slyly regarding me. “I’m rather surprised nobody has claimed responsibility for it yet. Claiming it would garner a certain amount of fame and notoriety, you
I shook my head. “Not really my thing.”

“You’d rather be the silent hero, watching from the shadows then? I’m pretty sure Irimi would find you more attractive with something like that. Or are you looking for a more dramatic entrance into the ghoul world?”

“Ehh, kind of neither. The whole fame and hero thing just doesn’t click in my head. Right now, I’m still figuring out what I should be doing, and keeping my head down.” Then my mind finished processing what had just been said to me. “Wait wait wait, what? You’re advising me to what?”

“Well, if you want a piece of advice—keep your eyes open.” I couldn't help but nip at the inside of my cheek in annoyance as Uta sidestepped what I was actually concerned about. His amused chuckle wasn't a help either.

“Why’s that?” And why am I sure you’re not going to tell me the whole truth?

“The whole west side of the city is on edge, haven’t you felt it? The eleventh ward is in a state of near panic, and I couldn’t tell you the last time any ghoul or group was bold enough to attack the Doves’ field offices.”

“Something big is on the horizon.” I completed the implied warning. Fits with how the Twentieth ward is getting steadily more busy.

“Indeed.” Snapping the notebook shut, Uta nodded, satisfied. “But, my current concern on the horizon is less on that than my current project of your mask.”

“Yeah, about that...when should I be telling you what it should look like?”

“You already have.” He tapped the cover of his notebook with a black-painted fingernail. “Knowing my subject makes for excellent motivation...and allows me to fit the mask to the mirror in more ways than just making it comfortable to wear.”

“I see.” I really didn't. The preference of pretty alongside practical was something I had experienced back home; even Monica had that same deal. “Well, I hope I gave you enough.”

Uta smiled as I stood, a look that was unexpectedly 'true' despite his off-putting appearance.

“Enough and more. I’ll bring the mask by Anteiku when it’s finished.”

I took my leave, blinking hard as I emerged from the chessboard onto the brightly lit street. Well, that was done and now the next step was just to wait. And hope that nothing went seriously south in that time—not that hoping for that was anything new. On the bright side, that didn’t take too much time to get through the whole process.

“He kept you for a while. I ended up waiting nearly an hour for you.”

Irmi was leaning on the wall opposite the maskmaker’s studio.

Maybe longer than I thought. “Didn’t know you were going to be waiting.”

“I didn’t either. Renji called me to have me tell you where he was parked, since you don’t have a phone and don’t know the area. Plus, it’s more risky for you to be going around in broad daylight than us.”
“Since I’m a foreigner.” I finished, seeing an uncomfortable look cross Irimi’s face. “It’s fine, I get it. So where’s Renji parked?”

Irimi nodded for me to follow her and we began to walk to the opposite end of the street. Despite Tokyo being that much larger of a city than Chicago, I was still surprised at how quiet some areas were, with even the constant scrabble of traffic sometimes becoming near inaudible. By now I was no longer privately marveling at how clean everything was; I’d find my hometown absolutely filthy when I got home. If I ever got home.

“I thought you had a phone though.”

“Yeah, but no.” I answered. “I’ve got one that works here, but it’s probably compromised; the CCG probably have my number, so if I put the battery back in it and call somebody, it’ll be tracked.”

“Smart. They don’t have your face, though.” We split for a moment to dodge a pair of businessmen as I followed her around the corner. “I check the CCG wanted posters every few days to see if anybody I know pops up.”

That was good to know, but also didn’t really make sense: I had to have a few dozen hours of security footage from my time at the CCG on their servers. Not to mention that they were probably eager as hell to hunt me down if Monica’s call to me was to be believed. Personally, I had been surprised that I hadn’t been the subject of a public safety bulletin on the nightly news.

“Makes sense that you wouldn’t have a poster up though,” Irimi noted, turning down another street, “you were walking the ward with the Doves for a while. If they put up a poster of you, it’d basically say ‘we work with ghouls’ and would be an embarrassment. Hell, it probably is—how’d you avoid getting pinged by the Rc gates at the offices?”

“They were only at the front doors.” I shrugged. “I came in and out via the parking garage in the basement and left via the employee entrances when walking the wards.”

“Hm. Lucky.” After a few more moments, she nodded to a tiny parking lot. “There we are.”

Lucky indeed. If I had set off one of those on my first weeks, I probably would’ve been dead within minutes, either via quinque or acute-onset lead poisoning. And my idiot self would’ve been trying to figure out what the heck I had set off.

I wasn’t really surprised when Irimi hopped into the backseat, though Renji informing us that we weren’t going to head back to the café was unexpected.

“Where to?” I asked, buckling myself in.

“Fourteenth ward. Got somebody who wants to meet you.”

“Okay.” Of all the times to be popular, I didn’t expect it to be today.

Irimi took her leave when we parked again, this time in a parking garage in an area of the city that looked to be a higher-class tier of recreation than where I had been drinking with Hasuko. Not the snooty kind of classy, closer to the type of classy that involved local brews and packed tables. My bar comparison was incorrect, as Renji and I ended up in front of a very unassuming door to a bar in a very quiet covered alleyway.

“Helter Sketer Bar.”

The name—though not the ‘bar’ part—was wholly in English, probably because there was no good
translation. Between the nondescript brass sign and the location, I half expected there to be a slot in the door for a bouncer to survey us, but Renji spoiled the illusion when he walked in without a moment’s hesitation. Spoilsport.
The interior of the bar was all subtle décor and low lights, lending it the air of a basement speakeasy. Which was probably the intended appearance.

“Ren! Since when do you visit more than twice in—” The current sole occupant emerged from behind the bar, greeted Renji and immediately rounded on me. “—Ooh, are you who I think you are?”

“Um. Maybe?” Her last words were unmistakably aimed at me.

I wasn’t prepared to be the subject of more laser-focused attention, and the low-cut top was not helping. At all.

“Itori, this is Allen, second newest employee at the café.” I didn’t know if Renji was stepping in to save me or getting the formalities out of the way. “Allen, meet Itori, owner and sole bartender at Helter Skelter.”

“Nice to meet you.” I bowed, though I was getting the feeling that most ghouls didn’t run with this particular social convention.

“Sit, sit.” Itori waved us over to the bar. “Make yourselves comfortable.”

In the space of a few moments, I was sitting next to Renji while Itori cleaned a set of glasses.

“So, you’re the second newest at Anteiku, and” she leaned toward me with a knowing grin, “second one-eyed ghoul at Anteiku if the rumor is true.”

“Well, it is.” I confirmed with a shrug. At this point, probably even Hinami knows.

“Based on how you look, I’m going to say you have it under better control, hmm?”

“Yeah, he’ll get there though.” I don’t think he wants to be stuck with one eye for the rest of his public life either. “Just takes time and a mentor or two.”

Next to me, though looking at his phone, Renji grunted his agreement.

“Aha! So you're planning on making yourself Eyepatch's mentor?”

“Eyepatch?”

“Kanekichi, of course! Your surrogate little brother!”

“Ah.” She was much too energetic for me to reciprocate. Nor did I understand where the nickname for Kaneki had come from.

“Allen. I need to head out.” Renji stood up, slipping his phone back into a pocket. “Yoshimura needs my help with an…emerging situation. Can you find your way back from here?”

I tapped my pocket, making sure I had my map. “Yeah.”
With a nod, Renji made his exit, leaving Itori to roll her eyes at his back.

“I think he does that just to avoid sticking around sometimes,” she pouted, placing one of the glasses back on its shelf, “he used to be less reserved when he was running around with Uta—even if all he ever wore was black back then.”

“Seems to be about all he wears these days too. Are those two really friends?”

Itori laughed, coming around to the other side of the bar and taking a seat next to me.

“Those two got up to all sorts of trouble in the fourth ward, but that’s all ancient history. Nowadays, they’re why the area is nearly unlivable for foolish ghouls. Those two are still frenemies, but they’ve cooled down over the years.”

Propping my legs on the barstool, I tried to imagine a version of Renji that was a hothead, but failed. In all my time with him, he had never spoken in anything more than his usual level tone. Nor could I imagine how he and Uta had ended up meeting.

“Hey Allen,” reaching over the bar, she pulled a bottle from its underside with a mischievous look and a wiggle, “free drink if you show me your eye!”

“All right.” It took barely a thought to have eye turn black. *And a drink might help me feel a little less awkward.*

“Oooh!” Itori brought her face in far closer than I was expecting. “It’s still exotic, even after seeing Kanikichi’s! Its your left one—is there anything special about that?”

“Well, I am a lefty,” I confirmed, “don’t know if that has anything to do with it.”

“Hm. There are more questions than answers when it comes to one-eyed ghouls, even with all I know on the subject. Not that I’d be adverse to getting a personal education sometime.”

What appeared to be wine was poured into a pair of glasses, one of which was slid in front of me. It was more opaque than I had remembered wine to look, though it certainly smelled like it had alcohol in it. As best I could remember, wine was not one of the things we could drink due to the non-human organic particles in it. On the other hand, Itori was sipping at hers without looking like she was slurping down motor oil.

*Well, if she’s drinking it…*

Cautiously, I took a taste. Then, a less cautious sip. The drink definitely had alcohol in it from how it burned on the way down, but I could not for the life of me place the taste or what it was made out of. Some investigator I was. Itori was watching me with a grin playing off her lips.

“What?”

“How do you like it?” She was definitely enjoying something about the whole deal as her smile widened.

“It’s definitely strong. What’s it made from?”

“This is a specialty popular with all the gourmets; fermented blood, aged in a warm dark place.”

*Oh. That explained a lot, since I wasn't really 'cultured'.*

Itori snickered, the glass held at her lips. “You must be as new to this as Kaneki, even if you look
more knowledgeable.”

“Kind of.” I took another sip from my own glass, not eager to be on the topic of my lack of knowledge. “I’m new to the city, remember? That, and my social circle at home was... pretty small. So, what do you do besides the bar? It can’t take up all your time.”

“Uh-uh-uh, you can’t just ask a lady that without offering something first.” Itori’s rebuttal came with a playful tone and a wiggling finger. “What do you do?”

“Well, at Anteiku I—”

“Don’t you play boring with me Alle-gator, you know I mean what you did back in your original country.”

Alle-gator? That was new to me.

“Well, I was military for a while.”

Itori gave me a look that clearly said ‘go on’. Or ‘flirt with me’. I erred on the side caution with the former.

“And then I kind of ended up in a group that handled dangerous ghouls, which led to me being a kind-of adviser here.” I braced for the likely explosion.

Except Itori was wearing a look best described as devious?

“Now that is both juicy and scandalous. And I wasn’t totally sure what you were likely to say.”

“Your turn.”

“Well, I do a little of everything, though nothing as interesting as what you’ve been up to. Bartending, exploring, fermentation, other ghouls when they catch my eye, but the bar is really just a hub to trade information.” She nudged her shoulder into me playfully. “Don’t worry, your past is safe with me—histories that personal are one of the few taboos here. Besides, its rather cute to see you uncomfortable.”

“That’s... good.” I took another few sips of my drink, uncomfortably reflecting that it was lucky I had been vague. “So what do you do with the information?”

“Oh, most of it I don’t pay special attention to. A lot of it just gets shared around by the patrons for public safety—newcomers, CCG movements, hunting territories, daily news. You know, daily news Raising the glass to her lips, she winked at me over the rim. “But for the really juicy tidbits, I’m in the business of buying and selling. For example, one of the newest ghouls in the ward has military experience.”

I could only nod, take another drink from my own glass and hope Itori really was serious about not selling off my history. Back home at the Bureau, I would’ve been unsurprised if she was in Intelligence. There were probably ghouls doing the same thing as her back home as well, though I could only guess at that. Once again, I could kick myself for not trying harder to get into the ghoul community back home.

“So you’d be the one to ask about anything going on in the ward, huh.”

“Broaden your point of view, Alle-gator. I have a good handle on what’s going on in the whole of the city—human, CCG and ghoul—and some of the suburbs beyond that.”
I couldn’t really think of anything to say to that.

“Try me.”

“Try what?” I was actually surprised at how quickly how fast I was going through the fermented blood.

“Ask me something. Or even better, ask me something difficult!”

“Well…uh.” I really didn’t have a question on the top of my head. “Give me a sec.”

To be honest, I didn’t really have any thoughts chewing at my mind right now. It wasn’t like I could ask her how to get back to the States, or recover my quinque. Really, the only thing that I wanted to know about was…Kaneki. Actually asking her about Kaneki’s life felt icky on several levels and borderline close to stalker-ish.

“All right, I think I have one.” I tapped my fingertips on the bar while I tried to phrase it cleanly. “Who in the city would be able to turn a human into a one-eyed ghoul?”

“Somebody’s got a curiosity, hmm?” Turning toward me, Itori placed her feet on the footrest of my barstool. “What makes you think that he wasn’t the CCG’s doing.”

“If it was the CCG, Kaneki probably wouldn’t be out and about. Or alive. And since one-eyed ghous don’t just pop up in nature, there’s got to be another party involved.”

“Good logic, but that’s one question even I only have loose threads for at the moment. My guess would be to start with the doctor who made the statement after the steel beam incident a while back.”

“Steel beam incident?”

“Oh? Kaneki didn’t tell you how he came to be?” Something unsavory glinted in Itori’s eye as she leaned in close enough that I could smell the drink on her breath. “A ghoul going by the name of Rize Kamishiro lured Kaneki out to a construction site, but before she could properly kill him…Splat! A cable snaps and turns Rize into a meat pancake. You can probably guess what happened from there.”

“Kaneki ends up as a one-eyed ghoul with Rize’s organs.” I felt my lips twitch into a grin in spite of the grim content; a news brief I had heard a long time ago had floated to the top of my mind. That said, one element of the story didn’t sit right with me. “Did a cable actually fail? I thought construction sites were supposed to be safe.”

Glancing up from the safety of my drink, I saw Itori matching me with a conspiratorial grin of her own.

“You’re totally right. What were they thinking, leaving that much metal hanging around?” Her smile lost none of her bite when she brought her face close again. “Rize’s habits in other wards made her a great deal of enemies.”

“You mean it wasn't an accident.”

“Rumors about that night say that there was another party up at the site. Curious, no?”

I nodded: ghouls had their own layers of culture and unwritten laws. I also knew that violations were rarely dealt with leniently. What Rize had done was another mystery; murder of other ghouls,
territory theft, collaboration, promiscuity, irritating the wrong people—just like humans, the reasons a ghoul would kill another ghoul were countably infinite.

*Here’s to our violently similar nature.* With another sip of my drink I noticed a subtle tingle of the alcohol doing its work.

“You might not be wholly right about one-eyed ghouls not popping up in nature, you know.”

“Pardon?”

Itori drained her glass, sliding it next to the dregs of mine. “You won’t hear the story from the kiddies in the ward, but there is actually one other ghoul like you and Kanikichi in the city.”

“Oh really.” *And you have Monica waiting in the back room to surprise me too, right?*

“Well, I’m not wholly certain either—after all, there are conflicts as to whether this one eye is a boy or girl, or just how old they are. But, there are more than enough stories and bodies surrounding them to make it more than just...” she paused , her hand making a ‘thinking’ motion, “…the average urban legend. It’s even popped up among the humans.”

“So the rumor has teeth.”

“Teeth, no,” Itori flashed a very toothy grin, “Very long fangs, yes. If the rumors are to believed, your fellow hybrid is fond of leaving blood trails. But, they dropped off the radar almost a decade ago. None of the young ghouls even know the rumors nowadays.”

“So...why tell me about an old rumor?”

“Because you wanted to know about who created Kaneki.” Itori winked, and then held up her pointer finger for emphasis. “Because ghouls who disappear without leaving a body aren't always dead. Rumor has it that a ghoul with a...unique ferocity has shown up.”

“And you think that its the same one?”

“Hybrids are more...” She nudged her shoulder into mine, reminding me of just how low the neckline of her shirt went, “*well-endowed* than regular ghouls across nearly all aspects—something I’d love to get a personal demonstration of by the way—so there’s little mistaking one in a fight. There's been new stories seeping out of the woodwork about someone as ferocious as that one-eye.”

“...Well, it's not me.”

The laugh from Itori made me twitch. Not a sound I was expecting while discussing something serious. At least, I was pretty sure we were discussing a topic that was to be taken seriously.

“It’s not you,” she agreed, “But, if anybody in the wards has good odds of surviving contact with that one-eye, it’ll be you. Hence, my offer: find out everything you can about your other hybrid, and I’ll see what I can dig up on Kaneki’s metamorphosis. Deal?”

*Guess I wasn’t going to get much of a chance to negotiate.* “Where should I start looking?”

“Not with any kind of precision, but a ghoul with such a penchant for blood that will probably gravitate toward the less safe parts of the city.”

It didn’t take much thought to determine where that likely was. “The eleventh, then.”
Exactly where I really didn’t want to be.

“What’s wrong, Alle-gator?”

“Ah, nothing important.”

“Some would say everything is important. Tell you what, Alle-gator; you’re interesting company. You ever feel like blowing off some steam or sharing another story with me, you can drop by the bar any time you like.”

Chapter End Notes

It feels like it's been a while since I last said this, so, thank you all again for reading. I mean it.
My internet graced me with a few roadblocks the past few days, so this chapter is coming out a bit off the usual schedule. Pacing has been a bit slow over the past few chapters, but the next couple will pivot from character development to fit in a bit more action. We've got one more major character to re-introduce from an early appearance, and we'll be moving into Aogiri territory almost right after that.
As always, I do enjoy hearing from you, so if you have a question or comment feel free to drop me a line.
Despite spending more time with Kaneki, the only thing I told him about that day was that I had gotten fitted for a mask. This in turn led to more common ground, as we both could agree that Uta was uniquely strange. On the other hand, Kaneki’s reason was more because of how he looked versus how he spoke, while I was more put off by the content of Uta’s conversation. Might’ve been just because he spent all his free time reading, but I was pretty sure Kaneki had a habit of digging into what people said like a literary investigator.

I didn’t want to tell him about my talk with Itori though—at least not until I had enough time to digest everything she had said. When I eventually got around to telling him, I doubted he’d be willing to look for that other one-eyed ghoul even if he stood to learn something about his transition. Kaneki was more of a thinker than a fighter, even if he was getting good at the latter. Touka probably wouldn’t be either; she was very much in the philosophy of staying insulated from other ghouls due to her classwork and wanting to pass as human.

Much of the interaction Kaneki and I had was done between bouts, when the two of us would go through motions at half speed. Despite him saying that fighting wasn’t his thing, Kaneki was basically a sponge. More than once, we’d run through something at half speed and on the next bout Kaneki would copy it with surprising accuracy for somebody who allegedly wasn’t interested in fighting.

Touka though was more interested in starting the next bout rather holding a conversation as a breather. Tough luck for her though, because about half the bouts we did were two-on-one—mostly for my benefit as opposed to theirs, though she never went easy on me. Unfortunately, I only really could call the fights difficult after getting worn down from the first rounds and nobody else up at the café had expressed interest in joining in the fun. The whole issue boiled down to experience and training. Kaneki had very little of either, Touka had experience but none of the training to not fight like it was a brawl, where I had, well, a lot of both.

It wasn’t that I was complaining—well, I was complaining, but not out loud—but useful as the current setup was for Kaneki learning, I could only do hand to hand training for so long before the bouts got boring. Touka seemed to be of the same opinion, alternating between neutral and irritable moods on a daily basis.

“All right.” Late as ever, Touka hopped down the steps and flung her hoodie against the wall. “Kaneki, I’m taking the first bout this time. And you—”

Jabbing a finger at me, I got the impression that Touka wanted to use me as a squishable stress ball.

“—get ready to get your ass kicked.”

She was certainly welcome to try.

We took our places in the middle of the space, with Kaneki sitting on the lowest few stairs looking like our long-suffering parent. Kind of true; he was the one who acted the oldest out of the three of us.

“All right, bring it.” I settled into my stance, trying to anticipate what approach she’d use.

For her part, Touka grinned…and popped her kagune.
My next few seconds were spent backpedaling while my own emerged and formed. This was definitely not what I expected. Well, I had expected high-impact violence, but kagune-on-kagune was not really expe—

A crystalline blur zipped past where my arm had been a moment before.

However—

A second blur prompted me to dive to the side, trailing my own kagune behind me like a barbed ribbon.

—I found it a welcome change of pace.

My kagune met hers on the next swipe, deflecting the blow and giving me an opening for me to close for a grapple. For her part, Touka responded with a kick that felt as if I had been hit again by a truck. Sliding a bit on the smooth concrete and into a support pillar, my only option to dodge the next attack was upward. With my kagune active, I must’ve hit at least five feet going vertical when I used the spikes on the ribbon to anchor myself on the concrete.

Touka paused, an aggressive grin still sitting on her lips. “Neat.”

I had to agree; this had been on complete instinct.

Enough of dodging, let’s make this a proper fight.

Kicking off the wall, I brought my kagune down like a hammer and nearly caught Touka with the blow. She spent a good chunk of the following time on the defensive, though not without landing a few hits of her own. Despite the fact that we were going harder than we usually did, we weren’t going to leave much in the way of bruises between most of our contact being kagune-to-kagune and just not making not a lot of contact that actually would result in said bruising.

Much as I didn’t like it, I was also having to pull my punches. Angle my kagune so that I was hitting her with the flat part instead of the spikes, don’t dislocate joints or try to break bones. All this was harder with the kagune out because that voice of restraint was always quieter. Even with practice, it was harder than I remembered to keep the latent aggression tamped down. Maybe because it had been a long time since I had done this, maybe not.

That said, we needed to stop soon, before one of us had a mental slipup and did something stupid.

We made kagune contact again, this time hard enough that we ended up almost on opposite sides of the space. I didn’t do much more than have time to think that this would be a good point to end the bout, before I refocused on Touka. Instinct screamed danger, and without actively thinking, I found that I was flat on the ground as a wave of crystalline kagune perforated where I had stood. At that same moment, there was a sharp yelp from their source.

“Allen?” Kaneki was standing between the two of us. “Touka!”

“I—I’m fine, I think.” I recounted my limbs, not trusting the adrenaline in my system to give me an accurate assessment. “Probably fine.”

Rerunning the order of events as Kaneki ran over to Touka, I found them…jumbled. How had it gone down? Touka had fired, I had fired, I had dropped. I had dropped, Touka had fired, then I had fired. Or had I fired, Touka had fired and then I had dropped. Wait. I had fired?

Oh no. There was no way that had gone well
Frantically, I scrambled to my feet, then over to the other side of the room, where Kaneki was trying and failing to do something.

“I’m fine, you idiot.” Touka’s general-purpose tough girl tone was undercut by slight tremor underlining ‘idiot’.

“Y-you’re pinned to the wall!”

Shit.

“By my kagune! Geez! Look, I can free myself, see?”

Touka’s kagune furled itself away and she slid down the concrete pillar to sit. Both Kaneki and I breathed a sigh of relief. That was far too close to tragic than I wanted to be. I ended up taking a seat on the floor as well, earning a glare from Touka in the process.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” That wasn’t unexpected for Kaneki; he seemed to have a softer spot for Touka than for everybody else.

“Yeah.” Anger gone, Touka played with a rip in her shirt. “If you want to help though…there’s a sewing kit on the second floor, could you grab that?”

“Yeah.”

Kaneki ran upstairs, flashing a worried look at me in the process.

Touka was quiet until Kaneki was out of sight. “Oof. We fucked up, didn’t we.”

“Yep. That’s on me.”

“Not all you.” That was a first from Touka. “Renji always said never to train angry. Nearly turned you into a pincushion.”

“And I thought I had staked you like Dracula.”

Half amused, Touka shook her head. “Guess we’re both disappointed then.”

“Ha. Lets not do that again.”

Reaching up, Touka tugged my shard of kagune free from the concrete and rolled it between her palms.

“You got a messed up kagune, you know that? Doesn’t look like an ukkaku, doesn’t shoot like one, and it comes out too low on your back.”

I held out a hand and she tossed the shard over to me.

“Well, it’s a match to the lady who gave it to me and she is…unusual.” This shard was different than all the other ones I had made; rather than looking like a spike of quartz, this one had smooth ridges distinctly corkscrewing all the way up its length but for when they reversed direction near the end. “She was always telling me if I wanted to be strong, I’d have to eat like her.”

“Pfft. The amount you eat, she was probably trying to make sure you didn’t pass out from hunger.”

“Mmm.” I ran my over a small segment of ridges, trying to figure out why it looked familiar. “She was more into cannibalism though.”
Touka made a quietly disgusted ‘ew’ and wriggled uncomfortably in place. I set the shard on the concrete with a clink, personally irritated that I couldn’t figure out the familiarity. Something I could mull over on my next run. Kaneki was sure taking his time getting the sewing kit.

“Kaneki’s a pretty good guy, isn’t he?”

“I’d say so.” What I couldn’t say was where this topic had come from. “Maybe a bit too passive though.”

“You think he’s seeing anyone?”

Now I really didn’t know where this was going.

“Uh. Probably not? Like I said, outside of training he’s just passive as hell.”

“That’s the truth…Still, he’s got some potential.”

I had absolutely no idea of what to make of that.

“If you tell him I said any of this—”

“—Yeah I know, you’ll kick my ass, right?” It was a familiar refrain.

Eventually, when Kaneki came down the stairs holding a small box, a switch flipped, and Touka was back to herself.

“The hell took you so long?”

“It wasn’t where I thought it was, I had to ask—” Kaneki took a quick look at me, “—for help.”

Don’t tell me I had scared him that badly in the round.

“Fine, fine. Just get the needle and thread out.”

While the two of them got sorted out with the kit, I left the shard and stood back up. At least my clothing had escaped this whole incident without anything more than a fresh layer of dirt and grit. Leaning on the railing that ringed the platform, I tried to get the botched bout out of my head.

Touka had told me that these tunnels had been built by ghouls, but it was probably more likely that there had been a few ghouls on the team of civil engineers responsible for building Tokyo’s storm drains. Probably also meant that the maps of the network were either inaccurate or outright missing. Something like this was probably impractical back home, between the river and how old some of the infrastructure was. On the bright side, if I got lost down here, all I had to do was follow the water.

Behind me, I heard Touka and Kaneki quietly disagree over something. Despite curiosity, I resisted the urge to eavesdrop or turn around. If Touka had some kind of interest in Kaneki—very likely, given what we had just talked about—me leaving them be was probably for the better. If only there was some kind of mirror with a good angle to look through, because my curiosity of what they were doing in silence was immense.

Hm.

Rummaging for half a moment to dig out my phone, I—quietly—flipped the screen open. It was unpowered, since the battery was sitting in my other pocket, but all that was needed was the reflective sheen of the screen. With a little fiddling to appear innocuous, I managed to finally get a good angle.
Kaneki was on one knee and bent in close, dutifully sewing at the shoulder of Touka’s shirt. For her part, Touka was leaning toward him probably more heavily than was needed just to help Kaneki sew up the tear. They were definitely having what Trisha would’ve referred to as ‘a moment’.

The phone went back in my pocket. Better to let that play out rather than intrude. And if Kaneki didn’t get a hint after this, I would be very surprised.

I also heard the trapdoor to the basement open, though I didn’t hear anyone on the steps. That would make it Itori—the only person in the café who managed to move without making a sound, even over that creaky spot on the second floor.

“Tou-ka! Ka-ne-ki! I brought you some water to help you cool off!”

_That was not Itori. Too energetic, too sunny, too...young._

“Oh! I didn’t know you were down here, mister Nishio. Weren’t you just upstairs?”

_Had the café added on another employee?_

I turned, more to see who my new coworker was than actually correct them. Except, it was a girl—brown hair, brown eyes, kind of old-timey clothes—holding a pair of glasses filled with water. So, not a coworker but a vaguely familiar face all the same.

The initially confused look on her face quickly twisted itself into something describable as _sheer terror._

Was this the kid I had almost tripped over on my run a few days ago? No, that had been a boy, and also closer to toddler age. Nipping at the inside of my cheek, I racked my head again—something had to explain.

The girl took one, then two shaky steps back before both glasses slid from her hands, the crash reminding me to blink. It was only after I saw her with the context of the sharp and watery puddle at her feet that I remembered. _Hinami._

_Oh fuck me._

I spun back around and stared pointedly at the concrete wall, wishing I could evaporate and reappear somewhere else. Behind me, I could hear quiet sobbing and Touka attempting to calm Hinami and stop what was almost certainly a heartbreaking scene playing out behind me. Kaneki was, presumably, standing around with a helpless look on his face. Doing the only thing I could think of to not somehow make this situation worse, I stayed locked in position until it sounded as if the pair had managed to get Hinami upstairs.

Of all things that could’ve happened today, why did it have to be that? Angry at myself and the universe, I rested my forehead on the cool metal of the guard rail as I tried and failed to keep the memory of that rainy intersection out of my head. I had spent so much time trying to keep her out of my head that I hadn’t even considered the possibility that we might see each other again. Stupid stupid stupid. And now that I actually thought about it, I should’ve expected it. Touka had been involved with her, from killing that CCG agent to the night under the bridge and I hadn’t given their relationship a second thought.

And I still couldn’t keep that day out of my head.

Feeling chips of paint come loose as my grip on the rail tightened, I tried to remind my
subconscious that I had already kicked myself enough for that. Naturally, my subconscious said ‘obviously not enough’ and continued.

So, with a quiet noise of irritation I sat down on the edge of the platform, resting my arms and chin on the lower rung of the guard rail. The weather had been mostly dry lately, so there really wasn’t any risk to getting wet from the trickle below my feet. Also on the bright side was that sitting here reminded me of the night I had killed Kureo, the happier memory making for a short reprieve.

“Allen?”

I broke my thousand yard stare on the far wall to regard Kaneki’s shoes.

“Are you, you know…okay?”

“Okay?” I shook my head, not looking up to make eye contact. “I honestly couldn’t tell you. How is…”

The ‘Hinami’ stuck in my throat like a blood clot.

“Touka’s calming her down upstairs. Well,” After turning briefly to the stairs, Kaneki sat down next to me. “finishing calming her down. The manager spoke with her after bringing you on, so it wasn’t as bad as a total surprise.”

_Not as bad as it could’ve been? I was there with the man who killed her mother. How exactly could that have been worse?_

Helplessly, I kneaded my forehead. “I should’ve done something that day. Instead, I just stood there like a deer in the headlights.”

“I should’ve too.” Kaneki sounded as he was being as hard on himself as I was. “Hinami found me, or I was lucky enough to find her, but when she brought me back to help, all I could do…”

Now it was Kaneki’s turn to rub at his uncovered eye as his voice trailed off.

“…I wasn’t strong enough to save Ryouko. All I could do was make sure Hinami didn’t see…”

He didn’t finish, but he didn’t have to. I dropped an arm around his shoulders and finally managed to meet his eye.

“I’m going to tell you right now that it’s impossible to save everybody. All you can do in a situation like that is what you know you can do.” I nodded at Kaneki, trying to see if I was making sense. “Take it from me, trying to overstep your own skills is only ever going to make a situation worse.”

Kaneki didn’t look convinced.

“Look. You did everything you were capable of, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I guess, but…”

“I never said you had to be content with how much you were able to do. Which is why you’re training, right?”

Nodding, Kaneki bounced his heels off the concrete in time with mine. “I just want to be prepared—I don’t want to let anybody else die.”

“We can step up the training if you want to push yourself.” Withdrawing my arm, I gave him a
nudge in the shoulder. “And if you want to join me on my runs, just let me know.”

We sat in silence for a while, the two of us sitting above the trickle in the storm drain. Lazily, a leaf sailed past, and I tried to distract myself enough from the memory in my head and the guilt in my gut. Not that it was really possible.

“If you want to be anything, be mad at me, all right? I fucked that up when I didn’t step in, and now I have to live with the consequences for the rest of my life.”

“I don’t think you have much of a reason to say you’re at fault for that though.” Kaneki shook his head. “You said a while back that you didn’t have much of an idea of what was going to happen, so I don’t think you should be so hard on yourself either.”

Withdrawing my arm I shrugged; he did have a point.

“I was trained to read situations like that and I didn’t catch it until it was too late,” Kaneki glanced toward the stairs for a moment, and I became aware that I might start rambling. “so personally, I can’t decide if that makes me more of a bad person or a failure. Hinami has every right to hate me to the day I die. Not to mention that I’ll owe her until then.”

“Ah, I don't know about that.” Rubbing his chin, Kaneki took a second look behind him. “Might be better to let her decide.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But,” I drummed my fingers on the railing and changed the subject, “if you want me to push you harder, I’ll start tomorrow and ensure you end up sore.”

“Sounds like a plan.” That managed to perk him up a bit, even if he seemed a bit nervous at the prospect. “I can’t wait.”

If Kaneki kept rubbing his chin like that though, he’d give himself a red spot. Even if I did see him as a little brother, I wasn’t going to tease him about it. With a final nod to him, I got back to my feet. With any luck, Touka and Hinami would both be upstairs still and since my work was done for the day, the only thing to do was to slip out the back door without traumatizing anybody else. On the other hand, since I would be patrolling the ward with Touka tonight, she’d probably take the opportunity to lay some trauma onto me.

I just wanted to lay down and try to decompress.

Turning to the stairs, I saw that Touka had reappeared, a reassuring hand resting on Hinami’s shoulder. Was it really impossible for me to not cause trauma for this kid? Exactly how long had they been standing there? I mentally braced myself for whatever was coming next; more tears, angry shouting, getting punched. Except the look on Hinami’s face wasn’t something I would’ve placed with any of those actions.

Her brown eyes were still wide and teary, but there was something, maybe not courage, maybe closer to resolve in the way she stood.

“I…I don’t hate you.” Her voice was small and her hands fidgeted little circles at the hem of her shirt, but there was enough strength in her words that I could almost believe them. “A-and you came to save big sis and me from…”

Hinami’s words trailed off and her eyes dropped to the ground at her feet. *Kureo.* Even if I trusted my voice, I don’t think I would’ve said anything.
“...I don’t think you’re a bad person.” She took a small step forward, away from Touka’s hand. “And you’ve been helping at Anteiku and teaching big brother and the café smells cleaner than when Touka was doing it...”

Behind her, Touka blinked, a look of irritated surprise across her face. Obviously, the last part was not expected.

“I-I miss m-mom and dad so m-much,” shifting her eyes downward, her hands twisted at the hem of her shirt, “and when big brother and sister aren’t around, I’m just s-so lonely ...so I just wanted to say thank you for helping them.”

I didn’t know how to answer that. How would one even answer that? The only thing that managed to escape my lips was a hoarse apology before Hinami bowed, turned and scampered back up the stairs. That would’ve been the cue to obey my legs and sit back down, but I resisted the urge and instead immediately bit into my cheek. A bad habit I hadn’t been repressing enough. Kaneki walked over, probably to see if I was all right, but I told him he’d do more good checking on Hinami rather than me and waved him off. I was not ‘all right’ after all that, least of all after that statement.

The manager was waiting for me when I got back up to ground level.

“Allen,” it was hard to not think I was in trouble, despite his concerned look, “are you all right?”

“Ahh, mostly.” I made an uncertain sounding sigh. “Physically, at least. You don’t need to worry about me, Hinami’s the one who—”

He brushed away my answer with gentle wave of his hand.

“Hinami has two individuals beyond yourself that are deeply concerned with her wellbeing. Allow me, for a moment, to be concerned about yours.”

His voice was fatherly enough that I couldn’t really help but to be honest.

“I was absolutely not ready for that.”

“And yet, here you stand, intact.”

“In body, yeah. Its just...I should’ve done something that day, and I can’t stop running through it in my head.”

Yoshimura nodded, a mournful look flitting across his face. “I understand how you feel; it is easy to look to the past and see what could have been, and was lost forever.”

“I won’t try forget what I did,” I replied, toeing the floor, “if that’s what you mean.”

“I wouldn’t want you to make the attempt. Our pasts make us who we are today, but they are also our most important tool.”

Now I was starting to get lost. “Tool?” Kaneki had been the intellectual, not me.

“Indeed. The past tells us how we may unwrap the present, as well has how to prepare for the gifts of the future.”

I couldn’t help but grin when I got the pun. The manager himself smiled at his bit of wordplay and nodded.
“Allen, I heard much of what was said, and I do not believe that there would be many with cause to call you a failure.”

“Thank you.” Once again, I had to keep myself from adding the ‘sir’.

“Also, I believe it would be best after today if you took tonight and tomorrow off to...re-center yourself. I do believe you took today harder than miss Hinami.”

“You’re sure you won’t need my help tomorrow?”

“Quite. Beyond that, I need to go out and purchase more cleaning supplies. I had forgotten how quickly we move through them when Touka isn’t in charge of keeping things clean.”

I made an amused sound and nodded. Touka not being very good at cleaning starting is was starting to be a common theme. More importantly, having some time to decompress after that would be more than welcome.

“Ah, and before I forget.”

Stepping to the side, the manager opened a cabinet next to the walk-in freezer and retrieved a flip phone.

“Yomo was of the opinion that it would be best to have some way to get in touch with you when you’re out of the café.”

The phone I was handed was small...and purple.

“I’ve put in a clean SIM, and saved down the information for myself, Yomo and Anteiku’s main number.”

“Thank you.” It’s a very purple phone. I was unused to the idea of having a phone that wasn’t flat black. “I’ll see you Thursday then.”

On my way out, I could’ve sworn I saw Hinami waving to me from the second floor as I was leaving. Probably just a mistake on my part; I was overstressed, and she would have no reason to be that friendly to me.
I woke up the next day with a bad feeling whispering through my head. I had dreamt of that rainy day in the crossroads again, except I had been kneeling in place of Ryouko. Uncomfortably, I noted that the sky outside was mirroring the weather of that nightmarish day. Why had that particular nightmare been so striking? Had it been just the memory of that awful day? Or had it been because it was Hinami who was the one to swing the quinque at my neck?

This trip had done absolutely nothing to let me sleep soundly.

Rolling over, I lifted the bedside clock to read the dial. Four forty four. That made my total sleep time just under six hours if my half-conscious brain was doing the math properly. Admittedly, most of that was my fault; I had watched the news and then flopped around in bed until I had given up on falling asleep. Half of me had wanted to go and see how late Helter Skelter was open, but much as it was appealing, it might be a little soon to just pop in again. So, I had just gone out roaming. Walked through a few parks, crossed a few bridges, scared a few local kids by accident when I roamed through the park.

Later on, I managed to catch a glimpse of Touka roaming the ward after the sun set. She had Kaneki as her partner tonight, and I had again wondered what she had meant when she had called him a ‘pretty good guy’. Neither of them noticed that I had spent a couple blocks following them, which was fine by me: I really didn't feel like having company tonight.

Dropping the clock back onto the bedside table, I realized that I wasn't going to fall back asleep. Damn the military life for taking away the pleasure of dozing in bed for me. Also, there was the chance of getting another nightmare—so no, I was definitely up for the day. Shambling into the bathroom, I started up a shower only to turn off the water a couple seconds later after being reminded that it sounded too much like rain falling into an intersection.

*Its going to be one of those days, isn’t it? Feels like I’m just waiting for another bomb to drop. Either literally or of bad news.*

I gave myself a onceover in the mirror. My injuries from Mado had healed up—though I had a new scar to add to the collection—and on a cheerier note, I hadn’t gained any weight from the comparative lack of activity. *Yet,* my insecurity muttered.

Well, if I was going to be up and didn’t want to shower, I might as well start my morning run early. Glancing at the clock again, I noted that it was a really early start. On the bright side, I noted as I left my tiny hotel room, there would be even fewer people on the street. The worst part about going running now was that I didn’t have the workout clothes I had packed. The old set had fit me better since it was longer, but asking the CCG to give them back obviously was not an option.

So for now I ran, as much to stay in shape as it was a habit and most of all to blow away the thunderclouds from my head. So I ran, zig-zagging through quiet residential neighborhoods, in long arcs along the storm sewers and between trees in the tiny parks.

All through the route, something was churning in my stomach as if a potato chip had found its way in. Something was, for lack of a better term, off. Like I was looking at a freshly planted landmine but just didn’t know it yet. Or I was walking into an ambush. Making a quick stop, I surveyed ahead and behind. No white coats, no silver suitcases—in fact, I was barely being noticed by the trickle of people out and about. I had been told oh-so-many times to trust my ghoul instincts when they told me something, but I had never been particularly stellar at translating what they said. On a
whim, I sniffed the air; damp dirt, car exhaust, and something like rotting fish from a tiny
restaurant. Nothing.

Maybe I was just feeling paranoid because I was too used working at this hour and perhaps going
past Anteiku would be a good way to defuse some of that. Or Hinami would be there and me
running past would just make more trouble for her. On second thought, I should probably wrap up
my run.

The clock on the bedside table read off a time unusual enough that I had to rap its housing to be
sure it wasn’t glitched. It wasn’t, meaning that I had been running for, well, much longer than I
thought I could. Admittedly, there had been some jogging and a few pauses in there, but I wasn’t
sure if I should be proud of the accomplishment or worried that my legs were going to give out.
Snagging one of my mostly folded shirts, I started up an icy shower, but no sooner had I grabbed
the soap than I heard a buzzing.

Something in the showerhead broken? No, it was the purple phone, with caller ID reading as it
being from the café.

“He—” the device nearly slipped from my wet fingers “hello?”

“Allen.” Renji. *Wasn’t it supposed to be just Kaneki and Touka at Anteiku this morning? “How
soon can you be here?”*

_Had to be one heck of a morning rush to need both Renji and I._ I took a look back at the shower,
wondering if I would have time to finish washing up. “How soon do you need me there?”

“Soon as possible. Don’t worry about the uniform.” Even through his usual deadpan tone, I caught
the urgency in his words. “There’s been an…incident.”

“Got it.” I snapped the phone shut with one hand and shut off the water with the other.

_Incident?_

The word bounced through my head as I dressed and left the hotel. It could encompass any number
of events, ranging from coffee-related all the way to troublemaking customer. I really hoped it
wasn’t a people issue; diplomacy was not my strong suit.

The second floor window was broken when I arrived at the back door of the café—the one in the
room with the couches, from the look of it. Guess that bird had finally gotten on somebody’s last
nerve. Well, that was good; I wouldn’t have to talk down some angry tourist. Broken glass wasn’t
too bad to clean up. Except, something was off when I crossed the threshold. The lights in the
storage room, for one, and the air conditioner that worked to counteract the heat from customers
and fresh-brewed coffee.

“Allen, up here.” Renji waved from the midpoint of the stairway. “Could use a hand getting things
back in order.”

On the second floor, I caught a glimpse of Yoshimura with his phone to his ear before he stepped
into the bedroom. The living room looked like somebody had used a small breaching charge on the
window, between the glass and bits of wood scattered about and that several of the couches had
been forcibly rearranged.

“If you get the floor, I’ll take care of furniture.” Renji had clearly already decided on the cleaning
roles. “Left the broom next to the door.”
“Got it.”

I started back by the birdcage, where its occupant was opting to cower on its floor rather than lose its usual stream of insults. Exactly what had I missed on my day off? Also.

“Uh, where’s Kaneki and Touka?”

“Manager sent Touka home to clean up.”

I kept my mouth shut, expecting to hear more, but that was all he said.

Standing back up with a full dustpan, I pressed the issue. “Along with Kaneki?”

More silence.

Biting back an irritated groan, I opted to empty the dustpan without a word. Nothing was sitting right about this. Even the silence from Renji, usually a nonissue, was grinding on my nerves for some reason. The damage, the closed café and my missing coworkers were starting to rub me the wrong way and tie a knot in my gut—if I didn’t know better, I would’ve said this was a break-in that had led to a fight. But this wasn’t back home, where burglary was somewhat commonplace. No blood on the floor either, and the café wasn’t under a CCG lockdown. Now that I thought about it, I wouldn’t put it past Touka and Nishiki to get into a fight if their verbal dueling went too far. Still didn’t explain the window. Not to mention that Nishiki was also supposed to be off today.

The possibility that Hinami had been dragged into this was another unpleasant idea to have. I didn’t think she knew how to use her kagune, let alone fight.

“Was Hinami…?” I wasn’t looking forward to the answer to this one.

Renji shook his head. “She wasn’t here.”

I let out a sound of relief. “So…what happened?”

This was as close to as uncomfortable as I had ever seen the man. “Kaneki was kidnapped.”

The thin metal of the broom handle made a squeak of protest as it collapsed under my grip.

“Pardon?”

Renji repeating the phrase did not change what I heard. Nor did it reduce the sudden urge to hurl the broom through the broken window.

“Who.” Trying to process this information, that word was about all I could squeeze out.

“That,” the manager declared from the doorway, “is a matter for the Anteiku meeting we will be holding shortly. I’ve set it up for in about an hour and managed to get in touch with everyone except Touka, though a few of our additional guess may run late.”

Renji held up a flip phone with a rabbit keychain. “Found her phone under a sofa.”

“I see. Allen,” the manager turned to me, “when you finish covering up the window, find me in the next room over.”

I nodded. Looks like I would be swapping off of sweeping.

Taking care of the window didn’t take long and I was standing as the manager made notes on a
“Forgive me for this error in judgement, Allen. I did not expect them to make a move like this so soon.”

“Aogiri.” It wasn’t hard to piece together this particular ‘them’.

“Yes.” The manager tapped the point of the pen down the few lines and started on another. “Based on the reports you and Touka provided, as well as…other indicators, I presumed there would be a build-up of some sort before they made some kind of move. It appears that Aogiri is just as unpredictable as it is dangerous.”

Rising from the desk, he handed me a sheet of paper, told me to collect Touka in time for the meeting, and that was it. No overt concern about Kaneki or Touka, only a hint of weariness that Aogiri had picked today to stage their kidnapping. I left before I could say anything foolish, but not so quickly that I forgot to pick up the flip phone from Renji. If he thought they would make a move, we should’ve kept some kind of guard here or picked up patrols, not continue business as usual.

Touka’s apartment was on a street I had ran down several times before, as I discovered—no wonder she claimed I was stinking up the ward. Though the information was clearly written, I checked back and forth between the ink and the brass numerals several times before actually knocking. After a few moments of silence, the door opened just wide enough for a large brown eye to survey me before opening to reveal a disheveled Hinami.

“C-come in.” She said, before I could say anything.

I waited for her to close the door before asking where Touka was, and was pointed toward another door. Her interaction with me ended, Hinami sat down on the sofa in the living room with her knees drawn up to her chin. I didn’t know if Touka had told her what had happened, but I didn’t want to be the one to break the news to her.

“Touka?” I tapped twice at the door. “It’s Allen.”

No reply.

“The manager sent me over.”

Silence.

“I have your phone, can I come in and return it?”

Still nothing.

Though as I was preparing to wait, a quiet voice slipped out from under the door.

“…come in.”

Touka’s room was less messy than I expected, though with more stuffed fuzzy things than I expected. The owner sat on the floor under a window, mirroring the position Hinami had taken on with arms around her shins and chin upon her knees. Somebody had done a thorough job of roughing her up, leaving bruises and abrasions across her face and down her arms, something I recognized from experience as the trophy of a lost fight. A badly lost fight, it looked like.

“Are you okay?”
Touka gave only the smallest of head shakes, eyes fixed on the carpet. An unhappy face if I had ever seen one.

“All right.” I squatted down to her eye level a couple feet in front of her. “The manager’s called a meeting, but let’s get you cleaned up before we head over, okay? I’ll grab a couple ice packs and you can change into something else if you want.”

A small nod.

Leaving the room, I sighed once I had shut the door behind me. I was as good as the other members of my team at patching up physical injuries, but that was about the extent of my medical talent, and I doubted that Touka’s injuries were all physical. It was only after reentering the main part of the apartment that I realized that I had absolutely no idea if Touka even had ice or a first aid kit. The only person I really could ask was, well, sitting on the couch looking slightly catatonic.

“Um…Hinami?” Talking to her felt as if I was breaking some kind of taboo. “Do you know if Touka has a first aid kit anywhere?”

She nodded silently, and stood up. While she walked over to a closet, I occupied myself with checking Touka’s freezer and succeeded in finding a nearly full ice cube tray. While I searched through cabinets for hand towels and plastic bags, a quiet voice at my side nearly made me jump.

“Mister Allen, I found the kit.”

“Thank you.”

“How does she move that silently?”

“Um, what are you doing with the ice?”

“Making—well, trying to make—ice packs for Touka.” All I had found were a set of possibly unused dishrags and no plastic baggies in any of the cabinets.

“What for?”

“Well, they’re good at bringing down swelling and numbing a bit.” I dropped a few cubes in one of the rags and loosely tied the corners together, making a useable—if not waterproof—ice pack. “Helps with the healing process a bit too.”

“But don’t ghouls heal faster than humans?”

“Yes,” Not by much for me though. “but there’s no harm in speeding along the process, you know?”

“Oh, okay.” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her paying close attention as I made the second ice pack. “Can…can I try making one?”

“…Sure.”

Stepping aside, I let her start on one while I took at glance at the kit. Looked complete enough; Touka definitely wasn’t making a habit of getting beaten up. Less definite was why Hinami was getting involved in all this, especially since it involved being around me. Maybe because doing so involved helping Touka, not that it really explained why she was talking to me. Mysteries of life, I suppose.

“Like this, mister Allen?”
I fell from my train of thought to look at what Hinami held up to me. “Yeah. Just tighten the ends a little.”

“Okay.” Placing the pack onto the counter, Hinami stared at me with a funny look. “You’re just like Kaneki, aren’t you, mister Allen?”

“Well…” I was not sure at all where this was coming from. “We both don’t really talk much, yeah.”

She shook her head. “I mean that you and Kaneki are both different from other ghouls.”

Oh, that similarity.

“You’ve got us both there. I didn’t even expect to meet somebody like me in Tokyo.” I couldn’t help but smile a bit at that happy coincidence. “How’d you figure that out anyway?”

“Oh! You and Kaneki smell different in the same way! I just didn’t know for sure until today.”

“Wow. That’s…some sense of smell.” I didn’t even know ghouls could do that.

“Irimi says I’ve might have a natural pros- propensity for it.” All proud of herself, I got a glimpse of the happy girl that should’ve been. “I knew it had to be that you had something in common Kaneki, because he seemed happier after he met you.”

Her expression dropped.

“…Kaneki is…really gone, isn’t he?”

I took a breath, really not eager to break bad news. “Yeah.”

Confirming it to Hinami made the reality settle uncomfortably across my shoulders. Kaneki really was gone, and I hadn’t been able to do a damn thing about it.

“Maybe that’s what the meeting is for?” Hinami wondered aloud, reveling that her ears were at least as sharp as her nose.

“Maybe,” I agreed with a shrug, “still just a feels like a shitty situation though.”

Her eyes widened in a mildly scandalized manner.

“Er, don’t tell Touka I taught you that.” If she knew, she’d probably try to kick my butt up and down the ward.

Hinami giggled and mimed zipping her lips closed.

“All right, all right.” In spite of myself, I felt the corners of my mouth twitch. “Let’s see if Touka is ready to get cleaned up and go.”

Nodding, Hinami grabbed her ice pack and hurried over to Touka’s room and left me to carry over the rest. I was halfway over to the door myself when I heard the two talking. Even stopping to focus, the voices weren’t any more distinct than a hazy murmur; Hinami had beaten me clearly in the smell and sound departments. Crossing the threshold, I was almost immediately set upon by Hinami, who grabbed the remaining ice packs and placed them gently on Touka as she sat on the bed.

“I see you’ve been busy.” Touka adjusted an ice pack, gesturing for me to put the kit aside.
“Uh-huh! Allen taught me how to make ice packs! He said they’d help you get better.”

“So I see.” She made eye contact over Hinami’s head. “Well…thanks then.”

“So?” Hinami impatiently shifted on her feet. “Are they working?”

“Well, I don’t think they’ll speed anything up, but they are an improvement.” Once again, Touka locked eyes with me. “So you’ll be taking over Hinami’s education?”

“I’ll be what?” Hinami was having approximately the same reaction, albeit nonverbally. It took me a few moments to determine that the statement was just snark. “Very funny.”

Seemingly ignoring me, Touka checked her phone with her non-iced arm. “We should get moving. Hinami, grab your stuff.”

“Okay.”

“Stuff?” I queried, after she had left.

“Disguise.” Touka replied. “Since the CCG put posters of her up, the manager helped me put together a set to let her get out in public.”

I nodded. “Speaking of which, I should probably head over separately from you two.”

“What should I do about the ice packs?”

“Toss them in the sink.” I paused at the door, wanting to say something reassuring, but nothing came to mind. “See you at the cafe.”
Deprivation

What cheerfulness I had built up had evaporated into the clouds during the walk back to Anteiku, leaving a feeling like standing on a leg that had fallen asleep. Sitting in the designated meeting room did nothing to help; even with the furniture back in position, the cardboard-patched window felt more like an accusing eye than a temporary repair job.

And Kaneki was just...gone. The feeling was only solidified by Irimi sitting in the spot he liked to read in. Everything the manager was saying seemed to go in one ear and out the other; I really should’ve splashed some cold water on my face before the meeting, because even Hinami seemed to be having an easier time of this than me. Mentally, I slapped myself. *Come on, I’d have enough time to bring myself back to some kind of functional equilibrium later.*

What eventually brought me back to reality was Yoshimura admitting that he couldn’t say whether Kaneki was still alive.

“If...if I may offer my knowledge on the situation.” The words helped me focus a little more, as did shifting mental gears back to my BGA experience.

“Of course.”

“Earlier, it was mentioned that they weren’t looking for Kaneki, but ‘a ghoul who smelled like Rize’.” *Whoever or whatever that was.* “Sounds like they aren’t looking for him as an individual, but as a means to an end. The fact that they took pains to grab him alive and mostly unharmed suggests that they have some use planned.”

“So he’s alive?” Touka was now perked up. “Manager, we have to do something, we have to-”

“No.” Yoshimura overrode her plea, a firm tone in his voice. “Even with Allen’s assessment, we are still operating under an estimate and one compounded by Aogiri’s unpredictable actions. Making a move to try and save Kaneki—if he is still alive—would be an unacceptable risk.”

Touka stood up before I could say anything about that. “Manager, this café’s purpose is to help other ghouls. And if you won’t help Kaneki, then I’ll go myself! I— We can’t just leave him.”

“I’ll be going as well.” I added, though I didn’t bother to stand.

“Me too.” Hinami piped up. “I want to help big brother too.”

Next to me, Nishio shrugged. “I still owe him anyway, so add me to that list.”

My eyes flicked back to the manager, unsure of how he’d handle this mass insubordination in the staff. He actually had an approving look.

“It is necessary for you all to understand that I cannot guarantee your safety.” He nodded to Touka. “My intent for the outset was to rescue, though the attempt will not be a simple undertaking. Yomo and I have been making arrangements for the excursion and we should have a concrete plan soon. *Soon. What a horribly vague word.* But I let Yoshimura continue without pressing him for details.

“In the meantime, I believe the best course of action will be to reopen the café tomorrow and resume a semblance of normalcy.”
Touka’s face backslid into an unhappy—well, unhappier—look, but she didn’t say anything else.

“What kind of a timetable are we looking to keep?” I asked, as much out of professional curiosity as wanting to distract myself.

“Despite the risks of being hasty, it appears likely that the CCG in the eleventh is planning on making a raid on Aogiri’s headquarters in the next three to four weeks. This puts our action as being no more than two weeks away.”

“Two weeks? That is absolutely not a g—” The look the manager pointed at me was more than enough to remind me to fear old ghouls.

Without missing a beat, his attention focused back to the rest of the room. “In the meantime, I would recommend all of you stay rested and prepare for our upcoming night out. I will determine a new schedule for the upcoming week and send it out by about seven thirty this evening.”

I waited until nearly everyone had left, intending to talk to the manager. To my surprise however, he waived over Touka before she could follow Hinami out.

“Touka, with the events of today, I’d like you take the night off. Allen, can you manage doing patrol duty solo tonight?”

She didn’t look any more or less happy about that, but she nodded and made her exit without a word. Unusual, to say the least. If not for the lack of recent violence, I would’ve thought she was in shock.

“I would guess you have several thoughts biting at your tongue. Please.” He took a seat and gestured me to the sofa opposite him. “Now is a much better time to discuss your concerns. I believe your first was centered on when we would want to move?”

Taking the requested seat, I shook my head. “Two weeks is absolutely not a good idea to work the timetable off of.”

“You have experienced this sort of incident in your line of work?”

“Never. I’ve heard stories where ghouls will kidnap a human for some skill they need to borrow, but I’ve never of ghouls kidnapping another ghoul.”

“I see. And the humans in those cases?”

I shrugged. “Odds are about what you’d expect. Poor and worse the longer it goes on, just like human on human ones.”

If the manager was worried after hearing that, he wasn’t showing it.

“And you have additional concerns about the CCG raid, most likely, to suggest we hurry along the timetable?”

“If they plan their operations like us and you’ve got their timetable right, not really. Planning for us is set around a concrete date, and it’d take a lot to force a rush.”

“And with both factors in play, you’re leaning on the side that haste is the best advantage we have in this situation.” The manager finished with an understanding nod. “A sensible conclusion, now that I see your reasoning. Very well, I will see if our timeline can be hurried along.”
He stood, indicating that our brief conversation was at an end.

After nightfall, I sat atop an air conditioner in the ward and kicked myself for not pushing harder. And why hadn’t I? Kankei was the only person at Anteiku I consistently felt like I had something in common with—and was the closest thing I had to a brother. *Fuck.* Not helping my mood, an almost-headache had been grinding at the tops of my eyeballs since the sunset.

Not for the first time that night, I rattled through my native English curses under my breath before moving to the ones in Japanese and finally French. No Aogiri snooping and no hunting disputes. I was in desperate need of something to break the monotony of the night, but the ward had been dead silent outside of the usual human ruckus. The first part of the night I had spent around the southern part of the ward, not actively looking for a fight, more looking for plausible deniability if something did break out.

Now though, I had hopped rooftops heading north and east in a slow orbit around Anteiku. I had been gnawing at the inside of my cheek the whole time, biting away little bits with each rooftop.

“You’re in a foul mood tonight.” Nishio emerged from a fire escape.

“Mh.” It was only afterwards that I realized I had growled a greeting when he had appeared.

Appearing put off by my lack of proper response, he leaned against one of the ventilation units.

“You know,” he tried again, “I don’t think I’ve seen anybody bold enough to question the manager like that. Sure Touka bitches at everyone, but you went further than that.”

“For all the good it did.”

Another pause.

“Well, Allen, if you were looking to pick a fight with some of those Aogiri bastards, I wouldn’t be surprised if you buried a few.”

“It’s crossed my mind.” It had been a fixture in my head since the meeting had ended. “Whatever happened to that unwritten rule of ‘don’t kill other ghouls’?”

“That’s more Anteiku’s thing, and more of a guideline anyway. Besides,” he shrugged, “with Kimi, I figure I’m outside of what the usual guidelines are. More dead troublemakers means that she’s safer.”

I made an understanding noise; he did have a point.

“I’m also more than smart enough to see you’re taking this pretty fucking badly. What was up with you and Kaneki, anyhow?”

“We, ah,” I took a breath to try and get my mind back into a talking mode, “I kinda had the thought that we should stick together. Ghouls of a feather and all that.”

Nishio didn’t look wholly surprised.

“You two had a ‘big brother, little brother’ dynamic going on,” he smirked, “guess that you two literally could see eye to eye on a few things helped it.”

I watched as he started to walk around the edge of the rooftop, now wondering at just how much attention Nishio had set on us.
“Were you just bored?” I couldn’t really think of any other reason Nishio would tabulate that much useless information.

“Obviously.” Came the disdainful reply. “This job isn’t exactly a mental workout. You two talk a lot, not to mention that you’re the most conspicuous person at the café.”

I didn’t know about that. I might’ve been a foreigner, but between Touka’s dye job and Nishiki’s ginger hair, I was probably less of a standout on the street. Well, at least from a distance.

“Why did you find me out here anyway?”

“Oh, that.” Nishiki waved a hand as if to disperse a distracting mosquito. “I was just out and about and happened to catch your scent.”

“…The manager asked you to keep an eye on me, did he?” I shook my head, both in answer to the question and me being done hearing about the manager for the day.

“No, actually. I was looking to get your perspective on this whole thing.”

“Me? Ah,” I had to stop myself from joining in pacing the rooftop with Nishio, “all I’ve got is less than I want to know. Never heard too much about kidnappings back at the BGA, and those I did always ended badly.”

“Shit. That’s all you’ve got? Thought you’d know more than that with your background.”

“I’ve only got three years’ experience.” I shrugged. “My team spent most of the week training and responding to calls. We were probably better versed in combat than we were in being investigators.”

Nishio, surprisingly, didn’t seem to have a reply to that and remained silent on his pacing route.

“You know,” he finally noted, “I’m starting to think you didn’t have a hard time killing that Dove.”

Now it was my turn to not have a reply ready outside of a noncommittal shrug. *If I hadn’t tried for a peaceful resolution at the start, it probably would have been easier.* I frowned and continued to bite at my cheek. Ow.

Stifling a sigh, I leaned a little more on the air conditioner. This helpless waiting was absolute sandpaper on my mind, not in the least because the manager had seemingly been as vague as possible and I hated not being in the know about stuff like this. The real worry was Kaneki, who I had the impression was barely afloat in the world of being a half ghoul. I didn’t even know what I could’ve done to try and prepare him for this mess. To my side, I heard a sniff.

“…You smell blood in the air too?”

“That’s me.” I replied, feeling the coppery tang on my tongue. “Thought I kicked this bad habit.”

“Oh.”

More uncomfortable silence.

“Well A, I’ll see you at the café tomorrow.”

I nodded. After Nishio left, my patrol zig-zagged through the ward for a few more hours before calling it quits and heading back to sleep. Or at least, try to sleep.
Opening time at Anteiku found me there early with the need to distract myself. Irimi kept shooting strange glances in my direction whenever she made a trip to pick up more coffee beans from the storage room and I had the suspicion that my showing up early was a break in some unspoken rule. If she had an issue, I’d wait for her to be direct about it. My level of patience today was simply too low with the usual level of indirect suggestions Japanese culture was fond of. Right now, there was nothing I want to do more than fight somebody, preferably from Aogiri. Somewhere along the route to the café a seed of wrath had sprouted in my head.

“Afternoon, Allen.” I blinked, and Koma appeared to materialize at the table in the middle of the room. “How’s it going?”

“Been better.” I admitted. “But I’m doing all right.”

I didn’t mention that he had said ‘afternoon’ instead of ‘morning’ despite it being only around half-past nine if my memory served.

“Well, I’m really only asking on Irimi’s behalf, since you’ve kind of spooked her ever time she’s gone back here to get coffee.”

“Spooked.” I echoed, putting down the mug I had been cleaning, unsure if I had misunderstood or misheard the word, since Irimi was pretty far from somebody who could be unnerved.

“Yeah, though looking at you now I can kind of see why. Did you even sleep last night?”

“Uh.” I actually didn’t know the answer to that. “Possibly?”

Kouma chuckled. “Well in that case, I’m going to say probably not. You’ve got a black shadow around your eyes and I’m pretty sure you’ve been cleaning that cup for the past three hours. Small wonder Irimi said you were boring a hole in the wall with that look.”

I blinked, and looked down to where there was still a sizable collection of dirty mugs seeming to stare accusingly up at me.

“…Oh.”

Shaking his head, it was clear that Kouma wasn’t really irked by my lack of cleaning progress.

“Irimi had said you were going to take this as badly as Touka, but you seem to be determined to pass her up.”

“Yeah, well, this was on me.” I finally switched to a new mug, resisting the urge to hurl its predecessor into the wall. “I was supposed to be in yesterday, but the manager told me to take the day off. So then Kaneki gets kidnapped because I wasn’t around. I shouldn’t keep you back here any longer, sorry.”

“Mmm. Well, you needn’t worry about neglecting customers—today’s been a slow day outside of the human regulars, not to mention Irimi is extremely competent at her job. As for you, well,” Kouma shrugged, clearly having thought about the whole incident, “the manager took you off the schedule for that day, so he’d be the one kicking himself for not having you around with how the chain of command works. Though you probably already know that.”

“Yeah, but a soldier—or anyone, can’t absolve themselves of any blame just by saying they were following orders. I should’ve been there.”

“True, but had either of you had known what was coming, both of you would’ve met Aogiri in the
doorway the next morning. It’s less of ‘you should’ve been there’ than of ‘who was expected to be there’. You can’t kick yourself for not seeing it coming—you’ve only been in proper ghoul company for barely a month.”

I almost replied, realized that Kouma had a good point, and closed my mouth. The urge to chuck the mug into the wall remained. Doing nothing did not sit well with me, and I said as much.

“I understand.” My coworker—or possibly my boss, I had never determined—nodded. “It’s just how it goes; they plan, we act. Weren’t you basically in the same position back home?”

“Doesn’t mean I liked it there either.”

Kouma’s amused snort was actually somewhat funny. “Fair enough, but in the meantime you better get some rest, eh? If you were working out at the counter, you’d be scaring the caffeine out of the coffee grounds!”

Even in my state, I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at the statement as he left.

Kouma had a point though. Everything came down to waiting back home. Wait for somebody to call my EOD team, wait for orders, wait for a field team to get into trouble, wait at a bar near a storm drain. If I didn’t have something to distract myself with, it was a great way to go stir-crazy. So, I washed, cleaned, sorted newly arrived coffee, all while nipping at my cheek the whole time. By the time Touka and Nishiki arrived, I was on my third repetition of sweeping the floors after Kouma had banned me from mopping more than once in a day.

Technically, I was free to head out now that the afternoon shift was in. Not that it was my plan anymore. After yesterday, it was probably best to have an extra person at the shop who could lend a hand in a fight.

I found myself in the living room space on the second floor, reading a newspaper with a fair amount of success. Up until I got out of the weather and sports sections—I was apparently still a long way off from being fully literate and the volume of partially incomprehensible characters served more as a reminder that I still hadn’t gotten anything to replace the dictionary I had lost after getting outed.

Dropping the paper back where I had found it, I kneaded my eyes. Staring at Japanese text had always ended up with it inciting an almost-headache, something that had at least had gotten better since I had been immersed in it.

The only other thing in the room capable of being a distraction was the somewhat chunky tome that Kaneki had been reading-slash-rereading. Had to be a good book if he had been writing it, right? At least I could read the title without much difficulty: ‘The Black Goat’s Egg’. On the other hand, the pages were possibly the most complicated ones I had ever read and admittedly, I flipped around to different points in the first chunk of the book. It seemed to be centering around a boy—referred to once or twice as an egg, oddly enough—who was either a ward or child of someone either very adept at or willing to kill.

Hm. If I had to guess based on how little experience I had with reading non-utilitarian Japanese, I had probably mauled the small details of the characters.

Still, the premise sounded like it could be interesting if somewhat done to death back home; tough guy takes little guy under his wing and they both end up better for all the trials they face. Maybe with a bit of a redemption story thrown in for good measure. Saying it like that made it sound kind of like what Kaneki and I had been kind of starting to do, not that real life ever behaved quite as it
did in fiction. I’d have to ask him exactly how the book went if we got him back. When we got him back.

Further thought was interrupted when Renji stepped into the room.

“Thought you would’ve been long gone.”

I shook my head, and gave him the short answer of why I was still around.

“That is a fairly pointless move. Aogiri came here for Kaneki, and now they have no reason to come back.”

Despite disagreeing strongly, I couldn’t think of a reason for why any of Renji’s statement was wrong.

“In your case,” he continued, “if you had been around the café when Kaneki was kidnapped, you likely would’ve ended up dead.”

“And why is that.” For some reason, probably the sharp headache behind my eyes, I was getting more than irritated at everything being said.

“You’re acting like a mother ghoul around him; any threat like yesterday would’ve made you do something stupid.”

Looking down, I fidgeted with the book and was forced to admit he was right. “I was thinking more like older brother…but yeah.”

“That would also work. Incidentally, I also agree that despite the risk we need to move more quickly than not, so I’ve worked a bit to hurry preparations.” Renji paused, seemingly giving me a full body scan. “Go home for the day, Allen. You’re not going to be able to help anybody if you’re running on zero sleep.”

“All right, all right.” At least he seemed willing to be a bit more urgent.

Making my way out of the café and through the alleyway, it occurred to me that there really wasn’t a good reason for Renji to be around at that hour. He usually only appeared at the very end of the day or right before we left to pick up suicides. Some instinct in the back of my head said that he was showing up for the same reason I had stuck around, but I had no proof.

In fact, I didn’t have a lot of things. What I did have was a headache pressing into the tops of my eyes, a sense of irritated helplessness and something caustic starting to simmer in the back of my head. One would think my personal atmosphere would be a bit more cheery given that it was December first.

The next days blurred a bit between lack of sleep and whatever was sifting through my head, but felt oddly like deja vu. My morning jogs transitioned to pre-dawn sprints through streets lit only by city light reflecting down from cloud cover. I cleaned through the café twice a day, earning worried looks as I worked. Touka had yet to return to the nighttime patrols thus leaving me to wander the now-too-peaceful ward and pray for something to happen. The cafe was starting to feel downright grim despite the cheery ambiance from the customers still permeating as pervasively as the smell of coffee.

I felt…off. Like a pressure switch trembling at the edge of its latch. No word from Renji or Yoshimura today either.
Something needed to happen. I reflected, leaving the café earlier than usual—the training sessions between Touka and myself had never restarted. Now, what could I do with myself between now and my nightly prowl?

A nap maybe? Maul something? Alternatively, coffee?

“Hey, Allen!” An answer trotted out from a bus shelter to walk next to me. “Got a minute?”

“Hide, was it?” For the life of me, I came dangerously close to not recalling his name. “You can have more than a minute.”
Hide looked less cheery than he had been the first time we had met. Perhaps my novelty had worn off. No, actually. He and Kaneki had been good friends according to both of them: after not seeing or hearing from his best friend Kaneki for several days straight, Hide must’ve been just as worried about his shy friend as I was.

“I was wondering if you had seen Kaneki recently? You know, since you’ve been hanging out with him most days.”

“Not…really, no.” I tried to deflect the conversation away from me. “How about you? You’ve known him for longer than I have.”

“Yeah true, but Kaneki’s been…working through a few things recently.” Hide led the way briefly as we rounded a corner. “He’ll get back in touch once he’s sifted through it, as usual.”

“He’s certainly had a lot to get used to.” I agreed, then hastily added, “Working at the café.”

“Yeah. Can we make a stop here?” Hide slowed, nodding toward a sign.

“Sure?” I reread the neon advertisement twice, not sure if I had misread something. *Karaoke?* “Uh, why?”

“We need to talk.”

*Oof. Why was it that phrase was just as scary in every language?*

I kept my mouth shut until after Hide had paid and lead the way onto an elevator.

“Why here?”

“Well, karaoke is fun, plus it’s almost our national pastime besides working overtime.” He ticked off the reasons on his fingers as he watched the floor number climb. “Plus, we were like half a block away, and making an old hotel into a karaoke place is just really cool.”

The elevator pinged as if Hide had answered a game show answer correctly, the doors sliding open.

“Ah.” He certainly was coming close to losing me here, despite how little noise was in the hallway. “So why do we need to speak here?”

Hide only shook his head and said nothing until we reached the door to our karaoke room.

“So, what band do you want to start with? Got a particular genre in mind?” He asked somewhat loudly as he swiped the door’s keycard.”

“Oh.” *Band? Genre?* Now I was lost in addition to worried.

“No preference? Fair enough.” He waved me into the room. “I’ll pick the first playlist then. You ever hear of Ling tosite sigure?”

I shrugged, still lost—not that I was in any way a singer either. Hopefully the music wouldn’t make my multi-day headache any worse. Hide locked the door, started the music and aimed the TV speakers toward the door.
“So,” he began, flopping down on one of the armchairs in the room, “where were we?”

“Well, it’s fairly private and since this is a converted hotel, all the rooms are fairly soundproofed and the music makes it easier to mask whatever isn’t supposed to be going on.” He ticked off the reasons on his fingers. “Plus, we were already really close, like I said.”

“And what did you want to talk about, then? Cause this is all pretty cloak and dagger.”

“My dad—well, stepdad—is a member of SAT. He, ah, taught me a lot with his work stories and encouraged me to think like an investigator.”

Sounded more like SAT had used a place like this for similar meetings, by extension making it a good choice for us to keep a conversation off the record.

“He also taught me to remember faces.”

Hide reached into his jacket and passed me a folded section of newspaper. It was only a tiny blurb—perhaps a junior journalist’s work—about international cooperation, but more notable was the also tiny photograph. It was of me, Amon and Kureo at the scene where Amon had killed Hinami’s father. The resolution was fairly poor, but it was clear enough. So there was at least one photograph of me in the public eye, which probably was a bad thing.

“Where did you find this?” I took a seat in the armchair opposite the amateur detective.

“Local paper, smooshed after the dullest political article you could imagine. Didn’t figure you were German though.”

I passed back the article. “What does this have to do with what you wanted to talk about?”

“I’m curious. What’s an investigator from the German GFG doing, working in a coffee shop rather than doing fieldwork with his CCG counterparts?”

“I’m not German.”

“So you’re from western Europe? Australia’s GCU? Russia’s FSGB? My point still stands; you were visibly working with the CCG, now you appear to be undercover.”

“Well, I’m not that either.”

“So what exactly are you doing at Anteiku from eight to two every day?”

“…Work.” Hide was getting close to details Touka would probably kill him for knowing.

My interrogator slumped forward in his chair, looking visibly irked from the way he had propped up his chin with his hand.

“And here I thought you would keep giving me straight answers.”

“Then,” I replied, leaning forward a bit as the music swelled to a crescendo, “drop the polite act that’s been drilled into your head and ask me a straight question.”

Hide’s eyes jerked up from a pensive glare downward. Oddly, he didn’t say anything, instead looking as if he was sizing me up.
“What would you do,” he finally began, “if—hypothetically—you came across clear evidence that an individual was a ghoul?”

“I’d look into it and see what I was dealing with.”

“Not contact the CCG?”

“Absolutely not.” The thought of Mado put enough force behind the word that Hide shifted.

“Determining if they were harmless or not would be on my terms. Not theirs.”

“And if you determined it was …harmless? Like living as a human and not killing to eat, right?”

“I’d leave it be.”

Hide cocked his head, appearing either confused or…satisfied? Mentally, I sighed. My headache was not being helped by the music.

“Hide, from personal experience, I can tell you that the biggest difference between a human and a ghoul are the Rc cell counts.”

Nodding, Hide looked as if he was thinking something through with the intensity of a high-yield explosion. “The CCG doesn’t think that.”

I nodded.

“This is a bit of a tangent, but what if—and this is a hypothetical, mind you—one would managed to make a human’s Rc count match that of a ghoul? That would be a gray area for the CCG, wouldn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, probably not. From what I understand about my own transition, at least, “once the Rc count crosses a certain threshold, the body kind of flips and from then on, I—you—person is basically a ghoul.”

“I see.” Hide looked as if he had half-expected that answer.

Exactly what Hide was doing was beyond me. If he wanted to ask about Kaneki being missing, he probably would’ve done so instead of peppering me with questions about ghouls and the CCG. There had to be something else going one here, unless he was less concerned with his friend than I could tell. The first song faded, and Hide started up something a little more upbeat-sounding than the situation might’ve warranted.

“I’m going to guess you’ve got something you wanted to ask me about besides Kaneki?” It was worth a shot.

The haunted look crept into Hide’s eyes as he stared me down through half a stanza of lyrics. It was fairly unsettling to see him this far away from cheerful. Also unsettling to be under a microscope like this; even when Kureo had been staring me down, Amon had at least been in close proximity. Being cooped up and thoroughly studied was…uncomfortable.

“No. Everything is and has been about Kaneki. We’ve been friends we were like five! Since then, we’ve never dropped out of contact like this.”

“All right, all right.” Given the look on his face, it wasn’t exactly hard to believe he was telling the truth. “So what are you really looking to do using our secret meeting here? Vent? Hire me to look into it?”
Another long pause. Hide took a few breaths, sizing me up as much as trying to calm down. Secretly, I was a little disappointed; I had hoped for something a little more worthy of all the cloak and dagger we were going through.

“…How likely are you to go to the CCG with anything, Allen? It’s a little hard to believe you’re fully detached from what they do.”

“You remember the night that investigator died in the ward? In that river or storm drain thing?”

Hide nodded.

“I was…” I laced my fingers for a moment, dredging up the right word. “Entangled, I think the word is, with the events of that night, fairly unpleasantly. That night was the last nail in the coffin, so to speak, of my interest of working with the CCG.”

“But you did keep working with them.” Hide noted. “At least until you were told otherwise, I assume?”

“Only because that was my job as set by the bureau.” I nodded. “So far as I’m concerned, the CCG is too willing to tolerate violent nutjobs than I am willing to work with.”

“Ah, yeah…good…” Hide shifted forward in his seat, changing to a new and faster song.

“Why all this about the CCG? You can’t possibly be looking for my recommendation to join up, are you?”

“Not from you, no. It’s just…” Hide leaned forward again, tapping the tips of his pointer fingers together. “Look, I just needed to figure something out before, well, just promise you won’t get mad until I finish saying my piece, okay?”

Now it was my turn to nod.

“Kaneki’s a ghoul.”

That wasn’t exactly what Hide said; there was less bluntness and more detail. Still, hearing that was more than enough to convince me that I should’ve seen something like that coming, given all the prying about me and the CCG but I’d wait until later to kick myself for that. My first thought was to ask how he had pieced that bombshell together, but if he had known Kaneki for that long, the change in behavior would’ve stuck out like a sore thumb.

“You knew.”

“What were you planning on doing with that particular knowledge?” I asked, bypassing Hide’s statement. *I never figured you for somebody to take advantage of something like that.*

I had kept my tone as neutral as I could, but the statement seemed to derail Hide’s train of thought for a few moments. The effect was somewhat similar to watching a fish out of water.

“Do you honestly believe I would betray Kaneki!?” The reply was forceful enough to almost drown out the music. After a nervous moment, he continued in an angry whisper. “You heard what I said about him. More than that, he’s basically my brother! I’d do everything in my power to help him and if you think—”

I raised my hands, indicating that I was taking him at his word—which I was, for the time being—and was reminded somewhat of the relationship Kimi had with Nishio.
“So how do you intend on helping him?” I asked. “I’m assuming you haven’t told him yet, based on all the cloak and dagger we just went through.”

“I haven’t. I’m going to wait until he tells me for that. Until then, I’ll keep supporting him in everything he does and make sure he knows it. He…is doing all right though, right?”

Shrugging, I had to admit I didn’t really know. “He’s kind of a closed book, despite all the ones he buries his nose in. Smart, and a pretty quick learner. I don’t think he was quite eager to become a ghoul though.”

Hide nodded. “He didn’t volunteer, that’s one thing I’m certain about. I think I’ve got basically the whole story put together.”

What followed was a fairly detailed account of the events surrounding that and all the way through the first few weeks after Kaneki had been released. Public outcry, details on the doctors and the hospital involved, the girl ghoul—Rize—involved and what little he had found on her.

I had to give him a silent round of applause, though Hide was too modest to do more than roll his eyes. “You should consider working in intelligence.”

“And yet I still can’t find Kaneki.”

I took a hard look at Hide, before deciding that if he was this willing to help Kaneki, getting another set of eyes in addition to Anteiku on this could only help. Naturally, I prefaced with an apology before giving Hide the whole story, albeit somewhat redacted. ‘Everyone at Anteiku’ became ‘other concerned parties’, the location was changed to the proximity of his workplace; all shifted just enough to keep the others involved out of focus.

“Do you have anything to go on? Besides that?”

Hesitation. How involved did I want to let Hide get? It didn’t take a genius to realize that he’d bury himself in this mess as deeply as he could, and my standards really didn’t want me to put this kid in danger. Still. What harm was in giving him a name?

“Aogiri.”

Hide scrunched his forehead up. “I thought they were limited in scope to the eleventh ward. Unless they’re operating in a much larger radius than that, it would have to mean that they sought out Kaneki specifically.”

“Huh.” I actually hadn’t considered much of that aspect of why he had been taken, more about actually getting him back. *Didn’t think you’d know about them, much less all that about them.*

“Or there’s some affiliate of Aogiri in the area who was passing through.” Hide seemed to be on the verge of losing himself in thought.

“Little more important is where they ended up, right?”

“Right.” Hide was definitely lost in thought. “Hmm.”

He reached over the side of his chair and pulled his backpack in front of him to begin rummaging inside. I wanted to say something about there being a place and time to start on homework, but kept my mouth shut. Hide meanwhile had pulled out a laptop and a folder.

“Here.” He moved onto the sofa next to me from his seat opposite and passed me the laptop.
At face value, the screen displayed a significant chunk of Tokyo and was dotted with little red points, though I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to be gaining from it.

“What is it?”

“It’s a tracker map, each dot being a location about fifteen minutes apart based on cell tower data.”

“Tracking who?”

“A, well, really scary looking guy I tagged a while back.”

I made an understanding grunt. Back home, if would’ve been hilariously illegal for somebody to do this and I was about ninety percent certain it was the same here. Not that I was planning on telling anyone.

“So he’s going back and forth between the eleventh and thirteenth, with a few stops here and there,” Hide pointed out the routes with his finger for me, “but what’s significant is the cluster in the eleventh. It looks like he spent days there at a time. I figure if Aogiri is anywhere in the eleventh ward, its there.”

If there was a pattern here, I wasn’t seeing it. “What makes you say that?”

“First off, I did a little digging in disguise around the thirteenth and all the places our scary guy went were ghoul hideouts. Second off, that spot in the eleventh ward is supposed to be abandoned; it’s some seaside retirement apartments that were abandoned in the market crash a few years ago.”

Now I saw the picture.

“So, what’s our next step?” Hide asked.

“Now I go and dig deeper into this.” I already had my own map out, making a note of exactly where the probable base was.

“Yeah.” Hide was already scribbling onto a scrap of paper. “When do we wanna go?”

“I am going to go tonight. You are going to stay back because I am not going to get Kaneki’s best friend into a gang stronghold, regardless of how good your disguise is.”

Hide reacted as expected—eyes rolling with a disappointed sigh—but he still went along with it.

“Ah, fine.”

“If you really want to do something relating to Kaneki, figure out how you’re going to tell him you know.”

“Will you at least tell me what you find?”

“We can.” I accepted the scrap of paper. “Afterwards.”

Both of us were ready to leave now, with a tacit understanding that we had both gotten what we had wanted. Personally, working with Hide again didn’t sound that bad.

“What made you trust me with all this in the first place?”

“Eh? The first time we met, you had this protective look on your face when I showed up. Plus, its not like I could’ve gone to anybody else with all this.”
Well, that didn’t explain much, nor did it do much to reduce the risk that Hide wouldn’t run to the CCG if the necessity arose. Despite that, getting the information Hide had was something I saw as basically essential; there were basically no leads on my end for Aogiri before this. Calculated risk, Robalson would’ve called it back home—not that it had ever fallen to me to collect intelligence more than a handful of times.

“Hey, Allen.” We were in the elevator now, going back to ground level. “Going back to that first question, what would you do if the ghoul wasn’t trying to be peaceful?”

“Hah.” The thought of a little violence was enough to coax a smile onto my face as we stepped back onto the street. “I’d take care of it myself.”

“You would?”

“Well, it is kinda what I was made for.” I was fairly sure Hide’s eyes were boring holes into the side of my head, but refused to look. “Don’t forget to tell Kaneki.”
I managed to bridge the time until my nightly patrol with getting as close to a nap as I could. The result was an odd sense of clarity, like standing outside on a deathly cold and clear night. Ironically, that was what I found myself doing after the sun had set. Touka found me about halfway between her apartment and Anteiku. She looked, even in the half light on the rooftops, as if she had been working toward emulating me.

“Wow. You look bad.”

“Ha.” I rolled my eyes in the cold air. “Then why try to imitate me?”

My attempt at humor was about as halfhearted as it could get.

“Yeah, well, that’s why I have a mask.” Her voice became slightly more muffled as she slid down the rabbit’s face over her own. “You just look like you belong in a hospital.”

“Ha.”

I ceded the lead to Touka that night, just following her as I had used to on the first few nights of our nightly duty. More than once, I heard her mutter about it being too quiet to be comfortable. After perhaps a half hour or roof hopping, we ended up on the southernmost area considered Anteiku’s territory, where Touka planted her butt on an air conditioner and stared lasers in the direction of the eleventh ward.

“You scare off everybody from their nightly walks? Haven’t smelled a soul since we started.”

I decided not to mention that Aogiri was the probable cause there, not me.

“Dammit.” Touka hopped from her spot to start pacing about the rooftop. “I was hoping something would be going on—I need to just shut my brain down and do something!”

She was saying the exact same thing I had been thinking. Meanwhile, Touka had been continuing her growling.

“—should be doing more than just planning when we don’t even know where he is. Meanwhile you’re just standing there because you’re even more in the dark than I am!”

Stopping, she directed what was probably a nuclear death stare toward the eleventh before her shoulders slumped. Losing Kaneki had hit everyone at Anteiku; Hinami, myself, even Nishiki had been worried enough to ask me about the whole thing. Looking at her though, it was pretty clear that Touka was taking it worse than any of us.

And…I wanted to hurt Aogiri back, even if I knew that it was an unhealthy impulse.

But that wasn’t something I could do. Retaliatory tit-for-tat was strictly forbidden under the BGA guidelines, punishable by permanent desk duty or getting fired and prosecuted. Not to mention all the personal vendettas it could start and the whole cycle of revenge thing that was hammered into my head from my first day. I still carried the ID and badge wherever I went.
Except, those rules no longer really applied to me at this point. This certainly wasn’t a Chicago rooftop, and I was definitely no longer operating on BGA payroll. I was free to do as I wished. Free to hurt whoever I wanted.

“Touka.”

A grunt.

“Think the ward could manage without us for the night?”

“Ha?” She didn’t even bother to turn to look at me. “Probably. Not like it could fall apart in one night.”

“I want to head to the eleventh tonight.” I didn’t see any point in beating around the bush in explaining my idea. “Ask questions, get answers, that kind of thing.”

“Well,” Touka muttered to herself, “not like my morning classes are essential or anything.”

Ah, right. Touka was still in school and today was…Thursday, probably. I hadn’t really been keeping track of the days recently.

“All right.” She stood up, looking less defeated. “But we’re not going over with your mask situation like that. Anteiku first.”

I shrugged internally and let her lead the way, not saying anything until we were in the back entryway of Anteiku.

“So…” I didn't want to ask why were were back here; Touka was more irritable than usual right now.

“Uta dropped by this afternoon. You and Kaneki got lucky; he brought your masks all the way out here.”

“Ah.” I followed her to the door that separated the customer area from the back of the shop, stopping on instinct by the threshold.

“Just come through. No customers for you to scare with your mug.”

I sat down at the counter while Touka looked through a collection of cabinets. The thought occurred to me that this was only the second time I had been in this space right before I had a canvas shopping bag held out to me. Kind of anticlimactic, not that I really knew what I was expecting. Would've been pretty neat if it came in some kind of dramatic box though.

Inside the bag was all gray fabric and hard surfaces, and with me not having any reference points to figure it out, I ended up turning the mask basically inside out before realizing the correct way to put it on. The gray fabric had been the outside, covering my whole head and slinking down onto my shoulders—more of a mesh than a fabric, since I could see through it pretty clearly. Underneath was the hard surface; a fairly thick molded piece of what was probably Plexiglass or Lexan that reached from just below my nose and covered most of my head. The whole thing was held on with a few straps and fit far better than I thought possible. If I closed my eyes, I could almost forget I was wearing it.

“He gave you horns.” Touka remarked, sounding more amused than peeved.

“He did?”
In response, Touka pulled out a compact mirror—an item I never expected her to carry around—and slid it across the countertop.

She was right. Two red horns poked through the cloth, right about at forehead level and just a little too large enough to be inconspicuous.

“Neat.” I passed the mirror back. “Didn’t expect anything like this.”

Uta’s measuring had truly paid off; with the mask on, it barely felt like I was wearing anything. I hadn’t even needed to adjust the straps.

Touka redirected our route to the train station after we left, leaving me feeling foolish for thinking we’d head over on foot, and paid for a pair of tickets to the eleventh. In practical terms, once we boarded, we had the whole car to ourselves. Few wanted to go to the eleventh, and even fewer after dark.

A thought occurred to me. “Does it bother you that your mask is kind of…simple?”

“Eh.” Touka shrugged from where she was leaning against a seat. “No. Yours isn’t that ornate, you know. Uta has a flair, but he’s not that flashy with his designs.”

She stopped speaking as the train pulled into another vacant station and waited as the doors slid open and shut under their timer. I was, between sleep deprivation and the hour of night, finding the whole train trip oddly surreal.

“Got mine when I was young, so that might be why its simpler. But it fits fine and I like it.”

“Ah. So no replacement then?”

Touka muttered something about me knowing nothing. “Ghouls don’t change their masks. It’s how we recognize each other when we’re out. Makes it easy to tell who’s who.”

It also made it easier for the CCG to track individual ghouls, but I kept my mouth shut.

“We’re getting close,” Touka noted, “Where are we headed, again?”

Wordlessly, I pulled up the picture of Hide’s map on my phone and passed the device to her.

“That’s their hideout?”

“A potential spot.” I replied as the train began to slow. “Tonight, it’s just confirming that.” And hopefully getting into a fight.

“What happens if we come across any Aogiri members?”

“If we do, we can ask them where their base is. If we’re lucky, we’ll get to fight.”

We were the only people who disembarked from the train. From there, finding a dark place to put on our masks and get up off of ground level was easy.

“So how well do you know the area?”

“Pardon?”

“How long is it going to take us to get there?”
“...I have no idea.” A problem opened up in that I really had no idea where this photo of a map fit into the eleventh ward.

Touka hit me in the shoulder, hard enough to tell me she was irked. “You idiot. Don’t you know how much coastline there is in the eleventh? Looks like we really will have to find some Aogiri to ask.”

Even that proved to be difficult, despite my expectations. Maybe this group was secure enough in their power that they didn’t feel the need to run patrols of their territory? Hopefully not; this was enough of a pain without getting Touka even more irritated. Baiting them to us would be easier, but how would we do that without risking drawing the CCG to us as well was difficult.

“I have an idea.”

Touka stopped pacing our most recent rooftop, her glare at me apparent even through the mask.

“If we bait them to us, it’ll be easier.”

“And how would we do that?”

“Remember what got us running when we were working back in our ward? We just need to make it look—smell, really—like we’ve just hunted a human on their turf, and it’ll broadcast our location.”

“There’s no humans out.”

I shook back one of my sleeves. “All we need is something that smells human enough.”

Touka slowly nodded, understanding what I meant.

“Just, ah, make it quick.”

One quick swipe later, and a slow drip made a tiny red puddle on the asphalt. Keeping my arm held out was less of a chore than a way to avoid getting blood dribs down my fingertips. Touka had flicked her fingers clean, but kept glancing down at the puddle for some reason unknown to me. On the bright side, we didn’t have to wait for long; a trio of Aogiri appeared at the far end of the rooftop, clearly identified by the robe that seemed to be their uniform. Two had matching oni masks, possibly also Aogiri issue, while the third and probable leader had a stylized wolf head.

“Didn’t we tell you?” One of the oni stated, “if you wanna hunt in Aogiri territory, you gotta be in Aogiri.”

The wolf jerked his head back to look at his subordinate, just long enough to give me a whiff of black comedy and be glad nobody could see my grin through my mask.

“Well.” Wolf head looked back to us. “He stole my line, but the point stands. Hunting in Aogiri territory is a high crime.”

“We’re only in Aogiri territory because we’re looking to join up.” Touka stepped forward. “Where should we go then?”

“You two? Hah.” The two oni exchanged a look as their leader spoke. “You wanna join, they you’ll have to prove you can make it—too many softies joining up already. Which ward you two from?”

“Thirteenth.” Touka declared, with no hesitation.
“Oh? Then why aren’t you in the White Suits then? Pretty sure they aren’t choosy.”

“We’re independents.”

Wolf head snorted. “A likely story. More like you’re too weak to get into any groups.”

“And you aren’t?”

Ah yes, the classic Touka snark.

“I’ll have you know that I’ve been with Aogiri from the beginning, whelp. Tell you what—”

“So you would know where Aogiri’s base is?” I interrupted.

“Every ghoul in the eleventh knows where Aogiri is.” Wolf head sneered back. “Except bandwagon fans like you.”

It wasn’t that my patience for this conversation hadn’t worn out, it was that Touka was partly blocking the direct approach to the three Aogiri.

“So. Tell. Us.” Touka sounded about as fed up as I was.

Wolf head’s response was a derisive bark of laughter that was echoed by his companions. He may have planned on saying something else, but that was also at the same time his presence sawed through the last bit of my patience. I brought the mouthy nuisance to the ground hard enough that we almost bounced. The matched pair stepped back a step from where I had their probable leader pinned and squirming.

“Now then.” I had one knee planted on one of wolf-head’s shoulder blades, and was not being gentle with my weight. “Where. Is. Aogiri?”

“Screw you!”

In response, I grabbed his arm and tugged backwards. Not hard, just enough to feel tendons strain.

“Do whatever you want, hurt me, whatever, I’m not telling you anything!”

“You? I don’t care about you. You’re not even a living thing to me. You said that every ghoul in this ward knows where Aogiri is, so I’m going to ask your buddies. Every time they don’t answer, I’m going to break your arm and we’ll keep playing until you can’t heal.”

“You think that’ll get them to talk? Y—you idiot, you think a member of Aogiri would be that cowardly?”

“Well,” I shrugged, leaning in close, “If they don’t talk, I can use one of them to take your place and talk to the remaining one.”

One of the two made a noise indicating just how not-eager they were to let it get that far.

“I’ve—erg—got a better idea.”

I looked down. Maybe wolf head had decided to make this easy for all of us after all?

“I’ll just kill you both.”

Or not.
A plume of an forming kagune erupted from the folds of his cloak, narrowly missing my arm. I wasn’t interested in letting wolf head get to a point where he’d actually be able to fight back, but with both my arms occupied with keeping him pinned, my options were…limited.

Before I could really think it through, I had brought my head down to where the kagune had been pushing through the folds of the cloak and ripped out a mouthful-sized chunk with my teeth. The sensation was like biting into a bundle of soft gummy worms with the flavor being slightly more savory, as if they had been produced with fruit rather than just sugar. I only really had the time to reflect on the flavor due to everything seemingly grinding to a halt by the time I had straightened up. Touka had actually paused mid-punch. Beneath me, wolf head was now making noises like a fish gasping for air, his kagune having gone limp like jello once I had taken my bite.

One of the matched pair was a little distracted with Touka’s kagune turning him into a partial pincushion, but the other appeared to be just as surprised as Touka despite the mask. I chewed and swallowed the mouthful as quickly as I could; now was the time to say something, since I had all the attention at this point.

“Now.” I paused to lick my lip where something had dribbled free, “We were talking about Aogiri and where to find them. Is that conversation going to keep going, or am I going to need to take another bite to tide me over until it does?”

Wolf head said something, too fast for me to catch, possibly referencing my mother.

I looked to Touka and confirmed that I had, in fact, been insulted. So, I took another bite, which resulted in more pained yelling and both of the other Aogiri members squirming away from me by a few feet.

Wolf head now seemed to be a font of information, albeit still speaking too quickly for me to catch every word.

Confused, I looked to Touka, who shook her head with the air of the long-suffering straight man in a comedy.

“He says he’ll tell us everything we want to know.”

Chapter End Notes

Bit late on getting this one out, but hopefully it'll prove a good distraction for that mid-week slump or Thanksgiving madness. Up soon is more of Allen's history, meeting a major antagonist and Allen getting in even more over his head.
We ended up letting the mauled trio go alive. Despite my misgivings on the consequences of the idea, I let Touka take the lead on that part of the encounter.

“So,” I said, “educate me; why did we let those guys go?”

We were several blocks away on a store’s sloped roof, plotting out our path to the location wolf head had described.

Touka groaned. “You and him, I swear, it’s like I’m teaching damn toddlers sometimes. It’s about reputation, you idiot. If you want to get recognition, you have to win fights, but if all you do is kill off the witnesses, you’re just some bloodthirsty ghost unless you’re part of a gang. Understand?”

“Ah.” As usual, I didn’t really have a reply to her irritated education.

“Also, what the actual hell were you thinking when you bit that guy!? Seriously, shit like that is not going to make you any friends.”

“I’m not here to make friends,” I pointed out, “I’m here to find Kaneki. Everything else is secondary.”

That was a lie; I also still wanted to get in a fight, because wolf head had barely been anything.

“Really? Because the way you launched yourself at that Aogiri guy says otherwise. Hell, they might even believe we’re from the thirteenth ward after that shit you pulled. You sure you’re feeling all right?”

“I’m feeling just fine.” I replied, taking a final look at the map before folding it away.

That was actually the truth. After all that, my headache had up and vanished along with the feeling that something was pushing down on the top of my eyes and left me with only the vague feeling that I had been awake for far too long. It also occurred to me that this was the first time I had eaten anything since Kaneki had been kidnapped; had all this been just because I was hungry? Hm. Trick question; in this case food had done nothing to sate my need to beat the stuffing out of somebody.

I asked Touka why they would’ve thought we were from the thirteenth ward as we made our way to the point on the map. According to her, the ward was one of the places where other ghouls and not the CCG were what made it difficult for ghouls to get by, with the controlling faction—the White Suits wolf head had mentioned—being the prime reason for that. The reason for me making us look as if we really were from there was that it was one of the places where cannibalism was more common.

It sounded like cannibals were more common here than they were back home. Hence why Monica suddenly turning the tables and turning a ghoul used to hunting dinner into being her dinner was usually accompanied by a lot of panic. For some reason, the rest of the team found her doing that a lot much less amusing than I did.

Despite how embarrassing it was to admit it to myself, I kind of miss all her ‘I care but I won’t show it’ habits.

Shaking my head to dispel the thought, I brought my mind back to the present. We’re getting close now; that looks like the road on the map from Hide.
Surprisingly, the street lamps were on, despite the site supposedly being abandoned.

“We’re not going to walk on the street to get there, are we?” Touka was sizing up the road as if recalling every horror trope possible.”

I was not about to tempt fate. “Nope.”

So we stayed in the trees, just close enough for slivers of yellow light to knife through branches and dead leaves.

“Remember,” I hissed, “we’re only here to look and gather information. If this goes sideways, we run.”

A little ways to my left, I heard Touka mutter something and decided to take it as acknowledgment.

The trees thinned out abruptly and my breath escaped from between my teeth in a hiss. This place was a lot bigger than the map made it look—the buildings being looming gray teeth not reducing the creep factor. But there was somebody occupying the buildings, though it was dead quiet, I saw faint glows of light in windows. Squatters probably weren’t the occupants here; there were lights in every building on nearly every floor, leaving the only likely occupant being Aogiri due to how much of the complex was occupied. Also because Aogiri had probably eaten whoever was unlucky enough to be homeless in this ward.

Touka followed my lead as I crept around perimeter, using the treeline as cover. There were eight rectangular apartment blocks arranged in two rows, all of which appeared to be occupied and number of outbuildings—a few of what looked like groundskeeping sheds and some larger buildings that I didn’t know enough to guess about. This was going to need a lot of searching to get through. For her part Touka was quiet, until we got around to look at where the complex butted up to the ocean, when she yawned and reminded me that this was still a school night for her.

“You should head back.” Waves were crashing against the rocks close enough to half drown out our conversation. “We can put together a map of this tomorrow and give it to Yoshimura. Gotta convince him to hurry too; with all the lights on here there’s no way the CCG isn’t going to move in on this place really soon.”

“While you stick around to make friends?” The shadows from the tree cast a frown across Touka’s mask.

“I want to check out the other side of the complex. I’ll be like an hour behind you at worst.”

“And if somebody sees you? We’re pushing our luck getting this close. Should’ve gotten the hell out once we figured out this was the place.”

“Here,” I passed her the map Hide had given me, “Get this to the manager if nothing else and tell him we—actually, tell him I said we need to hurry.”

Her head bobbed down to the map and then up to me.

“I swear,” she growled, “you better not fucking die and leave me with you and Kaneki’s work to do.”

“I’ve got no plans to end up dead.” I promised. “Tomorrow, we can take all this to the manager, okay?”

That finally seemed to placate her enough to leave. I noticed that she seemed to be moving to first
put as much distance between herself and the complex. Taking Touka along had probably not been a wise choice.

Sticking around was probably not the safest choice either, but I knew from experience that more intelligence only made planning easier. If nothing else, I probably wasn’t going to get sniffed out by anybody; the distinctly salty breeze coming in from the surf meant I was effectively downwind of anyone in the complex. Still, I stuck to being stealthy as I wound my way around the treeline again. I did not envy the CCG when they raided this. Two directions were basically impassible due to the water and an encroaching cliff, not to mention the only good way to get a vehicle in was via the road and up a few shallow flights of stairs. The whole location basically forced a frontal assault, unless the CCG could wrangle up gunboats or an armed helicopter for the other fronts. I had had seen castles with less effective defenses than this.

I had only heard it joked about by people who made more than me, but this looked like a place where ‘just bomb it to the ground’ was potentially the easiest option. Plus, explosions.

Finally, I got to the other side, where only one building caught my eye; a short and fat structure that looked as if a grain silo had attempted to become an observatory. Or maybe it actually was something obvious and I was just an idiot. Compared to the other boxy shapes, it just kind of lurked, somehow looking more ominous than ordinary.

Despite clearly being used, I didn’t see, hear or smell any activity in any of the buildings—not that my senses were much better than baseline human. Perhaps everyone had an early curfew? If that was the case than Touka and I had really gotten lucky. A little part of me wanted to push my luck a little and get closer.

Don’t. It’s a really bad idea to take a risk like this without backup. I’m only here to look.

I repeated the last sentence of that over and over as I backed off further into the trees, staving off any other foolish choices for the night. I had seen more than enough to draw a good map of the complex. I needed to just get back, convince Yoshimura to move up the timetable and I could look more when we came back to get Kaneki out. Right now, getting back to the twentieth was the most important thing to do.

Retreating, I stayed somewhat parallel to the entry road which was visible only as a dreamlike glow from its lamps if I looked hard to my left. After the forest, I’d be back in the urban areas and from there I’d have an easy time finding a train ride back out of this sketchy ward.

And a tiny ‘alert’ light clicked on in the back of my head. I dropped into a crouch and stopped dead. There was…something…going on. Exactly what was still unknown—local wildlife, Aogiri ghoul heading home, paranoid delusion, Touka lying in wait. This was the feeling of standing in the middle of an unfamiliar street and sizing up every movement in the windows as banal local life or a hatchling ambush.

Something squawked and fluttered from my right side to my left.

Just a bird.

I quietly let out a breath I thought I hadn’t been holding. Just a—

My vision flipped, giving me a brief view of the glow of the city sky poking through branches before dead leaves and twigs took their turn greeting my eyes before knocking the remaining wind out of my chest. I half-recovered, sucking in air and already high enough on adrenaline that I didn’t feel my landing as much as heard it.
Another ghoul? Half of me clamored for a fight. No, leave it, and get out of the ward.

Somewhere to my side I heard a high pitched giggle. Planting my feet, I made a beeline away from the laughter and didn’t attempt to be stealthy as the trees zipped past and low branches clawed at my clothes. City, railway, getaway. The plan bounced in my head as the second best idea I had; the first best being leaving at the same time Touka had.

The second time, I got a glimpse of my attacker: small, definitely Aogiri and much faster than I had any chance of reacting to. A kick landed home, something in my shoulder made a crunchy sound, and I ended up getting knocked off my feet again. Unfortunately, I didn’t get any open ground to tumble in and ended up hitting what felt like a good size tree with my ribcage.

When I got back to Anteiku, I was never going to ignore Touka’s recommendations again.

Getting back to my feet hurt, and this time my route was blocked by a white-garbed and red-jawed tree of a man. A second ghoul? Some kind of garb for the Aogiri elite? We sized each other up for about half a second before making our moves. I got lucky, for once tonight: he came in with the same low jab that Trish and Frank were fond of using on the mats, something I only notice after muscle memory had moved to deflect. That was going to be another bruise. The only response was a grunt that sounded suspiciously like approval.

There was a breeze on the side of my face and everything winked out for a second. Next thing, I was on the ground and a foot was being planted on my sternum. The small figure bent over my face, putting enough weight on that I felt something pop.

“Well now, look what just wrote itself into the story.” The figure toyed with the mesh of my mask and giggled. “What a lovely little surprise!”

The smile that cut through the mask of bandages was both playful and inhumanly far from reassuring.
From where I sat, I could watch the first rays of light creep down the wall like a slow burning fuse. I had been marched into one of the buildings and up a couple flights of stairs before being shoved into this empty-but-for-a-cot room. The female ghoul had led the way with a little half-skip every few steps, looking all the part of a kid who had nabbed the grand prize at a carnival game. Behind me, the big ghoul might have well been my shadow for all the noise he made. Hell, for all the looks I got, I might as well have been a prize.

One thing was certain, I wasn’t going anywhere. All the hits I had taken in the forest had seen to that, and I think the two who did it knew it—I hadn’t seen or heard anyone on guard outside the room. Worst part was I didn’t have a good excuse be angry about it. I had screwed up, and this was the price.

Not that it stopped me from having something to be angry about. She had either hit me in the side of the mouth far harder than I thought or had aimed her blow, because there were now nine bloody lumps of what had once been teeth sitting next to me on the cot. I didn’t know if it was the resurgent lack of sleep, but I counted that as the worst of my injuries. Payback for that was an appealing thought despite how unlikely it seemed at the moment.

And speak of the devil herself.

“Well, look who made it through the night.” There was still that energetic little bounce in her step.

Despite my mask still covering my face, I fought to not scowl at the tone.

“Aww, did I knock all the words out of you last night?” Her tone was teasing, like a child on a playground. “Do you need a pen and paper to scribble down your thoughts?”

Some of my attitude must’ve gotten through my mask.

“That’s better. Hiding your feelings is all well and good, but an unexpressive mask like that doesn’t make you an interesting character.”

She half-skipped closer and brought her face level to mine. Even though she looked to be only a couple inches shorter than me, the low legs of the cot meant the female ghoul had to bend over. Despite the childish tone, the eyes peering through the bandage mask she wore were cold as January wind.

“Nothing to say? Well, you may be mute, but at least you aren’t stupid. Lotsa ghouls would’ve tried to run away in the night.” She tittered, the laugh not making it to her eyes as she walked about the room. “They all die, naturally. Not even deaths worth writing about.”

My mouth stayed shut. I had nothing to say about that, or anything else already said.

Something seemed to have wafted into the room as she paced about, but nothing I could place. It was…not unpleasant.

“So.” She approached again, not bothering to crouch this time. “What brought you out to peek in on our little operation?”

Something about how she stood told me that staying silent this time was not going to be a healthy option.
“I… I was going to see about joining…” My voice trailed off as something flared to life in her eyes. “…up.” Had staying silent been the right choice there? Or did she see through the lie?

The uncomfortable silence didn’t get much time to settle. A pale hand snapped out to snag the collar of my shirt and pull me forward off the wall.

“My oh my.”

I wasn’t sure what had just happened; the teasing tone had dropped entirely and now I was being regarded with a completely different air. Then, in one smooth motion, her other hand came up and under the mesh and pulled my mask off.

“Mhmm. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you found your way out here, even if it took you this long.” She dropped the mask and produced one of my teeth before flicking it aside, “After all, someone like you spending time with the CCG would only end poorly…even if you were sanctioned back home.”

I wasn’t sure if she was being rhetorical or expecting an answer. More important was how she knew what she had just implied. Sure, a foreigner working with the CCG was going to be obvious, but the last part was unsettling. Exactly how did a ghoul in the eleventh ward figure out what I had been doing back home?

“How—” I began, but my question was cut off.

A slender thumb had been stuck in my mouth and forced my head back while stretching my cheek to the side. From the look in her eyes and the tightening of the grip on my shirt, I didn’t think that squirming was going to be a particularly safe choice. For a moment, both of us were nearly motionless. The scent that had followed my captor-slash-interrogator in felt as if it was filling the room. Then, an unexpected smile.

“You’ll live. Besides,” the thumb was pulled from my mouth with a perverse tickle as it rubbed along my cheek, “teeth grow back.”

Well, I knew that now.

“Who…” I finally managed to start—I was having a hard time getting my train of thought back after that…incident. “Who are you?”

The thumb that had been in my mouth was already in hers, so my only reply was a slightly distorted grin and giggle. For some reason, her doing that left me feeling more violated than when the finger had been in my mouth. I was starting to suspect that she was here only to mess with me.

“You really do know nothing.” She pulled her thumb from her mouth with an audible pop. “At least you’re smart enough to have figured out where we are, hmm?”

This time I didn’t try to hide the scowl. I had been told that line enough.

“Ah, there’s some fight still in you after all! Good. As for who I am,” she stepped back and made a mock bow, “you may call me Eto, lieutenant in Aogiri Tree and for the moment, the author of your immediate future.”

“I see.” Next time, she should add in ‘overly dramatic nut’. “So what happens now?”

“Blunt and direct.” I could only hope that was some kind of approval. “You are going to be taken to wait for proper daylight in one of the common areas, and then we’ll decide what to do with you.
I have more important things to do than sit around, so, goodbye.”

Eto plopped the mask on my lap and meandered back to the door, stopping at the frame to look back.

“We will be seeing each other again though, Allen. After all,” her smile still looked like a knife from here, “ghoul oddities like us should stick together.”

And then I was left alone with more questions than I had before she had entered. Had all that been the interview to join, an interrogation or what? To what end had the deal with her sticking her finger in my mouth been, exactly? Most worryingly was that this Eto had actually learned my name somehow, because the only way that was possible was that Aogiri had been watching me.

The only thing I was certain of was that I did not want to be here, amidst a group that neither humans nor other ghouls liked, that was very likely to be raided by the CCG.

Two Aogiri ghouls without masks on arrived to take me to the common area Eto had referenced. Neither made any attempt to make conversation, which suited me just fine. The common area turned out to be a fairly large lobby on the ground floor, complete with a bone-dry water feature. Through the doors—rather, through where the doors would’ve been—I could see the forest and concrete steps leading back to the city. All the better to remind me I was stuck here. What a mean joke.

Apparently it was also to let everybody leaving or entering the building stare at me while I sat on the wall of the water feature. I hated that, even with my mask on. Was uncomfortably reminiscent of my days before I was at the BGA.

The activity through the lobby grew as the sun rose higher, not really a stream of ghouls but enough that I lost count after what felt like half an hour and didn’t account for the movement outside the building. There had to be at least fifty ghouls in this building, and if that number held true for each of the buildings in the complex, that was a total of at least four hundred Aogiri members in total.

Back home, a group half this size would have been at the extreme end of the size scale. I didn’t even know how the BGA would’ve fought something the size of Aogiri back home. Whatever kind of escalation this was going to be from the CCG, it went without saying that I was not interested in seeing it firsthand.

I watched an adult lead a child on a pointed detour around me. That was a good point, actually; how many ghouls had joined as civilians for the safety in numbers and not as a fighting force? The distinction didn’t really matter to the CCG. Kureo had been a clear indicator that there was no distinction between combatant and bystander. Plus mother ghouls had a reputation for being crazy protective of their children.

“That’s actually him?”

“Smaller than I expected.”

Looking toward the heart of the building, I saw a trio approaching. The tree with the red half mask was there, along with a duo who were pointing me out.

“It’s him.” The tree confirmed, stopping a short distance back. “Despite Eto’s request, I hand him off to you. She sees use where I merely see…potential.”

“Potential is good, we can work with that.”
“Might be able to train some of it out.”

The duo seemed to be dangerously close to be the stereotypical creepy twins.

“He is not to leave the grounds. Should he attempt to do so, kill him.” Guess Eto wasn’t lying about running away being a bad idea.

“Fair enough, we’ll keep an eye on him.”

The tree then turned to me. “You have failed to disappoint me once. It will be fortunate should you continue to do so.”

*That was an odd complement.*

And then I was left with the duo.

“High complement from Tatara there.” Unlike his name, the man hardly looked like a furnace his name implied. “You’ll call us the Bin Brothers.”

“Now,” the other brother nodded, “what should we be calling you?”

For a moment, I balked. *If I lied, it would probably get figured out quickly.* “...Allen.”

Taken to a neighboring building, I was given one of the maroon-ish colored cloaks that every Aogiri wore—with the exception, I noticed, of my new captors-slash-bosses having found what looked like denim for theirs. After that and a short internal debate between the two, my fate was determined. Guard duty. And here I had thought that the end of my time in the military had been the end of that boring hell.

“You want dusk or dawn?”

I blinked, not expecting to be given a choice.

“C’mon, easy question, and we know you’re not a mute.”

“Uh,” I had the oddest sense of déjà vu from this. “dusk works, I guess.”

“Trick question, you get du—oh neat!”

“Nobody wants dusk duty around here.” There was no indicator of which one was talking at any given moment. “They all want to prance around Tokyo at night, looking for food.”

The shift from hostility to trust was…offputting. Maybe this was because I didn’t know much about ghoul society, but it felt like this was moving a bit fast. And then something Frank had said floated back to mind and finally made sense; ‘Leadership and enemies make for good glue’. Eto had ordered the Bin brothers to put me under their command, and the CCG was as much an en enemy as imaginable.

Eto. Everything between Aogiri and myself pivoted on Kaneki and now her. She knew too much and it was the *how* of the knowledge and the way she had looked at me through that strangely pleasant smell that seemed to follow her about.
--97: When in Rome—

The Bin Brothers had just dropped me off in what seemed to be serving as a barracks and left without a word. There were still a lot of things I didn’t know. For example, was I supposed to be interacting with the others, or were they supposed to approach me first? What was I supposed to do when nighttime happened and I was supposed to be on watch? Also, was leaving my mask on okay? I didn’t really want to take it off, but I didn’t want to make some huge social scandal out of wearing it around.

And I had thought going around as a human among humans in had been difficult.

If nothing else, my mask might’ve been why all the other ghouls were on the opposite side of the room. Someone had gone ahead and taken out several walls, making several apartments into one big barrack space. The added distance did not make me any more comfortable, and it looked like I would be sleeping in the same room with these people. Last time I had slept in a room with other ghouls—ghouls plural—had been back in my EOD time, and that had been distinctly uncomfortable. Not to mention it had only gone downhill from there.

Eventually I couldn’t deal with being in the room and stepped out onto the nearest balcony. It only faced another building, but it was good enough for getting me out of the room. I’d say that it probably couldn’t get much worse, but that stood the risk of further jinxing this whole thing.

Fuck me for not listening to Touka.

What I really needed to do was get in touch with Anteiku and let them know I was still alive. In that respect, I could be thankful that I hadn’t been searched: I still had everything that had been in my pockets, though I hadn’t checked if it was all intact. At least, it should be all intact.

After only a few minutes outside and feeling the breeze brush over my hands, I broke down and pulled the mask off. Even with it being comfortable as it was, there was something about feeling the coolness that just made me want to feel it on my face. Saltwater mixed with that scent that came before a cold snap or snowfall—possibly both, as it was almost the end of fall. Wonder what everybody did in winter? Maybe it would be just like back home.

“Hey uh, have you seen Kouto and Kei around, have you?”

I blinked, almost surprised at being spoken to.

“Uh…” I turned, not sure of how to answer that I didn’t know anybody.

The ghoul blinked hard and put up his hands apologetically. “Sorry, sorry. Didn’t think you were new. Nevermind.”

“Who are they?” Doing nothing until dusk would be worse than being stuck with Eto. “I can keep an eye out.”

“Kei is about so tall,” he made a motion at about my shoulder height, “shoulder-ish length hair. Kouto is her kid—about twelve, I think—has a bowl cut and bit of a bold streak.”
Well, that rules out the mother and kid I saw earlier; that kid was definitely younger than ten.

“Hazu! Don’t try to rope anyone else into that search party! They’re in a completely different group, you milf-chaser!”

I almost chuckled at the heckle. *Trash talk really is universal.*

The ghoul in front of me shot back with a couple rapid-fire insults of his own before turning back to me.

“Sorry about that. I only know her from back in the sixteenth ward.”

“A Different group?”

“Yeah. Thought they’d get put under the Bin Brothers like us or with Miza, but they put her in Ayato’s group.” He shrugged. “Didn’t get stuck in Jason’s group, at least.”

Jason. Now there was a name that rang a bell, even if all I had seen was him toying with Kureo and Amon. More recently, I also had heard the manager and Yomo talking as if he had been one of the uninvited parties to Anteiku on that day. Even assuming the usual embellishment that went with ghoul tales, Jason sounded more like a serial killer who also happened to be a ghoul. What I could say with certainty was that I was not interested in meeting him, let alone fighting him without a numbers advantage or my quinque.

I groaned under my breath after remembering that. If there was one item I’d do anything for right about now, it was that. Not that I’d ever see it again.

For the time being, the mask stayed off and under the newest addition to my wardrobe. Given how few looks I attracted while I walked around though, wearing it was kind of pointless. Here in Aogiri’s hideout I was getting fewer looks than when I was walking around the twentieth ward. Who would’ve thought that the ghouls were the more tolerant lot.

For the sake of being honest with myself, I wasn’t *really* looking for that Kouto and Kei pair. Well, I was looking, but not with single-minded intensity as much as using the looking to distract myself. In the past twelve hours, I had been basically kidnapped, railroaded into joining what was the exact opposite of my job, and was now basically being imprisoned. Not to mention that I was missing work. Between Touka’s wrath and Yoshimura’s disapproval, I was not going to be in for an easy time of it once we got Kaneki back.

That said, Kaneki had to be here; everything I knew pointed to it, down to Jason’s involvement. There were only twelve or so buildings here to search—even if eight were fairly large apartment blocks—and if I was lucky, I’d find him sooner rather than later. Alive. If he wasn’t, then…

A slew of murderous thoughts danced in my head. *It would only be right to return the favor, wouldn’t it? To the entirety of Aogiri.*

Only after that thought did I realize that I had been chewing at the inside of my cheek enough for it to start bleeding again. Recognizing the habit for what it was, I stopped on the sidewalk between two buildings and tried to get myself less worked up. Here I was in an even less familiar world than Tokyo and somehow even further in the deep end than I had been before. Stress was part of my job, whether disarming explosives or tacking ghouls, and I knew how to overcome it—or at least not let it bother me. What I was considerably less versed in dealing with were these recent urges to just solve problems with violence. Maybe the stress was getting to me.

“Where d’you think you’re headed, meat?”
I paused midstep. In the doorway of the building ahead, a particularly well dressed ghoul had stepped out to block my path.

“I’m looking for Kouto and Kei.”

No response. I started to describe them as they had been to me, but got cut off.

“And why the fuck would you come over here to do it?” He jabbed a thumb behind him. “This here’s White Suit territory. These’re our territory and Jason’s playroom.”

Staring back, I rolled around the last word in my head—he had said ‘playroom’, right? Either that or I was missing some critical detail thanks to me still not knowing enough to hold a conversation at the speed of a native speaker. Had he said ‘arcade’ or perhaps ‘private quarters’ perhaps, and I had mistranslated? At least the white suit part had been clear enough, mostly because it explained his getup.

“Holy hells, are you brain damaged or just deaf? We’re the White Suits! We don’t accept weaklings! If some mom and her twerp came wandering around here we’d chuck them right back where you’re standing.”

“Is that so.” I muttered, trying not to show just how much this roadblock was rubbing me the wrong way.

“Hah? You givin’ me lip?” The White Suit approached, cutting the distance between us to barely a foot. “How about you say that again where we both can hear it.”

Had I done something to irritate him, or was he just looking to work out some frustrations. In either case, getting into a fight here was something I could not call the best choice. _Or I could just kill him._

“What is it? CCG got your tongue?”

_It would be pretty easy to get rid of the body, given that the ocean is barely a short walk away._

“C’mon fresh meat. Wanna dance? Wanna run away and I can do to you what Jason did to the last group who tried to run?”

“What I want…” Making eye contact, I took a moment to think. “I want to rip you apart, eat your kagune and throw what’s left into the ocean.”

The space between the ghoul and I lengthened back to about six feet.

“Oh yeah?” The note of confrontation was also gone. “Go find somebody more gullible to screw with, goddamn nutcase.”

To be honest with myself, I didn’t know how serious I was being about that threat. It hadn’t been empty, but there was just a little too much seriousness to let me dismiss it completely. Maybe I had been a bit too eager in delivering it. Last night’s lack of sleep was not doing good things.

The rest of my daylight hours were split between dozing in out of the way rooms and trying to find said rooms that were empty. It was still surprising to me just how many ghouls were here, even if it was probably because I had only been around at most fifteen at a time before this. Ghouls walking around, talking, doing all the things regular humans did when they weren’t working.

The closest comparison I had was when friends said they had adult things to do, and then you
walked in on them doing their tax returns. Technically true, but not what was expected.

By the time I had been sent up to the roof for guard duty, I had a general of how Anteiku and I would want to raid. Easiest way in would be the same way I had come, and the safe way out would be to travel parallel to the shore through the forest before turning toward the city proper and home. We’d have to split up to search through; between the size of the buildings and getting blocked more times than I had hoped, I had only gotten to search through three.

On a similar vein, I still had no idea how the CCG were planning on raiding this place, though now I was of the opinion that the numbers would be the real problem. With the bodies at their disposal, Aogiri could force a very bloody fight from building to building if they wanted to. Of course, that opened up another possibility; that the CCG didn’t know the details of what they were walking into.

Also a new development; three more teeth had fallen out. I was doing my best to not think about my whole mouth situation, but every time I went to bite my cheek on the right side was a reminder of…that.

As the last bit of daylight faded, a question occurred to me that hadn’t previously: should I tell the CCG? Amon, really, since I didn’t have their tip line. Foul taste toward Kureo and the CCG in general aside, Amon and Shinohara were proof that not everybody there was a lunatic.

I’d call Amon. I owed him that much of a courtesy, from one agent to another.

More important was that I get in touch with Anteiku: I didn’t want our own raid to get delayed—or worse, cancelled—thanks to the mess I had gotten my sorry ass into. Sliding a hand down into my pocket, I looked over to the other few individuals who had night watch as well. Each of us had taken a different rooftop, but nobody seemed to be taking it seriously, and one had even laid down on the roof access with the intent to nap. Small wonder Touka and I had such an easy time scouting.

“‘My oh my, looks who’s not failing to surprise.’

I knew who it was before I turned. Eto.

“You’re either very brave or very stupid.” I wasn’t about to deny her claim—she was both right and I remembered how easily she had handled me earlier. “Tatara thought it was fairly certain you’d try to run. He doesn’t quite know you like I do.”

“Okay…” I retreated a step as she advanced. How had she gotten out onto the roof so quietly? More importantly, how was she somehow less disquieting than Hasuko?

“I know how characters like you are written.” A finger waggled scoldingly in my direction. “You’re either so obsessed with staying alive that it keeps you from becoming interesting, or you’re just a puppet who lives only to have his strings pulled.”

Something must’ve flickered across my face, because Eto giggled and smiled, her teeth catching the dim light and staining it silver.

“The puppet wants to stay alive, but is too scared to cut its own strings. Poetic.”

I only scowled and pulled my mask out and on. Giving her more things to throw at me was not what I wanted to do right now. We were circling each other by now, though I had only started to keep her from getting behind me.
“You’re really more interesting to look at with that mask off. Hmmm,” Interlacing her fingers at the side of her face, Eto smiled in a cruel flavor of happiness, “At least you’ve got more going for you than that other ghoul like you. A character struggling in a noose of fear is more fun to read than to write.”

Kaneki. She’s talking about Kaneki. She knows about Kaneki.

Taking a step forward, I didn’t manage the first syllable of my question before I found myself flat on my back and nailed down by an arm and leg. Eto once again stood above me, smile gone and eyes shadowed in black.

That was…not my brightest idea.

“You know that was clearly foolish.” She stepped around to step on my free arm, “Why you’d choose to associate with such a weak boy is beyond me and you should know better. Every weakling you associate with is just another puppeteer to pull your strings.

“Where—”

“Shush.” Except I was being spoken to by a complete mouth on the length of Kagune pinning down my arm. Exactly what the hell was Eto?

“I don’t even know where he is. And why would I?” She bent down so her head was directly over mine. “I didn’t become strong by concerning myself with the weak—something you should do well to note, assuming you want to live much longer.”

A second mouth shushed me when I attempted to disagree.

“You interest me, Allen. That’s something not even Tatara can claim to have done.”

That was very much a not-reassuring thing to hear.

“My advice to you for the moment is simple.” Stepping off my arm, she squatted down so her face was upside down and right above mine, and once again pulled off my mask. “Run.”

“Run.” I echoed with a touch of snark. “After you and Tatara threatened death if I did?”

“I only said that lots of ghouls die trying to run away. Tatara was the only one to make a threat, and he’s violently single minded. Did you know he’s only after one Investigator in a quaint little vendetta? He probably even thinks there’s something between him and I.” Eto giggled in that eerie way, making it clear of what she thought of that idea. “He doesn’t care much for the end goal here anyway.”

“And what would the end goal be?”

But instead of being shushed, Eto just ignored my question.

“Why am I interesting?” I tried again.

That caught her attention. And prompted something awfully close to a smile without malicious intent.

“Because you,” she smiled, tweaking my nose, “are a black swan event that nobody has thought to account for. The CCG are dumber than I thought if they didn’t tear apart the city looking for you, even if the men behind the curtain might’ve put a stop to that.”
Black swan event, men behind the curtain—Eto was making references to a things that I really couldn’t make sense of.

“This is all a little over your head, isn’t it?” I detected a distinct sound of disappointment in her tone. “For now, all you need to know is that Tatara and I are leaving, and that anybody still here by the end of the next week will be killed.”

“The CCG raid.” I could recognize that reference at least.

Eto only put a finger up to her grinning lips in reply before unpinning me with a slippery sound and daintily hopping off the side of the building.

Ugh. Goddamn heights. It would be a very dark day when I would imitate Eto for the sake of avoiding some stairs. As far from the edge as I could, I watched Eto and Tatara disappear into the woods at the head of a stream of ghouls. In the event everything she had said was correct, neither of them would be returning to the apartment complex. Not that I was really in the position to trust anything she said.

Hobbling away from the edge of the rooftop, I slumped down against the stairwell access. However Eto had pinned me, she had apparently done it with a minimum of damage, since I wasn’t hurting as much as I thought I should. Noteworthy because I was sure that she could’ve turned me into a smoothie if she had wanted. Seriously, what did she eat for her kagune to gain the ability to shush me. Forget the other one-eyed ghoul; Itori would better served to learn about Eto.

That said, I’d keep just how nice she smelled to myself. And how I almost wouldn’t mind her putting her finger in my mouth—I shook my head, hard, to dislodge that and several other thoughts.

Taking one last look around for unwanted company, I reached into my pockets and pulled out my phones. Black first; I owed Amon a favor, professional to professional.

Chapter End Notes

The idea of Eto referencing writing terminology came about naturally, given her established role as an acclaimed author and that we don’t have much in they way of full conversations to go on from the series. Her more sophisticated speech strikes a nice contrast to Allen’s more blunt manner moreso when her knowledge is compared with Allen not seeing much of the game behind the scenes.

Work has settled down a little, so I should be able to reply to comments again and post the next chapter sooner.

Next chapters; phone calls, murder, mayhem, a happy reunion, an unexpected reunion, corpse looting, retrieval of lost property, and a room with a checkerboard floor.
Quiet entry, loud raid

I almost thought the battery had died until I remembered that I had flipped it on that day everything had gone to hell. Fixing that, I was able to boot the phone. Being tracked via cell signal wasn’t exactly a worry, considering where I was: what were they going to do? Track me down to Aogiri’s hideout, that they were already going to raid?

There was nothing I really stood to gain or lose by this, I figured, apart from keeping my conscience clear. Once I told Amon, it was all out of my hands as to what he did with it, and Anteiku and I weren’t planning on being around to see the CCG raid. I flipped open the phone and took a last look around before pulling up Amon’s number. It was not reassuring that each ring felt an accusation.

I overrode the greeting. “Koutarou, this is Allen. I have something you probably need to hear.”

“Don’t.” Was the terse reply after a baited silent moment. “We aren’t friends; you don’t get address me like that.”

Thank god Amon wasn’t present to see me roll my eyes.

“Fine then. Amon, this is Agent Grissom. I have something you need to hear.”

Dead silence. Great. Was I not allowed to use my title either?

There was some scuffling over the line. “Speak your piece.”

“I have a good vantage point on the Aogiri hideout. It looks there’s easily about three-zero-zero ghouls in here. Granted, they’re spread out over the whole place, but it’s pretty busy here.”

“And what gave you the need to share that?”

“We’re in the same profession, Koutarou, and we both know that good intelligence is essential whenever fieldwork is involved.”

“We aren’t.” The cold in Amon’s voice matched the threat of winter in the air. “Not since that night. I should have left you in that storm drain, or better, put you down then and there.”

That…hurt more than I expected it to. Even if I had been justified that night.

“Oh, because keeping somebody eager to kill a kid from actually doing so is such an evil thing to do, right?” I winced; should’ve just kept my mouth shut.

“A ghoul.” Amon growled back, a barely controlled tremor in his tone. “You…killed him…over a ghoul.”

“After we killed her parents in cold blood.” Now I was having a hard time keeping my voice level, “I am not about to stand by and let a traumatized orphaned child get murdered because someone had a taste for blood!”

“So you decided the best course of action was just to kill him yourself then, you goddamn hypocrite? Is that what they taught you at your BGA—if you even were ever part of it?”

“I gave him every opportunity to back down, to take them in, and get everybody out of there alive.”

The slight against my organization was barely being held back my frayed professionalism.
“Multiple chances beyond what I should’ve, because my BGA taught me that offing innocent kids or anyone else for fun was off-fucking-limits.”

Dead silence.

“He laughed in my face, threatened me and threw the first punch.”

Amon’s reply came through the earpiece like nuclear winter. “You ghoul liar.”

Beneath my grip, the phone chassis creaked unhappily. I couldn’t deal with this anymore.

“I didn’t want that result.”

That was all I managed before I snapped the phone closed with the snap of plastic on plastic and tried not to hurl it into the forest out of frustration. The alternative was me cursing out the CCG and Amon’s late partner, something that for the moment was I was not. I looked skyward and sighed. I wasn’t even sure how truthful the whole thing had been about that night. Between the blood loss and emotional charge, that whole block of time between heading to the drain and getting back to my hotel room was somewhat…fuzzy.

On the bright side, I could be certain of one thing now; I did not want to deal with Amon again.

In contrast Yoshimura, when I got up the nerve to actually call him was calmer than I was. After I told him the basic situation, I didn't expect his first words.

“Allen, it's all right. I'm not angry, only reassured to hear that you're still in one piece.”

“I...” For some reason, there was a tear in my eye. “Thank you. I'll do my best to stay that way.”

I told him almost everything, less anything about Eto outside her name—I'd keep that to myself until I could figure it out. Security, approaches, everything I thought would prove useful when Anteiku made their move.

“I'm going to keep looking for Kaneki as well,” I finished, “if I'm lucky, I might actually find him.”

“No, I don’t think you should. Allen, you are currently in a fair amount of peril on the fact that you are a very new member of a very dangerous group. In the interest of your safety, I simply cannot recommend taking any further risks in your position.”

“Okay.” Against a fatherly tone like that, I had no choice. “I'll play it safe.”

Despite not wanting to do nothing, the point was undeniable; even with Tatara gone, there was no promise that his enforcers weren’t.

The last thing before we ended the call was the most important; there was going to be a meeting on when Anteiku would make their move this afternoon. That was a relief between fearing that everything was going to be delayed and hearing Eto talk as if it would be before the end of next week.

Now all I had to worry about was how hard Touka was going to hit me the next time we saw each other.

Eventually, dawn came and the night watch was swapped out once the sun had risen above horizon. That left me to find the darkest and most isolated spot I could to doze off in, since I really
wasn’t eager to fall asleep as the new guy with everybody around—that was how pranks and worse happened.

After sleeping away the morning and a good part of the afternoon, I jolted awake when my phone buzzed in my pocket, thinking something with lots of legs was crawling up my leg. After almost freaking out, I came to my senses and pulled out my purple phone. Several messages had been sent, actually. One from Hide, asking if I had any new leads on what he had given me: he could wait until this little Aogiri episode was over. On the more important side were two from Touka and one from the manager. Touka’s were ‘We’re coming to save your and Kaneki’s asses tonight, so you better be ready’ ‘I’m going to kick your ass after this is over’. The manager’s sole text was more or less the same thing, except without the language and stating that they’d be starting after dark. All three were timestamped from around one-ish.

As I noted that it was now just after five in the afternoon, the phone buzzed again. Another message from Touka; ‘You better not be fucking dead’. That in itself was funnier than it should’ve been. I confirmed to her that I was indeed alive and questioned her ability to kick my ass, then informed Yoshimura that I would be on the rooftop after dark.

Now all that remained was the worst part: the waiting. The weather seemed to be as restless as I was, the wind blowing in alternately from the ocean and the city and pushing around a patchwork sky.

Long after I had gotten paranoid that I had imagined the texts, a pair of ghouls in standard Aogiri garb came up the stairwell.

“We’re looking for a ghoul.” One of the pair said, prompting a confused turn from their companion. “One eyed, bit of a stubborn jackass.”

“Hah.” I recognized the voice and snark even with the Aogiri mask. “Nice one, Touka. I’m guessing you dragged along Nishiki as well.”

“Obviously.” Nishiki raised his mask just high enough to prove it was indeed him. “If you or Kaneki end up dead then we’ll end up with that much more work.”

I saw through the joke. At least I hoped It was a joke.

More figures emerged from the stairwell.

“The mask fits you well.” A tattooed figure—had to be Uta—nodded approvingly.

That left Yomo as one of the remaining two, though neither of them looked like they could be Kouma or Irimi.

“Mon dieu!”

Oh no. Please no.

“Monsieur Allen! It is, indeed, an unadulterated pleasure to see you again!”

You have got to be kidding me.

“Yomo...anybody?” I was so not prepared to deal with the Francophile. “Why is he...here.”

“We needed all hands on deck for this one.” Touka sounded about as eager to have him around as I did.
My hand came up to knead my forehead, but I had to settle for lightly touching my mask. Worst part was that I couldn't really disagree: if we ended up in a fight here, we'd need all the help we could get. This was just something to endure for now. Later would be the time for working out any kinks that came with this and if nothing else, we had enough firepower to put him down if it came to that.

Yomo held a quiet conversation over a walkie-talkie and earpiece, while I got a quick briefing from Nishiki on the plan. Anteiku had entered the complex on the side opposite the buildings the White Suits had claimed and searched both buildings at that end. Yoshimura, Itori and Hinami were remaining there to coordinate us on searching for Kaneki.

The general plan was to go floor by floor through the whole complex, working off of the intelligence provided by Yohimura’s team until we found Kaneki and then book it back out as quickly as possible. It was a good plan, or at least I couldn’t see anything wrong with it. Hinami being along was something I wasn’t particularly a fan of, but knowing her, she probably hadn’t given the others any choice in the matter. If she really wanted to be out doing stuff like this, I’d be a lot less tense if somebody taught her some self-defense.

Ugh. Later. I’d worry about that later.

Nipping at our Aogiri disguises, the wind tilted back to the opposite direction, blowing from the ocean to the city. This time though, it carried something oddly familiar. Diesel exhaust.

My head perked up from where Yomo had paused his planning to listen to some incoming brief. Diesel hadn’t been a common scent in Tokyo for the time I had been around, which made the oddly nostalgic sensation all the more unusual. It finally clicked: it was the same smell as the exhaust from military transport trucks back from when I was an EOD specialist. Which could really only mean one thing—

“The CCG is here,” Yomo calmly announced, “we need to continue the search.”

The snap of a gunshot added a weighty period to the end of his sentence.

A somewhat irregular waltz of gunfire proceeded as we made our search, floor by floor. Most of the Aogiri members paid us no attention, and those who did gave us little more than a passing glance—there were, unsurprisingly, bigger things for Aogiri to worry about.

“Hey.” Nishiki hissed, as Yomo and Uta led our search to another floor. “The hell is going on out there?”

“Stalemate, probably.” I flung open a door, only to find a broom closet. “I’d guess that the CCG is focusing their attention on that paved main entrance, but they’ve gotta deal with Aogiri having the high ground.”

“So this lasts until one side runs out of ammunition.”

“They won’t keep trying to just charge it in up the middle. The CCG will get in, it’s just a matter of time.”

“Ugh. You are a real mood killer, you know that?”

“Eh.” I shrugged, checked an abandoned apartment, and shrugged again. “No attack helicopter, so we’re in good shape as far as that goes.”

Nishiki made a noise like I had suggested he eat his girlfriend. “Attack Helicopter?”
“It...” I should've kept my mouth shut. “It was just a one time thing.”

Now Touka was staring me down through her rabbit mask as well.

“Look, it was for something a lot bigger than this, if that helps.” A low rumble undercut the chatter of gunfire. “...Is that a motorcycle?”

Nishiki cocked his head toward the front of the complex. “I... I think so?”

A few moments later, there was a distant but definite crash and a sudden spike in gunfire. What the hell was the CCG doing?
Whatever the thing with the motorcycle had been, it had clearly been enough to crack Aogiri’s defenses enough for the CCG to enter the buildings. The gunfire was more sporadic, but was now much heavier when it did happen. In the close quarters of the building, massed full-auto fire was an even match for a ghoul’s kagune if it didn’t manage to flank. This was a game I had only read about and never played, since it came with sizable risks to the entry teams. Echoes and ricochets bounced through stairwells.

This situation was starting to deteriorate, not rapidly, given that we had yet to encounter any opposition. If the CCG was operating like I assumed it would, victory was going to be less a feat of tactical genius than just flooding the complex with grunts and ammo.

Or Aogiri would collectively decide to cut and run and the whole thing would end in a rout.

Kicking in yet another door—I had ceased with the slower doorknobs about two floors ago—I noticed Touka running along with a distracted look on her face. Before I could get her attention, she nearly ran into a squad of CCG as they rounded a corner. She and Nishiki stopped dead, I yanked them into the room I had just opened, and the Uta-Yomo-Tsukiyama trio did their slippery work.

“Touka, you ok?” I knew Nishiki was fine, because he marched out of the room cursing at our luck.

“Y-yeah!”

Clearly not, since her mind had just been elsewhere.

“Keep your head in the present.” It felt funny to be passing on some of the first BGA combat advice I had received. “We worry after we win.”

“Right.” Her face shifted back to being serious, and nodded.

The unbidden thought I had was that she was thinking about Kaneki, but that couldn’t be the whole story, right? Giving my head a brief shake, I reminded myself of what I had just said. There’d be time to worry later.

“We’re going to split up.” Yomo announced. “Between covering as much ground as possible, and the Dove interference, it’s our best bet since Irimi and the manager don’t have any solid leads. Uta, Tsukiyama and I will force our way through. Touka, take Allen and Nishiki, and find the path of least resistance.”

After Yomo and company left, I took a short listen to make sure they were actually gone before reaching for one of rifles. Picked it up, toyed with the idea of bringing it along, then leaned it up against the wall. Between needing to waste time to scavenge ammo from bodies, and the fact that it was a full size rifle and not a more practically sized carbine...I’d have to pass. More than a firearm, this whole situation was a very sharp reminder that Hasuko still had my quinque. Following Touka and Nishiki up a stairwell, a chattering of fire from outside also reminded that a quinque wasn’t much against a firearm.

In front of me, Nishiki implied Touka was easily distracted, Touka responded by insulting his busy sex life. Nishiki noted that Touka had to be on her period to acting the way she was. I wondered if they were actually friends or if I was going to have to step between them to stop a fight.
We ended up on the rooftop, where Touka proceeded to scare the hell out of me by having us jump the gap to the last apartment building in the row and making us the second trio of ghouls. The other trio of ghouls were standing around the edge nearest the CCG incursion point and holding a lively argument.

“—Don’t get what the hell he’s doing, holed up in his playroom. If there was ever a time we needed Jason, it’s right fucking n—” The ghoul changed subject mid-word once he noticed us. “—You!”

Me? Had we met? He did sound familiar

“Didn’t I warn what would happen if you came back here,” He jabbed a finger at me, knifelike kagune unfurling at his shoulder, “you crazy fuc—”

The curse cut into a yelp; without the need to play by Aogiri rules, I opted to sink a spike of kagune into his chest, which in turn caused him to stumble off the edge of the apartment block. The protests from the remaining two ghouls were ended quickly by a kick and razor storm from Nishiki and Touka, respectively.

With that out of the way, I looked to Touka on where to go next only to find her and Nishiki looking to me. Both were very clearly looking at me to direct them. We’d clear this one the same way that we had been clearing the other building; floor by floor, room by room—not that there was a better or other way.

Clearly, there was a fair bit of fighting going on; the stairwell we came down was quiet, but the others funneled shouting and gunfire up while transporting Aogiri members down. Nobody was paying any attention to us, but it was inevitable that the CCG would take the building eventually. Clearing another apartment, my eyes drifted out a window to where the top of that domed building was just a few stories below. I shouldn’t have given it a thought, but a strange gravity pulled my head back in that direction.

‘Trust your instincts’ had been what Monica and the others had been pounding into my head back home, ‘your training informs them, and they’ll sort more data than you can’.

Why was that building drawing me in? It wasn’t like the other apartment blocks, and all the blocks had been were living quarters and storage.

“We’re going back a few rooms.” I announced, prompting a pair of questioning looks. “There’s a fire escape a little way back, and we need to get to ground level.”

If there were any doubts, they were left unspoken as we climbed down. There were actually two buildings at this corner of the complex; the building with the dome and a windowless one with about half the footprint of one apartment block.

“Nishiki,” I pointed out the structure with the flat top. “I want you to check out that building while Touka and I check the other one. And don’t take any pointless risks.”

“Just calculated ones, got it.” There was enough wit in the rapid reply that I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Don’t worry, I’m getting a minor in math.”

There was a single double door into the domed building; heavy, cold and enough to flip my senses into danger when I placed my hand onto the latch bar. Every alarm bell was ringing—danger, ambush, IED—but nothing happened when we stepped over the threshold.

What insufficient light there was had puddled in the middle of the open interior, giving the
impression that the opposite wall was further away than it actually was. A checkerboard of factory fresh ink and ivory tiles didn’t help mitigate the effect. Behind and to my side, Touka shifted, either because she was as unsettled as I was or to get a better look. The focus all came down on a simple scene in the center.

A table, a pair of buckets, an occupied chair, and a man resting his hands on its back.

“I thought” The figure stepped back from the chair and toward us. “that I had ordered you all to leave me be when I was having my fun. At risk of my…displeasure.”

Jason.

Touka made a nauseated sound. “Kaneki...”

That was the only possible person in that chair: the whole room smelled like him, smelled like he had been bleeding and sweating and dry heaving. A twist in my gut. Something wrong had happened here, something best forgotten.

“Interruptions, interruptions. Barely a few days to have my fun and then everybody wants to spoil it.” Jason seemed less concerned about the CCG than he was about being interrupted. “In any case, I think we have another pair of guests you can choose between.”

He gestured to us with one hand as his other tilted Kaneki’s head in our direction.

Now though, I wasn’t one hundred percent sure it was Kaneki—everything over there looked fairly gray, with no indication of Kaneki’s slightly unkempt mop of black hair.

Touka must’ve seen something I didn’t: she bolted for Jason, Aogiri disguise fluttering to the ground in her wake. The attack was broken off by swipe from Jason, one hard enough to sound like a truck pushing through wind and forcing her to dodge aside. I made my own approach, dropping the cloak and closing the gap—at a walk though, I wasn’t about to charge in like Touka. Jason locked his attention onto me with a look that very much said he expected a good fight and lunged.

I took a guess and dodged left; Jason’s arm went right, his reactionary kick whiffed past my leg and for the briefest of moments I was sparring against Frank back in the BGA gymnasium. Then Jason growled, deployed his kagune and reminded me that this was absolutely not home. In answer, I deployed my own and immediately used it to deflect an overhead blow while the rest of me blocked a fist aimed at my sternum.

Easy now. Keep defensive and open some distance.

Something was off about my kagune. Not in the sense that it had formed improperly, but more in the ‘gained twenty pounds overnight’ type of problem.

Two more kagune attacks from Jason, only one of which I managed to fully block with the sensation of being hit with a baseball bat studded with shark teeth. Something in my blocking arm creaked and sent a zing of hurt up to my pinkie.

My spike-edged ribbon wasn’t moving any slower, but it had all this new weight and now getting it to stop was—I danced backward to open some distance—almost enough to pull me off balance.

Jason stepped forward with a smirk, probably smelling weakness, until both his expression and approach were cut short by a spike from my kagune pinning his foot to the floor. At least I could still shoot straight. He simply ripped his foot free, charging in with a roar and another set of hits I just managed to block while sending a pair of new spikes into his gut. No effect. If anything, they
just made his next punch that much harder. Shouldn’t have sent Nishiki away. He would’ve been absolutely invaluable for this fight, letting me actually take shots at this guy since I wasn’t able to shoot and move my kagune with much more than point blank accuracy.

As it stood, I was approximately equal to this guy at the moment—until one of us landed a fatal or disabling hit. Or until my stamina gave out, after which the fight would be to avoid becoming a punching bag. Maybe I wouldn’t need to worry about the time issue as much. Touka was doing her best to free Kaneki from where he had apparently been manacled to the chair—I may have given her a lot of crap, but she was good at taking opportunities when they came.

That I only saw this after nearly being knocked to the checkerboard floor was irrelevant.

I kept my heavier kagune in close, trying to keep it from pulling me around too much as its ribbon of crystalline spikes flitted about like a loose band saw blade. Then came the distinct metal snap of Touka deciding to simply break one of the manacles. Jason heard it too, his own head snapping around toward the chair with a growl. Both to keep his attention off of Touka and because it was that much of an opening, I surprised myself and went for his neck with my kagune.

This only served to prove that Jason was every bit the threat he had been treated as when he stopped my kagune with his own and locked his gaze back onto me with the air of an adult who was ready to punt an irritating toddler.

Not good.

All I was really able to do was mentally brace for impact and externally try to mitigate the force that sent me close to what felt like twenty feet. Where I had expected him to lay into me with his kagune, Jason only sprouted a sadistic smile as he closed the distance. I was trying to get back up, but there was something slippery on this patch half-shadowed floor.

On the plus side, I didn’t get to experience what that sickly smile promised because Touka shouted something profanity-laced at Jason, applying punctuation in the form of a blast of razor-sharp spikes to his back.

While the no-doubt incensed ghoul chased Touka, I tried a different tactic to get up and found myself looking at a pair of Aogiri robes on the floor. Then, after successfully getting myself upright, I realized that it was actually a small body and an adult sized one. First thought through my slightly concussed head was that it was Kouto and Kei, but their heads weren’t exactly…head shaped.

Any other thought on them was pushed aside in the process of regaining my feet. I had other ghoul sized concerns fighting on the opposite side of the room. Rejoining the fray, I sunk a pair of spikes into Jason’s leg and took him off balance lone enough to let Touka get out of range to recover while I got back in.

Workable plan, up until a hand caught my wrist in a death grip and wrenched me off balance.

An audible pop slipped into the air from between Jason’s fingers and a steady cascade of fire knifed up from my elbow.

“I’m not about to let go.” This ghoul was having as much fun hurting me as Kureo had.

I grit my teeth, deciding whether I was going to let him break the arm or break it first and try to get an advantage out of that. Kind of a seesaw decision there.

See-saw. A messy idea, and one I didn’t know if I had the fine control to pull off…but all I had.
I clenched my jaw, tensed my arm, and for a moment I would’ve sworn a bit of concern danced behind his cruel little eyes.

Then my kagune whirled in close, only the first few spikes nicking flesh before the remainder ripped in deep. In motion, it looked almost like cutting raw meat with the business end of a blender. The last bit of skin holding on to the arm had to be ripped, but that wasn’t hard. Nothing had gone off course, and it hadn’t been as bad as I thought.

Hadn’t hurt me a bit, at least. To be fair, it had been closer to a relief of having my elbow slowly dislocated than actually stopping the pain. Jason’s face went through several stages of grief, eyes dancing between the bloody stump and the severed limb before realizing that he was now missing his grabbing arm from the elbow down. Something about the sad puppy expression on Jason was just so amusing that I couldn’t help myself.

“Ha—” The mirth was promptly cut when a tree trunk of muscled kagune whipped into me.

Despite having my kagune already in the way, the laws of momentum were not on my side and I was once again sent flying. Somewhere between the hit and landing, my mask had also been knocked off my head. Flat on my back, Jason’s kagune now resembled a cross between a horror movie mutant and several skinned corpses worth of muscle wrapping themselves around his head and maimed arm. The appearance was oddly familiar, not that I could place where I had seen it before I had on Jason. As he charged and roared like some kind of beast, I got lucky and sunk a spike directly into his knee. Taking advantage of the stumble and crash, getting to my own feet again was quick and painful.

If it hadn’t been under Jason’s grip, one of the bones in my forearm was definitely broken now. Something was also off with my same shoulder as it now felt as if someone had tried to leverage it out of the socket with a steak knife. Also a ringing in my ears, but that was more of an annoyance.

Once more, Touka had leapt in to draw our now-crazed opponent’s attention and proceeded to lead him around the room. Fuzzily, I realized that she had probably saved me from a follow up blow. I was so going to owe her for tonight. Forcing the hurt down, I raced back in. This was not a good spot or Touka to be in; I had training specifically to fight ghouls; how to take hits and minimize damage. She had none of that, and scrapping with other ghouls was a sketchy substitute.

There was a meaty thwack and a scream as Touka was basically catapulted across the room, taking out the table and both buckets before rolling to a stop.
I was now more than eager to do horrible things to Jason. Except I was beaten to the punch. Kaneki—at least, that was my going assumption of who the gray-haired person was—launched himself into Jason with a shout. Now I was being pulled between helping Touka or joining Kaneki and proceeding to do like Trisha said and peel Jason like a banana. There wasn’t much of a chance for me to intervene; the two were already entangled too heavily for me to make it a two-on-one, and I wasn’t about to try spiking Jason with Kaneki basically on top of him. Instead, I ran to Touka.

She flinched, and tried to wriggle away when I crouched over her.

“Easy, easy. It’s me.”

Checking her over as best I could in the bad light and with a broken bone, Touka appeared all right. I was almost the opposite of a medic though, and nobody had seen it to teach me more than basic first aid, despite my substandard healing factor.

“I’m okay. Help Kaneki.” She implored before shuddering and unexpectedly muttering. “Fingers.”

Still not much I could do there; the two weren’t fighting as much as they were simply beating the shit out of each other, with Kaneki holding his own surprisingly well. The pair separated for a long enough moment for me to feel safe spearing Jason’s leg with a pair of spikes. Maybe not so surprising. Rage—which Kaneki seemed to be running on—was a bigger motivation than just wanting to learn.

There wasn’t much I could actually do to get in involved in the fight with my arm still broken at a funny angle. Kaneki had already taken and healed from more injuries than I had taken—flaunting his rinkaku.

Also healing rapidly was Jason, though the difference was that he didn’t seem to be putting much thought into how he was flailing about, or at all. Both were entirely fixed on the other, neither seeming to notice I was moving about out of reach and sinking spikes into Jason’s joints on the rare occasion I could guarantee I wouldn’t hit Kaneki. Thanks to the room being lit by what appeared to be a single shitty light bulb, picking up the details was not quite possible.

I could see enough to wince whenever Kaneki tanked another hit. Healing factor or not, that hurt to watch. At the same time though, there was a little bit of pride in knowing that I had helped him get to the point where he could fight like this.

Jason played to his own—literal—strength, using his tree trunk of an arm as a flail. His kagune had wrapped itself around most of his torso and head like fleshy armor. Or given how they were being repeatedly ripped up beneath the hits from Kaneki, an ablative covering. The regeneration was starting to get on my last uninjured nerve; just how much of a reserve did we have to chew through before he went down? Even with ghoul resilience being what it was, his resilience was well above what a ghoul should be able to heal from and steadily becoming a frustration.

Oddly, Jason didn’t seem to be doing anything more complicated than flailing around and behaving borderline feral. Repetitive, too, making a swing and miss as Kaneki hopped back out of range. There was none of the brutal cunning I had taken a beating from, and certainly no attempts to
outflank or force off balance.

Watching Kaneki was very much an opposite, despite him clearly running on fury. I saw bits of every sparring session he and I had held and I had watched between him and Touka. A string of blows and a low kick from a rainy day when the storm drain had ran high. A feint and kick he had used on a rare day when he had tied with Touka. That retreating jab thing from a day where we had gone through five tins of coffee beans, but now augmented with his kagune. What unified it now was that Kaneki was putting it through lens of having something on the line to lose. The strike he made with the last blow was a hammer blow of a kagune strike that kicked up dust, knocked Jason backwards and ripped up tiles when it gouged into the floor.

When I took advantage of the gap to embed a spike through Jason’s knee, something unexpected happened. Instead of simply ignoring the spike and healing through it like he had, Jason’s knee buckled. Perhaps I had finally gotten lucky and hit something important, or even better, we had depleted his healing capacity.

Kaneki wasted no time in taking advantage of the opening, laying into Jason and pinning him down with two of his tentacles. Thinking that if nothing else, everything was no longer in quite the same state of madness now that Jason was effectively pinned. Then I heard the muttering. Bordering on inaudible, what I did catch of it was numbers. Radio frequencies? Phone numbers? Lock combinations?

Maybe things coming back to a baseline of sanity was premature.

The muttering just...continued, like static on a poorly tuned radio. Before I could ask anything or give in to the sudden instinct to run up and simply hug my surrogate little brother, Kaneki reached down and used his hands and free tendrils of his kagune to rip into Jason’s kagune. Watching now gave a very graphic demonstration of how very insufficient the ‘peeled like a banana’ threat was. For one, bananas did not scream when peeled.

When he finished, Kaneki’s arms were bloody up to the elbow. Jason’s screams had receded to ragged panting. My instinct to go right up to him had been slightly dampened despite how deserving his victim had been.

“Kaneki?” Touka, apparently having none of my qualms, stepped past me toward Kaneki.

Kaneki’s reaction was immediate; his head bobbed up to look at us with an expression of mild disbelief and then back around the room as if he doubted we were really there. His kagune mirrored the uncertainty, shifting to and fro like a squirrel tail as it shrunk down.

What was going through Touka’s mind, I couldn’t guess, but she got close enough to grab Kaneki’s shoulder and repeat his name.

At that, Kaneki’s murmuring stopped, his gaze snapping back up to look at Touka as if realizing she was actually there. His expression shifted from blank to horrified, stumbling over Jason as he stepped backward and ran for the door. I wasn’t surprised when Touka gave chase and sprinted after him. Aiming to make the third person in the chain, I started after them only to stumble when something rolled beneath my foot.

A finger. I realized, looking down at the fleshy object. And then I saw another, and another, and…

The floor was strewn with fingers pointing nowhere. Toes, grey and curled like miniature shrimp, sat vividly on the tile. Around the buckets Touka had hit, they made little fleshy mosaics. More than a few had been stomped into smears by the fighting. If there had been anything in my
stomach, it would have migrated to the floor by now.

In his own bloody puddle, Jason sucked in a shuddering breath. A ghoul’s reserve of Rc cells measured their ability to heal, and with Jason’s kagune torn from his body like a freshly skinned hide, Kaneki had effectively—and literally—stripped Jason’s means to fight and regenerate. He definitely was a smart kid. How many fingers and toes worth of time had gone into figuring that out?

Jason would know. Jason was also not in a state where stringing together more than two words was realistic. Jason also had a lot of chunks taken out of him in the literal sense. Unusual. Then, I recognized them for what they actually were: bite marks.

No wonder the two had been fighting in such close quarters; Kaneki had been taking chunks out of Jason like a ghoul piranha. Piece after piece after piece.

No sympathy was given for the mess on the floor. As far as I was concerned, all this was his fault. Kaneki tortured, Touka beaten up, me ending up losing teeth and stuck with Aogiri overnight, two buckets worth of severed fingers and toes. And yet Kaneki had left Jason alive. The CCG reminded me that they would finish the job via the echo of a gunshot dancing through the now open doorway, but that would be…unsatisfactory. Seeing the fear in Jason’s eyes when I crouched down to finish what Kaneki had started was more than a little bit enjoyable. Nobody said a quick death couldn’t be painful.

Emerging from the domed building put me back onto solid ground, so to speak. At least out here I had a better idea of what was going on and what the rules of the game were. My mask, despite having being removed from my head via blunt force trauma was intact but for the straps had needing some adjustment. Lucky—I had thought it had been broken from how it was sitting on the floor.

Struggling to fix the straps with one arm almost useless, I didn’t notice Nishiki until he apologized for taking so long.

“Sorry about that.” He actually did sound apologetic as he flipped up his mask. “They had a bunch of their own locked up in there. Didn’t think anybody deserves go out like that, even Aogiri.”

I grunted approval. Anything to make the CCG’s job more difficult.

“I didn’t miss anything important, now, did I?”

“Kind of.” We really could have used him in there, but I just didn’t have the mental bandwidth to tell him.

“I saw Touka chase Kaneki back into apartments; what happened in there?”

Looking up to meet his eyes actually got him to step back. “You really want to know?”

“Maybe…tell me later.” The subtext was; ‘or hopefully not at all’.

“Right. We need to get moving.”

We pulled our masks over our faces and jogged back into the apartments. Running didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would, at least.

The apartment block nearest us was clearly still contested, as were the others in the row facing the ocean, so that was a good sign at least. The CCG was still having a slow time of taking control o
the complex. I still had to find the others now, but at least we had Kaneki. Well, Touka had him since she had been on his tail according to Nishiki. At this point, our best option was just to get out; the others knew the exit plan and Touka being with Kaneki meant that he’d get out as well. In theory.

It would probably be for the best to keep an eye out for them as we went through the buildings to the opposite side of the complex; Murphy’s law, after all. Going through the buildings would also be slower than just staying outside and running for it, but due to personal preference I also liked not being shot at.

The first and building was in the total chaos unique to urban warfare; fighting on multiple floors, lots of holes from where shots had overpenetrated through an extra wall, and the obligatory smell of spent powder and fresh blood. Once again, I was unsuccessfully tempted to grab a dropped CCG rifle. Why they had chosen to use full-length firearms in close quarters was still a mystery. Not that they seemed to be slowing down their users much—there were more ghoul corpses than human ones littering the place.

Nishiki seemed to be taking this well, though that might’ve just been the mask. At least he hadn’t needed to stop to toss his cookies on a patch of floor.

We got lucky in getting to the second building: an open air causeway on one of the middle floors was intact and somehow unguarded by either side in an unusual bit of luck for me. I had expected that we would need to jump across the rooftop. The second and third buildings were only starting to be contested on the first few floors, with a stream of ghouls and CCG moving in to kill each other. Which, now that I thought of it, was strange. If Eto had known about the raid, why not leave a skeleton crew as bait and evacuate? Or use the forest to catch the CCG unaware with a surprise flank? Then again, maybe that was her plan, though she was leaving it kind of long if that was the case.

What I did know was that there was no sign of Touka and Kaneki. The two had a head start on us, so not seeing them was good, in theory. Nishiki wasn’t really worried about this, though he might’ve just been that much more concerned with our getting out in one piece.

And then a yell wound its way up a stairwell. Familiar sounding, if a yell could sound familiar. Irimi? Touka? No idea. I wasn’t familiar enough with anyone in Anteiku to tell who they were by their yelling. Probably for the better.

Ignoring Nishiki’s confused protest, I skidded to a stop and backtracked to the stairwell in time to hear another familiar-ish yell echo upwards. Based on what my companion was saying, he had no idea who or what was yelling and didn’t particularly appreciate my decision to investigate. Sounded like the yelp had come from one or two flights down judging by how echo-free it was.

No other sound came to guide me to any more accurate of a source than that. I groaned internally. With how big each floor was, I couldn’t just check every room. Even with the CCG still stalled on the lowest floors, I couldn’t afford to risk getting caught when they broke through. Fortunately, I caught something of a break on the first floor I checked: laughter. That was a clue. Like Trisha said back home, nobody sane laughed during raid—Monica was, possibly, an exception. From there, the all I had to do was follow the commotion.

What I found was another barracks-style room, a fair amount of very fresh corpses and a few survivors on the far side of the room. This at least I could reconstruct. CCG enters room, kills ghouls on far side of room, gets jumped from behind by Aogiri. The current survivor count seemed to be four Aogiri and at least one CCG. Still unexplained: why I had been lured down here in the first place.
The ghouls all had their attention on the CCG, taunting with what they’d do after they were dead. Typical overconfident bravado. The whole place collapsing around their ears and they were just wasting time. Not that the CCG hadn’t shown that it was apparently amateur hour, letting themselves get caught like this. I was ready to bet they had even ran out of ammo.

“Not ready just yet?” Once voice came. “That’s fine. Our leaders are going to hit the CCG from behind any minute now. Then we’ll have all the time to take you apart, bit by bit.”

“Fuck off!” That was the familiar voice, female, but I couldn’t identify who it was.

“Ah-ha-ha. We’ll have time for that as well, don’t you worry.”

“Whoo!” Another ghoul hopped to the side. “Easy there lady, you could hurt somebody swinging that around.”

In the gap that opened up, I saw part of a quinque—not much, but more than enough to identify. It had had been in my hands long enough that I knew it on sight.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here we are; chapter one hundred. I've had a lot of enjoyment writing this and I hope all of you enjoy it as well. If you've got any special questions about story points, bit of symbolism I've used, or anything else, ask away; I should be doing something special for milestone.

A note on the timeline here, since it may be a bit indistinct: Allen's pushing of Anteiku to not delay rescuing Kaneki meant that he reached Jason's playroom approximately three and a half days after Kaneki was caught. His ill-advised call to Amon also resulted in the CCG moving up their schedule of the Aogiri raid, due to Amon reporting it, and the CCG triangulating his cell signal.

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