In the Shadow of No. 6

by Ayemae, WhiteEevee

Summary

No. 6 is no utopia. After twelve years suffocating under the city's constant surveillance, Nezumi is determined to escape. But just when he manages to crawl out from under No. 6's watchful eye, he finds himself the captive of a West Block terrorist group. AU, rated T for language and violence.

8-1-2018: Added omake after Living the Dream: Part II, and character sketches by Ayemae as a pseudo chapter 34.

Notes

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The rain pelted the window, making an angry watercolor of the sky. Trees bent backwards; their wooden spines threatening to snap, and entire clusters of branches wrenched horizontally. Clumps of the flower garden below tore from their beds and tumbled across the lawn, before drowning in the pond out front.

He reached out toward the scene of silent destruction. His fingers streaked down the clear surface of the glass until they could stretch no further, and slipped off.

It’s so quiet.

Something large and dark smacked into the window, and he flinched back. But it was only a wad of leaves. They stuck for a moment, then were sucked off and away the next. He watched enviously as they spiraled skyward.

The room was dark, but so bare that he had memorized its layout and could navigate it without the need of light. There was a desk behind him. It was an unwieldy slab of dark wood, and more of a decoration than anything else. Various papers and textbooks were splayed over the surface. His bed was situated in a loft that overlooked the empty expanse of the room. There were bookshelves above and below the loft; but the only one that actually held books was the one above his bed, and it was barely half full.

And then there was the control panel. It glowed a pale white in the darkness.

It’s quiet... But it shouldn’t be. He glanced at the bedroom door, but there wasn’t a sound. He took a step toward the panel.

The control panel offered him the measurements of the air temperature and humidity; told him that all the windows and doors were closed and locked; the security system was on, both inside and outside the house. He swallowed, the luminous display burning its image into his retinas. He reached toward it, and then changed his mind and went to the row of cabinets to the right of the panel. He dug through the folded towels within it and eventually found what he was looking for: a small wooden wedge. He moved to the door.

His heart was racing, but he crammed the stopper into the space between the sliding doors, giving it a few careful taps with his heel. The door didn’t budge when he gave it a trial tug. Satisfied, he returned to the display and let his fingers dart across the screen. The monitor blinked: Room Security Disabled. He let out a soft sigh of relief.

He crossed the room again. When he reached towards the window, the ID bracelet on his wrist caught his attention. All his data was in this little hunk of metal. Everything he was; everything he was intended to be. Citizens were instructed to wear it at all times for identification purposes.

But the security system was off.

He slipped the ID bracelet from his wrist and tossed it onto the desk. He stood in front of the glass, tracing the streaks his fingers had left on it with his eyes.

He tore the window open. The separate partitions crashed into the walls, but he couldn’t hear
the impact over the shriek of the hurricane. A powerful gust of wind ripped through the open window, scattering the papers behind him and spattering him with rain.

He gasped. The winds rippled the fabric of his thin clothing, and icy droplets slashed at his body and nipped at the exposed skin. His hair was whipped into a frenzy around his face. The air was screaming. Something was wailing in the distance like a frightened freight train. The cacophony mounted until it got so loud he felt like his eardrums would burst, but then it cut out and only the rush of the rain and wind remained.

He could barely open his eyes, so he squinted down at the ground. There were twigs, leaves, and other debris, and more were falling from the sky every second. He weaved through them nimbly, making a game out of it. It felt so ridiculous being out there, being assailed by the wind and rain, dancing through sticks and leaves to get to the railing, that he began to laugh. Raindrops flew into his mouth and they tasted so sweet he opened it wider to drink them in.

His bare feet had smarted against the frigid surface of the balcony when he first stepped out, but now they were beginning to numb. He fell against the railing and threw his arms out wide. The air cut across his face so violently it was hard to breathe, and yet it felt as though he hadn't breathed until then. He closed his eyes and tilted his head skyward.

Something latched onto his wrist. He yelped, but the sound was torn away by the wind. He turned and came face-to-face with the old woman. Her lips were set into a thin, painted line, and behind her rain-splotched glasses, her dark eyes shone with a rare flash of displeasure. He was astonished at seeing her there in front of him, out in the midst of a hurricane. He wondered fleetingly if were possible that she would be blown away. But she held firm. She tugged his wrist and led him back inside.

She released him next to the desk and continued across the room to the control panel.

How?

He looked past her. The bedroom door was wide open. He scanned the floor for the wedge, but it was nowhere to be seen. The window slid closed behind him with a soft click.

“What were you doing outside, dear?”

Her back was still to him.

“Showering,” he answered flatly.

“Is that so?” The old woman turned and wiped her glasses on the front of her dress. Once she returned them to her face, she folded her hands primly in front of her. “I’m glad to hear you take an active interest in your hygiene, dear, but must I remind you of your weak constitution? What would I have done if you collapsed again?”

“I feel fine.”

She smiled serenely. “Yes, darling, I’m sure you do.”

He wrinkled his nose and turned his face aside. The rain fell in mute torrents behind the glass.

“Is something bothering you, my dear? You know you can talk to me about anything.”

He was silent.
After a moment of this treatment, the old woman sighed. “Why must you always make that face? I only want to get closer to you, dear. I don’t understand why you pull away. It’s not like you have anyone else to talk to.”

His grey eyes flashed at her.

“Oh! All that excitement almost made me forget.” Her voice had turned chipper.

*From one mood to another. At least they hired a proper actress.*

“I came in to tell you that dinner is ready. You must be starving, you poor thing. You’ve hardly come out of this room all day.” She turned to the panel again. “Oh, you turned the room security off? No wonder the alarm didn’t alert me when you opened the window! Why would you go and do such a silly thing? And with your condition. That’s not very wise, dear.” She pressed a few buttons.

*Beep-beep-beep.*

“What…?”

*Beep-beep-beep.*

She scrutinized him. “Did you take your ID bracelet off?”

His stomach roiled. He looked at the discarded ID on the desk.

“Put it back on.” Her tone had changed once again. “Takashi.”

He flinched. *That’s not my name.*

“Takashi,” she repeated with more severity.

He grimaced. His hand inched along the desk, hooked the bracelet, and dragged it back across. The metal was colder and heavier than anything he’d ever felt.

The old woman nodded once he had clasped it shut over his wrist again. “Honestly, you’re twelve years old—too old to be acting so immature. Now clean yourself up. You look like something the cat dragged in.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, *Grandmother.*”

He stared impassively.

“Say it.”

“…Yes, Grandmother,” he forced through his teeth.

“There’s a good boy.” Her mouth settled into a tight-lipped smile. “Come down to dinner when you’re done, dear. You don’t want to let it get cold now, do you?”

She made like she was leaving, but at the last moment, she glanced out the window. “Isn’t it lovely that No. 6 takes such care to make us feel safe at times like these? These security systems are so well monitored, why, not even a mouse could slip by without the alarm activating.” She gave him an eye-crinkling smile. “You’re so lucky to live in a top class neighborhood like
She closed the door and the room plunged back into darkness. He stood there in front of the window, soaking wet, a puddle already beginning to form at his feet.

Chapter End Notes

What is this? Wasn't something important supposed to happen here? Some fateful meeting? What?
Living the Dream: Part I

Chapter Notes

Hello~ ^^ Thank you to all of you who reviewed, left kudos, bookmarked, or even just took a peek! Oh! And to those who've started school again, good luck and I hope the semester goes fabulously for you. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was in an ocean of greenery, standing under an ultramarine sky. The air clung to him. He had been in this field before, many times; although, just like all the times before, he couldn’t remember how he had arrived there. Each time he returned, the foliage became less overwhelming. It used to nearly bury him, but now the coarse grass only reached up to his hips. Soil pushed its way between his toes as he flexed them. It felt soft and right sticking to his bare feet.

He waded further into the reeds. All around him were plants of varying shades and thickness. There were ferns at his ankles and clumps of leaves strewn all over the ground, wet and pliable underfoot. Some of the grass stalks were tall enough to be a slight hindrance, but he pushed them aside as easily as one might draw back a curtain. They felt sharp against his fingertips and smelled strongly of summer heat.

A breeze began to blow. His hair floated up in front of his face, tickling his cheeks and brushing against his lips. He could sense Her arrival, whispering words on the wind like the soft static of rain. The sound crawled along the ground with padded paws, smooth and weightless as it stalked toward him. He paused and strained his ears.

The wind picked up, lapping at the fabric of his shirt and providing a welcome reprieve from the merciless humidity. It weaved through the field, and set the grasses swaying like pendulums. He could hear Her voice on the wind, faint, but growing stronger by the second. It intoned the same message over and over until the words billowed beneath his hair and flowed into his ears.

Let me teach you a song, it said. I will teach you a song that you will need to keep living. He closed his eyes and let the song overtake him.

The wind carries the soul away, humans steal the heart

O earth, O tempests; O heavens, O light

Let everything cease,

Let everything be,

and live

O soul, my heart, O love, my memory

Return home here

And stay
The sweetness of the melody never ceased to surprise him. It pared his soul away from his body and made his heart ache. Always, it was accompanied by a sense of nostalgia; he felt like he had heard this same song on a thousand different days in a hundred different voices.

Her voice was neither male, nor female; it just was. And yet, it was so gentle and almost motherly, he had taken to referring to it as She. He could hear another sound beneath the song—a vibratory hum, like a swarm of insects.

_The wind carries the soul away, humans steal the heart_

  _But here I will remain_

  _to keep singing_

  _Please_

  _Deliver my song_

  _Please_

  _Accept my song_

The voice uttered his name. His real name. His breath stuck in his throat. It had been so long. Here was the only place he could hear that name; she was the only one who knew it anymore.

_Comes here, Singer._

He turned around and found himself in the middle of a forest. She had not taken him here before; yet, something cold pooled in his stomach at the sight of the sweeping branches and mossy undergrowth. The buzzing of wings grew louder, louder than they had ever been, until it was all he could hear. He wanted to raise his hands to block the sound out, but She held him in place.

_It will start soon._

“What? It’s too loud. I don’t understand.”

_Let me show you._

The woods were on fire now. Branches crashed down in streaks of orange and yellow. Black smoke curled in the air and blocked out all traces of sun and sky. The heat was ten times more excruciating than it was in the field. It felt like his skin would melt clean off his bones, as easily as wax from a candle.

The roar was deafening, and yet, he could clearly hear the incessant buzzing in his head. Indistinguishable shadows darted in front of him. Small, airborne ones danced before him, and then humanoid figures sprinted and tumbled across his vision. One ran out a few feet ahead of him and threw itself onto the ground. It writhed in the blackened dirt, tearing at its body. He could feel the creature’s pain trembling in the air and he instinctively ran toward it.

The figure he scooped into his arms was an ancient and decrepit man. The man stared up at him with wide, sunken eyes as his gummy mouth tried to work. If he had managed to form any words, they could not be heard above the chaos. He gave a few more spasms and then went stiff. He was still holding the body in his arms when something wriggled beneath his palm. He recoiled and watched as a sleek black form climbed out of the man’s neck. It flexed its silver wings and bobbed in the air in front of his face. It was barely a shadow, but he knew immediately that it was a wasp.
“What is this? Stop! I don’t want to see any more!”

He wanted to scream.

The flames erupted behind him and the hair on the back of his neck prickled. There was an enormous shadow looming over him, but he dared not turn around. He remained rigid, letting the heat and flames and the droning of the wasp pound him into the ground.

_It is already in motion_, She whispered against his ear. _But you need not fear, Singer. I will give you the power you need._

“The power for what?”

_The power to destroy No. 6._

Nezumi woke gasping for air.

_What the…?_

He stared up at the stark white ceiling, drawing in one shaky breath after another until his heart ceased its attempts to punch a hole through his chest. He had dreamt of the song, the field, and Her voice many times over the last few years, but this had been nothing like the ones before.

_The power to destroy No. 6._

He turned his head and looked at the desk below. Taped beneath it was a drive that he had been working on for the past two years. He had two identical drives hidden under the couch in the living room and in the bag he brought to work. The hiding places were not ingenious, but he had managed to avoid detection so far, so it seemed to be working well enough.

The time to compile the codes on them was fast approaching, and once united they would sequence a virus that would open every program on an infected computer. One of the city’s greatest achievements was that almost everything in it was automated. It made the indolent lives of its citizens more comfortable, and Nezumi’s plan much easier. The virus would send the security system haywire and every gate would be green-lit for his escape.

The voice’s last words rang in his ears. The force behind them was tangible.

_I’m so close to destroying No. 6’s hold on me. It shouldn’t be long now. I have to bear with it just a bit longer and then I’ll never have to see this godforsaken city again._

That was probably why his dream had been so screwed up. It was a subconscious manifestation of his fears that things might go awry at the last minute.

_My subconscious is pretty sick, though. What was with that old man?_

Something slipped down his neck and a pang of fear shot through him. His hand flew to the spot and came away damp. He relaxed; it was only a bead of sweat. He realized then that his shirt was sticking to him in all sorts of uncomfortable ways.

He ripped off his blankets and sat up. A wave of cool air wafted over him. If he sat still for another few minutes, the temperature control would recognize how drenched he was and adjust the air conditioning accordingly. He would be dry again in a matter of minutes.
He yanked his shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. He plucked a navy button up and slacks off the loft railing, and dressed as he walked down the stairs. Fortunately enough, the work uniform for the Robotics lab was relatively inoffensive. Most departments weren’t so lucky. The Park Administration employees just a few buildings down, for example, had to wear hideous green jumpsuits.

The weather outside the window looked cool, but sunny. Winter was fast approaching this year. It was just as well; Nezumi didn’t mind the cold. He toyed with the elastic around his wrist, deliberating whether he should tie his hair up or leave it down today. His hair had grown long as of late, more from neglect than from intention, and it was now just past chin-length. The length of his hair hardly detracted from his looks, and he couldn’t be bothered to cut it, so he let it be.

His ID bracelet predicted little to no wind. Down it is, he decided.

He stepped over articles of discarded clothing to get to his bag. He slipped on the boots next to it, and then dragged the bag off the ground and over his shoulder. As a secondary thought, he peeked inside to check for the drive. It was still there, dark and dwarfish in the bottom corner. He nodded to himself and headed into the hallway.

He paused at the top of the stairs and listened. He didn’t hear anything, but one did not take chances with the old woman. She was deceptively stealthy. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, slid the door until it was just ajar, and peered into the room beyond. A voice in the back of his head scoffed at him for resorting to such cowardly tactics, but he had learned a long time ago to ignore it. Avoiding the old woman whenever possible saved him a lot of grief.

He couldn’t see her in either the kitchen or the living area from his vantage point, and it remained silent. She must already be in the garden. If I’m quick, I can get out of the house before she sees me.

He slipped into the kitchen and moved to the fridge to pull out the lunch that, in the name of practiced expediency, he had prepared in advance. He crammed the Tupperware container into his bag and turned to leave.

“Shit!” He almost jumped back into the stove.

The old woman was standing right in front of him. Nezumi thought he had gotten used to her uncanny materializations, but the woman was like a constantly evolving amoeba of terror. At times even he couldn’t help but be amazed by her stealth and sangfroid.

There was a period when he was younger where he became quite suspicious (and perhaps even a little hopeful) that she was some sort of android. One night at dinner he decided to test this theory by knocking a glass of water into her lap. His hopes were dashed when it only flustered her for a moment before she wrestled her face into an affectionate façade and went on and on about what a silly and clumsy boy he was.

So, although he was unfortunately caught off guard by her sudden appearance, he was not at all surprised when the old woman handled his outburst with dignity.

She offered him one of her stock smiles. “Good morning, dear.”

“Hi,” Nezumi said, sidling along the island towards the living room.

“Where are you going?”

“Same place I go every morning. To work.”
Her eyes followed him around the room, but she stayed rooted to her spot in front of the fridge. “Aren’t you going to eat breakfast first, dear? I made quiche last night. I could heat up a slice for you, if you’d like.”

“Raincheck. I’m running late as it is.”

“You don’t have to be in until nine. Won’t you stay and eat a little, dear? We could use the time to catch up. We never talk anymore.”

“Can’t. I have a morning ritual that you probably know all about, so I gotta go.”

“Be back by curfew,” she called, as he leapt out the door.

*Maybe I should start leaving earlier. Dodging her is starting to become as draining as avoiding conversation.*

He ambled past the guard station at the Chronos gate, without a greeting passing his or the sentry’s lips. He didn’t have to be at the lab for another hour, but he always left the house early. He cut through the Forest Park. City Hall loomed above the trees. It was the tallest building in No. 6, and the closest thing the city had to a skyscraper. Most residents referred to it affectionately as “The Moondrop;” although he never understood why, because it didn’t resemble a moon or a drop of any kind. Sure, its exterior was pockmarked similarly to the cratered surface of the moon, but it was oblong and dome-shaped and not at all attractive. If it was going to be called anything more pretentious than City Hall, then he always thought “The Honeycomb” would be a more apt nickname.

“Good morning,” a cleaning robot trilled as it moved past towards the city center.

The robots that patrolled the park were only recently introduced, and still in their trial period. Their programs were supposed to be tailored to allow them to distinguish trash from non-trash, small animals, and insects. They were failures thus far.

He reached a crossroads in the path and was nearly run over by a female biker when she cut across without looking. The rush of air in his face testified to just how narrowly he had escaped a collision.

“Hey, watch it!” he snapped.

The girl had been staring down at the 3D display on her ID, but she skidded to a stop when she realized her blunder.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry!” She canceled whatever program she had been watching and flipped the kickstand down with her foot. “I wasn’t—I mean… I’m sorry.”

He exhaled through his nose. “Don’t bike if you’re not going to pay attention.”

The girl blinked apologetically, and Nezumi continued walking. He had only gone a few paces when he heard the faint clicking and dirt crunching behind him. He tried to remain calm. It was ridiculous to assume that just because he recognized the sounds of a bike behind him that she was following him—and even if she was, it was possible that she had always meant to go up this path, and her obliviousness had caused her to overrun the turn. Or maybe it was a different biker entirely. He stepped off the path and trudged along in the grass beside it to give them room to pass him.

He cringed when the female biker appeared in his peripheral vision and stayed there. “Hey,
um…” she said, looking right at him. “Sorry again for almost hitting you.”

*I already heard your apology before. Why follow me and say it again?*

“It was completely my fault,” she continued. “I wasn’t paying attention and I didn’t realize how fast I was going.”

Nezumi flicked his eyes to her. New bike models were equipped with built-in restraint mechanisms; it was impossible to go over the designated speed limit. So either she really wasn’t paying attention…

*Or she’s lying.*

She had dismounted and was rolling her bicycle alongside her, so apparently she had no intention of leaving. The girl smiled at him. He shoved his hands into his pockets and increased his walking speed.

“Yeah, so… I’m Mira, by the way. And you are…?”

“CVC-00103221,” he rattled off, glaring at the path ahead.

“Huh?” She cocked her head to the side.

*She’s a good actor. But then again, they all are.*

The speed difference was starting to show, but the girl jogged a little to get back in line with him.

“Hey… That’s a Chronos ID, right?” Her voice grew more animated. “You’re from Chronos? Wow, I’m so jealous! You must be really smart!”

He clenched his jaw.

“Gifted Curriculum students get to work close to the city center, right? So you must be… Wait…” Her gaze was drawn to City Hall and she gasped. “You don’t work in The Moondrop, do you?”

“Cut the crap already,” he muttered.

“What?”

He drew to a halt and faced her. “Look, as fascinating as this conversation is, I’d rather be alone right now, so could you just…” He waved a hand in the general direction of away.

The girl watched his hand for a beat. Then her face started to flush. “Oh, o-okay. Sorry, I—Sorry.” She clambered onto her bike and spun off. Nezumi watched her disappear around the corner.

*And now I feel like a jerk. Maybe I was too harsh. But that’s only supposing she actually was just a normal girl trying to flirt with me. For all I know, she could’ve been a tail. Not that it matters. Innocent or not, no good would come of it.*

He checked his ID. It was 8:19. Usually, he headed to work and clocked in before anyone else. He didn’t feel safe in the empty lab per se, but he appreciated the loneliness. The silence of the building in the half hour before work started was nothing like the ominous stillness of his house; it was a comfortable quietude, accompanied by the low hum of machines.
But the thwarted social encounter had agitated him, and the last place he wanted to go was No. 6’s labs. He decided he wanted breakfast after all.

He stepped off the cement pathway of the Forest Park and onto the paved streets of Lost Town. The most immediate difference one could discern between Chronos and Lost Town was the layout of the areas. Chronos was, first and foremost, a residential neighborhood, with yards and houses larger than most people knew what to do with.

Lost Town, however, was compact. The streets were lined with restaurants and stores and bakeries, and the owners usually lived above or in the back room of their establishments in order to conserve space. In comparison to the pristine, whitewashed walls of upper town living, the lower district looked worn, but the rows of brick buildings had an old world charm that Nezumi liked.

Shop owners were only just preparing inside their shops. It would be an hour still before most of them opened. He made his way to the only street that put out food this early, grabbed a mediocre donut from a mediocre bakery, and wandered around, too restless to find a park bench. He scanned the windows for signs of life, and his eyes fell upon a squat red brick building as a force of habit.

His heart twinged. The shop he was staring at now hardly resembled the one from two years ago. The door had been redone in pastel yellow, and the sign had been painted over to read The Glass Slipper in dainty script. The building’s location and his memory of what it once was were the only proof that it even used to be Hiro’s Green Grocery.

*Hiro would have been appalled if he knew I had stooped to eating crappy stale donuts. He was always going on about the positives of fresh fruit and healthy breakfasts.*

He had wandered over to Hiro’s grocery store on a whim one day. He had gotten into a fistfight with one of the other Gifted Curriculum brats after school, and he was storming around Lost Town to cool his head. So when the mustachioed man working the fruit and vegetable counter called out to him that berries were medically proven to relieve stress, he snapped back that he knew from personal experience that punching nosy old men in the face was an equally fabulous way to deal with stress. The man looked so shocked that Nezumi was about to begrudge him an apology, but then the man burst into laughter and tossed him an apple.

“You’re sharp!” Hiro had remarked with a grin. “Come back sometime, yeah?”

Nezumi walked away, thinking that the guy must have had a few screws loose, and yet a couple days later, he had found himself back again. Hiro recognized him immediately and struck up a conversation about fruit, or something similarly inane. The man seemed to enjoy the sound of his own voice. But Nezumi liked him. Hiro was never embarrassed when he was insulted, and even appeared to enjoy it.

He was so completely un-No. 6 that Nezumi didn’t even bat an eye when, two weeks after he had become a regular at the grocery, Hiro pulled him behind the counter and asked if he wanted to join his acting group.

Organized plays were illegal in No. 6, but Hiro insisted that what he and his troupe did was just improv and hadn’t drawn any bad press yet. Nezumi didn’t much care what No. 6 made illegal. He said yes, and was immediately rewarded with Hiro’s enthusiasm.

Behind Hiro’s silly demeanor, he had a deep appreciation for the arts. He even kept a piece of one of the banned classics hidden in his store: a paper onto which he had inscribed his favorite soliloquy. He said it was from Shakespeare’s finest and most tragic masterpiece, *The Scottish Play*, and went on to tell him every detail he could recall about it.
The words on the page captivated Nezumi, and Hiro’s descriptions of all the great plays that were, and that he would never see, stirred in him a deep longing. He had agreed to join Hiro’s makeshift troupe out of curiosity and respect for the man’s trust, but after seeing the lines from *The Scottish Play*, Nezumi genuinely wanted a taste of what it was to act, even if it was only a watered-down version.

His first performance was that weekend. Hiro and the other group members had set a tradition of wearing masks to protect their identities, and Hiro bestowed one of his own creation on Nezumi the day of. They gathered in the park, and managed to draw a small crowd of children and teens. In the end, though, the Security Bureau arrived, and then it was every man for himself.

He and Hiro ran into an alley in Lost Town, stuffed the masks into Hiro’s bag, and waltzed out like nothing had ever happened. Before they parted ways, they shared a conspiratorial smile, and Nezumi felt that as long as they continued to be careful, it just might work.

But there wasn’t another time.

He had gotten tied down with schoolwork in the days after the initial performance, and he hadn’t had time to pay Hiro a visit until the following Wednesday. When he turned onto Hiro’s street, two Security Bureau officials were escorting Hiro out of his shop. His hands were handcuffed behind him, but he stood tall as he walked. Their eyes met, and although Hiro wasn’t smiling for once, he tilted his head slightly as if to say, “It can’t be helped.” Then he disappeared into the squad car.

Nezumi wandered around the Forest Park for hours after the incident. He dreaded going home, because he knew the Security Bureau would surely be waiting to arrest him on the same charges. But no one ever came.

The news ran a brief bulletin on how three unnamed persons had been taken in for questioning earlier that day on counts of public disturbance, but there was not a word about him. He couldn’t understand it; every other person in the troupe had been arrested, so they had to know he was also a member. But for some reason he was being exempted from punishment.

He had known he was treated differently. He had figured out that the old woman was keeping surveillance of him early on, but there was more than just that. He was forced to endure monthly check-ups because he had a “weak constitution” and the old woman was “concerned for his health.” After the deaths of his parents, he was placed in Chronos, despite having been a former Lost Town resident. Whenever he got into physical altercations with other students, he only ever received a slap on the wrist, when by all accounts he should’ve been expelled from the Gifted Curriculum.

He had known that the authorities paid him special attention, but No. 6’s vigilance toward him had never adversely affected anyone around him. Then again, he never had anyone close enough before Hiro. The only people who ever talked to him were the old woman and his course instructors.

*Honestly, sometimes I wonder how you got into this program.*

In the days following Hiro’s arrest, those words resurfaced in his memory. They were the words of his teacher, Ms. Kim, a few months after his admission to the Gifted Curriculum.

Class had ended for the day, and they had to hand-in a writing exercise before leaving the room. Nezumi was one of the last kids out, and when he gave Ms. Kim his paper, she scanned it and told
him to wait. He had to stand there in humiliated silence as she read the entire sheet.

“Just as I thought,” she’d muttered when she finished. “You did the assignment wrong. Again.”

“I answered the questions truthfully,” he replied.

“Takashi, you are completely missing the point of the exercise. The questions do not require your honest opinion. All these questions have specific answers, and if you had managed to keep up with the lectures, you would know them. This is one of the easiest assignments in the course, if you can’t do at least this correctly, how can you expect to do well?” She scoffed and shoved the paper back at him. “Honestly, sometimes I wonder how you got into this program.”

He hated her so much in that moment he wished she would disappear. Then the next day, as if some higher power had heard his prayer, another teacher came in and informed the class that Ms. Kim had resigned. At the time it seemed like nothing more than a stroke of luck, but after Hiro was arrested, he couldn’t stop thinking of how Ms. Kim had sneered at his gifted placement.

He knew something was suspicious with his status upgrade to Chronos and acceptance into the Gifted Curriculum, but the old woman never gave him a straight answer about it. She waxed poetic about the kindness of the No. 6 government and eventually Nezumi had caught on to what she was really trying to say: Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

Hadin’t Ms. Kim done just that? She had insulted him, and by extension, the authority that placed him under her tutelage. In retrospect, after Ms. Kim, he was never again criticized as overtly and not one teacher ever questioned if he was meant to be in the class.

It wasn’t a coincidence that Hiro and the other members were arrested after he joined them. They had performed several times in the past few months; the Bureau could have acted at any time, and yet the group had never suffered any repercussions more severe than being chased away. They were arrested because of him. No. 6 was watching his every move and did not hesitate to remove anything and anyone that didn’t fit their plans for him. Ms. Kim’s own actions had led to her termination, but Hiro’s fate was entirely on him.

And they wanted him to know it. They could have apprehended the troupe at any time, but they waited until he would be there to watch as they forced Hiro into the Bureau car. They were trying to condition him with regimented education, monitored living, and bald-faced threats. They were trying to break him.

The issue with their ploy, however, was that they had laid all their cards on the table. In order to successfully cow him, they had to confirm every suspicion he had about the reality of his imprisonment. When he realized the extent of their control, it became easier to navigate his way around it while he worked on a way to escape No. 6’s grasp. He made a vow to himself from that day forward that, until the opportune time, he may suffer himself to bend, but he would not be broken.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the first chapter (yay)! As you can see, it's a two-parter, so Part II will go up next week. There will be quite a few familiar characters making an appearance in that one. I’m looking forward to it, and I hope you will, too! I apologize if Nezumi’s character is off in any way; I did my best approximation of
what No. 6-raised Nezumi would be like. xP

Some fun trivia: I think Panda! is a really cute name for a bakery just in general, but it's also a play on words. Pan da in Japanese means, "It's bread!" They're very creative in Lost Town.
Living the Dream: Part II

Chapter Notes

Edited 6/27/2018 :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With all his wandering and reminiscing, he barely made it back to lab before his ID beeped 9am at him. It felt surreal to come into the locker room and see other people. It had been months since he came to work on time. Two of his senior coworkers had come in just before him and were dropping off their personal items before heading into the lab proper. One of them, a twenty-something year old woman named Angela, turned when he came in.

She raised an eyebrow. “Well, well, well. Running late today, aren’t we, Lab Rat?”

Some of the senior technicians had taken to calling him ‘Lab Rat’ because of the obscene amount of hours he clocked in the lab. The name was obviously meant to be a taunt, but he had accepted it with grace and even adopted it as his moniker. If he had to use a fake name, “Nezumi” was ten times better than “Takashi.”

He smiled sweetly at Angela. “As always, it’s nice to see—”

BAM.

Both he and Angela turned their attention to the room’s other occupant. Nezumi didn’t know his age, but he always looked old to him. Or not old so much as washed out. Everything about him was sandy grey from his hair to his eyes. Even his personality was draining. Whenever he spoke to him, Nezumi was always left with a dry, bitter taste in his mouth.

His name was Sasori, and he had just slammed his locker shut with enough force to leave the door vibrating. He whipped himself around and leered at Nezumi. “What are you doing here?” he roared.

“…Good morning to you, too, Sasori.”

“You’re not supposed to be here now! You come in early!”

“What can I say? Sometimes even I get the urge to take part in the morning powwow,” he said with a shrug.

“You are not wanted here.”

“You wound me, Sasori. Whatever did I do to deserve such unabashed hatred?”

Angela stifled a snicker and made her way toward the lab.

“Do not play dumb with me. You know very well what you do.” Sasori pointed rabidly in Angela’s direction.

Ah, that.
Angela had her hand resting on a piece of machinery before the lab door and was reciting the pledge to it in a clear monotone. Every day they had to do this, and every day he saw his coworkers come in with that kill-me-now look on their faces. They obviously did not enjoy saying the pledge, and probably didn’t even realize why they didn’t enjoy it, and yet they did it with no questions asked.

*How can they stand it?* he always asked himself.

But he knew the answer. It was because they had no choice. Either you announce your allegiance to the city every morning, or you lose your job and get arrested for dissidence. He knew the answer, but that didn’t mean he had to act like a mindless zombie.

He had taken to embellishing the pledge. A couple weeks after starting in the lab he discovered that if you continued talking without pausing for more than two seconds, the machine wouldn’t register you as finished and kept recording. Mostly he just recited it with affected reverence, but sometimes, if he had happened to hit upon a particularly good idea, he would add his own lines. He understood the danger of treating the pledge so flippantly. He might’ve had a decent amount of leeway with the city, but he didn’t think they would stand him mocking the government in front of an audience. So he took care to only do so when he was sure he was alone.

Unfortunately, a week or so back, Sasori had come in uncharacteristically early and caught him in the middle of promising his first-born to the city. Apparently they did not share a sense of humor.

“Your blasphemy reflects badly on all of us,” Sasori growled once Angela disappeared into the lab. “You may be content with your life of debauchery, but everyone else in this building is invested in the prosperity of No. 6. If you continue your sacrilege, it will only be a matter of time before the Security Bureau comes in to investigate, and I will not allow the majority to be inconvenienced by the insolence of one.”

“I get it, calm down. I’ll do it properly this time. There’s no need to have a coronary.”

Sasori watched Nezumi like a hawk as he made his way to the hall and took his place in front of the ID reader. Nezumi noticed that Sasori hadn’t moved from his spot in front of the lockers, but continued to assess him from a distance. The man always spoke of him and to him like he was evil incarnate, and treated him like an infectious disease. Nezumi didn’t resent him for it; he actually found Sasori’s poor regard for him amusing.

When he had positioned himself directly before the machine, an image of City Hall displayed itself on its monitor.

“Good morning,” said a soothing female voice. “Your unwavering allegiance to the city,” it prompted.

He placed his hand over the display and cleared his throat. “I pledge hereon and ever my unwavering allegiance to the city of No. 6,” he recited in his best obedient No. 6 citizen monotone.

He raised his eyebrows at Sasori to say, “There. Happy?” but the man’s expression was burning with such self-righteousness that Nezumi couldn’t bear to leave it at that.

He kept his eyes trained on Sasori as he went on with growing reverence, “And ask that it continue to look favorably upon me and all my coworkers. Most especially my good friend, Sasori.”—Sasori’s eyes bulged—“who is always so kind to me, and gives me such wonderful advice and guidance about how to best express my admiration for this Oh so Holy City.”
Sasori’s already grey complexion had managed to turn even more ashen. He trembled visibly and gaped at Nezumi like a suffocating fish. He almost managed speech, but his body received the signals from his brain faster than his mouth, and he bolted from the room without a syllable.

Nezumi smirked while he brought the speech to a satisfying finish. “Lastly, I ask that my dear, sweet grandmother be delivered into the next life as swiftly as possible. If No. 6 could grant this small trifle, at the very least, I would be eternally grateful.” He removed his hand from the emblem.

"Our gratitude for your loyalty,” the voice droned. “Engage in your day's labor with sincerity and pride as a good citizen of the City.”

The door to the lab slid open. Nezumi drew in a long, slow breath and entered with a smile. As he approached his desk, he noticed there was a park maintenance robot next to it.

He grabbed the folder from the metal bin on his desk and scanned the papers inside. There were always one or two folders on every person’s desk in the morning. Inside them was all the work they were expected to complete. Allegedly, this was done in the interest of efficiency, but Nezumi always suspected it was so the technicians didn’t have to waste time interacting with each other if they didn’t want to.

The file instructed him to edit the robot’s programming so they would record data better and stop producing so many “indistinguishable object” errors.

_Easier said than done._

Nezumi logged on to his own computer and began sorting through the program code.

“Lab Rat.”

Nezumi directed his attention to the man at the desk diagonal to his. He didn’t know the man’s name, and he was fairly certain the man didn’t know his real name either.

“The Chief wants to see you.”

“Oh.”

Nezumi waited a second, after which he came to terms with the fact that he had no reason not to go to the Chief’s office immediately. He set off toward the office, and his passing garnered a few looks. His mere presence in the lab seemed to irk his coworkers. He had only worked there for a few months, and yet he had already been to the Section Chief’s office several times on account of complaints filed against him. The Chief would only give him a gruff warning and send him on his way, which increased his coworkers’ loathing.

He knocked twice on the Chief’s door and waited.

“Come in.”

The Chief was going over paperwork at his desk. He was a large man with meaty fingers, a cue ball head, and a bushy mustache. He was farsighted, but he didn’t like people to know it, so he never wore his glasses except for when he had to. However, Nezumi only ever had the pleasure of seeing him in his office when he was reading papers. Nezumi had never seen a sea lion up-close, but he imagined that the Chief looked very like one wearing glasses.

The Chief peered at him. “You saw the robot at your desk?”
“Yes. I started to work on it already.”

“Mm.” The Chief marked something down on the paper he was leering at.

Nezumi folded his arms and waited. The Chief continued leafing through his papers as though he wasn’t standing there.

“Is there something you wanted from me?” Nezumi asked at length, and then just barely tagged “sir” on the end. He got away with a lot, but baiting his boss might be pushing it.

The man grunted. “Yes. While you’re fixing the program, I want you to set it up so that it alerts the Security Bureau directly if the robots come across any non-living organisms.”

What the hell? Does he expect to find dead bodies in the park?

The Chief seemed displeased by his failure to immediately accept the order and skip off to do his bidding.

“Some kids found a dead cat in the park yesterday. It scared them and the Bureau doesn’t want it to happen again.”

Still weird, he thought, but aloud he said, “I see,” and then excused himself.

By the time he plopped back down at his desk his previously good mood was destroyed. It grew steadily worse as soon as he realized that none of the robots had any records of cats in their entry logs. There were birds, and dogs, and all a manner of insects, but no cats.

It must have come up as one of these error notifications. Just my luck. What kind of cat goes into the Forest Park to die? How’d it even get into the park?

No. 6 had a strict policy about keeping pets under control at all times. Inside the city walls, only indoor pets were allowed. Dogs were to be leashed outside of the home, and cats were not allowed outside at all, let alone in the park. Occasionally one would see posters advertising a lost pet, but the animal was eventually found one hundred percent of the time. He never heard of a cat—or anything, really—dying in a public setting.

I suppose that’s why the Bureau finds it so necessary to make sure it doesn’t happen again. Can’t have such a ghastly sight ruining the citizens’ perfect days. Still… His fingers pecked at the keyboard. This is infuriating! I have to input the physical parameters for a cat into the system. This is going to take forever.

Someone approached his desk. This didn’t concern him, as it was typical for people to drop files off. Usually it was Sasori, because he was Nezumi’s direct supervisor—to the man’s ever-present chagrin.

“I’ve brought some files that might be of use to you.”

The voice was not Sasori’s. Nezumi tore his gaze away from the screen and was met with a pair of clear, dark eyes. The man before him was one of the few people in the lab who didn’t despise him, and whose guts Nezumi didn’t hate. Nezumi hadn’t paid him much attention when he first started, but when the other technicians began to ridicule him as a ‘Lab Rat,’ this man was the only person who dared speak up against it. His defense wasn’t needed, but Nezumi had always appreciated the effort. They had hardly crossed paths since that time, and even when they did, they never shared anything more intimate than a greeting.
Some of the technicians pitied the man because he was crippled and wheelchair-bound. Moreover, he came off a little like a whipped dog whenever he interacted with people. But Nezumi had witnessed liveliness in his demeanor when he worked alone at his desk. He was embarrassed to admit it, but this man was yet another coworker whose name he didn’t know. He never needed to know it, but when he occasionally thought of him, he always referred to him respectfully as ‘Rou.’

Rou’s face was benign as he placed a hefty manila folder on the edge of Nezumi’s desk.

“Oh. Thanks… Why are you delivering files to me? Where’s Sasori?”

“Ah, yes, well, he was here earlier, but he seems to have become suddenly and violently ill. He called in sick a little while ago.”

“Is that so? That’s too bad. I hope he feels better soon.”

“Yes. So I’ve taken it upon myself to bring these to you.”

“Thanks.”

Nezumi bowed his head at the older man and swiveled back toward his computer. He typed a few lines before he realized Rou hadn’t left.

“Is there something else?”

“There is,” Rou muttered.

He took a moment to collect his thoughts. When he found his words at last, Rou’s face grew serious.

“Takashi, you’re still very young. You shouldn’t work so hard. Perhaps, since Sasori is out today, you could also take the day off. Spend some time with your friends.”

Nezumi blinked. *Where is this coming from?*

“Yeah… Maybe,” he managed to say without too much incredulity. “But I just got a huge project from Park Administration, so I think I should probably finish it first.”

“The maintenance robots? There’s always a problem with those. It won’t make much of a difference if you leave it for one day.”

The discomfort Nezumi was feeling must have been quite clear by this point, because all at once Rou’s earnestness splintered, and he reverted back to his typical meek demeanor.

“It’s just that…” he fumbled. “Don’t you think you should spend less time in the labs? You’re here far too often. It’s not healthy. I just think that you should do something… more with your time. Take some time to do something you enjoy.”

*Something I enjoy?* Nezumi couldn’t help but smile wanly at that.

“But working is my passion, didn’t you know? No. 6 told me, so it must be true.”

Rou’s expression underwent a second change; one very much alike to Sasori’s that morning. The blood drained from his face, so that it was almost as white as his hair, and there was fear in his dark eyes.

“Takashi. Please. Be more careful.”
And with that whispered warning, he turned his wheels and rolled away. Nezumi frowned.

*What was that all about? We hardly talk, and then he dumps that on me. I must’ve looked pretty pitiful, if Rou suddenly felt so strong a need to deliver a grandfather spiel about wasting my youth.*

He dragged the folder of papers Rou had brought him in front of his keyboard and opened it to the first page. There was a sticky note on the first sheet, which read, “Be cautious” in clunky script. He raised an eyebrow and flipped through a few of the pages. He furrowed his brow. He glanced at his computer screen and then back at the files.

*They’re the same.*

Rou had delivered hard copies of the maintenance robots’ data logs. Nezumi read the sticky note on the first page again.

Rou didn’t seem the type to joke, so for whatever reason he thought the note was necessary. Had Sasori squealed about his pledge antics?

*Or maybe he’s really concerned that I’m going to screw up the project…? That kinda pisses me off. I don’t have time for this. I need to code for fricking cat recognition.*

He pushed the folder to the edge of his desk and the encounter from his mind, and turned back to the program on his computer.

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The weather report chimed on his ID, informing him that there was a chance of rain later that evening. He ignored it and craned his neck back to stare up at the cloud spotted sky. He was lounging on a park bench in the flower garden, and had been doing so for several minutes now. Work ended at five, but he had persevered in his project until six. After that point he had hit his limit. He clocked out and found himself once again in the flower garden. The sounds of life were all around him; birds chirping, children laughing, a dog barked somewhere nearby. It was an ambiance befitting of No. 6’s last paradise on Earth reputation.

“My thinking about flying away?”

Nezumi lifted his head. A familiar tanned youth was smirking at him. Their hair hung loosely over the shoulders of their overlarge sweatshirt all the way down to the top of their baggy jeans. He supposed the choice of clothing was entirely for the sake of personal preference and comfort, however, the small form looked even more diminutive and androgynous for it. Their dark eyes sparkled with amusement.

“My hate to break it to you, but you have zero chance of sprouting wings. It doesn’t matter how hard you wish; rats were made to crawl on the ground.”

Nezumi sat up and draped his arm over the back of the bench. “Well, if it isn’t Kaoru. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Kaoru snorted. “Pup needed a walk.”

*Always with the dog.*

At the sound of its name, a young Border collie trotted over. It wedged its head between Nezumi’s knees and panted up at him. Kaoru clicked their tongue. Nezumi smiled and ruffled the fur atop the dog’s head. He didn’t have a particular fondness for dogs, however, Kaoru’s dog had
chosen to become friendly towards him. Likely because a few months ago Nezumi had—
by grudgingly—helped Kaoru rescue the puppy from one of Kaoru’s entitled classmates. He only
agreed to help, though, because it was somewhat his fault that the dog was kidnapped in the first
place, but Nezumi feigned ignorance whenever Kaoru brought it up.

A week or so after the incident, they passed each other on the street in Lost Town. He pretended
he didn’t know them and walked by. The next thing he knew, there was a fluffy black and white
puppy barking at him and hopping around his legs. He frowned at its owner.

“What?” they said indignantly. “I can’t control this guy’s impulses. I was gonna pretend I didn’t
see you and keep walking, but Pup insisted on thanking you for saving him from that brat Emi.”

If it wasn’t for their bitter expression, he might’ve suspected that they were trying to be coy.
However, it seemed they were genuinely displeased, and he also got a strong feeling that they
would find such pretenses sickening.

“’Pup?’ That’s its name? How terribly uninspired.”

The youth's face twitched as though they had been expecting a sarcastic answer all along.
“What’s yours?” they accused.

“Nezumi.”

They sneered. “It’s one thing to give a dog an unimaginative name, but it’s whole new realm of
stupid to call yourself something as idiotic as ‘Nezumi.’ Is that supposed to be impressive?”

“It’s not supposed to be anything. It’s a name.” He pivoted on his heel and walked away.

In the months since their first encounter, he and Kaoru had only talked a handful of times, and
even then, their interactions typically consisted more of insults than actual conversing. He didn’t
want to get close to anyone, but Kaoru had absolutely no intention of becoming friends. They had
displayed their dislike of him enough times for him to believe it. The two of them didn’t speak to
each other with enough frequency or affability for him to feel Kaoru was in danger of being
arrested by the Bureau, so whenever luck would have it, and he and Kaoru were feeling sociable at
the same time, he lent himself to their company.

Pup swished his tail back and forth, but after he realized that Nezumi had finished petting him,
he wandered away. He was engrossed in sniffing the base of the fountain in no time. Nezumi
returned his gaze to Kaoru.

“Whatever it is you’re selling, I’m not buying.”

“Selling? What are you talking about? I’m not selling anything.”

“No? Some gossip you couldn’t wait to talk about, then?” He smiled wanly. “Or has the day
finally come that you’re here just to wish me a fabulous evening?”

Kaoru’s face soured. They turned their head away and watched Pup as he sniffed at a
maintenance robot. Nezumi crossed his legs and waited.

“Some kids found a dead body here yesterday.”

Nezumi blinked. “A body? Yesterday?”

“Yeah. Some old guy crawled behind a bench and bit the dust. A couple of kids from Lost
Town found him. Apparently the Security Bureau rushed over and wasted no time moving the body. The kids who found the guy said his face was all contorted and he looked like he’d been dead a while, but the Bureau claimed it was just an accident and told them not to talk about it. It’s all very hush-hush. Weird, huh?”

Nezumi frowned in concentration as he listened. It was an interesting piece of gossip, albeit not extraordinarily strange. Old people died, often suddenly; that was a fact of life.

_Hm. But I understand now why the Security Bureau gave such a weird order this morning._

“Did he have a cat?”

“What?” The question was left field enough that Kaoru bothered to consider it. “No, they didn’t say anything about a cat... What kind of weird question is that, anyway?”

“It just seems like a lot of things are dying in the Forest Park lately. It’s nothing, forget I even asked.”

Kaoru shook their head, as if to dispel the exchange. “So? What do you think?” They smirked. “Could it have been a hit?”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow. “What are you babbling about?”

“Come on, dead body in the park, the Security Bureau trying to keep it secret. I woulda thought you’d be screaming conspiracy theories by now.”

Nezumi’s wariness around people in general had caused several persons to accuse him of superiority. There were also other less vindictive souls who chalked it up to crippled social skills, or a mental disturbance caused by his parents’ deaths that never quite healed. No one knew the full extent of his paranoia and suspicion regarding No. 6 and its institutions, but Kaoru was the first to come close to realizing it.

Despite the limited amount of time they spent together, Kaoru had picked up on his poor opinion of the school system and was well acquainted with his dislike of the Security Bureau. They never failed to mock him about it, and whenever they did, Nezumi felt a familiar pang in his chest. He dared not react to or entertain their ridicule. He and Kaoru were not friends, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t feel horrible if they suddenly vanished because of him.

Nezumi shrugged. “Sounds like your run of the mill old-person death to me.”

“But what about how his face was all contorted? Isn’t everyone in No. 6 supposed to die a peaceful and painless death? He obviously didn’t.”

“Oh, please, don’t tell me you actually believe that?” Nezumi chuckled. “It’s impossible for everyone to die a completely peaceful and painless death. No. 6 is good, but not _that _good. No one is. Of course the old man’s face was pained. He probably suffered a heart attack. If you suddenly went into cardiac arrest while taking a walk in the park, I don’t think you’d die smiling either.”

Kaoru lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Nezumi studied the lines of concern on their face and smirked.

“You know, Kaoru, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you look scared. Is that why you rushed over here to tell me? To have your fears laid to rest?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” they scoffed.
“What’s wrong? Been having chest pains lately?”

“That’s not even a funny joke. Like I’d be concerned over something like that. I’m young—younger than you. There’s no way I’m dying anytime soon.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. You know… There’s another possibility for the old man’s death. It could’ve been a virus. Have you ever heard of the Black Plague? It’s said that it struck so suddenly that you could be young and healthy one moment, and dead the next.”

Kaoru stared intently at him. Nezumi’s smirk grew more pronounced. Kaoru clicked their tongue and turned away.

“The Black Plague doesn’t exist anymore,” Kaoru said, crossing their arms.

“Mutated strains pop back up now and then. The elderly are the first to go. Then come the children.”

Kaoru looked askance at him and pursed their lips. “Well, if people did start dropping dead of the Black Plague, it’d be because No. 6 let a rat in.”

“You’re mistaken. Plague doesn’t come from rats; it comes from the fleas that infest them.”

“Hmph. Fine, I’m only too happy to get out of your hair.” They clapped twice and Pup came bounding over. “Say hi to the old lady for me,” they jabbed as they moved to leave.

Nezumi grimaced. Right. Kaoru knows about that, too.

“Kaoru.” The youth didn’t bother turning, but looked over their shoulder. “Don’t go talking to too many people about that body.”

Kaoru raised an eyebrow.

“Not everyone finds death a comfortable topic,” he added by way of explanation.

“Since when did you start caring about other people’s feelings?”

“Good point,” Nezumi chuckled. He got to his feet and walked over to them.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Kaoru said dryly.

“I can tell I made you angry. In penance, I have decided to escort you home.” He bowed and offered his hand. “My liege.”

Kaoru rolled their eyes and walked away. “You just don’t wanna go home.”

Nezumi didn’t deny it.

Pup trotted ahead of them. Even though citizens weren’t allowed to let their dogs roam free, ever since Pup had been trained, Kaoru hardly ever bothered leading him around with a leash. Their relationship was based on friendship and respect, rather than ownership. Kaoru didn’t walk Pup; they took walks with Pup. That being said, Kaoru always brought a leash with them to keep up appearances and sometimes they even latched it onto the dog’s collar. It was hooked on Pup’s collar at that moment, but he was walking himself, the end of the leash dangling out the side of his mouth.

The people in Lost Town had already settled down to dinner. Restaurants remained open, but
almost every other shop had closed their doors for a brief respite. The streets were nearly empty and would not regain their usual flow until suppertime ended.

A Law Enforcement officer marched around the corner on the opposite side of the road. Like the Security Bureau, these officers were of a branch of the Public Safety Department. Essentially it was a sect made up of people who had aimed to be in the Security Bureau, but fell short. To vent their frustration, they patrolled the Lost Town streets with a self-important vengeance. They lived purely to harass children for breaking curfew, and validated their existences with the compliments they received from elderly women for their exceptional work doing so.

“Officer,” Nezumi said to Kaoru.

Kaoru spotted him a second after and gasped. “Pup! Stop!”

Pup had been poking around the entrance of an alleyway, but when he heard his master’s command his ears shot up. The leash dropped from his mouth and he took off. Kaoru jogged dogedly after him, but at the rate they were going, they wouldn’t catch up. The noise had drawn the Law Enforcement officer’s attention and he watched from the corner with a disapproving look on his face. Pup stopped a ways up the street and wagged his tail happily.

Kaoru stopped where they were as well and cupped their hands to call to him, “Pup! Come!”

They clapped their hands twice, and Pup loped back down to them, the leash bouncing on the stones behind him. Nezumi shook his head. He had seen this performance before.

Kaoru bent down to pick up the leash and the dog lapped at their hands. “Great job,” they whispered, ruffling the fur on Pup’s head.

“Excuse me.” The officer had made his way over and was standing in front of them now. He was a squat man, barely a head taller than Kaoru. “Pets are required to be leashed at all times.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I was holding his leash, but he just took off.”

Kaoru wasn’t a very good liar, but fortunately their nervousness helped to make them seem more like the frail child they were pretending to be. Even so, the officer was unmoved.

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Sixteen,” Nezumi provided when the officer looked at him.

“Your number. Both of you.”

_Aren’t you at least going to buy us dinner first?_ The quip was on Nezumi’s tongue. On any other day he would have said it; he had said similar things when officers stopped him before.

“Pw-34109,” Kaoru answered immediately. They held out their wrist for the officer to scan.

Nezumi glanced at them. He never got in trouble for sassing the officers that stopped him, which was yet more evidence of No. 6’s bias. _It’s probably not a good idea while Kaoru’s here, though…_

Nezumi pursed his lips. “CVC-00103221.” He offered a limp wrist to the man.

The officer looked down at the reading his machine gave him. His eyes went to Nezumi’s face,
and he fixed him with a dirty expression.

“Miss Kaoru, is it?”

Kaoru shifted.

“You seem like a nice girl. You should spend your time with better role models.”

Kaoru smiled weakly.

“It’s almost curfew. You should be getting home.”

*It’s barely seven. Curfew isn’t for another two hours.*

“Why don’t you let me walk you there?”

Kaoru looked inclined to accept.

*Kaoru’s not a threat. It’s unlikely anything will happen to them.*

Even so, his heart beat faster. Nezumi took a step forward, wrapped his arm around Kaoru’s shoulders, and pulled them to his side. Kaoru gasped, but he didn’t know who was more surprised, them or Pup, whose leash had suddenly been yanked back.

“Sorry,” Nezumi said blithely, “but I told her father I’d take her back home. And besides, you’re right, it’s far too close to curfew time, so we really must be going. Come along, Kaoru.”

He dragged them along with him as he walked away from the officer. He glanced back before they turned the corner, but the man had disappeared.

Kaoru wriggled free from underneath his arm. “Are you insane? You can’t talk that way to a Law Enforcement officer.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” they snapped. “Couldn’t you have waited for a time when I wasn’t there to run your mouth? It’s bad enough Pup and I almost got caught, but talking back to an officer can get you arrested. I know you don’t give a shit, but there’s no way I’m gonna let myself get locked up because of you. Come on, Pup.”

They shook the leash to get the dog’s attention and stalked off.

****

Technically those under the under the age of eighteen weren’t allowed out past nine, but Nezumi had his ways. It was a little after eleven when he returned to the house. He climbed the trellis in the garden and swung onto his balcony. The doors were supposed to be locked, but he never bothered. The old woman used to lock them while he was out, but doing so meant that an alarm would go off when he tried to get back in late at night. She lasted only three days before she decided that her sleep was more important than trying to make a show of authority.

He slipped down into the kitchen to make dinner. The old woman went to bed around ten, so the house was dark. He turned on no more lights and appliances than was necessary for his task and went through the pantry and refrigerator to make an inventory. In the end, he decided to make chicken and rice soup.
He carried the bowl up to his room and lounged on his bed, drinking in the dark, as well as the savory flavor of the broth. The moon outside the window was halved. He watched it until the spoon made a porcelain clink on the bottom of the empty bowl. He laid it aside and went to the bookshelf behind his bed. His hand found the book he wanted instantly: *Eat Healthy, Live Happy*.

The corner of his mouth quirked up. *I can’t believe Hiro actually read this junk.*

He flipped it open to the center and removed the slip of paper that had been pressed between the pages. The etching on the sheet emoted boldly in the moonlight:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

He mouthed the words as he read along. He had read them so many times that he could recite them without the use of the paper. But seeing the words written calmed him. When he had finished, he replaced the paper, returned the book to its spot on the shelf, and crawled into bed.

Chapter End Notes

And now the stage is set. Next chapter is when it picks up, so stay tuned! ;D

So, as some of you might've guessed, Kaoru is, in fact, Inukashi. I had to change their name, because "Dog Keeper" would not be appropriate in No. 6. Same goes for Inukashi's gender; No. 6 is a cruel, unfeeling place and it only cares about your biological gender, so the officers refer to them as female like it says in their records. But as we all know Inukashi's a bit more complicated than that, and that's why I used the them/their in the narrative.
Ayemae drew this to go with last chapter. Obviously not "canon," but hilarious nonetheless.
I drew that bee! :D
TAKASHI, BE MORE CAREFUL.

WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT?

WHAT...

IS THIS...?

BEE CAREFUL!
Wake up, Singer. You are in danger.

Nezumi shot up in bed. His eyes darted around the room, but he didn’t see any immediate threat. He could’ve sworn he had heard someone’s voice.

Another nightmare?

He threw the covers off and looked over the loft railing through the window below. It was dusky outside, the sun only just beginning to peek over the horizon. A black and white car was pulling up to the front of the house. Even if the color scheme and affixed siren didn’t give it away, it would have been fairly obvious that the car belonged to the Security Bureau; the old woman didn’t get a lot of visitors, and Bureau officials were the only ones who ever drove directly to people’s homes. Nezumi supposed this was primarily because normal citizens didn’t need to bring portable cages on neighborly house calls. The siren wasn’t on—not that he would’ve heard it if it was. That soundproof glass was a bitch.

Why would the Security Bureau be here? he wondered. Although, if he was being completely honest with himself, he could think of several reasons why the Security Bureau would be at his house. The last twelve years of his life had been a string of misdemeanors. So perhaps the question wasn’t why was the Security Bureau here, but why was the Security Bureau here now? He couldn’t remember doing anything recently that was grossly outside the norm of his typical deviance.

He frowned at the cars. Regardless of their reason for being here, he had no intention of being taken in for questioning.

He all but jumped down the staircase. He yanked on the first pair of boots he found lying on the floor and went to the window. If he slipped down from the balcony and made a run for it just as they got to the door, he would have a decent lead on them and a fair chance at escape. But how long was he expected to stay hidden? He had to come back to the house eventually, whether he wanted to or not. Would they still be waiting for him? It would be much easier to create a strategy if he knew why they had come.

He retraced yesterday’s events. Perhaps Sasori had reported him to the government for the stunt he pulled with the pledge? He wouldn’t put it past him, and that would be more than enough reason for the Bureau to pay him a visit. Although, it seemed strange that that would be the straw that broke the camel’s back. After all, this hadn’t been the first time he had embellished on the pledge.

He pulled at the window handle. It didn’t budge. That was interesting. He hadn’t locked it last night when he’d snuck in. He never did. Rather than trying again, he crossed over to the control panel. It told him the windows were locked, but the front door was open. He tried to disarm it.

Access Denied. The screen blinked an apologetic orange. He leered at it.

Not good.

“Takashi!” the old woman called from downstairs. “Wake up! Someone’s here to see you. Takashi!”
He didn’t like the tone of her voice. It wasn’t her usual cloying, dear old grandmother voice. It was still cheerful, but it carried a note of excitement, as though the Security Bureau coming here to see him was the best surprise she’d ever received. Or maybe it wasn’t a surprise.

Alarm bells went off in his head.

Did she call them here? Did she find one of the drives?

It was possible. The one in the living room was only just beneath the couch. If that was the case, and they knew he had planned for years to sabotage the city, this was definitely not a friendly house call.

His pulse skyrocketed, kicking his fight or flight response into near violent overdrive. Suddenly, it seemed he was surrounded by danger. It dripped from the old woman’s words, permeated the air, and solidified in the shape of the black and white cars in the driveway. His instincts told him he needed to get out. Not just out of the house, but out of No. 6, drives or not.

“Sweetheart, answer me,” the old woman crowed. “It’s rude to keep your guests waiting.” Her words were lilting. She sounded like she was having fun. No doubt she was; she thought she had him cornered.

He needed to calm down and think rationally. Where could he go? He thought of the sewage tunnels. No. 6 was pristine in every facet of its outward appearance, but its underbelly was rotten. He had seen the open sores with his own eyes. There was an old sewage network underneath the city that the government had, for some reason or another, elected not to block off. The openings to these pipes were sprinkled around the city, usually hidden out of sight in a ditch or an alleyway, and they had fascinated Nezumi with their stark and spurned existence. No. 6 was literally built on the filth of a past long forgotten and buried.

The tunnels might be too small to get through, but they were his only option. The one leading into Chronos was too dangerous with the Security Bureau so close behind him. He would aim for the one in Lost Town.

But first he had to get out of this room. He glanced around. A plan began formulating, but it was a risky one. Its success would rely on the players acting exactly as predicted, and precise timing on his part. But it wasn’t as though he had any other options.

The staircase creaked. He froze. He went to the door to listen for a moment. Sure enough he heard footsteps leading toward him. Several sets.

So far, so good.

He heard the old woman grumbling to someone about his insolent behavior, but Nezumi slipped away from the door before he could hear anything else. He concealed himself underneath the staircase leading up to the loft.

The door opened and the old woman stormed in. “You should come when I call for you,” she growled to the open air.

Nezumi raised an eyebrow. Well, well, well. At last, your true colors come out.

Upon realizing the object of her outburst was absent, she stopped a few paces in and looked around from the window to the bookcases on the opposite wall. Two men had followed her into the room and came up alongside her when she stopped.
“Where is he?” one asked in a gruff voice.

“In here somewhere. The window’s locked. There’s nowhere to go,” she hissed, still speaking to him, he supposed.

*I can get past the old woman fine, but those thugs are a different story.* He adjusted his crouch, readying himself to sprint. *Come on. Move.*

The larger of the two men nodded at the desk in front of them. “Check over there.”

Nezumi’s heart sped up. The man did as he was commanded, and Nezumi held his breath as he waited to see what the other official would do. The large man turned toward the staircase. His eyes roamed their length and then scrutinized the loft. Nezumi swallowed, and his stomach lurched as the official began to mount the stairs. It was torture, but he made himself count to four. If he were too hasty, the official wouldn’t be far enough up the stairs and might be capable of snagging him on his way past.

He swung out and bolted just as the old woman began turning. Their eyes met for a split second. She looked so shocked and angry, her glasses flashing and her face all pinched. It really wasn’t an attractive parting image. Nezumi silently promised to treasure her always in his memory with that face.

She barely had enough time to utter, “You!” before he blew by her and escaped through the bedroom door. His thoughts were already calculating his next move before he reached the staircase. The front door was impossible, so that left the windows—which he suspected were all locked thanks to the old woman’s forethought—and the side door that led out to the garden.

He jumped down the last few steps and pivoted in that direction. The door slid open easily, which he considered a godsend, because he estimated he had about six seconds before the Bureau officials stampeded down the stairs. Given his limited time, he made a deliberate decision to head for the section of hedges behind a row of lilies. Thinking of the old woman’s fondness for the flower, he took a small satisfaction in trampling them underfoot.

He cleared the hedges and sprinted across the lawn until he reached the road. But he knew he shouldn’t take that path. They were already onto him and they had a car. He crossed over the street and a wildlife bridge onto the next property. He quickly navigated his way from the backyard to the next street over. *Thank No. 6 for its residential uniformity.* The rest was a straightaway to the Chronos gate. He made a beeline for it.

While he ran, he became increasingly aware of his ID bracelet bouncing against his wrist. He glanced down at it. The ID bracelet. He needed to get rid of it. There was a one hundred percent chance it was transmitting radio waves that the Bureau could use to track his whereabouts. The only issue was he couldn’t get anywhere in No. 6 without the damned thing. Then again, he wasn’t planning to be in No. 6 much longer. The gate was just ahead. He could see the guard that minded the entrance sitting in the booth. Really, he only needed the ID up until he got out of Chronos.

The guard saw him and scrambled out to meet him.

*Either he’s really excited to see me, or...* His suspicions were confirmed when the man yelled, “Stop!” and threw his arms open wide to try and block his path. If Nezumi weren’t expending all his energy trying to escape, he would’ve sighed. He had to hand it to the Security Bureau; they covered their bases well.

Nezumi slipped the ID bracelet from his wrist and slowed a fraction as he approached the
guard. *Now that I’m busted, this is almost as good as useless...* He waited for the man to make a move toward him, and once he had committed, Nezumi chucked the bracelet at his face. *Almost.* He smirked as the man doubled over, clutching his gushing nose.

He was now in the Forest Park. As expected at that hour, it was completely deserted apart from the cleaning robots. The surrounding areas may not be the posh and pampered paradise that was Chronos, but they were still a part of No. 6, which meant that the residents there were determined to take it as easy as possible. There was hardly a business that opened before nine, let alone people who chose to take strolls through the park at an hour past dawn. The workers in the Park Administration Office would likely be the only occupants of the park at this hour, and their only job was to stare at screens, drink coffee, and press a button every time the robots sent back an “indistinguishable object” error.

The solitude and quietness had often been a relief to Nezumi on previous mornings. However, this particular morning he would’ve been much obliged if there was a bustling crowd to get lost in, or at least a few eyewitnesses.

He hazarded a look behind him. There were no officers in sight. He couldn’t decide if that was a good thing, or a bad thing, but he wasn’t naïve enough to believe that he had eluded the Bureau. His muscles were starting to tense up. He sucked in a deep breath and kept running. Luckily, No. 6 wasn’t a big city, so if he kept a steady pace he would be in Lost Town in ten minutes. If he could make it there and to the sewage tunnel, he would be safe. He hoped.

It had apparently rained during the night. The park smelt sharp and moist, and the ground squelched with every stride he made. Naturally, the Forest Park had pathways, but if recklessly crashing through the slick foliage would shave even the slightest amount of time off his journey, they would be seconds precisely won. He hit a particularly wet patch and slid across the damp grass. He must have been either very bored or very tired, because upon realizing he had narrowly avoided pitching head first into a pond, his first thought was: *I’m still in my pajamas. I’m literally running for my life in my pajamas.*

He was wearing dark sweatpants and a long-sleeved shirt, so as far as sleepwear-turned-getaway clothing was concerned it was adequate. Still, the fact that he was ambushed in his home at dawn, where and when, by all accounts, one should feel safe, infuriated him. It was the principle of the thing. No. 6 touted values like community, comfort, and safety, but the reality it enforced wasn’t what it advertised. Forget natural human rights, No. 6 was the kind of callous snake that couldn’t even allow a citizen the dignity of putting on something decent before they stormed into their house and arrested them.

He didn’t realize he had reached Lost Town until he stumbled into the street. He cursed himself. Now was not the time. He could harp on No. 6 later, after he was sure he’d never have to see the glittering generality again. Like the park, Lost Town was silent. If he wasn’t mistaken, the entrance to the tunnel was in one of the alleys that flanked the road stretching out in front of him.

He jogged out into the middle of the street, just as a car streaked out. He spun around and put his hands out to try to blunt the blow. Fortunately, cars in No. 6 had superb brakes, so it halted in time to save him from being crushed, but his hands had still hit the hood, and they vibrated with the impact. His hair fanned out in front of his eyes, and when it cleared, he found himself staring into the sunglass-shaded face of a Security Bureau official.

He turned smartly on his heel and sprinted down the road. The car screeched and purred behind him. He could feel it gaining. The closer it got, the more difficult it was to remember which alley the tunnel was down. He had a none too pleasant vision of himself being rammed from behind and
rolling over the front of the car, only to land, sprawling, on the pavement in a pool of his own blood. He was sure the Bureau would have a fun time concocting a colorful story about the ill-fated demise of a promising Chronos elite.

Deciding to take his chances in favor of being mowed down, he cut to the right and dove into the first alley he saw. He ran until he saw the brick wall looming in the distance.

_No_. He checked for fire escapes or footholds, but the surrounding surfaces were smooth and unforgiving. _No, no, no, no!_ He skidded to a stop and slammed his fist against the brick.

“Dammit!”

A leisurely clapping began behind him. The sound bounced off the walls, each reverberation hitting him like a slap in the face.

“Very nice,” a smooth voice droned.

He stifled his frustration as best he could and turned to face his pursuers. The alley was only wide enough to fit two men shoulder to shoulder. Despite this, the Bureau had apparently felt the need to cram every man they had in the car into the space. This amounted to four men, three of which were pointing guns his way. Nezumi’s mouth was dry. He didn’t expect to see guns. What ever happened to No. 6’s subscription to peace?

The only official who wasn’t sporting a firearm was at the forefront of the pack. He was a broad shouldered man, with a deep forehead and a black buzz cut. He had forsaken the sunglasses that his coworkers seemed so fond of, and as such, his face seemed softer and more open than his companions’. However, his dark eyes and thin mouth screamed of deceit.

“Honestly, I’m impressed,” the man continued. He ceased clapping and smiled wanly at Nezumi. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Citizen Takashi. My name is Rashi. I’ve come to inform you that you have been promoted.” Rashi pronounced each word slowly, as if he were picking them with the utmost care.

Nezumi took pause. _They don’t seem to know about the drives… If they did, they wouldn’t bother with such petty foreplay. So, what? Is it about the pledge after all?_

“You chased me halfway across the city to tell me I got a promotion? Compliments of Sasori, I suppose?” he fished.

“Ah, yes. We did receive a call from him yesterday. However, this promotion has been pending for a while now.”

_What’s that supposed to mean?_

Nezumi’s eyes wandered from one man to the next. “Must be a really important job. This is quite the welcoming committee.”

“Well, I know you have a penchant for the dramatic. I thought you might appreciate the fanfare.”

Nezumi chuckled wryly. “How thoughtful of you. However, as much as I appreciate your originality with the guns, I would have been just as delighted with the standard balloons and party poppers.”

Rashi smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “What do you say we continue this conversation in
the car?"

Apparently this was some kind of signal, because the man behind Rashi stepped forward and whipped out a pair of handcuffs. He kept his gun trained on Nezumi as he approached. Nezumi swallowed, his back pressed against the brick wall. He tensed when the official snatched his wrist, but the gun prevented him from retaliating, and his sense of dignity kept him from making any further show of apprehension. He winced as the handcuffs locked around his wrists with a bright chink.

“Bit tight,” he said to his handler. The man was impassive. He gripped him by the back of the neck and pushed him stumbling forward. Nezumi grunted as he was muscled out of the alley and to the idling car. One official opened the door, and another ducked Nezumi’s head and pushed him inside.

“Geez,” Nezumi growled as he was sandwiched between two of his captors. “If this is a promotion, I’d hate to see what a demotion looks like.”

Rashi watched without interest from the passenger’s seat. The car pulled out, and the scenery outside began to blend.

Nezumi turned to the man beside him. “So, do you usually bring this many men, or am I just special?”

“I suppose you could say that,” Rashi drawled.

“Excuse me. I was talking to Sunglasses here.” Sunglasses, however, didn’t answer. “Can the others not speak?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Rashi twisted around in his seat. “But it won’t happen. They’ve been instructed not to encourage you.”

“Oh? So my reputation precedes me. I’m flattered that you’ve bothered to do your research.”

“Mm. Yes, I know quite a bit about you, CVC-00103221. But seeing as you insist on making a spectacle of yourself wherever you go, I don’t think there’s anyone in the city who hasn’t heard of you in one way or another.”

Nezumi smirked. “You’re making me blush, old man. If I knew you were such a big fan, I would’ve prepared an autograph.”

“You see? There’s that brazen egotism. If you’re not disrespecting authority, or mocking the city pledge, you’re out in the park, masquerading with grocers.”

The sarcastic retort died in Nezumi’s throat.

“Tell me, did you think your impertinence would go unpunished? Did you think just because we let you get away with acting like a spoiled brat, that you were invincible?” Rashi’s mouth twitched. “You know, you’ve always thought yourself pretty special, but I don’t think you realized just how special.”

Nezumi glowered. “I must admit, I really don’t know where you’re going with this.”

“Yes. You never were very smart. To tell you the truth, I was against the decision to waive you into the Gifted Curriculum, but the management insisted. They thought higher education and a greater standard of living would produce a more favorable subject. But it seems to have done
nothing more than give you an inflated sense of your own self-worth. You’ve proved to be a colossal waste of time and funds. If you ask me, I think they should’ve let you die with your parents.”

Nezumi stiffened. His mouth worked, but no sound came out.

“Oh, dear… I forgot. You didn’t know that, did you?” Rashi looked genuinely pleased. “It was a pity. Your father was a clever and useful man, and your mother…” He smirked. “Well, she was no real beauty, but she’d do in a pinch.”

Nezumi jerked against his restraints, but was quickly pushed down by the other officers. Rashi chuckled.

“Their execution was unfortunate, but what could we do? The higher ups just had to have you, and your parents kept refusing their offers. You should actually be thankful someone saw so much value in you; it saved your life.”

“You bastard!”

He lunged at Rashi again. This time when the guards yanked him back down into the seat one elbowed him roughly in the sternum. He sputtered and coughed.

“Now, now,” Rashi chided. “Be gentle, boys. We don’t want to damage the merchandise before it’s properly delivered. Although…” he said as an afterthought. “Perhaps, it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to break you in before we turn you over. Elyurias only needs the brain, after all.”

Elyurias? Brain? What is this guy talking about?

The car jolted. He glanced out the windshield and realized he had no idea where they were. The car was heading down a dirt road cutting through a forest of towering trees. This was nowhere near the Bureau. The Bureau abutted City Hall, nestled in the center of the Forest Park, with all its managed greenery and manicured lawns. The woods outside the car windows were natural and gnarled. Their lack of maintenance told him that No. 6 didn’t deem it necessary to pay such fastidious attention to this path, which meant it wasn’t a place normal citizens were expected to see. If he had to guess, he would say they were heading toward the northwest sector of the city. But there wasn’t much up there. Nothing but the Correctional Facility.

Nezumi blanched. The fists he had balled in his lap were beginning to slicken with sweat. His visceral reaction to his surroundings did not go unnoticed.

“Catching on, are we? If you’ve figured out where we’re going, you must also realize that all the snide comments in the world can’t shield you from what’s coming. You thought the years with Fumiko were bad?” Rashi smiled, his eyes crinkling just the slightest in the corners. “Wait till he gets his hands on you.”

*Dammit!* His heart was pounding and his chest ached from the blow he had sustained. He grit his teeth and tried to bite back the bile of hatred that was clawing its way up his throat. *Think, you idiot!*

A large black shape hurtled at the windshield.

“What the—!”

The driver slammed on the brakes. The car’s passengers were thrown violently forward and then slammed back against their seats. A crow swooped down in a determined arc and ran its talons
over the hood of the car. Its shrill caws mingled with the keening squeal of its nails dragging over the metal. The bird flew at the window again, pecking angrily.

Rashi sneered. “Ignore it. Keep driving.”

The driver released the brake and rolled forward.

And then the side of the road erupted. Nezumi smashed into the man next to him as an eardrum-shattering *boom* rippled through the air and blew the car clear off the road. Nezumi instinctively threw his hands up to cover his head and face, but he was too tightly boxed in to bring them up all the way. The car lurched in midair and came crashing down on its side before flipping completely over. Halfway through the roll, Nezumi’s head collided with something hard.

The next moment, everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

*squints* Is that… the plot?
Nezumi’s first thought when he floated back into consciousness was, What the hell happened, followed almost immediately by, Ugh. Everything hurts. His head pounded and there was a searing pain in his left shoulder. Something was tapping his cheek incessantly. Nezumi’s eyes fluttered open for a second, but the shock of the bright light that flooded into them was nauseating. He squeezed them shut and groaned.

His cheek smarted. Nezumi’s eyes flew open. He squinted until his vision came into focus. There was a canopy of trees above him. That’s not right.

He turned his head a fraction and saw the car. Black smoke billowed out from behind the wreckage. The airbags in the front had been deployed and he could see Rashi draped over one, crumpled and motionless. One of the guards that had been sitting beside him was lying halfway out of the car. His eyes were shut, but he was moaning softly and looked like he might regain consciousness soon.

How did I…? Nezumi turned his head the other way and came face-to-face with a stranger.

He was a young teen with a mess of shaggy brown hair and a serious expression. He appeared to be looking very hard at Nezumi’s face. Nezumi thought dazedly how odd this boy’s eyes were: they were brown, but the way the light hit them made it seem as though they had a purple tint.

“What’s three times seven?” the teen said suddenly.

“Wha?”

“Seven multiplied by three. Quickly.”

“…Twenty-one?”

“Correct!” the odd stranger enthused. “Great! It doesn’t seem like you have a brain injury.”

He beamed at Nezumi and stuck something small and sleek in his face. His fuzzy brain took a second to identify it, but he soon recognized the object as a gun.

“Get up,” the boy ordered. “We have to run.”

Nezumi swallowed thickly. His body and mind were a throbbing mess of bruises and confusion, but he did as he was told. He rolled over onto his right side and noted with a small degree of surprise that his handcuffs had been removed. He tried to push himself up, but his left shoulder twinged in protest. The muscle grated faintly against the bone.

He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. Dislocated?
“Quickly,” urged the gun-brandishing youth.

Nezumi growled, switched sides, and put as little weight on his left shoulder as possible as he climbed to his feet. He teetered once, and then righted himself.

“Follow me,” the teen said. He trotted forward a few paces and checked to ensure he was behind him.

Nezumi hesitated. He didn’t want to risk staying and being recaptured by the Security Bureau, but he also didn’t think it was wise to abscond into the woods with a suspicious stranger, who also used guns to force compliance. He considered his chances if he turned tail and fled from both the Bureau and the boy. However, he couldn’t ensure he wouldn’t be shot from behind, and he had no intention of dying.

Then there was the stranger himself. He looked a little too rough to be a citizen of No. 6, but then where had he come from?

“Do you wanna die?” The teen yanked Nezumi’s right arm.

He supposed mystery was better than certain death. If this boy wasn’t from No. 6, then he might be his only chance of escape. He would go along for now, and when he no longer needed the stranger’s services, he’d flee. The other teen didn’t look like much of a threat if one subtracted the gun.

Nezumi huffed, but followed this time when the teen ran. His left shoulder was causing shooting pains up and down his arm and upper back. He grasped it and tried to hold it in place while he stumbled along. The boy beside him was surefooted as he sped through the undergrowth.

Who is this guy? Nezumi thought. Now that his mind was clearing up, he was pretty sure the person he was following was not only responsible for bombing the Security Bureau cruiser, but had also dragged him from the overturned car. But why? Had he come expressly for that purpose? He seemed to know what he was doing and where he was going, so Nezumi got the feeling he had.

First the Bureau arrests me and starts talking like I’m some kind of troublesome pet, and next a complete stranger bursts in to whisk me away. None of this is making any sense.

Fhwp. Something shot between them and embedded itself into a tree trunk a foot away. Nezumi twisted around. One of the backseat Bureau officials was behind them. Apparently the crash had been easier for those who weren’t up front. He was pointing a large handgun forward. Nezumi was just about to warn his companion of another impending shot, when there was a loud pop. The official’s head jerked backwards and he dropped to the ground in a heap. Nezumi couldn’t comprehend what had happened until he turned around and saw the teen facing the direction of the official with his own gun raised. His face was set into a look of stony determination.

“Keep running,” he commanded.

Nezumi swallowed. Who is this guy?

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Navigating the uneven terrain was proving to be more difficult than he would’ve liked. He kept tripping, and each time he did so, he had trouble regaining his footing quickly. He had a suspicion that the reason he was tripping was because holding his arm while he ran threw him off balance. He tried releasing his shoulder and running normally, but trying to swing his arm forward sent stabs of pain down its length. He replaced his grip, and decided that the best he could do was place
his footing better. He didn’t think this strategy shaved too much time off his running speed, but he kept receiving anxious and impatient looks from the teen beside him.

He felt a mixture of fear and annoyance when the boy dropped behind him and pressed the muzzle of the gun to his back.

“You need to move faster. They’re right behind us.” The boy shoved Nezumi’s left shoulder with the gun.

The shoulder shifted slightly in its socket and Nezumi yelped. The wave of pain was so intense he felt like vomiting. The gun disappeared from his back instantly. Nezumi leaned against a tree and coughed into the bark.

“You’re hurt?” The other teen’s voice was half shock, half agitation. He glanced around. “Hey, get up.” He nudged Nezumi from behind.

“Can you give me second?” Nezumi snapped.

The boy made a face. “Just come with me, alright? Come on.”

Nezumi hissed, but once again followed the teen at a jog. He led him behind a grouping of boulders.

“Your shoulder may be dislocated,” he said as soon as they were concealed.

“I know,” Nezumi growled.

“Sit down.”

“What?”

“Sit.” Nezumi didn’t obey immediately, and the other boy sighed. “We really don’t have time for this.” He waved his gun. “Sit.”

Nezumi sat gingerly.


Nezumi frowned.

“Just try. Raise your injured arm up and out in front of you as quick as you can without causing too much pain, but fast, because we need to get out of here.”

If the situation weren’t dire, he would’ve commented on the confusing directions, but despite his distrust of the person in front of him, he realized the danger of their situation, and tried his best to do as he was instructed. He grit his teeth and slowly, yet as quickly as possible, began to lift his arm. After a couple seconds of sweating and discomfort, he got it parallel to the ground.

“Great. Hold still. I’m going to realign it.”

The teen wrapped his fingers around Nezumi’s extended wrist and drew it carefully toward him. He pressed the affected shoulder with his other hand, placing his thumb at the base of the joint, where the shoulder connected to the collarbone. Nezumi wrinkled his nose in pain. His shoulder popped, and the pain dulled to an angry throb.
“Feel okay?”

The shoulder ached, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as before.

“Freeze!”

The two boys froze. A Bureau official stepped out from behind a boulder and leveled a gun at them.

“Don’t,” he growled, aiming at the dark-haired teen, “even try it.” Nezumi glanced down and saw that he had tried to reach for his own gun beside him. “Hands up, or I’ll blow your brains out.”

The gun shifted in Nezumi’s direction.

“You.” The man sneered. “You’re lucky we have orders to bring you back in one piece, or else I —”

The man stiffened. His eyes bulged and a strangled sound escaped his lips. He abandoned threatening them to claw at the base of his neck, with both his free hand and the muzzle of the gun, which he neglected to drop in his frenzy. The two teens watched in horror as the man’s face turned as dry and wrinkled as parchment. Black spots blossomed on his hands, and his skin shrunk until it was stretched like shrunken canvas around his emaciated frame. His hair streaked with white and began to fall out in tufts, while teeth fell in rotted handfuls from the gaping cavern of his mouth.

He dropped to the ground. The gun he was holding bounced off the rock and skittered into the underbrush. The boys did nothing but stare at the mummified corpse that, until a moment ago, had been a perfectly healthy young man.

“What… the…” the teen whispered.

He was staring intently at the corpse’s neck. There was a black mark there, and it looked soggy… Nezumi’s stomach rolled. The mark was pulsating like something was moving beneath it. His nausea mounted. The skin cracked and a large, black insect emerged. It quivered gossamer wings. It looked like… a wasp?

*I will give you the power you need.*

Nezumi inhaled sharply. He had witnessed this scene before. In his dream, two nights ago, a man had died, and a wasp emerged from his body.

His head was reeling. He had just witnessed two deaths in the span of minutes, and this second death had been more horrifying than the first. He had no idea what to think anymore. But there wasn’t really time for thinking. If he didn’t move on, he could be next. The wasp took flight and Nezumi pushed himself up, ignoring the spasm in his shoulder.

“Which way?”

The other boy looked completely shell-shocked.

“Hey, you, wake up. We don’t have time, remember? Which way?”

The mention of their timetable roused him. He swallowed, and tore his eyes away from the corpse. A trace of confusion and something else—fear?—crossed his face, before he pointed west.

*Towards the West Block, huh? Shoulda known.*
Nezumi set off at a run and was joined a moment later. He could feel the other’s stare boring into the side of his face, but he did his best to ignore it. He supposed his quick recovery was a surprise, even to himself. But now was not the time for contemplation. He needed to focus on escaping; he could think about the things that didn’t add up later.

“Through here,” said the teen, taking the lead.

They were out of the woods and standing at the side of a road. A car parked up the road sped toward them in reverse. Nezumi barely had enough time to feel nervous before he was ushered into the front seat of the vehicle. It was a transport car, for things like small cleaning robots and maintenance workers. The cars were equipped with bench seating in front, so three could fit comfortably, but still, Nezumi found himself caged in the middle again. The first thing he noticed, apart from that vexing fact, was that the driver of the car was a young girl.

She was petite and looked to be around the same age as him and the boy he assumed was her associate. Her dark hair was cropped boyishly short, which provided an androgynous contrast to the pretty, delicate features of her face. However, at present, her expression was livid.

“Where were you?! I’ve been waiting forever! I thought something had happened to you!” she shrieked across Nezumi at the boy opposite.

“Something did happen, but right now you need to drive.”

The girl growled and peeled out.

“Unbelievable,” she spat under her breath. Her eyes darted to Nezumi beside her. “This is him? He doesn’t look like much.”

Nezumi raised his eyebrows, but he didn’t have a chance to respond before the girl stomped on the gas pedal and the car swerved around a corner. He gripped the dashboard to keep from sliding down the seat. He managed to hold his place steadily enough, however, the boy next to him still pressed close to the door to avoid him, and remained there even after they had straightened out. Nezumi could feel the other boy’s eyes trained on his face, and after a moment, he turned to look at him.

The other teen did not avert his gaze, but swallowed and looked perplexed. “I should’ve asked earlier,” the boy said finally, “but what’s your name?”

“…Nezumi.”

His look of confusion deepened. “Nezumi? That’s your name?”

“No way that’s his real name,” the girl scoffed.

“As far as you’re concerned, it is.” Nezumi grit his teeth as they skidded around another corner.

“My name is Shion,” the other boy supplied without prompting.

“‘Shion?’” Nezumi repeated with mild distaste. “As in the flower?”

The boy nodded mutely. Nezumi grunted. *It's somewhat insulting to realize that I've been bossed around by a guy named after a flower.*

“Well, now that we’ve established a rapport,” Nezumi said aloud, “you mind telling me where we’re going?”
“A place you ought to feel right at home in, Mr. Rat,” the girl said with the hint of a smile.

There was a long stretch of road ahead of them, at the end of which was a large white building. Nezumi recognized it as a waste disposal facility. There were a few of them peppered around the outskirts of No. 6. Their main purpose was to process the garbage the city and its people produced, but it also was capable of converting some of the waste into an energy source. No. 6 ran primarily on clean solar energy, but lower stratum, like Lost Town, sometimes relied on the cheaper refuse-derived fuel (RDF) that was manufactured in the waste disposal facilities.

The building was by no means an area of high security, but it still had a gate, which required chip authorization to get through. He didn’t have such a chip, and he seriously doubted either of his kidnappers had one. However, they were heading right for the gate, and the car wasn’t slowing down.

Nezumi gripped the edge of the seat. “Do you have a chip?” he asked the girl.

“Chip? Nope. Do you?”

“No. But then…”

He glanced at the speedometer and saw that the needle was creeping steadily up the dial. He flattened himself against the back of the seat. She can’t be serious.

“Hold on!” she roared.

The car smashed full throttle through the gates, setting off the facility’s lockdown alarm. The windows on either side of the car shattered upon impact, and although the windshield escaped with only minor cracks from debris, the hood had crumpled completely. Despite the beating, the car still continued to fly forward toward the glass entrance of the waste disposal facility.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Calm down. Safu’s an excellent driver.”

“Really? Because she just crashed into that gate!”

“Of course I did. How else were we supposed to get through it?”

The car was fast approaching the entrance to the facility, and the emergency gates to seal off the building were descending just as quickly. Nezumi could feel the blood drain from his face.

“Get down!”

Nezumi didn’t need to be told. He had already started to duck when he realized that the girl—Safu—intended to crash through the entrance as well. The car made a horrendous screeching noise as it burst through the glass door and was decapitated by the emergency gates. The car skidded to a stop in the facility lobby.

Safu hopped out of the car through its new sunroof, while Shion exited through what was left of the door. Nezumi shook off the glass and metal shavings that had rained down on his head, and jumped out of the car. He wasn’t granted a second of reprieve to feel dazed by the violence of their escape, or frightened by where this path might lead. The minute his feet touched the ground, the boy was waving them toward the interior of the building.

The inside of the facility was loud and acrid. Machines pulverized garbage above and around
them with near-deafening enthusiasm. The equipment did not appear to be in the best shape. Some of the pipes were leaking wastewater onto the walkways, leaving them slick, slimy, and perilous to traverse in the poor light. The remains of the refuse that could not be used for fuel were liquefied and siphoned off down a sewage tunnel. It was to this tunnel that Shion led them.

The girl thrust a pair of goggles at Nezumi. “Hope you can swim.”

Nezumi took the goggles and stared down at the murky brown water. “We’re going to swim through that? Won’t it be hard to see?”

“The goggles are equipped with infrared. We’ll be able to see fine, but can you swim? How’s your shoulder?”

He was surprised that Shion bothered to remember or show concern about his injury. Quite considerate for a criminal. Though I assume he’s mostly worried I’ll slow them down. His shoulder was indeed still pained, but he could move it.

“I can do it. Anyway, I’m dead if I don’t, so there’s really no choice.”

The girl frowned. She looked between her partner and Nezumi. “Injured or not, we only have one shot, so you need to suck it up for a little.”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow. Charming.

Something clanged in the distance, followed by the rumble of footsteps.

“Time to go,” Shion said in a low voice. “Slip in, don’t jump. Take a deep breath, and follow me.”

One by one, they disappeared under the thick flow of water.

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He had not prepared himself for the onslaught of smells. The foul scents in the water mingled with the pieces of unidentified filth floating in it and combined to form a putrid concoction that seemed to seep into the skin. His nostrils and throat burned. His body ached to cough and gasp. His left arm had rejected his attempts to make the proper swimming motions after a few strokes, so he had resorted to using just the one arm and kicking gently. He wondered how much longer he would have to hold his breath. His lungs screamed for air.

At last, Shion stopped and seemed to be hanging onto the wall. He was gesturing at a handle. Nezumi grabbed the end and together they turned it. Safu arrived and also took hold. With the three of them pulling, the valve swung open easily. They were sucked into the opening in a jumble. His heart thudded violently against his ribs as his body was propelled through the channel. He lost his breath, and took in a mouthful of bitter water before he was thrown out onto dry land.

He choked and spit the water onto the ground, which he recognized as concrete when he had regained control of his faculties. He tore his goggles off and tried not to think too much as he peeled away the hair that clung to his face. It was dark and difficult to see, but he could recognize that they were in a tunnel.

“Is this… a sewage tunnel?”

“It is,” came Shion’s confirmation.
Nezumi stood, and Safu took the goggles back from him and stuffed them inside her jacket. He looked back at the valve and saw it was still streaming brown liquid. He scowled. No. 6 just dumped every bit of useless garbage out of the city for someone else to handle. It figured. There were virtually no places to live, except in one of the six city-states; and No. 6, the best and most prosperous, the so-called ‘Holy City’, saw it fit to muck up the last of the habitable environment as it suited its interests. It was staggering how frequently humans ignored their past and repeated their mistakes.

“Are you going climb up the ladder or not?” the girl droned.

Nezumi was standing in front of a rusty ladder bolted into the wall of the tunnel. Shion had already scaled it and was pulling himself out of the opening at the top. The ladder’s condition wasn’t exactly reassuring, but he figured if it held the other boy’s weight without a groan, he would have no trouble with it. He began to climb.

When he reached the exit, fresh air wafted over his body and filled his airways. It was the sweetest, cleanest scent he had smelled in what seemed like forever. He took in an appreciative gulp and stood up. The light of the morning sun was glaring after the time he’d spent underground, but his eyes soon adjusted. The opening to the sewers was located on the crest of a craggy hill, and from its height, one could see the full scope of the West Block below.

He had expected the West Block to be a desolate, dilapidated stretch of land, but it was more built-up and busy than the stories made it seem. The buildings, of course, were not altogether well preserved, and even from up high he could get a sense of how dangerous and dirty the town below was. Although, it still looked like a bustling civilization, despite its shoddiness. The cityscape was layered with tall, cylindrical towers over cramped, low-lying buildings and residences. The scene looked eerily like an enormous factory complex. Looking upon the West Block, the stories of postwar destruction seemed a lot more palpable.

He turned aside and came face-to-face with Shion for the second time that day. He had not heard or seen him approach, and yet the boy had managed to get within arms length of him. Nezumi flinched back, but the teen caught his wrist and began winding something around it.

“It’s procedure,” Shion said. He gingerly brought Nezumi’s left wrist forward to meet his right and fastened them together with rope.

Nezumi stared down at his hands, tied one on top of the other in front of him. So it’s a kidnapping after all.

“Brought him alive, huh?” commented a gruff voice.

Nezumi lifted his head. A man was standing off to the side. He had an angular face, a slim nose, and coal eyes. His hair hung thick and unkempt over his ears, and he had a dusting of stubble on his upper lip and chin. The sunlight illuminated the traces of gray in both. He had a deep yellow bandana tied around his neck, and Nezumi only now realized that the girl and boy also wore the same one.

The next thing he noticed was a gun holstered at the man’s hip, which appeared to be of a different variety than those the Security Bureau carried. The Bureau’s guns were thicker and heavier looking, while this man’s was smaller and streamlined. An old revolver model, if he had to guess. Regardless of the make and model of the gun, the threat it presented remained the same.

“He says he’s called Nezumi,” Safu volunteered.
Nezumi didn’t like her tone.

“‘Nezumi,’ huh? How quaint.” The man was smirking. “Welcome to West Block, Nezumi.” He waved to the other teens. “Bring him.”

Chapter End Notes

Shion and Safu's welcoming rescue ain't so welcoming as Nezumi's was in the novel.

BUT like… how did Nezumi pull his off? How'd he get into No. 6? Where'd he get that vehicle. Nezumi… HOW? Canon Nezumi was a magician I s2g.
The two teens flanked Nezumi as they walked a few paces behind the older man. They were walking in the opposite direction of the cityscape. Nezumi was taken down the hill, and into a neighborhood of ramshackle houses that were more in keeping with No. 6’s descriptions of outer wall living. The roofs were slumping and the exteriors were peeling. A number were obviously abandoned, and yet there seemed to be people living in quite a few of the others. A small boy’s face appeared in the frame of a broken window. He watched their procession with clouded eyes, until an older girl grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him into the interior of the house.

The scruffy leader entered the mouth of an alley and rapped on the first door. A disheveled young man opened it. Nezumi wondered if the men in the West Block were uniformly disheveled. The man had a long and unremarkable face. He struck Nezumi as the type that went unnoticed in crowds, the kind of person who attracted descriptors like “normal” and “nice guy.”

He looked startled, and then nervous, upon seeing the man at the door. “Yoming, sir… Good morning.”

"Good morning, Comrade Yamase. There’s nothing to be alarmed about, but I was hoping you might allow me and my friends to use your basement."

Yamase peered over Yoming’s shoulder and looked from one person to another, before settling on Nezumi. They locked eyes for an instant, and then he was back to Yoming. He swallowed.

“Oh, I see,” he said quietly. “I… I was actually about to go down to headquarters right now, but if you’d rather I stay up here…?” His words sounded stilted, as though he were an actor trying to perform lines he hadn’t yet mastered.

Yoming grinned. “That’s generous of you, but we’re fine alone.”

Yamase nodded and stepped aside. Yoming strode in, followed by Shion, and then Safu, pulling Nezumi by the rope behind her. Nezumi tried to catch the nervous man’s eyes again, but he kept them glued to his shoes.

“Well, then, I’ll be going,” the man said.

“Yamase.”

“Yes, sir?”

“It’s really nothing,” Yoming said languidly. “We won’t be long. In fact, we’ll be gone so quickly, it’d almost seem like we were never here. So it’s nothing to be concerned about.”

“Oh. Yes. It’s really not worth mentioning.”
“Precisely. I’m glad we understand each other. Tell the men at headquarters I’ll be down soon.”

“Yes, sir.” Yamase turned and left without another word or glance.

“Right then.” Safu cleared her throat. “Shall we?”

She pivoted on her heel and headed toward a door at the back of the room. It looked more like the entrance to a vault than a basement door. There was a padlock built into its center, and a small wheel, which he assumed was the handle. Safu blocked the lock so he couldn’t see her turning the dial for the code. The heavy door swung open soundlessly to reveal a staircase plunging into nothingness, and Nezumi felt very much like a sheep being led to slaughter.

The basement was pitch black. The darkness and stale air hung over him like a thick blanket. He was shoved down onto a crate, or something of the sort. He sat still, his heart thudding in his ears. Suddenly, a light flared up in front of him. A lantern hung in the air in the far corner of the room. It illuminated Shion’s face, but its light did not provide definition to anything else. Still, Nezumi could make out dark shadows, and from those he got the impression that the room was packed with shelves and boxes.

Shion stepped up to hang the lantern from a cord, and then slunk back into the gloom. The light hung low and close in front of Nezumi. The scene was starting to strike him as reminiscent of a Bureau interview. He squinted his eyes to save them some pain while they adjusted to the proximity of the lantern. The older man’s face looked gaunt and horrible with the under lighting.

“Bit young for a top ranker, aren’t you?” He flashed his canines at Nezumi. “Don’t you think, Safu?”

Safu made an indifferent sound and stepped out of the dark to stand beside him.

“So, Mr. Elite,” he spread his arms like a host at a grand party, “what does a pretty boy like you have to do to become such a top priority?”

Nezumi’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry?”

“A little slow on the uptake, aren’t you, Elite? Let me dumb it down for you. What’s No. 6 using you for?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. All I did was wake up this morning, and the next thing I knew, the Security Bureau were sticking guns in my face.”

Safu inclined her head. Yoming slipped his gun from his holster and thrust it toward Nezumi.

“If you continue to not answer my questions quickly and honestly,” Yoming lowered the gun until the barrel was pointed at Nezumi’s thigh, “I might get angry and squeeze this trigger.”

Nezumi’s eyes widened. He looked at the far corner of the room, but Shion was shrouded in shadow. He looked at Safu, but she was unmoved.

*These people are insane.*

“What was the question?” he asked, taking care to sound as inoffensive as possible.
“Why are you so important to No. 6?”

Nezumi grit his teeth. “You'd have to ask them. I don't have a clue.”

Yoming held firm. “Occupation?”

“I work in the Robotics lab.”

“Robotics lab?” Yoming’s eyes narrowed. “You work on their weapons?”

“No, they don’t let me near anything of value. I do system tune ups for the robots and computers.”

“Tune ups?”

Yoming glared at Safu. The girl shrugged, keeping her eyes trained on Nezumi all the while.

“Why would they transfer a guy who only does tune ups to the Correctional Facility?”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow. “To put them in jail?”

Yoming hissed, and Nezumi jerked his leg closer to himself reflexively.

Safu frowned and stepped forward. “My source explicitly said they were rushing a citizen of top priority to the Correctional Facility. You’re not telling us everything.”

Yoming pointed his gun at Nezumi’s head.

He leaned back further to distance himself. “No. 6 treated me differently. I don't know why.”

“Different, how?”

Nezumi twisted his wrists in the restraints. “They had me live with a spy. I was constantly under watch.”

Safu was looking hard at him, searching his face for signs of something. Nezumi noticed that Yoming was looking at her again. He kept doing that, but why?

*Is she trying to read my expressions? Some kind of lie detecting technique?* He turned his head down, letting his hair fall into his face to hide his scowl. *Great. Here I am again, a prisoner under scrutiny.*

The lantern was swaying in front of him, and he watched its shadow waver back and forth over the tips of his boots.

“Why?” Safu pronounced slowly, taking yet another step closer to him.

Nezumi wiped his face clean of expression and raised his eyes to hold her gaze. “I don't know.”

“So, to make this abundantly clear,” Yoming said, “you were not being moved to a job at the Correctional Facility.”

“No, I was handcuffed and shoved into the car at gunpoint. He knows.” Nezumi nodded his head in Shion's general direction.

“He was handcuffed when I found him,” the teen volunteered from the darkness.
This answer did not please Yoming.

“Why would a prisoner transfer be a top priority operation?”

Nezumi tried to recall what that officer Rashi had said in the car. The events were fuzzy—he supposed he had Shion’s pyrotechnics to thank for that—but it was starting to come back in bits and pieces.

“They said… something about funds?” he drawled. “That 'higher management' had some type of investment in me. They…”

They said something about his parents. How they had murdered them to get him. He ground his teeth.

*That isn’t important right now. I shouldn’t think about that.*

“This conversation is starting to drag,” Yoming grunted. “I’ll tell you what, either you tell us everything you know, or I’m going to empty this gun’s cylinder into your limbs, beginning with your legs and working my way up to your face.”

Nezumi jolted out of his thoughts. The barrel of the gun twinkled in the lamplight. He cleared his throat and swallowed. Yoming grinned.

“The…” He squeezed his eyes shut, sorting through the haze to find something that might be of interest. “Something about brains?” Yoming and Safu’s faces contorted. “That… something called ‘Elyurias’ needed them.” He took in a deep breath and shook his head at his captors’ questioning countenances. “It sounded ridiculous to me, but that’s what they said. That’s all the Security Bureau told me before the car blew up.”

“What’s ‘Elyurias’?” Yoming demanded.

“I don’t know.”

For once, Yoming didn’t look at Safu. He stared at Nezumi, the sharp angles in his cheeks pooling darkness in the lantern light. He withdrew the gun. Nezumi exhaled softly.

“This has been a huge waste of time. You have no information. You have no political standing. You know nothing about the Correctional Facility. Is that what I’m hearing?”

Nezumi felt it was wise not to answer, but feared not answering would anger the man even more. He settled for looking uncomfortable.

“You’re valuable to No. 6,” he said, casting a glance at Safu who was worrying her lower lip. “But you’re worthless to us.”

He pulled back the hammer on his revolver, and Nezumi’s chest constricted.

“Still, this doesn't have to be a total loss. I don't think No. 6 would be too happy if we liquidate their precious investment.”

Yoming raised the revolver. Nezumi did a quick calculation of his options. His best chance was to dive to the side and kick the man as hard as possible in the shin. Not ideal. It would only slow him down and there was nowhere to run afterward. But he’d rather get his own parting shot in than sit passively by and take a bullet in the face.
“Yoming, wait.” Shion's voice rang out from the darkness. “I need to ask him something.”

Nezumi tore his eyes away from the muzzle of the gun. Shion stepped into the range of the lantern and slipped past Safu to the forefront.

“It’s about something strange that happened while I was securing him.”

Yoming clicked his tongue. “Make it quick.”

“When we were escaping from No. 6, we both saw that officer die,” he addressed this to Nezumi, but the rest seemed to be an explanation for all the occupants in the room. “The officer aged before our eyes and fell dead in a matter of seconds.”

Nezumi could clearly recall the look of raw terror on the man's face before he crumpled to the ground.

“A wasp clawed its way out of his neck.” Shion's lip curled. “Anybody would've been distressed by that—a sheltered elite, particularly—but you didn't seem surprised. Why is that?”

Nezumi swallowed thickly, but it did very little to relieve the dryness in his throat. The lantern light was beginning to irritate his eyes. He averted his gaze.

“Look at me,” Shion commanded.

He lifted his face. Safu had stepped forward to stand beside Shion, and both were staring intently at him.

Nezumi resisted the urge to click his tongue. “I was surprised, but then I remembered that I had seen it before.”

“Inside No. 6?”

“No,” he muttered. “I dreamt it.”

Safu threw Shion an exasperated look. Shion, however, remained unreadable.

“I see,” he said. “So the fact that that man died only after he pointed the gun at you, you're saying that was a coincidence?”

“Your friend didn't die the minute he pointed a gun at me, did he?”

“I don't think you're grasping the gravity of the situation. If you know anything, anything at all, now would be the time to say it. There's nothing unusual about that man dying when he pointed that gun at you?”

Nezumi grimaced. He had a suspicion that it had to do with the voice, but he couldn't tell them that. It seemed crazy to him, how could he expect anyone else to believe it?

“He knows something.” Safu spoke to Shion, but at a volume that could easily be heard by all in the room.

Nezumi slumped. *I'm going to die.*

“I can't say for sure,” he relented, “but I think She might've had something to do with it.”

“She?”
“The… voice in my dreams.” Nezumi wondered if it was too late to take a bullet to the face.

Shion’s cold look melted. He and Safu frowned in bewilderment. It was quiet.

Nezumi explained further, “I have a reoccurring dream where this voice talks to me, but the other day the dream changed. In it, the voice came to me and told me She's going to give me the power to destroy No. 6.”

Almost immediately, a loud laugh broke out from behind Safu and Shion. Yoming chuckled for a handful of seconds.

“So even elites dream about destroying No. 6, huh?” he said after he sobered. “What? Was life too cushy for you?”

Nezumi felt a flicker of anger at the man’s insinuation. He was exhausted, his head and shoulder were in pain, and this guy was really starting to grate on his nerves.

Nezumi allowed himself a wry smirk. “You keep throwing around words like 'elite' and 'privilege,' but that only goes to show how little you know about No. 6. It isn't a paradise; it's a machine. Sure, life's cushy, but only if you keep your mouth shut and stay in line. The elite's privilege is their ignorance, and the minute you fail to fulfill the city’s parameters, they eliminate you.”

“Pretty words from a pretty mouth,” Yoming sneered. “If you had spent a day in West Block, you'd know how ridiculous you sound.”

Nezumi’s eyes flashed in the dim light. “And if you had lived twelve years inside No. 6, you’d know how badly I want to see that city burn.”

The atmosphere in the basement felt like it was filled with gunpowder. Nezumi and Yoming were locked in a fierce staring contest. A vein in the older man’s temple was throbbing. Safu’s eyes darted from one person to another, her expression disgruntled. Shion continued staring hard at Nezumi.

“Well,” Yoming said, raising his gun again, “if you really are so special to No. 6, then your death will help both of us achieve our goal.”

“Yoming, wait,” Shion interrupted for the second time. “I don’t think it’s wise to kill him.”

“Shion,” Safu said in a low voice.

She placed a hand on his arm, although it seemed not to serve any purpose but to put her in physical contact with him. Despite the dire circumstances, Nezumi’s mind continued to collect data on his surroundings, and he found himself wondering if their relationship exceeded the professional.

“Oh, you don’t, do you?” the man snapped, without taking his eyes or gun away from his target. “What is it now?”

“He still could be of use,” Shion pressed on. “ Shooting him now would be premature.”

“No, it’d be preemptive. Today was our first real strike at the heart of No. 6, and I only approved the operation because I expected to gain a weapon, or intel, at least, but what do I get? This useless fucking idiot!”
Nezumi bristled. He bit the inside of his cheek to check himself before he lunged at the man. If there weren’t a gun between them, he wouldn’t have bothered restraining himself, tied up or not.

Yoming tore his eyes away from Nezumi to spear Safu with them. “This is the last thing I need when there’s a Hunt coming any day now! Your sources were shit!”

Safu set her jaw. “My sources were right,” she growled. “They were moving a top priority citizen. It’s not my fault he doesn’t know anything.”

“It’s not Safu’s fault,” Shion said evenly. Among the flaring tempers in the room, he alone managed to keep his composure. Or, at least he was skilled in keeping up the pretense of calm.

“Well, now No. 6 knows we exist, and we’ve gained nothing for our trouble! If he’s really as important as your sources made him out to be, they probably already have satellites trained on West Block searching for him. Keeping this brat around will only paint a huge target on our backs.” Yoming wrapped his other hand around the grip of the revolver. “We kill him now, and we cut our losses and deprive No. 6 of whatever it is he does.”

Nezumi held his gaze. Whether it was bravado, brought on by the insults he’d suffered, or a defiant permutation of death acceptance, the more crazed the older man became, the less the gun pointed his way alarmed him.

“I understand your frustration.” Shion punched out each word with measured moderation. It was the kind of voice Nezumi imagined one might use with a cornered animal. “But just because he’s unable to explain his usefulness, doesn’t mean he’s actually useless. We didn’t learn much from him, I’ll admit, but the information he did have is worth looking into. He raised interesting points about the Correctional Facility, about this Elyurias. And I’m still not convinced,” he glanced at Nezumi, “that he doesn’t know more about the Bureau officer’s death.”

“What are you trying to say?” Yoming growled. The vein in his temple was getting more conspicuous.

“Let Safu look into his claims about the Correctional Facility. Killing him now will protect us in this moment, but I believe it will deprive us of valuable options in the future. For example, as you said, now No. 6 knows we exist, and that we’ve declared war on them. It doesn’t matter who we blame for this, because it’s an unchangeable fact. They’ll want us destroyed, and even if this elite is dead, it won’t prevent them from sending the army to exterminate us. It may even cause them to strike quicker.

“But,” Shion emphasized, letting the word hang in the dusty air until Yoming stopped glaring daggers at Nezumi and whipped his head around to face him. Released from the man’s murderous glare, Nezumi, too, turned his attention to the boy. For the moment, he was trying to save his life, and therefore his arguments were of greater importance than the gun.

“If No. 6 knows we have him alive,” Shion continued, “that could be the only thing preventing them from killing us immediately.”

Yoming opened his mouth, no doubt to demand an explanation, but Shion raised his voice a fraction to cut him off. Safu looked stricken, but Nezumi was delighted at the violent shade of red the older man turned when he realized he had been talked over.

“You weren’t there when I was securing him, but the officers avoided him entirely. They only fired at me, and one officer even admitted they had orders not to harm him.” Shion shrugged a shoulder. “True, he only has value to No. 6, but if No. 6 comes down here to kill us, then their
respect of that value is the only thing that counts, and it only lasts so long as he lives."

Shion waited for Yoming to refute him, but the man only seethed. Nezumi cocked an eyebrow.

“Safu’s good at what she does,” Shion said. “If you’re willing to give it a little time, I have no doubt she’ll be able to discover what this Elyurias is and why the elite is crucial to No. 6’s plans.”

Safu blinked at Shion’s profile. She had not released his arm from when she had latched onto it.

“In the meantime, he makes a fair shield.”—Nezumi frowned at his word choice—“I don’t think we lose anything if we keep him alive. But it’s your call, Yoming. I won’t fight you if you disagree with my reasoning and decide killing him is the best course of action. You’re the leader and I trust you to do what’s best for the group.”

Yoming narrowed his eyes at the insubordinate teen. His revolver was still cocked, but throughout Shion’s speech he had lowered its aim to the ground between Nezumi’s feet. Shion and Safu patiently awaited Yoming’s decision.

In the interest of his life, Nezumi followed suit, albeit while frowning. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with this group’s choice to allow this obviously psychotic scumbag to occupy the leadership position. Despite the merit in Shion’s argument, Nezumi felt it was just as likely that the man would execute him just to assert the dominance his underling’s fearlessness deprived him of.

“Safu,” Yoming barked.

Safu slipped her hand off Shion’s arm and stood at attention. “Yes, sir?”

The girl did not show any outward signs of being intimidated. Her voice was level when she spoke, and her face was set in a look of undaunted determination. Nezumi had to give her credit for her sublime self-control.

“Are you confident you can uncover the truth behind this,” he sneered, “idiot’s testimony?”

Nezumi took his insult with a wan smile, but only because his question indicated that he had decided not to shoot him in the face.

“I am,” she said with no deficit of confidence.

Yoming pressed his lips into a hard line. “I suppose having a bargaining chip against No. 6 would be beneficial.”

Nezumi released a soundless exhale.

“But keeping him around is going to be a hassle,” Yoming grumbled. “Not to mention a danger to our group’s safety.” He leered at Nezumi. “He can’t be allowed to wander around or the satellites will pick him up… Shion.”

“Yes?”

“Since you’re so intent on keeping him alive, you’re in charge of him.”

Shion blinked. “Me?”

“Yes, you. You know the consequences if you fail, so I’m sure you’ll do a fine job of it. Besides, you have plenty of practice with rats, don’t you? I’m sure adding one more to your nest won’t be a problem.” The corners of Yoming’s mouth curled up in a mirthless smile.
Shion and Nezumi shared a look. The dark-haired boy’s eyes flickered with an array of emotions, most of which were inscrutable to Nezumi. The lighting in the room made it difficult to discern the subtle differences between such sentiments as pity and disappointment.

“I understand,” Shion said at length.

“Fine, then. It’s settled. Safu, I better see results.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s get out of here. This took much longer than it should’ve, and wasn’t worth the time and effort. Safu, go on ahead and tell the men at headquarters to prepare.”

Safu hesitated. Nezumi watched Shion squeeze her hand once. In the dim light, and at the angle Yoming was standing in relation to the two teens, it was unlikely he saw the action. Nezumi only saw it clearly because he was seated and had a lower sightline.

*Definitely more than coworkers.*

Safu exhaled. “Understood. See you later, Shion.” She offered the boy a small smile and walked up the stairs. A bright light illuminated the room when she opened the door to the upper floor. Nezumi caught glimpses of stacks of wooden crates, but the harsh white light stung his eyes. The last thing he noted before the room plunged back into darkness was that the walls of the room were made of concrete. *Not your typical basement. It may have been a shelter of some sort in the past,* he thought fleetingly.

Shion sighed under his breath. He took hold of the rope lead and tugged once to signal Nezumi to get up. Nezumi scowled at his condescension, but rose nonetheless.

“If I’m dismissed?” Shion posited to his superior.

“You may go.”

Shion strode toward the stairs with Nezumi in tow.

“Shion.”

Shion paused and turned to face Yoming.

“If you ever speak so impertinently to me again,” he reset the hammer of the revolver, “I won’t hesitate to make a public example of you.”

Yoming wasn’t looking at Shion, and instead focused his complete attention on shining the muzzle of his gun. Shion waited a moment, just watching him do so.

*These two have some serious alpha male complexes.* Nezumi frowned. *Never thought that this kid had it in him, though. He doesn’t look like much.* Shion’s frame was scrawny under his russet coat, and his face, boyish on its own, was rendered more childlike by his feathery hair. Still, there was something in his eyes. Something in the way they caught the light.

“My apologies,” Shion said respectfully. “I’ll be more careful.”

Shion pulled the rope again, and they mounted the stairs. Nezumi took one last look back and locked eyes with Yoming. They burned like coals beside the lantern flame. The next moment, the light of the open door eclipsed all.
Chapter End Notes

Geez, Yoming. Rude.

Next chapter is all Shion and Nezumi ;P
“Here we are,” Shion announced as he pulled the door open.

There was the sound of a match being struck and the darkness in front of him was bathed in dim light. The room into which Nezumi was led looked like a converted bomb shelter. The walls were sallow concrete, and some places had crumbled away to show the brick behind. The entire right side of the room consisted of floor to ceiling bookcases. Shion lit two other lanterns at the far end of the room and returned to him.

“It’s not much, but it’s away from town, so it’s quiet, and I don’t have to worry about being bothered. I think it’s cozy.”

*What is this kid going on about? Am I a hostage or is he trying to sell me a piece of real estate?*

Shion guided him over to a couch and instructed him to sit down. “I’m going to take a shower. I won’t be long.”

Shion disappeared into the space between two bookshelves. A moment later, he could hear the faint sound of running water.

If he were going to attempt an escape, now would be the time. Nezumi twisted his hands in the bonds, but they were too tight, and the friction only succeeded in causing a burning sensation around his exposed wrists. He groaned. He was beginning to feel like his entire life was a conspiracy to keep him chained like an animal. He shifted in his seat and contemplated just walking out the door. It would be easy, but the issue was what he would do once he was outside. The rope tied around his hands would definitely attract attention, and should he be approached, his incapacitated state would leave him essentially defenseless. It would be better if he could find something to cut or loosen the ropes. He looked around the room for such an item, but there appeared to be none.

The exhaustion of the morning began to weigh on his body. Perhaps he should gather his bearings before attempting heroics. He slumped and leaned his head against the wall. The back of his head fluttered with pain. He maneuvered his hands to probe the spot: bruised, no doubt, from the crash. He rotated his left shoulder. It was still sore, but the pain wasn’t unbearable. It seemed he was lucky. He shifted his other shoulder, his limbs, and neck to test for injuries. Other than an overall sense of fatigue, it didn’t seem like he had incurred any other damages.

He stared at the bookcases across from him. Not only were they floor to ceiling, but they were filled wall to wall as well. He had never seen so many books in his life. There were even boxes of books and scrolls in the corner, and stacks underneath the coffee table in front of him. He wondered if this had been a library at some point, or if Shion had hoarded all the books himself.

He looked around the rest of the room. There was a kerosene heater in the middle of the floor, a piano and chair by the door, and a single bed to his left. The walls were unadorned, with the exception of a small mirror next to the piano and a clock piece above the bed. It appeared to be broken, suspended at nine-o-seven. That was it. Overall, the décor seemed to be aimed toward practicality rather than aesthetics. It didn’t provide much in the way of entertainment.
As promised, Shion didn’t take long in the shower. He was back within the frame of five minutes. He took one look at Nezumi’s withering expression and snorted, before disappearing into the book stacks again. There was a pocketknife in his hand when he returned.

Nezumi wet his lips. “Changed your mind about killing me?”

The boy shook his head. “Stand up. I’m going to cut the rope.”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow, but didn’t move. Shion’s face fell. Nezumi tensed as the teen approached, and remained wary, even as he crouched down beside him.

“Sorry about this, by the way.” He nodded at the rope. “It really is procedure. Hold still.”

Nezumi watched in bewilderment as he sawed at the rope. It took only a moment, and then it slithered from his wrists and fell onto the table in front of him. Shion clipped the knife closed, paused, and then elected to drop it into his pants pocket. Nezumi ran his thumb over the sections where the skin had been rubbed raw.

“You sure it’s okay to cut me loose?” Nezumi asked with a smirk. “Aren’t you afraid I might jump you as soon as your back is turned?”

He was speaking half in jest. His condition wasn’t ideal, and besides, he was still in the process of sizing the teen up to see if he actually presented a threat. It seemed Shion regarded him just as warily. He furrowed his brow in thought. His gaze swept over Nezumi’s figure, and Nezumi twitched. When the boy reestablished eye contact, the sad smile that graced his features communicated something very close to pity.

“Go take your shower,” he said. And then he added insult to injury: he turned his back to him and started to walk away. Nezumi clenched his jaw. He hadn’t intended to act so soon, but if his captor was determined to be such an unmitigated ass, then he deserved to be pummeled right then and there.

Nezumi snatched the severed rope and lunged at Shion, but the downside of joking about attacking someone, moments before you actually follow through, is that your target is prepared. Nezumi had aimed to hook the rope around Shion’s neck from behind and use his weight to pull him down, but Shion anticipated the blitz, and chopped his wrist so hard Nezumi’s hand went numb. With no grip, the rope slipped from his hand. The next thing he knew his right arm was twisted behind his back and he was forced face down on the bed. Nezumi turned his head aside and growled. The pain in his chest reminded him that he had also sustained a bruise to his sternum, courtesy of the Security Bureau.

“You had to know that wouldn’t work.”

Shion shifted above him. Nezumi inhaled sharply and glared at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Let go.”

“That was a good try,” he said conversationally. “You’re a lot quicker than I expected, especially given your injuries.”

Nezumi clutched the edge of the mattress with his free hand and dug his nails into the fabric. The botched attack was humiliating enough, but his captor seemed intent on prolonging his torture.

“Though, in the future, I would recommend only trying to use skills you’ve already mastered. If you bring in a weapon you don’t know how to use, you might as well be handing it to your
opponent.”

He had wound the rope around the length of Nezumi’s pinned arm, and it bit into his flesh as Shion applied pressure. Nezumi winced. His chest ached; he was afraid that the uninjured shoulder Shion was pressing on was going to pop out; and to top it all off, he felt even more murderous than before.

“Get off of me,” he hissed.

The rope went limp and the strain on his shoulder disappeared. Nezumi pushed himself up. He remained hunched over the side of the bed, trying to collect and focus his seething rage. No matter how badly he wanted to, he knew that a second charge would neither be wise nor productive. He had to choke down his loss for now and regroup.

He turned around and discovered that Shion had retreated to the other side of the coffee table. Well, at least he wasn’t being completely underestimated. It wasn’t much of a balm to his wounded ego, but he’d take what he could get.

“You can take your shower now.”

Shion’s voice was level. There wasn’t a trace of superiority in it. It was as if nothing had even happened. Nezumi hated it.

“Don’t worry,” he continued after a beat. “I won’t watch you while you’re in there.” This he said in a lighter tone, although Nezumi couldn’t be sure if he was trying to improve the mood or make fun of his paranoia.

“Hilarious,” Nezumi sneered. He brushed by the table and strode in the direction of the shower.

“I put a set of clean clothes outside the door,” the boy called after him.

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Nezumi internally cursed over and over again while he showered. Half were directed at the boy waiting just outside in the cramped apartment. The other half were aimed at the piece of junk he called a shower. It was old and the controls were absurdly sensitive. It took him a full five minutes just to adjust it to a temperature somewhere between searing and arctic, and even then the spurt was susceptible to sudden and unwelcome bursts of cold water.

He pressed a fist against the chipped tiled wall. He had escaped from underneath the yoke of No. 6, only to find himself in a whole other prison. Now what? The answer was, unfortunately, nothing. There was nothing to be done. Not at least until the opportune moment.

He recalled the incident that had just transpired. How easily he was swatted away and pinned like an insect. He grit his teeth. That had been foolish of him, a real class act. He needed to calm down before he got too worked up and made another stupid mistake.

He hoped the warm water would soothe his injuries, because as it was he felt like crap. He closed his eyes and tilted his face up into the spray. The water running over his lips reminded him that he hadn’t drank—or eaten—anything since the day before. He was suddenly overcome with an intense thirst and near sickening hunger. It occurred to him to open his mouth and drink in the shower water, but the thought was instantly dismissed. Even if the pipes hadn’t been rusted, stories he recalled of the West Block being a poisonous garbage dump were enough to discourage him.

*Maybe showering in this water isn’t such a good idea either.*
As though offended, the shower stopped producing hot water and dumped a torrent of ice water on his head. He gasped and sprang backwards.

“Stupid piece of junk!”

He twisted the knob to try to coax it back to a comfortable temperature, but it refused to expel anything warmer than sixty degrees. He glared daggers at the nozzle. You know what? Fine. This is just as good a cool down as anything. He grit his teeth and stepped under the flow. He fought to regulate his rapid breathing and erratic heart rate, but he commanded himself not to move until he either completely calmed down, or the water ceased to affect him.

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When he emerged from the stacks of books, Nezumi’s face was a mask of neutrality. His hair hung loosely over his shoulders, leaving dark water stains on the plaid shirt Shion had laid out for him. He was cold, but he had it under control. After a few minutes under the stream, his body adapted. He stopped shivering and actually began to feel a little refreshed. It had done the trick.

Shion was perched on the end of the coffee table. There was a kerosene heater in front of him with a kettle boiling on top of it. He sat up when he saw Nezumi.

“Hey, do you want… Are you okay?” He took in Nezumi’s drenched and seemingly demoralized appearance with a measure of concern.

“You have horrible taste in clothing.”

“Better than sewage drenched sweats.”

Nezumi couldn’t argue with that. He toweled off his hair and, having searched and not found a better place, tossed the cloth onto the end of the bed.

“I’m making tea,” Shion said, turning back to the kettle and dropping a sprig of something into it. “Do you want some?”

Nezumi sniffed. He was cold and thirsty, and tired now to top it all off. Tea sounded wonderful. Some last vestiges of his wounded ego wanted him to refuse out of spite, but there was no point in punishing himself for something so petty.

“Sounds fabulous,” he said airily.

The damp sensation on the back of his neck was growing uncomfortable. He pulled the hair tie off his wrist and twisted his hair up into a messy bun. He scanned the small expanse of the room a second time. It was still as simple as he remembered. There was nothing more to it than what could be seen from where he was standing. It was no Chronos—or even a Lost Town apartment, for that matter. But it had everything necessary for a typical house. It was clean and tidy, and with the domestic scene of a pot of tea boiling over the heater, he could imagine that some might even call it quaint.

His attention was drawn to the upright piano by the door. Or maybe it was some type of small organ? There were rows of bars rising up from behind the keyboard. He moved towards it.

“What are you doing?”

Nezumi rolled his eyes. “Relax, I’m not gonna make a run for it.” Not yet, anyway, he thought to himself. “I just want to look at the piano.”
The wood was old and faded, but like everything else in the room, it appeared to be in decent shape. It looked like any other piano, except for the weathered bars that protruded out of it. Maybe it was an organ after all. There was a pattern carved into the center of its backboard, which he reached out to run his fingers over. It didn’t look like it had been played in a while; there was a thin layer of dust on the keys.

“Tea’s ready.” There was a note of agitation in Shion’s voice that drew Nezumi’s curiosity. “Here. Come get it.”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow, but slunk away from the instrument and took the cup from where Shion had placed it down beside himself. Shion poured another cup of tea into a regular glass. Apparently his eating utensils were as sparse as his furniture. Nezumi waited until the other boy took a sip before sampling the liquid. It was bitter, but not in a bad way. It tasted like an herbal medicine.

“Pretty good,” he said without thinking. The other boy smiled at him, which he chose to ignore. He took another sip and sat down on the opposite end of the couch. “Why are you doing this?”

“Hm? Doing what?”

“First you cut me loose, now you’re making me tea. I’m not sure this is what your boss had in mind when he sent me here.”

Shion studied him for a moment. “Are you asking me why I’m treating you like a human being?”

“Yes, I am, because it doesn’t make any logical sense.”

Shion sighed. “Look, this may feel like a prison to you, but it’s my home, and I think it’d benefit us both if we weren’t constantly at each other’s throats. Obviously, friendship is impossible, but I believe a mutual tolerance could be agreed upon.”

“That’s stupid. You realize there’s nothing stopping me from killing you in your sleep, right?”

“You won’t.”

Nezumi raised his eyebrows. “Oh, is that so? Please, enlighten me as to how you arrived at that conclusion.”

“I’m going to tie you up again before I go to sleep.”

Nezumi sneered. Such an answer was not unexpected. However, if this kid thought he was going to passively sit by and be rebound, he was even more idiotic than he seemed.

“How’s your shoulder?”

Nezumi shifted it, but its condition remained the same as when he last checked it. “Worse than I’d like it to be. That was a pretty sloppy kidnapping.”

“Seeing as you’re currently in one piece, drinking tea on my couch, I’d say my ‘kidnapping’ was a success.”

“Managing to pull it off in the end does not excuse its poor execution.”

“In what way was my execution poor?”
“You bombed the car I was in.”

Shion blew on his tea. “I timed it so that the car wouldn’t be close enough to sustain any serious damage. And besides, you were walled in by officers, weren’t you? You were the safest person in that car.”

“You dislocated my shoulder.”

“No,” Shion said slowly. “I fixed your shoulder.”

“It wouldn’t have needed fixing if you hadn’t overturned the car.”

“I’m sorry that the car flipping over was so traumatizing for you—”

“I’m not traumatized.”

“—But I did what I had to do to get you out of there. I wouldn’t expect a sheltered elite like you to understand, but things aren’t easy here in West Block. We went through a lot of trouble to get information on the Security Bureau’s movements, and I did the best I could with the short time I had to plan.” He narrowed his eyes. “You said you don’t know what No. 6 wanted to do with you, but I’ve known enough people that have disappeared into the Correctional Facility to say that whatever they do there isn’t good. If we hadn’t intercepted you, you’d probably be dead right now. Instead of criticizing my methods, you should be thanking me for saving you. I didn’t have to.”

“You know what? You’re right.” Nezumi’s voice filled with an outpouring of gratitude. “Thank you. Thank you so much for rescuing me from certain death, and showing me what real freedom looks like in the West Block. When you dragged me here at gunpoint, tied me up, interrogated me, discussed killing me, and decided to keep me hostage in your home, you were only thinking of my wellbeing. I don’t know how I didn’t see it before.”

“I’m trying very hard to be patient, but I do have my limits.”

Nezumi sniffed and gulped down another mouthful of tea. “So you came up with the plan all by yourself?”

“Yes, I did,” Shion said hotly.

“And was shooting that officer part of the plan?”

“Well, that…” A conflicted expression crossed the teen’s face. He turned away and switched the kerosene heater off. “Well, no. Ideally all the officers would’ve been knocked out in the crash… But things don’t always go according to plan. He got in the way, so he had to be eliminated. It’s unfortunate, but it was necessary.”

“Necessary, huh?”

Nezumi recalled the incident. He had been a little dazed from the explosion and a blow to the head that had caused a brief period of unconsciousness, but he had been more or less aware of his surroundings. They had been fleeing from the wreckage of the crash when a bullet whizzed by. He had looked back to see their pursuer, and the next moment, the Security Bureau official twitched and fell dead. Shion had shot to kill without an ounce of hesitation.

Shion avoided making eye contact and passed his cup of tea from one hand to the other. “What about you?” he said quietly.
“Hm? What about me?”

“You really don’t know anything about the other officer’s death?”

“This again?”

Nezumi brought his mug to his lips to buy him some time on answering. That had been another shock. He could only remember the look of fear on the other teen’s face when the man aged before their eyes and crumpled to the ground like a withered leaf. He hadn’t done anything, but it seemed like too much of a coincidence that he should see it in a dream the day before, only to have to it happen for real before his very eyes. He couldn’t quite understand it, but he had a nagging feeling, like something bigger was at work in No. 6.

“Like I said before, I don’t know anything. It’s as much a mystery to me as it is to you.”

“Is that so?” Shion said in the same soft voice.

He didn’t mention the dreams again, and Nezumi was grateful for it. Being forced to admit it once was embarrassing enough.

Nezumi finished off his tea while the other boy sat and stared at the wall, absorbed in his own thoughts, he assumed. For lack of better things to do, Nezumi tried to count how many books the room housed. He got to fifty-seven before Shion spoke to him again.

“Do you like books?”


Shion passed behind him and climbed over the covers of his bed to lounge against the wall. He nursed his tea from there while Nezumi perused his collection of literature.

“Feel free to take out any book you like.”

Nezumi plucked a random book off the shelf. It was a beige soft cover, well worn around the edges, and the title seemed to be in another language. He read it to himself. Tartuffe: Moliere’s classic comedy. He leafed through the pages. It seemed to be a French play. Hiro’s face rose up in his memory.

“Hey, do you have The Scottish Play?”

“The ‘Scottish Play’?” Shion considered this for a moment, taking a sip from his cup. “I’m not sure,” he mused. “What’s it about?”

“Well…” Nezumi frowned. What had Hiro said about it? “It’s a tragedy about a Scottish king. I’m pretty sure it’s by Shakespeare—”

“Oh!”

“What?”

“Oh, uh, nothing. Go on,” Shion said hurriedly.

It didn’t look like nothing. He was shielding the lower half of his face with his cup, but there was smug amusement sparkling in his eyes. Nezumi glared at him.
“Quit laughing,” he snapped. “It’s not my fault I don’t know the plot. No. 6 doesn’t allow us to read classics.”

“Wait, what?” Shion straightened against the wall. “You’re not allowed to read classics at all in No. 6?”

“Nope. Not one. I imagine they think the content is too inflammatory. Don’t want their citizens getting any ideas of their own, now do they?”

“That’s horrible.”

Nezumi shrugged. “But there are some that still remember the classics from before the city became so totalitarian. An acquaintance of mine, for example, was a really big fan of The Scottish Play, and told me that if I ever somehow got a chance to, I, and I quote, ‘Just need to read it, because it’s the most tragic masterpiece ever to be written, and never to be replicated.’”

Shion was smiling openly. “Your friend speaks like that?”

“I kid you not. So, do you know it?”

“A tragic masterpiece that goes by the name of The Scottish Play, huh?” From the way he was biting his lower lip, it was obvious that the boy was trying to fight a smile from forming. “Hm… I might know what you’re referring to, but I’m not sure.”

The corner of Nezumi’s mouth quirked. You know exactly what I’m talking about, you arrogant bastard. It was hard to imagine that the boy sitting across from him was the same one who had controlled his countenance so well in that basement.

“Do you think you could you recite a line or two?” Shion asked, a little too innocently.

He never wanted to punch someone in the face as much as he did now. Here he was trying to be sociable, and this twerp was laughing at him, all the while putting on an angelic face. Where did he get off acting so self-important, just because he had read a few books?

Nezumi smiled sweetly at Shion and felt a small sense of satisfaction when he was repaid with a look of confusion. He returned Tartuffe to its place on the shelf, straightened his posture, and began in a clear voice,

“She should have died hereafter:
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”

Nezumi poured every ounce of his being into the performance, giving life to a character whose personality he could only guess at, and emotional context to a scene for which he had no reference. He knew the words so well, he let their own inherent music lead him, adding a touch of regret here, an undertone of anger there. The overall tone of the speech, however, was a stony helplessness befitting of what Nezumi imagined was a king who had nothing left to live for.

When he had finished, he fixed the teen with a haughty look. “It goes like that. Ever heard of it?”

All traces of smugness had drained from Shion’s face. His eyes were wide and his lips were slightly parted in an expression of awe. His steaming cup hovered in his hands at chest level. He stared unblinkingly at Nezumi for a number of seconds.

It quickly became uncomfortable. “Hey, snap out if it.” Nezumi waved his hand in the air in front of Shion.

“Oh.” Shion blinked. He stared at Nezumi for another second or two and then he broke into a grin. “Wow…” He tried to cover his mouth with a hand to stop the smile from spreading, but he gave up just as soon as he started. “Wow,” he repeated. “I’m an ass.”

“I agree.”

Shion laughed. The sound was clear and genuine. “I’m sorry, Nezumi, I…” He shook his head. “That was amazing. Where did you learn to act like that?”

It was Nezumi’s turn to be smug. “I didn’t learn it from anywhere. Like I said, No. 6 isn’t a fan of the classics—or anything creative for that matter. I’ve only performed once, and that… wasn’t acting. It was more like improv.”

“You’ve never had any training, and you can still perform like that?”

“I know. I’m very impressive.”

“You are, though. You’re really talented. I’ve never heard anyone recite Shakespeare that well. Your intonation and emotion are flawless. You’ve really never read the play before?”

Nezumi grimaced. The boy’s eyes were shining. He half expected him to start drooling or ask for an autograph.

“You know, I don’t usually have an aversion to compliments, but every time you open your mouth, it pisses me off.” The barb rolled off Shion, and Nezumi’s scowl deepened. “So you do know the play.”

“Oh. Yeah, I know it.” He put his cup down and hopped off the bed. He came to stand beside Nezumi at the bookshelf. Nezumi shifted, taking a deliberate step away.

“That’s Macbeth. Act five, scene five, to be exact…” he carried on as if he hadn’t noticed Nezumi’s displeasure.
He dragged his eyes over the rows and rows of books, and then knelt down to get to the lower shelves. Nezumi stared at the top of the teen’s head and wondered, if he were to push a few of the red bound encyclopedias off the shelf just above where he crouched, what were his chances of escaping successfully before Shion recovered himself? He compared that percentage with his calculation of whether or not such an action would result in a serious head injury, and then tried to gauge how guilty he’d feel should that be the case.

“I know it’s right around… here!” Shion yanked a book off the shelf and held it up for Nezumi to take.

The cover was bland, splashed in mute blotches of color. A fancy cursive script in the center read: Macbeth. He understood then why Shion had laughed. Still, how was he supposed to know that ‘The Scottish Play’ wasn’t its name? Hiro spoke the words with such reverence anyone would have thought it was the title.

The book looked well cared for, and had a nice weight to it. Act five, scene five, huh? He flipped through the book until he found it. The words stood out crisply on the paper, just as he had always imagined. However, now he was holding the play in its entirety, which he had never dreamed would be possible. The passage he had so studiously engraved into his memory was but twelve short lines in a book that spanned many more pages in both directions.

Nezumi was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn’t notice Shion studying his profile with the ghost of a smile on his lips.

“Sorry my compliments annoy you, Nezumi,” Shion spoke at last. “But I really do think you read well. Do you think you could read that passage again for us?”

Nezumi looked up from the page he was reading. “‘Us?’”

Shion pointed to a row of mice perched on the coffee table. There were two brown mice and one black.

“These little guys are my roommates, Tsukiyo, Hamlet, and Biscuit. Hamlet—the dark brown mouse—his favorite is Hamlet, obviously, but he likes all of Shakespeare. Tsukiyo and Biscuit are a little more particular, but they all seemed to have been really impressed by your performance.”

The mice chirruped as though in agreement. Shion bent down and cupped his hands. One by one, the mice jumped into them. They waited patiently as he lifted them to face Nezumi.

“Guys,” he said, “this is Nezumi. He’s going to be living with us for a while.”

The mice chattered. The darkest one crawled to the edge of Shion’s fingers and twitched its nose. Nezumi gazed into its eyes as deep and sleek as marbles. He had scarcely ever seen a mouse before. It was a matter of course that mice would be strangers to an overblown neighborhood like Chronos, but even in Lost Town they were rare. Mice were seen as pests and carriers of disease, so, naturally, they had been cut from the city’s friendly park critters list.

And yet, he supposed here in the West Block mice were commonplace, and apparently there were those who voluntarily lived with them. The black mouse reared back onto its hind legs and batted its whiskers while the other two climbed over each other. So these are my namesakes, Nezumi thought to himself. Not so bad.

“I’m sorry, did you say ‘roommates’?” he said aloud.

“Mm-hm.” Shion set them back down on the coffee table, and leaned down to stroke the dark
brown one’s head with the tip of his finger. “They were born here a year or so ago. I was cleaning out the shelves, and found them nestled in between the books. I was a little shocked to see them there, and to tell the truth, I wasn’t even sure what they were at first. Have you ever seen a newborn mouse? They’re kind of funny looking because they don’t have any fur…” Shion laughed to himself just thinking about it. “Anyway, I found them and raised them. They’re exceptionally smart.”

Nezumi rolled his eyes. “You talk a lot, do you know that?”

Shion looked at him as he made his way to the couch and plopped down. He cracked Macbeth open to the first page and swung his feet up onto the coffee table with a dull thunk. The mice scattered with a raucous squeaking and disappeared into the book stacks.

“What’d you do that for?” Shion cried indignantly.

“What’d I do what for?” he retorted.

Shion pressed his lips into a hard line and stood up. He glowered at Nezumi for a number of seconds, but he soon grew tired of holding a staring contest with the backside of a book. He huffed, and Nezumi could’ve sworn he heard him mutter “jerk” under his breath before he gave up to return to drinking tea in bed. Nezumi smirked and began reading.

They sat in silence for a while, the only sounds between them being the soft shick of shifting pages and the intermittent sound of tea being sipped. Both carried on as if the other wasn’t there. After about an hour, Shion got up to grab a book off the shelf. He pulled out several of varying shades, sizes, and length before deciding on a stark white book. He slid down to the floor in front of the bookcase and began reading. Another hour passed in this way.

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At some point, there was a knock on the door. Two heads snapped up from their books. Shion put his novel down and got to his feet.

When he opened the door, Nezumi saw the girl from earlier that morning standing there. From where he sat, she was half-shaded in the doorway, but he could tell that she was clutching something tightly to her chest. Her face brightened when she saw the boy at the door.

“Hey, Shion. How’s the babysitting going?”

“It’s going well enough.”

Safu peered in at Nezumi. “Why isn’t he tied up? And his feet are on your coffee table!” She turned incredulous. “Shion, what are you doing? Don’t you know anything about keeping prisoners?”

“Safu, it’s fine, calm down. I just didn’t see any point in keeping him tied up. He won’t cause any trouble.”

“How can you be sure of that? We’re holding him hostage. That doesn’t exactly breed friendly feelings.” She lowered her voice, but Nezumi could still hear her hiss, “What if he tries to attack you?”

“Eh… I don’t think that’ll be a problem….” Shion laughed awkwardly and eyed Nezumi.

Safu exhaled noisily through her nose. “Here. I brought you dinner.” She handed the bag she
was clutching to Shion.


Safu pursed her lips. “Yeah, well…” She caught Nezumi smiling wryly at her and leered. “What’re you smirking at?”

“Nothing.” He looked down at his book and pretended to start reading again. Safu made a disgusted sound.

“It’s fine, Safu,” Shion insisted a second time. “I’ve got this under control.”


Shion nodded. “Really, thank you so much for the food.” He closed the door behind her and sighed.

“Bit protective, isn’t she? Your girlfriend.”

“Huh? Oh, Safu? She means well.” He paused, and looked as though he wanted to say something, but couldn’t decide if he should. “She’s not my girlfriend,” he said at last.

Nezumi chuckled at the cliché. “Did you tell her that?”

The boy cleared his throat and ignored the comment. Nezumi dropped his boots to the ground to clear the table. Shion placed the bag down and began pulling out its contents. He clunked a sad-looking loaf of bread and a bag of crackers on the table. Shion seemed to be anticipating some kind of snide remark, because he immediately jumped in to defend the food.

“Now, I know it’s not a caviar or anything like what you’re used to in No. 6,”—Nezumi did a double take—“but this is what we have. You’ll get used to it.”

“What did you just say?”

“What?”

“Repeat what you just said.”

Shion tilted his head. “You’ll get used to it?”

“No, no, before that. What do you think I used to eat in No. 6?”

Shion’s expression clouded. He seemed to sense that he had said something strange. If Nezumi had been feeling merciful, he would have taken pity on the boy’s self-consciousness and dropped the matter. However, he was a captive with no outlet save for the mockery and exploitation of the faults of his persecutors.

“You didn’t say anything wrong,” Nezumi said in a soothing voice. “I just didn’t quite hear you. Please, could you just repeat what you said?”

“I said…” He squirmed a little under Nezumi’s steady gaze. “I know it’s not caviar…” His voice dropped off and he looked down at the food he had laid out on the table.

Nezumi smiled. He hadn’t made a mistake this time, but the fact that he corrected himself just proved that he had no idea what he was talking about.
“That’s what I thought you said. Might I ask you one more question?” Shion glanced up at Nezumi from beneath the fringe of his bangs. “Do you even know what caviar is?”

“Yeah. It’s…” He looked embarrassed and confused for a moment, and then his eyes lit up. “Fish.” He smirked. “It’s fish.”

Nezumi furrowed his brow as if he was disappointed that he knew the answer. “Okay, very good. But do you know what kind?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it matters a lot. Not every fish is considered *a caviar.*” He pronounced “a caviar” in the most self-important tone he could concoct.

Shion frowned. He dragged the chair in front of the organ over to the table and sat. Nezumi raised an expectant eyebrow.

Shion scowled and made a show of shrugging. “I don’t know, okay?”

“That’s what I thought.” Nezumi leaned back and crossed his legs. “Do you want me to tell you?” he drawled, letting each individual word dangle in the air.

Shion narrowed his eyes. “You have a horrible personality, do you know that?”

The corner of Nezumi’s mouth quirked. Despite his bristling, he could tell that Shion wanted to know. Or more like had to know, now that they had drawn out the conversation so far. All he had to do was wait.

The boy clicked his tongue. “What is it?”

*Heh. This is fair recompense for your cockiness earlier.* What was a caviar, indeed?

“Caviar is shark meat,” Nezumi stated. He paused a moment to let his words sink in, and then added, “But you can’t call any shark meat caviar. It has to be a shark that you catch with your bare hands.”

Shion screwed up his face. “What?”

“It’s the truth.”

“I don’t believe you. No. 6 isn’t even close to the ocean. How is anyone going to catch a shark, let alone with their bare hands?”

*Not as gullible as you look, huh? That’s fine, though. I would’ve been disappointed if you were.*

Nezumi nodded sagely. “You’re absolutely right about that. And that’s precisely why it’s considered a delicacy. Only the most high-class citizens have access to it. It’s so expensive to have it delivered that no one but the privileged elite in Chronos can afford to eat it.”

The suspicion on Shion’s face had given way to uncertainty. “You’re serious?”

“I swear on the health of my grandmother.”

Shion stuffed a piece of bread in his mouth and frowned. It made loud, unpleasant crunching noises. Nezumi made a mental note to be careful when he ate it. Shion was quiet for so long, that Nezumi, too, began to eat. He tried the crackers first, but they were stale and tasted like couch
stuffing. He ripped off a section of the bread and picked at it to remove the parts with the largest colonies of mold.

Nezumi was halfway through his piece of eviscerated bread when Shion sighed. The sound was weighed down with such a profound sense of sadness that it secured Nezumi’s full attention. Shion’s face was a caricature of torture. His eyes were dark and glazed, and his mouth was set into the most childish pout Nezumi had ever seen.

“Well, I guess I’ll never get to try a caviar…” he muttered. He crammed another portion of bread into his mouth and chewed sullenly.

Shion’s words took a moment to process, but when they registered, Nezumi was powerless against them. That expression, the mention of “a caviar” again—it was too much. Nezumi burst into a fit of hysterical laughter. He collapsed onto the couch, grasping his sides.

“What? What?! What’s so funny?” Shion demanded.

“You! The look on your face!” Nezumi choked. “It’s so—priceless!”

“Shut up!” Shion stuttered. “It’s not funny. Stop laughing!”

Shion’s violent embarrassment only succeeded in making him laugh harder. It was getting hard to breathe and his sides were aching with the effort. His chest felt like it was being ripped open; his bruised sternum did not appreciate the overexertion of his diaphragm. He gasped, tears filling his eyes, but he couldn’t be sure if they were a result of laughter or pain at this point. Injury eventually won over hilarity, and the last of his fit was punctuated by coughing.

He lay staring up at the ceiling as he caught his breath. “That was too funny.” He wiped at his eyes. “Look, look at this. I’m actually crying.” He began chuckling again, but quickly reined in his mirth.

“I still don’t understand what was so funny…” Shion grumbled. His face was a deep shade of red.

“Heh. Don’t worry about it.”

The ceiling began to blur and Nezumi closed his eyes to stop it from whirling. Shion said something, but he felt too heavy to try and make sense of his words. Something landed on top of him. His eyes slid open against his will. A coal-colored cloth lay in a bunched heap on his chest.

“I don’t have a spare blanket, so use that.”

Nezumi grabbed a handful and rubbed it between his fingers. It was a tough material, but very light.

“Superfibre?”

He cast a questioning look at Shion. Superfibre was top tier material. All the Security Bureau officers’ uniforms were made of it. The fabric was ten times as durable as steel, and so served as a reliable bulletproof vest, and yet it was breathable and nearly weightless.

The boy shrugged. “We have sources.”

Nezumi smoothed it out. The piece he had been given was designed to be a shawl, so he couldn’t use it as a full blanket, but it’d do fine as a covering for his torso. He draped it over his
arms and positioned himself more comfortably on the couch.

“You don’t do too bad for yourselves. Thanks.”

“So you are capable of courtesy.”

Nezumi heard the comment, but the prospect of sleep was more alluring than carrying on the conversation. He closed his eyes again and was insensible in seconds.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's wondering why I replaced Cravat's name with Biscuit, it's because I figured that Shion wouldn't have seen many cravats in West Block, if any. Biscuits, though, he would see and eat on the daily.
Give An Inch

Chapter Notes

~The plot thickens~

(Nezumi angry curses a lot in this chapter. For some reason I really felt like I should warn people.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The man glared down at the report on his desk. One destroyed cruiser; one decimated transport vehicle; damages to a security gate and the Waste Disposal Facility’s entrance; two hospitalizations and two casualties. All because of one sample, which had been stolen from their grasp in the midst of the chaos. He lifted his cup of coffee to his lips and took a heavy gulp to combat his oncoming migraine. He knew creating utopia wasn’t an easy pursuit, but it was costing more than projected.

The lamp on the wall began to flash, signaling he had a direct call from the Correctional Facility. He answered it. A spectacled man in a loose white lab coat appeared on-screen.

“I was just about to call you.”

“You lost the sample!” the lab-coated man rasped.

The man blinked. He had not expected such an emotional outburst. Through the decades they had spent together, he had seen the man get animated only a handful of times.

“It was beyond my control. Of all the things that could have gone wrong, an attack by armed radicals was the last thing I expected.” The man scowled, glancing down at the report. “I thought we crushed all traces of resistance in the last Clean-up, but it appears some didn’t quite get the message.”

“Why did they take my sample anyway? What good is it to them?”

“I couldn’t say. Psychological warfare, perhaps?”

“The timing was too obvious to be a coincidence. There must be a leak in your network.”

“I’ll look into it, but whatever the reason, two officers are dead and two more were hospitalized. Do you have any idea how much of a headache it’s going to be to make up something to tell their families? And, by the way, one of the officers that died was a sample, but the data you gave me didn’t list him as a chosen candidate. Care to explain what you were doing?”

“That wasn’t my design. There must have been an error somewhere along the way. I’ll check… But apart from that, I’ve had several successful resonances. I just need the last piece. That’s why I needed that sample transferred immediately.”

The man on-screen began to pace. It had always been a bad habit of his. The lab coat swished back and forth in front of the camera.
“That boy was a prime sample. His breeding made him an ideal candidate for a successful resonance, and the tests show he was responding well to the treatment. If only I could spend some time with him in the labs, I would have all the data I need. He was the one; I could feel it. I need you to get him back for me.”

All these years and he still only ever thinks of himself and his experiments. If his ingenuity weren’t so instrumental to the success of No. 6’s City Project, I would’ve dropped him decades ago. The man sighed at the lab coat.

“If you need a sample that badly, I can arrange to have another sent over.”

“No, Fennec, you don’t understand! He was ideal. Every aspect of his upbringing has been monitored to fit this program. There are no others nearly as compatible.”

The man’s ears twitched at the nickname “Fennec.” It had been given to him when he was a much younger man, and he never liked it. He didn’t even understand it; he looked nothing like the desert fox from which the name was derived. But he hadn’t been called that in a while. The fact that the other man had used it was proof of his agitation.

He folded his hands on the desk in front of him. “What would you have me do?”

“I don’t care what you have to do. Get him back. Make the Clean-up earlier.”

“Move it up? You can’t be serious. I’m not going to send the army into the West Block to retrieve one lost sample when you can just get another quietly inside the city. Besides, didn’t you see the report? The radicals are obviously getting dangerous supplies from somewhere; we can’t just charge in as we did before. If we send the army, a conflict might break out and people will die, and if that happens word of what we’re doing might get out. No. I will not mobilize the army. Forget it.”

The lab coat froze in the center of the monitor.

“At least let me use the satellites to track him.”

Stubborn old fool. Why can’t you just let it go?

But then a thought occurred to him.

The group that attacked them was getting supplies from somewhere. Could another city have violated the treaty as well…? I should’ve paid more attention.

“If you can find him, then by all means,” he sighed. “We should keep an eye on that group anyway, to see who their supplier is. But if the radicals have him, he may already be dead. They have no use for him, and they aren’t known for their hospitality.” The other man didn’t respond. “But promise me this isn’t going to interfere with your work. We’ve worked too hard to lose sight now.”

I’ve worked too hard.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten. As soon as my experiments come to fruition, you will become the undisputed ruler of this land.”

The man smiled at the image. “I look forward to it. Do you want me to send the sample from this morning to the Special Autopsies Room? Section V, was it?”

“No. The trial phase is over. I only require living samples now. I’ll give you the list.”

“Fine. Rashi will be discharged later this afternoon. I’ll send him over with the samples by this
evening.”

“Fine.”

The connection cut out. *The undisputed ruler, huh? Leave it to him to come up with just the right phrase.*

The man sat back in his chair and sipped his coffee. It was still as hot as when he had filled it more than an hour ago, due to an adjustment mechanism built into the cup. During his uninterrupted term as mayor, No. 6 had grown from a small town to a prosperous entity in which people were free to create such products. He was the sole reason the city came to be known as the safest and most magnificent of the six city-states and earned the title of the Holy City. No. 6 was near utopia. He and his people wanted for nothing; they lived happy and leisurely lives. It was only natural that he should lend his guidance and good fortune to the rest of the world.

Outside the window the trees in the Forest Park were shedding the last of their leaves. Winter would soon be upon them. The man smiled. He hoped that the season wasn’t the only change approaching.

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When Nezumi awoke, one of his legs was asleep and his neck was sore. He reached up to rub his shoulder and paused.

His hands were unbound.

He pushed himself into a sitting position and his body groaned with the effort. The aches in his shoulder and chest were testaments to just how many times he had avoided death the previous morning. It had been one trial after another, and not a single moment of it made sense. Perhaps he should be thankful that he didn’t have answers, since the only thing keeping him alive right now was the mystery surrounding his importance to No. 6. Well, that, and Shion’s suspicion about his ability to rapidly age people and hatch wasps from their corpses.

He had thought the fire and brimstone dream from the other night had been a product of stress, but now it seemed like a premonition. The silhouette of the old man dying in his arms and the wasp bursting out of the Bureau officer’s neck merged with each other. He didn’t dare call it prophetic, but it was too much of a coincidence to ignore. Still, he couldn’t figure out how or why he was connected to such an unbelievable incident. The voice said something had started and that She would give him power; but whatever force had caused the death of that officer, he certainly wasn’t controlling it.

*If I really am going to get some kind of power, I wish She’d deliver it already, because right now I’m feeling pretty damn powerless. I’ve gone from pet of No. 6 to prisoner of a nameless terrorist faction. Hardly an improvement. Although, at least I’m more or less alone now.*

He could hear soft breathing from the bed beside him. *I’m no longer being watched. I’m still a hostage, but right now he’s asleep. And my hands are fucking unbound.*

He frowned at the patch of darkness where the bed was located.

*How can this airhead who fawns over Shakespeare and mice be the same person who mercilessly gunned down a Bureau officer? Where’s the shrewdness he displayed when manipulating his superior into sparing my life? I would’ve thought a kid from the West Block would be more intimidating, or at least more wary, but this guy… He’s an idiot.*
Nezumi wrapped the superfibre cloth around his neck and stood up. He thanked his captor for his tidiness and the room’s overall sparseness, because it made reaching the door that much easier. He ran his hands over the surface. A single bolt. If silence weren’t so vital, he would’ve whistled. It was too easy. He slid the bar by degrees to minimize the sound, but even with his care, it made a woody scraping noise.

He paused to listen for stirring behind him, then, with a twist of the knob and a muted click, the door was ajar. He opened it only enough to slip through, and then closed the door behind him.

And just like that, he was outside and unchaperoned for the first time in twelve years. He celebrated with a sigh and scaled the stairs to the surface. Dawn was creeping into the sky, giving it a musty tint. The desolate, ruin-dotted expanse around him offered no clues as to which direction to go. He never doubted he would escape No. 6, but now that he had actually done it, he realized maybe he should have given a little more thought to where he would go. Anywhere that wasn’t near No. 6 had always sufficed in the past.

He took the path that led in the opposite direction of the city. He had no supplies and no specific destination, but for the moment that didn’t seem to matter.

The world outside the West Block could very well be a nuclear wasteland, and yet I’d rather chance that than stay where I can see No. 6.

Nezumi smirked. The uncertainty of his destination may be cause for worry in the future, but at present he was enjoying the soft crunch of untrodden dirt beneath his boots. The sun had finally reached a height where it bathed everything in a red-orange glow. He looked back, squinting into the glare, but it didn’t seem anyone was behind him. He couldn’t see or remember which sad-looking blob was the entrance to Shion’s underground bunker. The fortress walls of No. 6 sparkled white and perfect in the distance. The ragged outline of the West Block etched itself into the bottom of the wall, like faulty stitching on the hem of a wedding veil.

From this distance, the scene seemed like a mirage, and he hoped it would disappear just as quickly. He hooded the superfibre over his head and picked up his pace. He walked a few yards more when he came upon a swathe of rubble. The ruins of a sizeable building, it seemed. Parts of the structure were still standing, but it looked on the brink of collapse. He could cut through or go around it. He took a second’s pause to consider. It was unlikely that going through it would prove any real threat.

That is far enough.

Nezumi froze. His eyes roved over the ruins, but it was obvious he was alone. He swallowed.

That voice. It can’t… I’m not asleep.

You are awake.

He broke into a cold sweat. There was no doubt. He was awake, and She was right there.

This isn’t happening. How can I…? How are you…?

It is starting, Singer. I am growing stronger. It will not be long before No. 6’s destruction becomes reality.

He squeezed his eyes shut. I’m hearing things. I really did get brain damage yesterday and now I’m hallucinating. Take a deep breath and ignore it. He took his own advice and walked into the decimated building.
A sharp pain jolted through his body. He stumbled, but caught himself on a slab of concrete jutting out of the dirt. He leaned against it, trying to quell the nausea that washed over him.

You must stay.

“What?” he croaked aloud. He could feel his heart pounding in his head, and it hurt more and more with every beat.

We must destroy No. 6. Is that not what you desire?

Desire? What are you talking about? I wanted to get out of No. 6, but I’ve done that. Now I’m leaving.

His breathing had become labored. A bead of sweat trickled down his spine.

What’s happening to me?

If you remain here I will give you the power to destroy No. 6.

I don’t want that power. I just want to leave.

He was beginning to sound pitiful in his own mind. He struggled to stand up straight, but it felt like his body was leaden. It was just like in his dream. Her presence bore down on him so heavily he could barely summon the will to think.

You do not want it.

The words were an emotionless question. Nezumi poured all his will into fighting his dizzying migraine.

You can do whatever you want to No. 6. I have no attachment to that place. It has nothing to do with me anymore.

You are a stubborn child. You know nothing. But you will be made to understand in time.

Nezumi’s ears were ringing. No. Not ringing—humming.

No! He clamped his hands over his ears, but it didn’t block the sound. It even seemed to magnify it. Stop! What are you—?

The sound of insects was deafening. They filled his head until he swore he could feel them crawling under his skin. His vision went spotty. He knew these symptoms. He didn’t have long. He slid down the concrete slab onto his hands and knees.

What are you?

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Something slammed into his stomach. Nezumi awoke with a gasp and coughed into the superfibre cloth around his neck.

“Get up,” a voice hissed.

He squinted up into the lazy yellow glow. It seemed that not too much time had elapsed between his slipping into unconsciousness and being kicked awake. The figure was close enough to recognize even from his position on the ground and through the brightness. It was the girl that
had helped kidnap him and came to deliver dinner last night. Safu.

She drew her leg back and Nezumi realized she was going to kick him again. He bolted into a sitting position, and remained there without getting fully to his feet on account of vertigo.

“You’re pathetic,” she spat, dropping her foot back to the ground. “Passing out like a goddamn princess. Unbelievable.”

Nezumi grit his teeth and stood up. She was right. The fact that he had fainted was humiliating—for more than one reason. He had been so close to freedom, only to realize he wasn’t free, and had never been. There was nowhere to go. There wasn’t even safety in retreating within himself. For whatever screwed up reason he now had to contend with an enemy that could infiltrate his mind. These people from the West Block, the voice, and No. 6, they were all the same. No matter where he turned, someone wanted something from him, and he didn’t know what and not a single one of them would give him an answer.

“Shion stuck his neck out for you, and this is how you repay him? Do you have any idea how much trouble—”

“I don’t give a shit! I don’t owe him anything! I don’t owe any of you anything!”

The girl narrowed her eyes. She was several inches shorter than him, but she didn’t look the least bit intimidated by this fact. She leered directly at him.

“I’m taking you back to Shion.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

She shifted, and there was something in her movement that compelled him to react. He snatched her wrist as she brought it up. There was a click and a flash of light. She was holding an open pocketknife in the hand he had just grabbed. A second later and he would have sliced his hand wide open. Nezumi tightened his grip and pushed down to ensure that her hand would go no higher.

Safu growled and he was suddenly aware of her other fist flying at his face. He raised his free hand just in time to prevent a direct hit, but the impact crushed his own wrist against his cheek. He bit back the pain and twisted his tingling hand around to grasp her forearm. She jerked her arm back, but he managed to wrap his fingers around it. He exerted pressure and maintained her hands at chest level, although not without difficulty. Safu was skilled, but he had height and strength to his advantage.

She refused to give up, though. Nezumi jolted backward when Safu’s foot connected with the bottom of his shin. If it weren’t for the slab of concrete behind him, he might’ve been thrown off balance and overpowered, but his back slammed into the wall and kept him upright. He dug his fingers harder into her wrist and arm, half as a defense mechanism, and half as an outlet for his pain.

“Do not kick me again or I’ll break your wrist,” Nezumi breathed.

“You don’t have the skill.”

“Try it, and we’ll see.”

Safu hissed. The girl’s expression was one of unadulterated rage. She wriggled, but his grip was firm.
“Let go.”

“If you ask nicely, I’ll think about it.”

“…If you let go, I promise I won’t stab you.”

“I don’t.”

“Tch.”

She stopped twisting her wrists. She still pushed back against him, but she had apparently decided that attempting to wrench her hands away wasn’t going to work. Nezumi could practically see the wheels in her head turning behind her fierce gaze. The sight caused him to smirk and her to glower in return.

_Grrrr._

They turned their heads. A large brown dog was crouched on the outskirts of the ruins. The hackles on its neck were raised, and its lips were pulled back over its teeth in a vicious snarl. It stalked a few steps closer. Nezumi could see a strand of spit swaying from its jowls.

_GRrrrr.

“We need to stop this.” Nezumi glanced at Safu, who kept her gaze on the dog circling them. “You wandered into wild dog territory. If that dog’s here, there’s a high chance there are other dogs lurking nearby. And even if that’s the only one, there is a decent chance it has rabies. If you don’t want to die, you need to let go of my hand so I can defend myself.”

Something about her words and bearing made Nezumi suspicious, but the dog was getting closer and growling louder.

“Lower your knife and I’ll let go,” he said shortly.

She relaxed her hand and Nezumi followed suit by dropping her wrist. Once her forearm slipped from his grasp, she sprang away from him.

“Hey! You—!”

He froze. The dog was only a few feet away, and there was nowhere to run if it launched itself at him. The concrete that had benefitted him against Safu cornered him this time around.

“Heel!”

Nezumi looked up. Shion was running toward him. He drew to a stop in front of the ruined building and they locked eyes for a moment. The other boy’s expression was hard, but he seemed more concerned with the snarling mutt.

“Heel!” he repeated more sternly at the dog’s back.

The dog’s ears twitched. It twisted around and directed a low growl at the teen.

“Down, girl.”

Shion extended a hand and took a step toward it. The dog raised its tail and approached him. It
rumbled once softly, but seeing that it didn’t have an effect, it sniffed Shion’s outstretched hand once, and then gave it a lick. Shion relaxed.

“Good girl.” He patted the dog’s head and it wagged its tail in return.

*Of course. Of course the dog is his.* Nezumi banged his fist against the concrete.

“Escape attempt’s over.”

Safu appeared in his peripheral vision. She was holding the knife in front of her, ready in case he tried to resist.

He growled. *Perfect.*

Shion’s glare was smoldering. “I had considered you might try to run away, but I didn’t think you’d actually be stupid enough to do it.”

“What the fuck did you think I was gonna do? Sit around drinking tea and reading Shakespeare all day?”

“There’s nowhere to go! There’s nothing but dirt and feral dogs out there. You’d die before you reached anything. You don’t even have supplies on you.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“I understand you’re frustrated, but—”

“You don’t understand shit! You don’t know a fucking thing about me! And don’t pretend like you give a damn about me or my safety. You’re just worried about yourself and what your psycho boss will do if I escaped.”

“Shut up,” Safu growled. The knife glistened as she took a step forward.

“Safu, stop. There’s no need for that.”

“He’s disrespectful!”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle. Besides, we all know there’s truth in what he’s saying.” Shion fixed his gaze on Nezumi once more. “You’re right; I’d be in a really bad position if you escaped. I can’t deny that that is the main reason why I’d prefer you don’t run away.” Nezumi gritted his teeth. “However, don’t misunderstand. I do give a damn about your safety, because I worked hard to prevent your death—twice. It might be selfish, but that kind of effort comes with a sense of responsibility.”

“So, what? You think I should be grateful to you? That I owe you some kind of debt? Fuck you. You can take your sense of responsibility and shove it up your self-righteous ass.”

He could feel the girl radiating hatred beside him, but she stood rigid. *Almost wish she’d attack me again. At least then I could do something. But it looks like she won’t act without that guy’s permission.*

Shion was frowning deeply at him, but his glare had lost some of its intensity. Either his thinly veiled anger had dissipated, or he had regained enough control to mask it. The boy sighed.

“Look, I know you’re pissed, but can we continue this back in my house? The longer we stay out here, the more dangerous it is. No. 6 probably has satellites looking for you.”
Given how “important” he was to the city, there were definitely satellites combing the West Block in search of him. Nezumi had already come to this conclusion, but he had figured he could make it into the wilderness far outside No. 6’s influence before they could mobilize and reclaim him. That had been the plan. But that had been foolish of him. What gave him the right to make decisions for himself when so many other people needed him, and obviously knew far better than he what he should and shouldn’t be doing at any given time?

Nezumi squeezed his fists tightly to prevent himself from trembling. He couldn’t even leave if he wanted to. He was outnumbered and outmatched, inside and out.

“Move,” prompted the girl beside him. “We’ve wasted enough time.”

Nezumi moved. It was a whole body effort, but frustration was a good motivator. Shion sidestepped out of the way when he neared. He walked alongside him, but there were a few feet and a dog between them. The girl continued to brandish her weapon behind him.

Nezumi glared down at the mutt ambling beside him. It was scrawny and its coat was missing patches of fur in some places. It looked like a miserable creature, certainly, but nothing like the feral beast it had seemed moments ago.

*What a cheap trick.*

“She’s not mine,” Shion said suddenly. He must’ve seen him appraising the dog, but he stared straight ahead as he spoke. “She really is wild.”

“That one has its good days,” piped the girl. “But I wasn’t joking about the feral dogs. They exist, and in large numbers. If you pull another of your fainting spells you could very well be eaten.”

Nezumi refused to dignify her remark with a reaction. *I don’t think I’ve ever met someone so annoying.*

“You fainted?”

He could sense Shion assessing him with a vague aspect of concern.

*I stand corrected.*

He frowned. *At that time… I didn’t faint. It’s more like I was made to faint… So if I try to leave, that will happen? Why does She care?* Nezumi screwed his eyes shut. *What do you want?*

She didn’t answer. He didn’t expect She would, and a large part of him was glad for the silence and hoped She would never speak to him again. He suppressed a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose.

The walk to the ruined warehouse that marked the entrance to Shion’s underground room felt longer than expected. Perhaps his slow pace was the legitimate reason for this, but it was satisfying to think that he had managed to walk a decent distance away before he was caught.

*How did they find me, anyway?*

Shion stopped at the top of the stairs and looked up at the sky. He muttered something too quiet to hear and then called to Safu. “You should go on ahead. I can take it from here.”

The girl’s eyes flitted between her partner and Nezumi. “Your track record doesn’t inspire
“Yes, I realize I was foolish. I’m reflecting on it as we speak, but I’ll take better care this time. Promise.”

Nezumi didn’t like the sound of his words. *I swear if he even tries to tie me up again...*

The girl did not look at all convinced. She had her arms crossed, the knife-wielding hand placed on top with the blade pointing toward Nezumi. The posture was half threatening, half careless, and wholly obnoxious.

“Safu, you need to go. You’ll get in trouble if you’re late, and then Yoming will be mad at the both of us, so please, go ahead of me and try to stall if I’m not there in twenty minutes.”

The girl straightened at the mention of their boss. “Well…” She pursed her lips and glowered at Nezumi. “Do you want to borrow my knife, just in case?”

The boy coughed a laugh. “No. You know how I am with those things. It’s way more useful in your hands.” Safu continued to waver and Shion took a step forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Thank you for your help this morning. I really appreciate it. I know I’m asking a lot of you, but I need you to help me out a little longer by going ahead and covering for me if need be. Please.”

“…Fine.”

“Thank you. I’ll be right behind you.” He glanced down at the dog and petted its head. “Thank you, too. If you escort Safu downtown, I’ll treat you to something later.” The mutt’s tail flopped from side to side.

*Ugh. Kill me now.* Nezumi turned away with a look of disgust. *There should be a limit to how much saccharine dialogue captors can exchange in front of their hostage.*

“You,” the girl accused. “Pull another stunt like the one today, and I’ll make it so you’ll never be able to run again.”

Nezumi smiled wryly. “Not as colorful as your boss’s threats, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

She scowled at him for a good three seconds, offered a “Be careful” to her partner, and flounced away. The dog followed at a half-hearted trot. Shion turned and locked eyes with Nezumi. The other boy’s expression was serious, although not altogether angry. He then sighed.

“Come on.” He pressed a section of the building’s wall, revealing the stairs beyond, and went down them himself. Nezumi narrowed his eyes.

*Turning your back on me again. You really don’t take me seriously, do you?*

Just because he had overpowered him, this kid expected him to roll over and obey his every command? Nezumi could feel the anger simmering in his veins. Shion had stopped halfway down and was peering up at him. His body language read, ‘don’t tell me you’re going to try and run again?’ Nezumi clenched his fists and trudged down the steps.

Everything looked the same as when he’d left it, and yet the room seemed even smaller than he remembered. The door closed with a heavy *thunk* behind him, and Nezumi felt a familiar wriggling sensation in the pit of his stomach. It radiated through his limbs and made the air around him difficult to breathe. He squeezed his eyes shut and drew in slow breaths through his nose. In, out.
It’s not like he wasn’t used to this.

“Are you feeling alright?”

He tried to block out the nigglng voice. He would have himself under control in a few moments. If he could just have a little time—

“Do you feel faint again? You should sit down if you’re not feeling well.”

“Shut up!” He whirled around on the other boy, seizing him by the bandana around his neck and slamming him against the door. “Why can’t you just shut up and leave me alone for one second! Your voice is infuriating!”

“You could’ve just asked,” Shion said tightly. “There was no need for violence.”

He grasped Nezumi’s hands and pried them a few millimeters away from his throat. Nezumi pulled his elbows in and brought the collar of the coat up so that the boy had no choice but to tilt his head back to look him in the eye.

“Don’t patronize me. I am so sick of everyone looking over my shoulder and telling me what to do.”

“I’m not telling you what to do.” A grimace flitted across his features as Nezumi’s grip tightened.

“Like hell you’re not. You’re keeping me here against my will, and for what? So I can be a ‘shield’ for you and all your trigger-happy buddies. You feign innocence, but you’re trying to control me just the same.” He sneered. “You’re just like No. 6.”

“Don’t compare me to No. 6,” the other boy bit out. His face had finally shed its cool composure, and Nezumi could see the annoyance filtering into his features. His dark, almost purplish eyes were bright with indignation.

Nezumi’s mouth twisted into an acerbic smile. “You are the same. Everything is just a means to an end, isn’t it? You don’t give a damn about who you trample on the way.”

All at once, Shion’s tightly pressed lips sagged into a frown, and his peeved expression dissipated. His eyes darted back and forth between Nezumi’s in a manner as puzzling as it was irritating.

At last, he swallowed, glanced down at Nezumi’s hands fist ed in his coat, and said quietly, “I didn’t realize you felt so suffocated.”

Nezumi blinked. There was pity in his look and tone. He was being pitied.

“Stop that,” he snarled.

He had begun to tremble from anger, and Shion tightened his grip on Nezumi’s hands as a precautionary measure. Shion’s face had undergone a third change, and he was now watching him with a look of steady determination.

“You should’ve just said something.”

“Said something?” Nezumi echoed with deadly calm. “Oh. I see. So you’re saying if only I had asked nicely, you would have gladly granted me my freedom? It was that simple, was it?”
“…No, I can’t let you go,” the other boy admitted sheepishly. Before Nezumi could react, he continued in a quick, earnest voice, “But if this situation really upsets you so much, we could make a compromise.”

“Oh, yeah, by all means, let’s compromise on my rights. I don’t think they’ve been compromised enough.”

“What? That’s not what I— I meant we can make a deal.”

“I’m not interested in making any concessions to you.”

“You’re not listening to me. I’m saying—”

“I don’t care what you’re saying; it’s all bullshit—”

“Will you just shut up and listen!” Shion shouted. He seemed to have forgotten his opposition towards violence, because he clutched the superfibre cloth around Nezumi’s neck and yanked it to emphasize his words. “I’m saying I’ll leave! If it gets to be too much, tell me, and I’ll leave the room!”

Nezumi stiffened at the outburst. His mind struggled to make sense of the words, but it could not come up with any interpretations he could believe.

“What?”

The other boy huffed. “Provided that you promise not to run away again, I’ll agree to leave the room sometimes, to give you privacy. In fact, as soon as you let me go,” he said pointedly, “I’ll leave you alone.”

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“I’m completely serious. I do actually have a job, you know. One that I really need to go to now, and that I really can’t be late to, especially considering…” He frowned and then sighed, releasing his hold on Nezumi as well as the tail end of that sentence. “I can’t watch you all day, and I think we can both agree that tying you up again is not the solution, so I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Nezumi was having a hard time settling on a reaction to the torrent of words flooding from the dark-haired teen’s mouth, although the emotion that seemed to surface most frequently was suspicion. The implausibility of the situation was enough to quell his anger however, and he relinquished his hold on Shion’s bandana and took a step back.

“Let me get this straight. I try to escape, and your solution is to let me have free roam of your room while you go to work?”

“Yes.”

“…Are you mentally incompetent?”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s the only way I can justify your insane reasoning. I can’t imagine how someone could have all their mental faculties and still be such a natural idiot. Or maybe you’re just screwing with me?”
“I think I’ve said this before, but I don’t appreciate your insults. If you continue to be rude, I might be inclined to take back my offer and tie you to that pipe over there. But I don’t want to do that, and I’m pretty sure you don’t want me to either.”

Nezumi scowled.

“I have to go. I’m not ordering you to stay in here, I’m asking you. The outskirts of the West Block are dangerous. There are thieves and wild dogs and who knows what else, so please just…” He ran his fingers roughly through his bangs, pulling a few strands of hair loose in the process. “Just stay here and read a book, okay?”

Shion’s face was imploring as he awaited Nezumi’s acquiesce. Nezumi’s face remained blank, neither a confirmation nor a rejection, but the other boy must have read something in his expression that he wasn’t aware of, because he nodded once.

He offered a mysterious, “Don’t open the door for anyone, no matter what they say or what you hear,” and stepped out.

There was a soft click as he locked it behind him, and then silence.

Five minutes of waiting was all it would take. After that, anyone who could possibly restrain him would likely be too far or too preoccupied to come after him. That was the time to run, if ever there was one. There wasn’t any reason why he should stay.

And yet… Her unexpected interference earlier complicated matters. If She wanted to destroy No. 6, that was Her business, but why did She insist on him being there for it? If he tried to leave again, would she render him unconscious like before? How did She even manage it the first time? If he did go out, and he did faint again, there was a possibility that he would accomplish nothing save for becoming some mutt’s chew toy.

Even if he didn’t have to worry about his mind being hijacked, the West Block was unfamiliar territory, and his desire for freedom in no way overrode his common sense. Without know-how, a weapon, or connections, his odds of traversing the area unharassed were dismal. As much as he wanted to leave, it seemed that every desirable path was barred, and his chances of success were too uncertain to make it viable.

He clicked his tongue. Wallowing in frustration was as frustrating as the frustration itself. With a growl, Nezumi turned away from the door and collapsed onto the couch.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered to the open air.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is pretty long, but it's all from Shion's POV. You'll get to see a little of what his life is like >w> And, of course, more Shion-Nezumi interaction.
This chapter is long~ >w< But I hope you will enjoy looking at West Block and Shion.

Shion was conflicted. He felt that leaving Nezumi alone in the room was the right thing to do, but common sense told him that he had already tried the trusting thing and it almost backfired.

When Hamlet woke him up and alerted him to Nezumi’s disappearance, he had been furious. It was mostly self-directed rage at having been so reckless.

Really, what was I expecting? Nezumi’s a hostage. If I were in the same position, I would’ve tried running too. He knew he should’ve restrained Nezumi before he went to sleep. He never should’ve cut him loose in the first place. But he had been lenient. He let his emotions muddle his judgment.

When he was sent to retrieve an important elite, he had not expected to find a boy his age, and certainly not one who looked so nonthreatening. However, he had a job to do, and No. 6 was the enemy no matter what face it wore. But as the day progressed, and he watched Nezumi flounder to answer questions and bristle at Yoming’s threats, Shion became more and more unsure about whether he was the enemy. It seemed that the other boy was just another angry and confused victim of the Holy City’s tyranny.

Even now he didn’t think he was wrong, but he had been wrong to underestimate Nezumi’s survival instinct. The teen had seen his weakness and took advantage of it to escape, and if it hadn’t been for the mice, the dog, and most especially Safu’s help, Shion could have been executed. Up until they had found Nezumi, he had been filled with fear and self-loathing, because he had been stupid enough to let a moment of compassion dictate his fate.

He had been determined to drag Nezumi back and restrain him, as he should’ve done from the start. But once he’d caught up to the teen, all his own anger and panic had been eclipsed by the sheer intensity of Nezumi’s desperation.

You’re just like No. 6.

Those words had sent a pang through him, and his chest was still throbbing from the impact. That’s not how it was supposed to be. They were supposed to be the good guys. No. 6 was a virus, and it was their job to exterminate it for the good of everyone it ever hurt. He was sure that the Holy City was wrong. But then why did Nezumi’s accusation hit him so hard?

It had made him angry to hear those words. How dare he compare them? Nezumi didn’t know how difficult it was to pick up the pieces after the Hunt two years ago. He didn’t know how hard they had to work every single day and how little they got for it. He was just a spoiled, pampered No. 6 citizen. He couldn’t possibly understand what it was like to wake unsatisfied, to feel the weight of injustice bearing down on him and be powerless to stop it.

But then he saw the anger flashing in those grey eyes, he remembered how confused Nezumi looked when Yoming demanded answers from him he did not know, and Shion thought to himself,
maybe he does know how it feels. Nezumi had lived his whole life in No. 6. He despised it, and he looked at Shion and what his life had built up to in the last year, and said they were the same. And that shook him. It resonated with a fear he had tried to suppress, but that had been growing steadily louder since the day he joined the Resistance: they had gone wrong somewhere.

He stopped and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. This is not good. I can’t be having these thoughts. These kind of half-hearted feelings are what get people killed.

“Shion!” Shion’s head shot up, and he took note of a man coming toward him.

“Yamase.” He cleared his throat. “Good morning.”

The older man fell in beside him and smiled slightly. Despite his bleak mood, Yamase was a welcome sight. He was four years Shion’s senior and one of the few people he could call a friend.

“Everything alright?”

Shion dropped his hands and tried to appear more at ease. “Yeah,” he said, injecting a bit of energy into his voice. “Everything’s fine.”

Yamase nodded, taking the words at face value. That was Shion’s favorite thing about him. He was considerate enough to ask such questions, but tactful enough not to push the issue if you’d rather not discuss it. His discretion was probably the reason why Yoming allowed him to work within the inner ring of their group, despite the fact that the man wasn’t skilled in any particular area.

“Are you heading to work?” Shion asked.

“Yeah. Aren’t you?”

Shion smiled. That was a good sign; if Yamase was only heading to work now, that meant that he would not be late, and Yoming would not have a reason to think anything had gone amiss. Shion found himself cheering up.

“Anything happen while I was absent yesterday?”

“Mm… No. Nothing outside the usual. Though, that may have more to do with how pissed the Boss was when he came down. Everyone was so tense, we barely got anything done.”

“…Is that so? I’m sorry. That must have been hard.”

Yamase shrugged. “It’s not your fault. You know the Boss. Sometimes he’s just not in a good mood. And Kaze’s prodding didn’t help.”

Shion nibbled his lip and cast a sidelong glance at Yamase. Even if he couldn’t have known the specifics, he must have been curious, but he was acting as though he was none the wiser.

I wonder if he ever has doubts… But he stopped that train of thought before he could run away with it. I have to pull myself together. This is no time to have a moral crisis. They lapsed into silence for the rest of the walk to headquarters.

Once they passed through the doors, it was apparent that something had happened. A crowd had accumulated in the center of the room, and several people were talking in excited voices. Shion spotted Safu hovering on the edge of the group. He nodded to Yamase and made his way to her side.
“What’s going on?”

Safu glanced at him. “I just got here a little while ago, but apparently there was some kind of fight with the Disposers this morning. One of our men was shot.”

Shion peered into the center of the crowd. Two men and a woman were pleading their case to Yoming in livid voices.

“He weren’t even doin’ nothing but defending the cause!”

“They can’t get away with this. We need to strike back!”

“They’re gathering weapons! We need to destroy them before they get any stronger!”

Yoming listened calmly to their outbursts.

“I understand your distress,” he said once they had finished, “and I’m sorry for Yoshi’s death. He was a good man and a loyal soldier. His service will not go unacknowledged. You have my word.” The men and woman’s faces turned solemn. “However,” he continued, his voice growing firm. “We will not attack the Disposers.”

Angry and astonished protests erupted from the crowd. Yoming weathered the barrage of demands and complaints for a few seconds before he pronounced in a booming voice, “The Hunt is coming!”

A hush descended over the crowd.

“The Hunt is coming,” he repeated with gravity. “And we all know what that means.” His eyes skimmed over his audience, before finally settling on the chief complainants. “I understand your frustration with the Disposers—you know I do. But we’ve worked too hard these past few years to get distracted by petty turf disputes and personal vendettas. It is more important than ever that we citizens of West Block stand united, comrades. No. 6 doesn’t care if you’re Resistance or Disposer, old or young, man, woman, or child. We’re all vermin to them. They don’t see us as a threat. They think they can come down here, kill our families, steal our children, and we’ll have no choice but to take it. But not this time.”

Murmurs of assent rose from the audience. Yoming fed on it, his voice growing in a passionate crescendo. “We have supplies, we have numbers, but most of all, we have a cause worth fighting for. We can win, comrades, but we must stay focused on the true enemy: No. 6.”

A few hearty cheers burst from the crowd, and still more nodded in vigorous approval. Shion swallowed.

The corner of Yoming’s mouth quirked slightly in acknowledgement of the enthusiasm. “Do not approach the Disposers. Save your strength for the battle ahead.”

The men and woman pleading retribution for their fallen friend took this order with mixed acceptance. They didn’t seem wholly satisfied, but the fire in their eyes had dulled. There wasn’t a person in the room who doubted the authority of Yoming’s words.

“Bit hypocritical, coming from the guy who started it with the Disposers,” Safu muttered. Shion peered at her and noted the sobriety of her expression.

Yoming placed a hand on the shoulder of the nearest complainant and offered a second apology to the group for their loss. He deferred them to a woman at his side with an explanation that she
would help them with the funeral arrangements. The people began to disperse, chattering amongst themselves.

Yoming parted from the group and his dark eyes speared Shion almost immediately.

“Well, look who’s here.” He grinned without warmth. “Did you take care of your business?”

Shion covered his uneasiness with a shrug. “I did, thank you.”

“So I take it we won’t have any more trouble? Your absence yesterday was sorely felt. I’d hate for you to miss another day.” Yoming’s tone was congenial, but Shion could feel the gazes of a few of the more observant and nosy members on them.

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem. I’ve taken care of it, so I can come to work as usual. I appreciate you being so understanding.” Shion bowed his head, hoping the older man would read it as submission. “I’m sorry if I harmed the group’s productivity. I’ll work harder in the future to make up for it.”

“Good. That’s good.” Yoming adjusted the superfibre shawl about his shoulders. “I’m glad to hear you’re so dedicated to the cause, because I have a task that I wanted you to help me with. They’re shorthanded with rations today. I need you to go help hand them out.”

Shion kept his head bowed in case his expression betrayed anything. Handing out rations was a job given mostly to new recruits and the lowest ranking members. That being said, Shion was not a big fan of hierarchy and he felt no shame picking up the slack in areas where help was needed—he was often one of the first to volunteer whenever the request was put to the group. However, volunteering was one thing, being told to do menial work was another.

“Sure, I’d be happy to.”

Shion raised his head and looked Yoming directly in the eye as he spoke. He was one of the few who could do this, and likely the only one who did so frequently. He let an edge of his nervousness show through, though, so that Yoming would see this act as obedient acceptance and not a challenge.

The older man grinned. “Much obliged. You go too, Safu,” he added as a matter of course.

Safu’s mouth popped open, but she quickly brought her face back into neutral and murmured a “Yes, sir.” The two teens left the room without another word or glance.

“Sorry about that,” Shion said once they were outside and on their way to the market.

“It’s fine. I’m used to it. Guilt by association and all that.”

“Well, I guess, but doesn’t it ever bother you? You’re a good soldier: you do what’s asked of you and you’re really good at it, but you’re always getting penalized because I can’t agree with Yoming.” He sighed. “Sometimes I feel like you’d be better off if you just cut ties with me altogether.”

“Oh please.” Safu rolled her eyes. “Don’t be so melodramatic. I couldn’t care less what Yoming does to me. And besides, I couldn’t cut ties with you even if I wanted to, because I don’t want to be indirectly responsible for your death. Because let’s face it, you wouldn’t last one week without me around. You owe me a lifetime of debts for saving your butt.” Safu arched an eyebrow at him. “On second thought, you’re right. I don’t get anywhere near the amount of thanks and appreciation I deserve.”
“I know. But—and maybe it’s selfish of me to say—but even though I know joining the Resistance wasn’t your first choice, I’m glad you’re here with me. You’ve always stood by me and I’m thankful for that.”

Safu bit her lower lip and averted her face. Shion beamed at her profile. She had always been pretty to him, but having known her since they were toddlers, he was able to see that her once girlish features were smoothing out into a delicate and refined femininity. Some of the other men had expressed distaste at the androgynous aspect of her short hair, but Shion thought the style suited her well.

Safu huffed. “Quit grinning at me like a dope already.”

He chuckled softly. “Sorry.”

“So, what’d you end up doing with that rat?”

Shion felt his face heat up despite his desperate attempt to quell the anxiety building in his stomach. It was useless to lie to Safu. Even if his body language hadn’t already given him away, she would know the truth the minute he opened his mouth. I’m just gonna have to say it quickly, like tearing off a band-aid.

“I left him in the room.”

“Shion.”

He came to a halt as a hand closed gently, but firmly, around his wrist. He hadn’t realized it, but he had sped up and was now standing with his back toward Safu. He sucked in a breath and turned. His friend’s dark eyes bored into his.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing bad. I just… left him in there.”

“‘Left him in there’? Meaning what? You just ushered him into your room, wished him a good time, and came to work? Is that what you mean by ‘left him in there’?”

“Not really…” The color drained from Safu’s face. “But yeah.”

“Shion.” She dropped his wrist. “Shion, you can’t just— And after this morning— I can’t believe you, I really can’t.”

Shion had been expecting anger, but the pain and disappointment on Safu’s face was far worse. “I know it sounds bad, but I talked with him, and I think it’ll be okay. He’ll stay in the room, I’m almost sure—”

“He’s dangerous! He’s not some docile, pampered No. 6 idiot. You can’t underestimate him. I did, and he was able to stop my knife.”

“He stopped your knife? Really?” He recalled the night before when Nezumi lunged at him. He had been quick, surprisingly so, despite his injuries. But to stop Safu’s knife, he must be faster than I thought.

“Like I said, I was caught off guard. But that just proves my point. I didn’t see him as a threat, and I was put in a bad position. If I wasn’t fast myself, he might’ve hurt me. But you’re not as good at close quarters as I am, so you need to take this seriously and really think about—”
Suddenly Safu’s eyes widened. “Wait. Don’t you have a ton of guns in your house?”

Shion blinked. Oh yeah. He had almost forgotten. A month or so ago they had gotten a new shipment of supplies and he had agreed to stow a few rifles away.

He put his hands out defensively. “Now, Safu, I know what you’re going to say, but hear me out.”

“Shion, you stupid—! You said—you promised—you were going to be more careful! And what do you do? You leave him unattended and untied in a room full of guns! How can you be such an idiot!”

“Ah!”

Safu punched him hard in the shoulder and he felt the pins and needles all the way down to his fingertips.

“They aren’t loaded!” Shion exclaimed, drawing away from her. “Do you really think I’d be that irresponsible? I only have one loaded gun.”

Compulsively, he reached down and felt the spot where his pistol was holstered between his waistband and hip. After confirming its presence, he reached out to Safu and started to say something, but she silenced him with a look.

“I already know what you’re going to say, and I’ve known you long enough to realize that once you’re set on something, it doesn’t matter how many appeals to logic I make. He’s your responsibility; you handle it however you want. The only thing I ask is that you be careful. You can manage to keep that promise at least, can’t you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“That’s fine, then. We don’t need to talk about this anymore.”

Shion felt a wave of guilt wash over him, but it was mingled with a heavy dose of relief, so he let the matter drop. They began to walk again, merging seamlessly with the crowd as they entered the market.

Downtown West Block was bustling at any given time, but on ration day, the streets turned to murder—sometimes in the literal sense. Shop keepers and stall owners called out to passerby with more gusto, hoping to net customers made amenable to their suggestions by the weight of food in their hands. Scruffy children and carefully made-up women slinked in the shadows, waiting with practiced patience for the right mark to walk by. It was an atmosphere every West Block resident knew well, and that was to say it was one in which no one felt completely comfortable.

Safu and Shion reached a slightly wider section of street. The Resistance worked out of two stalls, which were situated in front of the group’s favorite bar. The owner of the establishment was a member herself, so it made the process easier. The representatives of Resistance-affiliated families would line up, and one by one they approached the counter to collect their food. The ration recipients rotated weekly. Although Yoming had good connections, it was impossible to provide every member and his family with food each week.

That being said, the families of the members who performed more dangerous tasks, or who were high ranking and put a lot of time and effort into the cause, were rewarded with more portions. As core members directly under Yoming, Safu and Shion were allowed to take rations every week. The only other way to get more food was to donate a larger amount of money than
what was required for tithe.

Shion watched a man take a name down at the stall and motion for a younger girl to fetch the food from inside the bar. The people in line were up to the usual jostling and leering, but it wasn’t out of control. He identified a few new members standing off to the side by their gold bandanas. They were leaning against the wall and staring out at the crowd with bored expressions.

Shion tilted his head and addressed one of them. “You’re not working?”

The girl straightened her posture as he approached. “Comrade Shion, and Comrade Safu. Good morning.” They nodded in greeting. “They have enough people working the desks and delivering the food, so us younger members were put on crowd control.”

“So you’re not understaffed?” Safu asked.

“No…” the girl said slowly. “If anything, we’re overstaffed.”

Shion and Safu exchanged a look. Shion thanked the girl and told her to keep up the good work.

“Well, this is humiliating,” said Safu after they had moved away from the crowd.

“It’s not so bad. My only concern is what we’re supposed to do now. Yoming obviously doesn’t want us around.”

It would be best not to return to headquarters for at least a few hours, if at all. He was sent here to prove a point, and in order to communicate that the lesson was learned he had to lay low for a bit. It didn’t matter that Yoming’s punishment was petty. There was no use in drawing out the bad blood between them.

Safu shrugged. “Let’s collect our rations. We can eat while we reflect on the error of our ways.”

Shion felt the corners of his mouth tug up into a smile. They circumvented the line and walked straight into the bar to collect their share of food. They each received a brown bag that contained the following: a packet of salt, crackers, half a loaf of bread, a pouch of rice, nuts, and beans. These were the staples of the rations, however, some weeks a specialty item was thrown in. As they exited the building, Shion peeked into the bag to check if this were a lucky week. He brightened at the sight of an apple sitting neatly on top.

“But my husband was part of the Resistance. Lloyd? Someone must have known him.”

A keening voice rose above the noise and Shion’s attention was drawn to a woman at one of the ration stalls. She was wringing her hands as the member manning the desk shook his head.

“You’re not in the register. Step aside.”

“He was dedicated to the cause for two years! Aren’t I entitled to something?” She was becoming quite hysterical, and both the man and those in line behind her looked disgusted.

“Do you have money for the tithe at least?” droned the man behind the desk. “We might be able to give you something, but only if you pay the tithe.”

“No, I don’t, but I could—”

“If ya got no money and yer not in the register, you don’t get no food,” growled the man behind her. He elbowed her to the side and took her place in front of the stall. The woman gnawed her
fingernails and watched as the man placed ten copper coins on the table.

Shion had seen people like her many times. They came around every week when rations were being distributed, hoping to beg some food or snatch morsels when they thought no one was looking. They tried any ploy, real or embellished, to get the food they so desired. The less experienced ones often made the mistake of lying about having relations in the Resistance, but all the members in charge of handing out rations were required to check the group register before giving away food. The register was constantly and meticulously edited; it was nearly impossible to fake legitimacy.

Although, he didn’t think this woman was lying about her husband. Her cries sounded genuinely anguished, so Shion wondered if she might have just recently caved in to desperation.

“Please…” She wandered toward the members standing off to the side on crowd control. “I don’t even need a whole ration, just a pack of crackers would be fine. Just enough for my child.”

She made the mistake of reaching out and touching one of the member’s arms, and he shook her off roughly. Shion winced as the woman stumbled to the ground. She sucked in a ragged breath, head swiveling from side to side as people sidestepped her.

“Please,” she whimpered.

And then her glassy eyes locked onto Shion’s. He felt his heart leap, and quickly averted his gaze.

“We need to go.”

Safu, whose attention had also been drawn to the woman, seemed to share his agitation, and they hurried toward the crowded street.

“Shion! Comrade Shion!” the same keening voice called from not too far behind him. His stomach somersaulted.

Safu placed a hand on his elbow. “Don’t turn around.”

“She knows me.”

“Everyone knows you. Keep walking. We’ll lose her in a minute.”

Shion’s coat snagged on something as Safu tried to herd him through the throng. He looked down. A small boy had latched onto him. His face was pitifully thin, and Shion had seen enough similar cases to know that the child was malnourished. He was gripping something in his free hand, but Shion couldn’t break away from the sight of the boy’s lusterless eyes to see what it was.

“Shion,” Safu urged. “Shake him off already, she’s—”

“Comrade Shion!”

The beggar woman had caught up to them. She slowed when she saw the child, who looked up at her in return. The woman’s face went white.

“Jeremy...” She swiped at her eyes. “What are you doing here? I told you to stay home.” The boy turned away and stared down at the ground.

*This child is hers, then?* Shion shifted uncomfortably and the woman gave a small gasp.
“Oh, I’m sorry about my son. Jeremy, let go of his jacket. Come now.” She reached down and pried his bony fingers away, pulling him against her hip. “I’m sorry if he disturbed you.”

“It’s fine,” he mumbled, turning away.

“It’s only that he’s hungry!” she blurted, making a swift move to stand beside him. Shion flinched back at the earnestness of her words and tried to look away, but his eyes found her child’s sullen face, which was turned up at him. He hummed under his breath and stared at the bag in his arms.

“We’re sorry about that, but we can’t help you.” Shion felt his face grow hot with shame as Safu stepped to his rescue. “You have to wait in line over there to get your rations.”

“Yes, of course, but… Well…” She raised her hand to her mouth to bite at her already ragged nails, but caught herself at the last second and let it drop to her side. She stroked the top of her son’s head with her other hand. “There seems to be a mistake. My husband was in the Resistance, but he passed away two months ago and we haven’t received any food.”

Safu frowned. “He died in service?”

“An accident. In the bar.” She tilted her head toward the building where the rations were housed. “But Lloyd was a member, so we should still be on the register for this week. He only passed two months ago, and we’re supposed to get six months notice, so—”

“That’s not right.” Safu cut her off before she got too excited. “If he didn’t die in service, you’re not entitled to reparations.”

“What?”

Shion sucked in a breath and began to explain, “If a member dies outside of the line of work, it’s treated as—” He was going to say “negligence on their part” because that was the way Yoming always phrased it, but he couldn’t bear to say that to the woman in front of him. She was so weak and pale; it looked like the smallest of shocks would shatter her. So, instead he backtracked and said, “We compensate the families of those who lose their lives under orders out of respect for their sacrifice, but we can’t possibly provide for every family that has lost someone to sickness or accident. Even if we wanted to, we just don’t have the resources. Please understand….”

“But my husband was dedicated to the cause for two years.” Her voice was faint.

Suddenly, the child, who up until that moment had been staring into the distance, reached his hand out to Shion. There was something balled up in his tiny fist, which it seemed he wanted him to take. Shion hesitated, but the boy’s pitiless stare compelled him to accept. A snatch of fabric was placed in his palm. It was filthy with dirt, but he could still see spots where the gold showed through. It was without a doubt one of the bandanas issued to Resistance members. At the sight of it the woman covered her mouth with the back of her hand. Shion’s grip tightened around the cloth and Safu cleared her throat.

“We’re very sorry for your loss, Ma’am,” she said, keeping her professionalism far better than he was.

The woman trembled as she looked down at her son, and Safu took her distraction as a signal that the conversation was over. She nudged Shion’s shoulder and began to walk away. Shion moved to return the bandana, but the woman reached out and clasped his hand. There were tears in her eyes, and they dribbled down her cheeks, heedless of the sad display this presented to her son.
“Please,” she choked. “I can’t bear to watch my son starve. I know you’re a good man. You treated Lloyd once when he was sick—and our daughter, you helped her. Sophie?”

Shion’s brow furrowed. He couldn’t remember this woman’s husband. There were so many sick people in the West Block and he couldn’t possibly remember everyone he helped. However, the name Sophie was familiar to him. He had known a child by that name a few years back. She had been unfortunate enough to be playing in the street when a shop owner fired a shotgun at a fleeing thief. By the time he arrived, there wasn’t anything he could do but staunch the flow of blood and whisper consolingly until she closed her eyes.

“Please, just once more. I swear I won’t ask again.” The woman began to sob, and the boy at her side raised his arm to rub her back. His own face was vacant. Shion swallowed thickly.

Safu drew in a quavering breath behind him, but when she spoke her voice was firm, “We’re really sorry, but we can’t. It wouldn’t be fair to the other families.”

And with that she transferred her rations to one arm, took hold of Shion’s elbow, and steered him away. The woman’s fingers slipped from his hand without a fight, but he could still feel the ghost of their touch for several minutes after they parted. He and Safu floated through the crowd, only stopping once they reached the massive weather-beaten ruins of a once grandiose hotel.

Safu left him and went to stand under an archway off to the side. Shion remained still. His hands were sweating, and he looked down at them to see that he was still clutching the dirty bandana. His chest hollowed out with sadness and pain.

_I should not have taken this. This belonged to that boy’s father, that woman’s husband. I should go back. I need to return this before it’s too late_, he thought over and over again. But his body was numb. _I’m a coward._

A hotness built up in the back of his throat and he squeezed the cloth tighter. He dragged himself over to a chunk of stone and dropped down onto it. Safu came to his side a minute or two later, but they didn’t speak. He drew pictures in the dirt with the tip of his boot, and she opened her rations and started nibbling on the edge of a cracker. The glances she tossed his way every now and then indicated that she wanted to say something, but she never gave voice to the thoughts.

Shion scrubbed away a doodle with the sole of his shoe and then yelped as something hot and wet brushed against his hand. He yanked his arm back and the dog beside him panted, as though laughing at his surprise.

“Hah… Hey, girl.” He placed the bandana in his lap and cupped the dog’s head in his hands, stroking its ears with his thumbs. “I guess you’re here for your reward?”

He reached into his bag, tore open a sleeve of crackers and held one out to the dog. It lapped it out of his hand and wagged its tail at him when it finished. He chuckled and moved to pull out another, and then stopped. He stared into the mouth of the bag and then glanced at the dog. He fished out the bread and the crackers and placed them on top of the cloth in his lap.

Safu had been watching him since he recoiled from the dog, and she slumped when he began wrapping the food in the bandana. “Shion…” she groaned, but her voice lacked its usual force.

“Alright, you’re going to help me,” he said to the dog. He pulled out one cracker before tying the bundle off. He raised the morsel above the dog’s head and held the package in front of its face
with his other hand. “Come on, girl, sniff it.”

The dog turned away and hopped up to snap at the cracker. Shion deftly pulled his hand back. “No! Bad dog. Come on, you did it for me this morning, you can do it again. Smell the cloth.” He pushed the bandana against its nose. The dog gave a low growl, but then paused and sniffed. It licked the bundle and Shion smiled. “Good girl.” He rewarded it with the cracker.

He tied the bundle around its neck as it scarfed the treat down. The dog looked annoyed with the weight on its shoulders when it straightened up, and prepped to shake, but Shion caught its muzzle.

“No,” he hissed, staring into its eyes. “Take the package to where the scent leads. Do not eat it or lose it. Send it. Send.”

The dog wriggled and made disgruntled noises, but eventually it sat and huffed through its nostrils. When it pawed his pant leg, Shion released it. “Good. Send.” He snapped in the opposite direction. The dog obediently turned and stalked off.

“You can’t help everyone,” Safu said softly once the dog had disappeared from sight. Shion lollled his head back, exhausted. She sighed. “Well, at least you didn’t give away everything this time. And you had enough sense to keep the apple for yourself.”

“Yeah, well, I had to save something for Nezumi, and he didn’t like the bread or crackers yesterday.” He shook his head. “Maybe the apple will make him less hostile.”

Shion started when Safu groaned loudly beside him. “Who cares what that elite snob likes? It’s your food, he should be grateful to be fed anything at all.”

He suppressed a chuckle at her overwrought expression. “It’s fine. I don’t really care, and besides, there’s enough food for us both.”

Safu rolled her eyes, stuffed her hand into her bag, and shoved her apple into his chest. He caught it as it rolled into his lap.

“Safu, I—”

“Just take it. I don’t like apples, anyway.”

The corner of Shion’s mouth twitched into a small smile. “Thanks.”

****

It was a little after six when Shion made his way back home. After he and Safu had finished their modest meal, he helped her run some errands for the girls at the hotel. When they returned with the prescriptions and baubles they had set out to buy, Safu invited him in to make a few overdue greetings, but he declined.

He had been out for several hours already and he was beginning to feel nervous. Had Nezumi stayed put? And if he had, what was he doing? The worst was the thought of whether or not he’d found the guns. He was sure they weren’t loaded, and yet a part of him kept thinking, what if they were? He didn’t think the boy had enough guts to try to shoot him, but it had been impressed upon him time and again not to underestimate the elite’s capabilities.

He slipped into the underground passage and stood in front of the door for a few deliberating seconds. Empty guns are still dangerous. He could be waiting by the side of the door to hit me over
the head with the butt of a rifle. I wouldn’t put that past him. But that’s probably not the case; there’s no reason to attack me when he had all this time to escape. If he’s still in there, I shouldn’t have anything to worry about...

He placed the bag of rations next to the door and took out the key from his pocket. Slowly, he inserted it into the lock, took a breath, and swung the door open.

The first thing he saw was Nezumi, staring at him from behind the coffee table. He stayed, Shion thought with a rush of relief. He let out a breath, and then sharply sucked it back in.

The floor was littered with books. There were at least thirty of them sprawled out on the floor in front of the shelves. In the process of making himself at home, it looked like Nezumi had cleared room underneath the coffee table by pushing out the magazines stacked there with his feet. And while the majority of the pile was intact, a few of the top issues were cascading into the pool of literature in front of them. A block of wood rested on the table, and it took Shion a few seconds and a glance at the conspicuous white outline on the wall above his bed to realize that it was his clock.

And there Nezumi sat at the coffee table, puckishly unconcerned with the ruin he created.

“Welcome home, sweetheart,” he said brightly. “I was beginning to worry.” Nezumi’s smile had just the right touch of innocence.

Shion wet his lips and nodded minutely in response.

Okay. Okay, he’s still angry, obviously…

But he did stay in the room and didn’t try to ambush me when I walked in, so I’m willing to overlook this.

He forced his mouth to form a small, but overwhelmed smile. “You really went for it. Did you read all those books?”

“I cracked open a couple of them, but I kept losing interest after a few pages.” Nezumi cast his gaze around the room. “I hope you don’t mind. You told me to help myself, after all.”

In an extreme feat of self-control, Shion managed to minimize his outward show of annoyance to a scowl. How childish can you get?

He eyed the clock splayed open on the table and felt a prick of nervousness. If he wasn’t mistaken, there had been a palm-sized revolver inside its cabinet, but he didn’t see it anywhere.

“You’re trying to fix the clock?” He tried to sound casual.

Nezumi gave him a loaded look, picked something off floor next to him, and dangled it between two fingers for Shion to see. The revolver.

“Yeah, I found it,” he said in answer to the unspoken question. “Not exactly top-level security.”

Shion accepted his loss and shrugged. “I thought it was inconspicuous enough.”

Nezumi’s grey eyes glinted darkly at him from across the room. “Apparently. You ever consider that your clock might work better if you didn’t cram firearms into it?”

“The clock was broken long before I put the revolver into its compartment.”

“Was the organ broken, too, before you decided to replace the pipes with rifle barrels?”
Shion paused in the middle of taking off his jacket and eyed Nezumi. His eyebrows were raised expectantly and there was a ghost of a smirk on his face. Well, it wasn’t like I hadn’t expected this.

“You were pretty thorough, huh?” He shrugged his coat the rest of the way down his arms, and added without interest, “How many of the other weapons did you find?”

Nezumi’s eye twitched and Shion turned aside, knowing that feigning nonchalance would increase his suspicion. Of course, the revolver and the rifles were the only weapons hidden in the room, but he wanted to wipe the condescending look off the other boy’s face. Shion allowed himself a smirk of his own as he hung his coat on the chair in front of the organ.

“I brought food.”

“I’ve had enough crackers for one day, but thanks.”

Shion picked the bag up from beside the door and rummaged through it. “Well, I don’t have any crackers, but I do have this.” He placed an apple on the table in front of Nezumi. “If you’re not hungry now, you can save it for later. Whichever.”

He moved past him, sat down on the bed, and snacked on a few nuts from the bag while he waited. A minute or so passed, but finally Nezumi took the apple and bit into it with a sour look on his face. Shion snorted lightly.

He’s acting like a little kid. Is it really that hard for him to accept it? Or maybe it’s just me he doesn’t want to accept anything from.

He noticed Macbeth sitting on the couch and wondered if Nezumi had read something seriously after all. The other boy seemed engrossed in the clock gears now, however. Shion leaned forward and tried to peek at whatever he was doing with them, but he couldn’t quite see over the hulk of the clock body.

“If you have something you wanna say, just come out with it,” Nezumi said blandly. “Your hovering is distracting.”

Shion pushed the rations aside and moved to the edge of the bed. “What are you doing?”

“Fixing the clock.”

“…Thanks.”

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it because I’m bored.”

“What's wrong with it?” Nezumi bit a chunk out of the apple and stared down at the interior of the clock. “Guess you don’t know?”

“I’ll figure it out eventually. I’m working by process of elimination. There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with the gears.”

Shion hummed thoughtfully and the room lapsed into another round of silence. Nezumi was acting touchy and unfriendly, but he wasn’t entirely closed off. Shion shifted. Something compelled him to try and make conversation again.

“So…”

He paused, realizing that he had spoken before a proper topic had come to mind. He rubbed the
back of his neck. Maybe he should just drop the matter after all. Besides, Nezumi didn’t look like
he wanted to talk.

The moment he decided that, Nezumi turned his head to look at him. His expression was
miffed, but expectant. Shion blinked slowly. He’s waiting for me to finish? He floundered to come
up with the rest of the sentence, and ended up spitting out the first thing that came to mind.

“How are you feeling?”

Nezumi cocked an eyebrow. “…Peachy.”

“It’s just that I know you fainted earlier.”

Nezumi made a disgusted sound and turned back toward the clock pieces. Shion persevered,
however, because even though the topic had been spontaneous, it was an important one.

“Could you describe to me what happened at that time? Did you feel dizzy or nauseous
beforehand? Or have headaches? If you have any of those symptoms you need to tell me.”

“I felt fine right up until you started talking. Now I have a massive headache.”

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

“If you fainted, it could mean your head injury was worse than I thought. You could have a
concussion.”

“I didn’t faint because of a head injury.”

“Well, if you’re sure, then that’s good. Still, if any of those symptoms develop, you need to tell
me. We don’t have many supplies, but I’m sure I could do something…” He had a few herbs that
might help. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Do you normally talk this much?” Nezumi dropped his hands from their project and angled his
body toward Shion. “Stop asking about my condition. I’m fine.”

Shion slumped his shoulders. Nezumi once again returned to his work. The only sound in the
room was the clinking of clock parts.

“I don’t,” Shion admitted at length.

“What are you babbling about now?”

“I don’t usually talk this much. I actually dislike small talk, but I don’t know how long you’ll be
here, and I can’t stand this strained atmosphere. I don’t know what else to talk about but your
health… Maybe I’m over compensating for this morning. But you answer rudely no matter what I
ask…” He trailed off near the end, muttering the last few lines so that Nezumi had to strain to hear
them.

“I answer rudely because you ask stupid questions with meaningless answers.”

“I get the feeling you don’t like personal questions, so meaningless questions are the only ones
left to ask.”

Shion’s eyes roamed over the books scattered on the floor. I wonder if he’s going to be too
stubborn to put them back… I don’t want to let him walk all over me, but I also don’t want to leave everything on the floor where it could be damaged. In the corner of the room, he spotted a slim volume with a colorful illustration of a statue and a bird on the cover. His heart gave a nostalgic lurch.

“Did you read that book?” He pointed in its direction.

“The Happy Prince? Yeah. It’s short, so I read that one all the way through.”

“Oh, really? That’s great.” Shion smiled softly, happy to have discovered a new and inoffensive topic to discuss. “My mom used to read it to me all the time. What’d you think?”

“It’s ridiculous,” Nezumi scoffed. “Both the Prince and the Swallow are idiots.”

Rather than being angered at his venom, Shion merely furrowed his brow. He didn’t see how anyone could come to that conclusion.

“How so?”

Nezumi gestured at the book. “The Swallow dies for no reason. Alright, fine, he takes pity on the Prince and carries out his last wishes, but then he should’ve just flown to Egypt like he wanted. Who cares if the Prince can’t see? He’s a statue, and if he didn’t have to stare at the poverty every day, maybe he’d be a little less miserable. The only thing the Swallow accomplishes by staying is bringing the Prince to further ruin, and then freezing to death himself. Am I supposed to be moved by such a pointless sacrifice?”

Shion opened his mouth to reply, but Nezumi barreled on, becoming more heated as he spoke,

“And don’t even get me started on the Prince. Does he really think that giving away all his jewels and gold is going to make a difference in the long run? After the townspeople use up what he gave them, they’ll be just as poor and miserable as they always were, except it’ll be worse, because they’ll know what they’re missing. It’s so naïve it’s cruel.”

Nezumi scoffed again and glared at the book in the corner. Shion stared at him with his mouth just the slightest bit open.

He’s serious.

He coughed and ducked his head when the other boy turned to look at him. But it was too late; Nezumi had already seen the incredulous smile.

“You,” said Shion without a trace of amusement. “You’re so spoiled. But I guess that’s only natural of a No. 6 citizen. You’ve never known what it’s like to starve, or to wonder if today is the day you’ll die. You’ve never had to watch the people you love struggle while you can do nothing to help them.” He paused and shook his head. “You’ve never known the meaning of misery or sacrifice, so of course you don’t understand. But if you spent a little time in West Block, you’d realize how wrong you are to dismiss the Prince and Swallow as idiots. Even if the Swallow only helped the Prince out of pity at first, he stayed because he grew to understand and love him for his selflessness. And maybe the Prince was naïve for giving the people his jewels, but I don’t think he was wrong, and I definitely don’t think it was worthless. There’s no such thing as a worthless act of kindness, and to people who have nothing, it can mean the world.”

He expected some kind of dismissive retort, but Nezumi’s expression was silent and unreadable. Shion felt like he was being sized up. I wish he’d relax a little.

Shion leaned back on his hands. “That’s what I believe. But I guess most people in West Block would agree with you. Now that I think about it, if The Happy Prince took place in West Block,
the Swallow probably would’ve taken the Prince’s jewels and gold for himself and laughed all the way to Egypt...”

Yoming came to mind. *He would definitely do something like that. And then he’d come back to melt the Prince’s body into bullets.* He blew out his cheeks and grumbled at the thought.

“You’re weird.”

“Huh?”

Nezumi had returned to the clock. He was frowning at the cabinet door, swinging it back and forth to look at the clock face.

“Where’s that knife you had yesterday?” he said distractedly.

“Why do you ask?”

“I wanna try something. I think I know what the problem is.”

“And you need a knife for it?”

Nezumi let the cabinet fall shut with a *clack.* “Do I really look like I’m going to stab you?” Shion raised an eyebrow, and Nezumi smirked in spite of himself. “Yeah, okay. Point taken. But I’ll need it if you want this clock fixed.”

Shion didn’t exactly mind the clock not working. It hadn’t worked for at least two or three years, but it had been a gift to his mother from a friend, and she had insisted they keep it out of respect, even after it had frozen one day. Now he kept it around mostly for aesthetic reasons. Besides, it made a decent hiding spot for small items. At least it had, until today. Still, even if he didn’t need a working clock, having one would be nice, and he was curious to see if Nezumi could actually fix it.

*But with a knife of all things…*

He leaned over the edge of the bed and reached underneath the fitted sheet on the side of the mattress. He dropped the knife into Nezumi’s open hand. Without pause, the other boy wedged the blade into the space between the wood and the clock rim and pushed. The glass cover popped out and up, and Nezumi caught it and placed it aside. He bent the minute hand against the clock face.

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Uh… Six thirty, maybe?”

Nezumi grunted and dragged the minute hand around the perimeter until the clock reflected the time he was given. He stood the clock up, moved the pendulum to the right, and released it.

*Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.*

A satisfied smirk made its way onto Nezumi’s face. “Told you I’d figure it out.”

“Sorry to have doubted you.” Shion, too, grinned at the revived timepiece. “What was wrong with it?”

“Minute hand was touching the glass.”

“Really? It was that easy?”
Nezumi shrugged a shoulder and slowly moved the clock to the couch.

“Where’d you learn so much about clocks? Did you work with them in No. 6?”

“Nah. Even though I technically worked in the Robotics lab, the only thing I was allowed to do was edit code. I haven’t worked with anything like gears or actual machine parts since I was in school…” The flesh of the half-eaten apple on the table was browning. Nezumi picked it up and took a bite. “Which is annoying because I was good at it,” he said between chewing.

“What kind of stuff did you do in school?”

“Well, since I was super-elite,” he said with sarcasm, “I got to pick an area of concentration, so I picked mechanical engineering. It was mostly math and theories, but sometimes they let us build our own projects. They weren’t much more than toys, though.”

_Mechanical engineering?

Shion studied the clock on the couch and pressed a hand to his mouth. “Do you think your skills would come back if you had the resources and practice?” Nezumi sent a look his way. Shion placed his hand in his lap and tried to pick his words carefully. “I only ask because… Well, you know… if I asked Yoming, I could probably get whatever parts you needed to do projects.”

Nezumi placed the apple core right-side up on the end of the table. “Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ somewhere in that sentence?”

“It’s not really a ‘but’ so much as a small ‘if.’ I can't say why No. 6 wouldn’t want you to build things for them, but I can think of a ton of people here who would know the value of your skill set and put it to good use. For example, the group I work for could always use more—”

“No way.”

“But now that No. 6 knows we exist, they could attack us at any time. Even you could be in danger. We’re seriously outmatched in man and firepower, and we could really use someone with your expertise, especially if you can apply your skills to weaponry.”

“Definitely no.”

Shion pouted. “I think it’s at least worth consideration. If you joined our group, you’d actually be able to use all that knowledge that was being wasted in No. 6. And don’t tell me you don’t care about that, because I saw you smile when you fixed the clock. There’s nothing to hold you back anymore. No No. 6 to hide from, nothing. All you have to do is make a few things for us in return.” Shion drew in a breath and added what he thought would be the most convincing of his arguments, “And, if you joined our group, you’d definitely be allowed to leave this room. You might even be permitted to wander around outside by yourself.”

Nezumi’s incredulous expression flickered. But it lasted only a moment before his delicate features twisted in scorn. “It’s tempting, but no thanks. I’m sure you and your group of freedom fighters can achieve whatever it is you aim to achieve without the use of my skills. What is it you’re trying to do again? Take down No. 6?”

“… In a manner of speaking.”

“Good luck with that.”

“I don’t see why you’d say no. You get to build whatever you want and you’d be able to do
what you want, too. And you don’t like No. 6, right? If you help us, you’d be helping to end No. 6’s tyranny. There’s no downside.”

“The downside is that if I joined your group then I’d have to take orders from a guy who has no qualms about emptying his entire gun into people’s faces. I could list other issues with your proposal, but I think that’s more than enough reason to refuse.”

He had a point there. Yoming wasn’t an easy person to get along with, even when he was in a good mood, and Nezumi’s first encounter with him had been more violent than most.

“Yoming’s not…” he started, but then gave up. If he couldn’t even convince himself of Yoming’s virtue, there was absolutely no way he was going to sell Nezumi on that point. He wasn’t going to embarrass himself by trying.

Nezumi smiled somewhat at his aborted defense. “Yikes. If even you don’t dare to bullshit about his leadership ability, I’m definitely not signing up.”

“Yoming has plenty of leadership ability, it’s only his methods of obtaining obedience that I can’t, in good conscience, defend.”

“Oh really?” Nezumi said with a mocking lilt. He took Macbeth off the couch and sat down in its place. “Funny you should say that, because I seem to recall several times yesterday when you waved a gun in my face and ordered me around.”

“That’s different. I never actually intended to shoot you.”

“Just like you never actually intended to shoot that officer?”

“That…”

That was not something he was proud of. Shion felt the blood rushing unbidden to his cheeks and turned away. But he couldn’t escape the throbbing in his chest, or the way his stomach tied itself into knots when he thought about that moment.

He hadn’t even blinked when he turned and watched his bullet rip through that man’s skull. It was only afterwards that he felt the weight of his actions bearing down on him. He had trained hard for that moment, had imagined similar scenarios many times before, but the reality did not bring the promised relief, or even numbness. He felt disgusted. He felt ashamed.

“That’s not the same,” Shion said, clenching his fists when he heard the slight tremor in his voice. “I didn’t…”

Why am I explaining myself? He doesn’t care. He doesn’t want to hear this. I should stop. If he thinks I’m a cold-blooded killer, he’ll be easier to control. But the harder he tried to push the thoughts and feelings down, the more desperately he wanted to voice them.

“I didn’t know anything when I fired that gun.” The words tore from his throat, and it was like opening a floodgate. “I thought I did, but… I was only thinking about our mission and that the people from No. 6 weren’t people. They’re just parasites. No human could treat other people like they do. That’s what Yoming says, that’s what everyone says, so I didn’t even think and I shot him. It was supposed to be like slaying a monster, but it felt like shooting someone in the face. I’m not proud of it, I didn’t enjoy it, and… and I don’t want to do it again. So it’s not the same. We’re different.”

The words hung in the air long after he finished, but he didn’t look up. It was mortifying enough
to know that the words had been heard and that he was being watched. He had hoped that speaking his mind would help relieve some of the guilt, but it only made it real, and he suddenly felt very sick and very tired.

“Sorry… I didn’t mean to dump that on you. I’m tired, so I’m gonna go to sleep.”

Carefully avoiding looking anywhere but down, he climbed under the sheets and pulled the blanket over his head. The couch behind him creaked, but then there was nothing. Shion squeezed his eyes shut and prayed she would not come to him in his sleep.
The Resistance

Chapter Notes

Another long one. There's plenty of Shion, Safu and Nezumi. Plus! Two new faces. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tick. Tock.

Nezumi’s head hit the table with such a loud *thunk* that the mice he was reading to squeaked in fear. “I can’t do this anymore…” he muttered to the open air. “This is torture.”

He picked himself off the floor, snatched *The Happy Prince* up and shoved it back into its place on the shelf. Even though tidiness had never been a priority of his in the past, he had adopted the diligent habit in the last week. He had no desire to repeat the experience of having to pick up and reshelving all of the books he left spread out on the floor.

He had read a good number of the novels in this bookcase. Shakespeare was his favorite author so far, and he had almost finished the entirety of his collection of plays. But Shakespeare and the contents of this bookcase were only a fraction of the books in the room. He wanted to read them all, and planned to do so, but he couldn’t go on only reading day by day.

*I almost regret kicking Shion out earlier.*

He groaned, knowing he really must’ve been in a bad way if he was regretting the other boy’s absence. It was true that Nezumi was never bored when he was around, but that was only because he was too busy feeling annoyed or dumbfounded to feel anything else. But he had to give Shion some credit, because he kept his promise. Whenever Nezumi told him to get out or leave him alone, he left the room and didn’t return for at least a few hours. According to the clock on the wall, it had been a little more than two hours since he had banished Shion. He glared at it, but the pendulum continued to twinkle and swing dutifully.

*Maybe I’ll go take a shower.*

He had already taken one that morning, but the bathroom was as much of a change of scenery as he could get, and it was also the quietest place in the house. He was still contemplating his life’s direction when the door cracked open behind him. Nezumi watched as Shion stepped back into the room.

“It started raining,” Shion said without prompting.

Sure enough, Nezumi could hear the soft patter of rain. It was strange, but the only outside noise one could hear inside the room were the sounds of the wind and rain. Nezumi wasn’t used to hearing the elements, since every home and building in No. 6 was soundproofed, but he didn’t dislike it.

He crossed his arms and faced Shion. The other boy took in his defensive posture and sighed, crossing the room to his bed. He pulled the towel from the end of it and mussed his lightly dampened hair. After he’d finished, he looked at Nezumi.
“Why are you glaring at me? I’m not going to stay out in the rain. You’ve had enough time to cool down, haven’t you?”

“I want to go outside.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been in here for five days, and honestly, I have no idea why I am still here, because I’ve been angry and miserable for the majority of it. But I’ve hit my limit. There isn’t a single thing to do.”

“There are hundreds of books in here. Read one of those.”

“There are only so many stories a person can read before they go insane, and I’ve been flirting with that limit for the past three days. And that,” he pointed at the clock above the bed, “is not helping.” Shion smiled. “You can laugh all you want, but I’m dead serious. If something doesn’t change soon, the next time you go out, I won’t be here when you get back.”

Shion frowned. “Okay, I see your point. But I don’t know what I can do to help you.”

“Get me out of this room.”

“Nezumi…” Shion scratched the back of his neck and then bent down to pick up the mouse running circles around his feet. “We’ve talked about this. You know I can’t just let you out. You’re supposed to be keeping a low profile. It’s for your own protection.”

“Isn’t it for your protection? Or for your group’s protection, more like. I don’t remember asking for your help.”

“No. 6 has satellites looking for you.”

“Yeah, about that. If No. 6 really wanted me back, I have no doubt that they’d already be tearing West Block apart searching for me. But they aren’t, so I have no choice but to conclude that they’re not planning to fetch me anytime soon.”

Shion stopped petting the light brown mouse in his hand. “That… That doesn’t make sense. You were important to the city, they should definitely be looking for you.”

“Then why haven’t they stormed down here to reclaim me?”

This question appeared to vex Shion. He placed the mouse on his bedspread, but then looked like he was at a loss for what to do with his hands now that he had nothing to occupy them. He settled for crossing his arms in a mirror of Nezumi.

“Maybe they’re afraid? Or not afraid, per se, but worried about showing their hand so early. I mean, think about it. If they did come down here they’d have to go through us, and they know we have weapons and explosives, so they’d have to bring at least part of their army to ensure their success. But by doing so, they’d be revealing to the world that they have an army.”

“How are you so sure No. 6 has an army?”

Shion looked confused for a moment. “I’ve seen it,” he said slowly.

This was news to Nezumi. Although after letting it sink in, he found that it didn’t much surprise him to discover that No. 6 apparently had an army. Armies, weapons, and even talk of violence of
any kind were forbidden, technically. In the aftermath of widespread warfare, it was agreed between the six remaining city-states that, in order to preserve the last vestiges of the motherland and humanity itself, they would sign a peace treaty to ensure only harmony and prosperity going forward. Every school child in No. 6 knew this. The treaty was called the Babylon Treaty, after the castle it was signed in.

Every city was expected to honor this agreement and follow the decree to the letter, but it had become abundantly obvious to him over the years that No. 6 had been deviating from it. Although its veneer of perfection seemed to be constructed well enough that the other cities had yet to suspect anything was amiss. It even managed to earn the title of Holy City for its pristine design and utopian atmosphere.

“Anyway,” Shion continued, “now that I think about it, what we’re supposing could very likely be the case.”

“Great. Then if we don’t have to worry about retaliation from No. 6, there’s no reason why I can’t go outside.”

“Nezumi, it’s not that easy. Even without the immediate threat of No. 6, it’d still be a problem for you to be seen. No one but the people that were involved in rescuing you know you’re here.”

“I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t glorify my kidnapping by calling it a ‘rescue.’”

“People would ask questions,” Shion said, smoothly ignoring the jab, as well as the scowl that followed once Nezumi realized he was ignored. “I’d have to talk to Yoming before I can promise you anything.”

“Of course you do,” scoffed Nezumi. “Naturally.”

“I said I’d talk to him about it. What more do you want?”

“Shut up. You’re getting on my nerves again.”

Shion immediately stopped talking. Nezumi’s scowl lessened a bit as he took in the abrupt change in his demeanor. Why is he looking at me like that?

In the quietude, Nezumi could hear that during the course of their conversation, the patter of rain had turned into a rush and the wind had picked up. The weather outside had turned for the worse rather quickly. Shion was lucky to have returned when he did, or—

A slow smile crept across his lips.

“Shion,” he said sweetly. The other boy flinched. “You’re not thinking that I’d be so heartless as to send you out into the pouring rain, are you? Really, you wouldn’t think just because I didn’t get my way, that I’m going to take such a childish vengeance, would you?”

Shion plastered a strained smile onto his own face. “No, of course not. I wouldn’t do you the injustice…”

“Mm-hm.”

“Because I know you realize how lenient I’ve been this past week, and how kind it is of me to offer to talk to Yoming for you.”

The angelic smile slipped from Nezumi’s face. “Shion—”
“I’m getting in the shower!” he blurted, bolting toward the bathroom, and very nearly slamming the door behind him.

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“You want me to do what?”

“Talk to Yoming for me. Please?” Shion repeated, meeting his hands in front of him in a pleading gesture.

“I don’t see why you can’t talk to him yourself.” Safu kept her slouch against the windowsill, but she shifted a little to face him. Her cheek rested against her knuckle and she was watching him with an expression as bored as her posture. “Why do I have to do it for you?”

Thankfully, the storm abated after one night of furious rain, but the next morning was back to its usual dishwater grey skies. Shion had gone out in search of his friend. It was both of their days off, so he had been hoping to find her free and accommodating. Safu wasn’t one to spend her off days near any of the group’s haunts, but neither was she a sit-at-home type, so he took a chance and went to the small ramshackle building on the outskirts of town. When they were young, Safu had become enamored of a clump of wildflowers out front of it, and claimed the house as their secret play area. The years of neglect had not treated it kindly, but even now it felt to them like a sanctuary of sorts.

“He’ll say no if I ask him, but he’d be more willing to listen to you.”

“Hmph.” She flicked a wooden splinter out of a fist-sized hole in the windowpane.

So much for catching her in a good mood.

“Safu, are you alright? You seem a little angry. Did I do something?”

Safu didn’t answer immediately, and he became suddenly nervous that he had actually done something to upset her. But I don’t remember doing anything. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The wind outside picked up and the house groaned in protest. He wondered fleetingly how long the hideaway would last before it finally gave in and crumbled.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with me lately.”

Shion’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re mad at me because I spend too much time with you?”

He had been hanging out with Safu more recently. There weren’t exactly tons of things to do in the West Block besides go to work and shop, if you had the funds to do so. There were other forms of entertainment like the hotel or the playhouse, but Shion usually stayed away from the former on principle, and he forewent the latter because it made him miserable. He had tried the playhouse in the past, and still went once in a while with feeble hopes of its improvement, but it was not to be. The actors weren’t exactly top tier, and subsequently the performances were painful to watch. He almost shuddered at the memory of their rendition of Romeo and Juliet. The play had always been among his least favorite of Shakespeare’s, but even he felt a twinge of sadness watching it being butchered on stage.

He would choose being with Safu over any other activity that the West Block had to offer. She was good company and he enjoyed being with her. But if I’m getting on her nerves…

“Do you… want me to leave you alone for a while?”
Safu sighed. “I love spending time with you,” she insisted. “But I’m mad because you’re only doing it because you’re letting that elite bully you.”

Shion’s stomach fluttered. He hadn’t thought Safu knew about that. He had been careful not to mention the arrangement he made with Nezumi to her because he knew she wouldn’t approve. I don’t think I was acting suspiciously, but did she figure it out because I’ve been spending more time with her? His shoulders sagged.

“He’s not bullying me,” Shion conceded. “We made a deal.”

“What do you get out of it?”

“…I get to see you during the day, instead of being cooped up with him.” He offered her a smile.

“Aren’t you smooth,” she commented dryly. But she straightened up and turned to look at him again, and this, at least, was encouraging.

“Look, Safu, I know you don’t like Nezumi very much, but talking to Yoming about letting him get out of the room every once in a while would be beneficial for all involved.”

“What benefit would it have for Yoming? Because that’s all that matters. If he doesn’t get something worthwhile out of it, he’ll never agree. And that goes doubly because he already hates the elite, and he’ll suspect you put me up to asking. Just those points may be enough to shut the conversation down before it starts.”

“Well…”

Shion wracked his brain for an attractive lure with which to bait Yoming. His first thought was of Nezumi’s aptitude for machines, but he reluctantly dismissed it. Even though mentioning it to Yoming might do the trick, Nezumi had firmly rejected his offer of recruitment, and he didn’t want to break what little trust he had managed to build between them. He looked up to find that Safu was studying his face, her own expressing a bewildering sadness.

“I’ll think of something,” he said earnestly.

“Shion,” Safu sighed. Shion’s heart sank. She sighed more frequently lately, and he couldn’t help but think he was the cause. “Why are you bending over backwards for that guy?”

Shion experienced a swell of discontent at the insinuation. He didn’t think what he was asking for was too much.

“I’m just trying to do what’s right. I was the one who brought him into this mess, after all. We chose to be in the Resistance, but Nezumi didn’t choose any of this. I feel in some way… responsible. And a little guilty. I want to help him if I can.”

“You’ve already helped him. You saved his life. If it hadn’t been for you, he would’ve been carted off to the Correctional Facility, and then who knows what would’ve happened to him. He should be paying you back, if anything.”

Shion pondered her words for a moment. “Wait, that’s it! The Correctional Facility! Doesn’t Yoming have maps of the building? Nezumi lived in No. 6, so maybe he can provide information or insight on them that we missed. If we approached Yoming with that, he’d be more likely to agree, right? Since the—” He caught himself out of habit and corrected his wording, “Since he has an interest in the Correctional Facility.”
Only after he had amended his sentence did he realize it hadn’t been necessary; Safu hadn’t lost anyone in the Hunt, so she wouldn’t have been upset if he mentioned it.

The girl shook her head. “But he doesn’t know anything. He was quite clear about that the last time we grilled him.”

“It’s worth a shot, though. He was kind of in shock the first time, maybe he can remember more now that there isn’t so much pressure on him. We could ask him again. In the meantime, you could say you need to look at the maps for your research on the Elyurias thing, and you think that Nezumi’s perspective would be helpful. How are you doing with that project, by the way? Did you find any hints about what Elyurias might be?”

“No, nothing,” she said with a disgruntled scowl. “I told the girls to listen for it, but so far no one has heard or mentioned anything. There is talk of some kind of illness going around. Apparently, the officials are beside themselves. You’d think the world was ending the way they carry on.” She rolled her eyes. “But, yeah, nothing about any Elyurias. Whatever it is, it’s top secret. Just like everything else that happens in the Correctional Facility.”

“But Nezumi knew about it, so it’s possible he might know more. He’s our only connection to No. 6, so if anyone could give us clues about the Facility, he’d be our best chance. And even if he doesn’t know anything, it’s not like any harm would be done.”

“Try telling that to Yoming…” But Shion could hear a note of resignation in her voice. He perked up at it. Safu took one look at him and groaned. “That’s not fair. You’re playing dirty.”

“Please, Safu? You know I wouldn’t ask you if I could do it myself, but he won’t listen to me. You’re my only hope.”

She slumped over onto the windowsill. “Alright, fine. You win. I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you! You’re the best.”

“Yeah, yeah…” She turned away and rested her cheek against her hand. “I know.”

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Nezumi placed the pot over the kerosene heater and waited for it to boil. What he really wanted was a cold glass of water, but there was none in the room and Shion insisted that he boil all the impurities out of the water from the tap before he drank it. Like he needed to be told to do so. The only coldish water around came from a stream somewhere outside, and since he wasn’t allowed to go out there, and Shion was out, it was impossible to have his wish fulfilled.

Why am I being so obedient? I should just go out there and get my water, orders be damned. In fact, I’ve been here long enough. It’s already been two days since I gave Shion that ultimatum. That’s more than enough time. He eyed the door and then the water started gurgling. He cut the switch on the heater and settled in for the second round of tedious boredom, in which he waited for the water to cool. I’ll give it one more day. After that…

He considered his options. He hadn’t dreamed about or spoken to Her since his botched escape attempt. He had tried calling out several times, but She would not be summoned. He supposed She would only answer any questions he had on Her own time.

He had just transferred the lukewarm water into a cup when Shion burst into the room.

“Nezumi! Nezumi, I did it. You have permission to go outside.” He beamed at him.
Nezumi raised his eyebrows. The other boy didn’t appear to be joking. “Explain.”

“…Why aren’t you excited? You don’t even look surprised.”

“I assure you, I’m very excited. Especially to hear what kind of things you promised your boss I’d do for him, in exchange for this once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“There’s no need to be so suspicious. Safu talked to Yoming and he agreed on one condition.”

Nezumi sniffed. “Thought so.”

“It’s nothing bad. You just have to look at a map for us and give us any information you have about it. And… it’s only for tonight.” Shion’s enthusiasm curbed a little, but he regained his momentum. “Sorry about that, but that was the best we could do. But it’s something, right? He still agreed, so you’ll get to go out. And if you turn out to have a lot of information, we could probably convince Yoming to give you more free time.”

He makes it sound like I’m some pet that needs walking. But Nezumi withheld his annoyance to consider the information he was offered. Only one night wasn’t exactly ideal, but it was a start. He didn’t like to admit it, but the need to be somewhere other than that room was nearly overpowering.

Shion was watching him with an aura of accomplishment. It reminded him vaguely of the looks Kaoru’s dog used to give him. Nezumi narrowed his eyes. What? Does he want a pat on the head?

He opened his mouth to speak. He had many questions, but there was one in particular on the tip of his tongue. He fixed Shion with his most depreciating look.

“Hold on. You said Safu talked to Yoming? You mean you made your girlfriend do all the dirty work for you?” He whistled. “That’s pretty low. I’m sorry, but I can’t compliment you for that.”

Shion swallowed. “Well… It’s…” He kept his mouth open in case anything intelligible decided to work its way out, but after a moment of struggle, his face clouded over and he became suddenly fascinated with the sleeve of his coat.

Nezumi smirked at the boy’s pantomime of shame. Shion was entirely too easy to read. “What’s this map I’m supposed to look at?” he asked, granting the boy a reprieve. “Something about No. 6?”

“I can’t tell you that,” he mumbled. “We need to go to headquarters. Yoming will explain everything to you.”

“Ugh. Of course that guy will be there.” The water sloshed in his cup when he shifted. He had forgotten he was holding it. He downed it and placed the cup aside. “You said we’re doing this thing tonight? When do we leave?”

“Uh, right now, if you’re ready.”

“I’ve been ready for more than a week. Let’s go.”

Shion opened the door and held it as he approached. Nezumi suppressed a laugh.

“Well, someone’s mother raised him to be a gentleman,” he remarked as he passed. “Are you going to offer me your arm as we walk as well?”
“That’ll hardly be necessary, I think.” Shion turned to shut and lock the door.

A rush of wind blew through the underground corridor, and Nezumi relished the feel of it on his skin. He didn’t bother waiting for Shion as he mounted the stairs to the world above. The wind was stronger in the open where there was nothing to block it. It blew through the trees and plucked the colored leaves from their branches. They rustled as they danced along the dirt.

He drew in the first breath of fresh air he’d had in a week. It had an earthy scent that stuck in his throat on its way into his lungs: a concoction of dirt and dust, with just an edge of winter in it. It was nothing like the clean, crisp air of No. 6.

It was delicious.

A gust of wind sent a handful of leaves scurrying against his boots. He fixed his bangs, which had been mussed by the force, and ignored the chill creeping across his skin. He realized he should’ve put on or asked for more substantial clothing before he went out: he was wearing only a long-sleeved shirt and old cargo pants.

I need a jacket, he mused as his eyes swept the expanse. They fell upon the massive wall of No. 6. It was late afternoon and the wall shined pearly white in the rays of the sun. Its ability to sparkle in the light was attributed to the special alloy from which it was constructed. He had heard many call the sight godly, but looking at it looming over the spires of the West Block slums, it appeared to him like an aberration. It leeched all the light from its surroundings, leaving everything else to drown in darkness. It seemed that he was destined to live forever in the shadow of No. 6.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” said Shion from behind him.

“What is?”

“The wall. No. 6.” Nezumi turned. Shion was staring at the wall with a troubled countenance. “I often wonder how something that beautiful could be so cruel.”

Shion’s words were just another whisper in the dry soundtrack of wind and leaves. Then he blinked, and the expression was wiped cleanly away. He flashed Nezumi a quiet smile.

“Put this on and pull it over your head.”

He tossed something at him. It was the superfibre cloth that he had been given as a blanket the first night. Shion had since purchased an actual blanket for his nighttime use, and he hadn’t seen the cloth since. Nezumi did as instructed.

“Shall we go?”

“Yeah. Sure…”

Shion began walking, and Nezumi drew up beside him. He cast a sidelong glance at the other teen. He looked casual enough, ambling toward town with his hands shoved into his coat pockets, but he was frowning slightly and there was a strange, somehow unapproachable atmosphere about him.

I wonder what’s gotten him into such a brooding mood… But Nezumi wasn’t one for prying into people’s personal business, so he left it alone. After several minutes, Shion snapped out of it.

“So,” he chirped. “Before we get to headquarters, there are some things I think you should know. First and foremost, don’t make Yoming angry. Over the past week, I’ve noticed you aren’t
very good at controlling your anger and dislike for people, so I won’t bother asking you to be polite.”

Nezumi waffled between amusement and offense at this statement. Shion continued without a breath, “But keep the sarcastic remarks to a minimum, if at all possible. You may not like him, but he is the boss, and it’s because of him that you’re able to leave the room. Which reminds me, you should thank Safu for convincing him.”

“You should thank her.”

“I did already, but I’ll do it again, and then you can take that opportunity to thank her after, so you don’t feel awkward.”

“You know, I don’t appreciate this picture of social ineptitude you keep projecting onto me. I’m perfectly capable of being gracious and civil. It’s only that I don’t feel you’re deserving of that respect.”

“Is this the part where you bring up, yet again, how I kidnapped you and held you against your will?”

That wasn’t what he was going to say, but it pissed him off nonetheless.

“It’s the part where I tell you that you have to earn my respect, and right now you aren’t off to a good start.”

Shion didn’t reply immediately, so he knew he understood his meaning.

“Another thing you should know,” Shion began tentatively after a bit. “There are going to be other members at headquarters—not many, but enough. And they might… No, he’ll definitely ask who you are and why you’re here... Yamase—he’s the man whose basement we used—he won’t pry, and we can trust him not to say anything about what goes on, but the other member on duty tonight… He’s loyal and Yoming approved him, so he can be trusted. He’s just a little excitable, is all.”

Nezumi didn’t really care about the politics of the group, but he was experiencing a return of the contentment that came when he first stepped out of the bunker into the open air. His mood had improved enough that Shion’s inane chatter wasn’t as annoying as it usually was, so he allowed him to prattle on, only half listening.

“We call him Kaze, although that’s not his real name, and even ‘Kaze’ is a shortened form of a nickname.”

“What’s his nickname?”

Shion smiled broadly, and Nezumi had a feeling that he had been hoping he’d ask that question. “Kamikaze.”

Nezumi cocked an eyebrow. “How’d he get a name like that?”

“He’s our main weapons guy. He builds the explosives.”

Ah. That explains a lot. You’d have to be suicidal to work that job, especially in West Block. Since the world was supposed to have sworn off violence, he didn’t imagine there were many bombs or how-to manuals lying around, and in slums like these, the supplies were likely scarce. You’d essentially have to build the explosives by trial and error, except in that line of work, when
an experiment blew up in your face it had literal and lethal consequences.

“If you really want to put him in a good mood, call him by his full title, but otherwise just call him Kaze.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Hm… Is there anything else…”?

They had made their way into the town, although Nezumi noticed that Shion avoided any main streets in favor of back passages. There were still quite a few people leaning against the walls of the alleys in shady-looking groups, and there were a few dirty children rooting through the dumpsters. A little girl picking out a discarded apple core looked up when they approached and gave a small wave. Shion returned it, but neither he nor the girl stopped to chat.

At last they let out of the side streets and walked down a brief stretch. They were heading toward a building at the end of it. It looked like it once had a cupola atop it, but the structure had broken down into a splintered stump. It had a gray pallor, and although the building wasn’t remarkable in any way, there was something about its construction that struck him as odd. A man was waiting for them at the door. Nezumi recognized him as the nervous basement owner.

“Good afternoon, Yamase,” Shion said when they had reached him. “This is Nezumi.”

The man greeted him politely, as though he had never seen him bound and battered on his doorstep, and Nezumi responded in turn. They all entered the building together. The interior was open, with wood floors and pasty white stucco. There were a couple of long benches against the walls on either side and a medium-sized wooden table placed in the center of the room. It was much cleaner and less threatening than he imagined a terrorist hideout would be. At the far end of the room was an alcove. There were stacks of boxes in it, but what caught his attention was the cross, mounted on the wall above them.

“This used to be a church,” a voice said from behind him. He knew it was Safu before he turned around, which he did eventually do after consideration.

“Hey, Safu,” Shion chirped. “Thanks again for setting this up.”

“I just hope we get something out of it.”

Both she and Shion looked purposefully at Nezumi, though they may have had different reasons for doing so. Regardless, they felt the same sense of disapproval when he didn’t respond.

Shion scanned the room. “Where’s Yoming?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

“That’s strange…”

Suddenly, a large crow swooped down from the rafters and alighted on Shion’s shoulder. He started, but then sighed and reached up to scratch its neck.

“Hey, boy.”

Nezumi frowned. The bird was somehow familiar. Hadn’t a crow crashed into the Bureau car that day?
The crow received Shion’s attentions for a moment and then glided off to sit on the table. It made a guttural squawk at them and began preening.

“Oy, Shion! Long time no see.”

Another man came out of a door in the back of the room and strode over. Nezumi noted the gold bandana folded and tied around his bicep like an armband. The man gave Shion a lopsided smile before turning his attention to Nezumi.

“Who’s the kid?”

“This is Nezumi. Nezumi, Kaze.”

“Pleased to meet ya.”

“Yeah. You too.”

Nezumi hadn’t given much thought to what a weapons and explosives specialist might look like, but Kaze was simultaneously what he expected and not. He guessed he was in his early to mid-twenties, because his face still had a boyish aspect to it, but the stubble on his chin made him seem older. He had the shortest hair out of every person he had met in the West Block, which Nezumi thought was strange, because out of all the people he had met, he thought this man would have the most need for longer hair—he had no eyebrows. He was tanned, so there was a faint outline of where the eyebrows were supposed to be, but they appeared to have been singed off. If that wasn’t enough to make one uncomfortable, there was also a huge gun strapped to his chest, resting in its leather holster for all to see, like he was daring someone to pick a fight.

Kaze extended a hand for him to shake. Reluctantly, Nezumi did so, and he was met with an odd sensation against his palm. He masked his surprise and glanced down at Kaze’s hand as he pulled it away. He was missing his entire pinkie finger and two of the knuckles of his ring finger.

Kaze looked a little disappointed when he released his hand and Nezumi had yet to gawk or ask what had happened to it. “So why’s your name ‘Nezumi,’ by the way? You don’t really look like a rat... Your parents hate you or something? Or is it a nickname?”

And I thought Shion talked a lot. Speaking of Shion... The other boy and Safu were watching Kaze’s verbal assault with varying degrees of amusement. Bastards.

“It’s my name, as far as everyone here is concerned.”

“Oh, touchy. Nickname then, huh? It’s fine if you don’t want people to know your real name. There are all sorts here. My real name sucks, so I go by a nickname, too.” He paused in his rant and smiled at Nezumi in a suggestive manner. This time Nezumi was sure he was waiting for him to ask for more information.

I didn’t think it was possible, but this guy is even more transparent than Shion. And ten times more annoying.

Kaze actually pouted when Nezumi refused to take the bait for the second time. “Kaze is short for Kamikaze,” he huffed. Nezumi gave an uninterested “Mm” in response to this revelation, and Kaze moved on to his next question. “Where’d you come from, anyway? I’ve never seen you around before.”

Shion finally stepped in on his behalf. “He’s a contact from No. 6. Yoming brought him in.”
“No. 6?” Kaze’s brow twitched, and if he had eyebrows, Nezumi was certain one would be raised in question. He appraised Nezumi anew. “Explains why you’re so fancy.”

Safu smirked. Nezumi wasn’t sure how to take this comment.

Kaze leered at him. “What’d you do?”

“Come again?”

“You're a criminal, right? That’s the only way you can get out of No. 6. Or so I’ve heard. So, what’d you do? Must be pretty bad for them to kick you out. What’re you, like, fifteen?”

“Sixteen,” Nezumi bit out in spite of himself.

“Uh, Kaze, that’s a bit…” Shion started to say, but Nezumi spoke over him.

“I wouldn’t say the pledge,” he deadpanned.

“Huh? Pledge?”

“To announce my undying loyalty to the city. I refused to say it and they arrested me.”

Kaze glanced from one person to another before settling back on Nezumi. “You’re shitting me. They threw you out because you wouldn’t say some pledge?”

Nezumi shrugged ruefully. “Came to get me at the crack of dawn and everything. My grandmother begged them not to take me, but they wouldn’t listen. If I hadn’t escaped when I did, I’d likely be rotting in the Correctional Facility right now.”

“Fuck, man. That’s harsh. And I thought Yoming was exaggerating about how crazy No. 6 is... Hey,” Kaze drawled with a note of realization. He turned to Shion. “Is that why Yoming needed that bomb? To bust this guy out?”

“Kaze!” Yamase shouted. “You can’t talk about that!”

The outburst seemed to surprise even Shion and Safu, so Nezumi guessed either the older man wasn’t prone to shouting, or that they had forgotten Yamase was there, just as he had.

Kaze chuckled. “It’s fine, Yoming isn’t even here. Where is he, do you know, Safu? He should be here already. This map thing is his deal.” He gestured at the table. There were papers spread out on it, which Nezumi hadn’t noticed before, but now did, because the crow was picking at the corners of them.

“Hey!”

Kaze half-ran toward the bird, waving his hands. The crow cawed irritably at him and flutterted in the air for a moment before flapping over to the boxes in the alcove.

“Damn bird,” Kaze muttered under his breath as he inspected the papers for damage.

“Do you think it's a bad idea to start without him?” Shion whispered to Safu. “He is late, and he hasn’t sent any messages.”

Safu pressed her lips together and shrugged.

“Someone’s coming,” Yamase announced. He was peeking out the window near the front door.
“It’s not Yoming, though… It’s Getsuyaku.”

In response to this information, the entirety of the room looked confused.

“I take it he’s not the most popular member of the group,” Nezumi said aloud.

“He’s Yoming’s brother-in-law,” Shion provided.

“He’s not a bad guy or anything,” Kaze added with a shrug. “He’s just kind of a dud.”

Yamase shook his head and glared reprovingly at Kaze, just as another man walked in. He was middle-aged, with grey streaked hair and a gaunt face. He was carrying a tube of paper under his arm, which he brought to the table in the center while murmuring his greetings. He tried to place the papers down, but a few sheets slipped out of the middle of the bundle and crashed to the floor.

Kaze jumped. “Ey, watch it! Those weren’t easy to get.” He helped the man pick them up and smirked when he caught Nezumi’s curious gaze. “A guy died for these. Thankfully not one of ours.”

“He’s joking,” Shion said immediately, shooting the other man a baleful look. Nezumi wasn’t so sure he believed Kaze was.

Getsuyaku spent an impossible amount of time straightening the papers, while the rest of the room waited in anxious silence.

It was Safu who finally asked the question everyone was thinking. “Where’s Yoming?”

“He got caught up in some trouble downtown. But he asked me to bring the map and keep watch over everything.” He offered the room a small smile. “Don’t mind me.”

Hm. This turned out better than I could’ve hoped for. Now I don’t have to deal with that nutcase.

“Well I, for one, am happy to have you,” said Nezumi, smiling at Getsuyaku full force.

The man looked shocked, as though he had never received a kind look or word in his life. “Y-yes. You’re welcome?”

“Alright, let’s get this over with.”

Nezumi slunk to the table, making sure to stand as far from Kaze as possible. Getsuyaku stepped back a little, but he could feel the man hovering just behind his shoulder. He resisted the urge to click his tongue. Shion and Safu, too, joined him at the table, but Yamase remained by the window to act as look out.

The map was crudely rendered, and it was only after a moment that Nezumi realized that it had been hand drawn. If he hadn’t already suspected Kaze’s comment was not a joke, this would have caused him to doubt. The map depicted a huge building with several levels. The first schematic held the plans for two floors with at least fifty rooms between them, and there were five sheets spread on the table. He read the title in the top left-hand corner: Correctional Facility.

“What do you want me to do with these?”

Safu tapped the map. “Look at them and tell us if you know anything that could help.”

“Oh, well if that’s all, I’d be happy to. I don’t know anything.”
Safu’s glare could corrode metal.

“Come on, Nezumi, you barely looked at them,” Shion intervened.

“I don’t need more than a look to know I can’t help you. The government doesn’t exactly hand out pamphlets detailing the inner workings of their top-secret buildings. If you wanted information on the Correctional Facility, you should’ve waited until I got the grand tour before you ‘rescued’ me.”

“I knew it,” Safu seethed. “This is a waste of time. We never should’ve done this.”

“For once, I’d have to agree with you.”

“Uh…” The three teens turned to face Kaze. “I don’t know what’s going on, but Yoming’s going to be pissed if we pulled these things out for no reason. They don’t exactly bring up good memories.”

Safu shot him a dangerous look and Shion glanced nervously at Getsuyaku.

Nezumi frowned down at the piece of paper. “I don’t know what you expected. And besides, even if I did know something, I don’t see any reason why I should tell you. I may hate No. 6, but that doesn’t mean that I’m willing to throw my lot in with a bunch of terrorists.”

Kaze laughed. “So we’re the terrorists, huh? I don’t remember the last time we charged into No. 6 and blew hundreds of people away.”

The room went eerily quiet. Nezumi scanned the faces of those around him, but everyone except for Kaze refused to make eye contact. Even Kaze seemed to understand he’d said something wrong after a moment and looked abashed.

*Why do I get the feeling I’m missing something crucial?* His eyes settled at last on Shion, as he was his surest bet for an answer.

Shion shrank under his gaze, but eventually he said in a small, uncertain voice, “The Hunt?”

“What’s the Hunt?”

Kaze blinked at him. “You don’t know? Seriously?” Nezumi shook his head, a little angry at the hesitant atmosphere. Kaze made a face. “Well, fuck me. Yoming made it sound like it’s a sporting event to you people.”

“Is anyone going to tell me what you’re talking about?” He turned to Shion again.

The boy cleared his throat and finally looked Nezumi in the eye. “I told you before how I know No. 6 has an army because I saw it. Well…” His confidence gave out and his voice dropped so that it was barely above a whisper. “Every couple years the army comes down here without warning and… takes people.”

“’Takes’ people?” Nezumi’s eyes flicked to Kaze. “Hundreds of people?”

“We don’t know the numbers and we don’t know what they’re doing with them,” said Safu. “The only thing we do know is that they’re taken to the Correctional Facility, and not one person has returned.”

“That’s what the Resistance is,” Kaze cut in. “We’re building an army of our own, so that the
next time they come down here, we’ll be ready. We’re going to put an end to the Hunt. We’re the good guys, you're the terrorists. Or at least your city is.”

Nezumi felt ill. This was a little too much to process all at once.

“Nezumi—”

Shion reached a hand toward him, but he slapped it away. He didn’t bother acknowledging his or anyone’s reactions before he crossed the room to the benches against the wall and sat. He leaned forward on his knees and tried to make sense of the information.

*How the hell am I supposed to react to that? I knew No. 6 was no utopia, but that’s just...*

Nezumi knew from personal experience that the city wasn’t above using violence to get its way, but it could never be so overt about it within the city walls; No. 6 had a reputation to uphold. But no one was looking at the West Block. People didn’t like to talk about the place, but the unspoken opinion of all was that it was a topic better left undiscussed. Which was why he could believe that if No. 6 did decide to charge into the West Block and abduct a few—or a few hundred—no one inside the walls would be the wiser. Some might even outright ignore it. How many people had No. 6 erased while its citizens lived on in ignorance?

*They should have let you die with your parents.*

Nezumi inhaled sharply as the words resurfaced from the depths of his memory. That officer—Rashi—had admitted the city murdered his family. Part of him wanted to dismiss it, wanted to believe that the man had made it up to get a rise out of him, but the evidence to the contrary was more convincing than hope.

He felt stupid for not considering the possibility that their deaths were not accidental more seriously. Fires in No. 6 were rare, and in a city lauded for its progressivism, the notion of a family perishing from one seemed antiquated. He had thought this and suspected his parents’ deaths came about because of the government’s negligence.

No. 6 wasn’t a big city; the fire department and ambulances should have had more than enough time to get to the house and rescue the people trapped inside, and yet his parents had not been saved in time. Despite the city’s claims to equality, there was a very clear hierarchy, and as his parents were of Lost Town, they were afforded less importance. He had convinced himself that his parents died because No. 6 didn’t consider them worthy of immediate attention.

As it turned out, he had only been partially correct. The time discrepancy wasn’t an accident; neither was the fire.

What was it for? So they could get their hands on me? Why? No. 6… What is that place up to?

Nezumi ran his hand over his face. No one had followed him to the bench, though he could hear whispers coming from the group around the table. Even Getsuyaku had moved forward to take part in the hushed conversation. Nezumi pushed himself up and strode back to the table. The looks he received varied from uninterested to anxious, but he ignored them all.

“Hey, man, uh... About before.” Kaze scratched his chin and looked off to the side. “Sorry if I... You know.”

Nezumi waved it off and glared down at the maps on the table. “It’s fine. I already knew No. 6 was underhanded, I just didn’t realize how depraved it actually was. I’ll live. How many floors does the Correctional Facility have?”
“Ten,” Shion answered immediately. “Technically, only nine, but there’s a large blank space underneath the Facility that no one can figure out the purpose of.” Shion pulled out the paper on the bottom and spread it out for Nezumi to see.

“Fabulous. Let’s start there.”

“There isn’t much to work with,” Safu said. “Nothing is labeled on it. Except for a door.”

“It has to serve some purpose, otherwise it wouldn’t be on the plans.”

“Some of the guys think there’s an incinerator down there,” Kaze volunteered. He continued after he realized he’d captured everyone’s attention. “I mean, they take tons of people, but the Facility isn’t big enough to hold everyone. And no one ever comes back, so they gotta be doing something with them, right? So, some of the guys were saying that they kill everyone and then burn them so no one has proof that the Hunt ever happened.”

Shion shook his head. “That’s just a rumor. I don’t think there’s an incinerator down there. It wouldn’t make sense.”

Nezumi nodded. “If their only goal was to kill off part of the population, it’d be a waste of time and resources to take them to the Correctional Facility to do it. It’d be a lot easier just to shoot a bunch of people in the middle of the street. It’d only take a couple of minutes, and then they can be back over the wall and home in time for dinner. There must be another reason why they kidnap them.” Safu mumbled something which Nezumi thought he caught, but hoped he’d heard wrong. “You say something?”

She looked startled, but gathered herself quickly and stated in a clear voice, “Carbon fuel. That’s why I think they take them. Think about it: The world is a mess. There’s hardly any livable land left and natural resources are scarce. No. 6 is a big city, and there are five other city-states just like it, so how do they sustain their standard of living? Carbon fuel. It makes sense.”

She waited for a response, but no one said a word. Kaze and Shion stared in mute horror, while Getsuyaku shook his head at her, frowning intensely.

“No. 6 runs on solar power,” Nezumi sneered.

Safu crossed her arms and looked away. “That’s what they tell you,” she muttered under her breath.

“Any other bright ideas?”

“Why don’t you come up with something?” growled Safu.

He studied the blank space on the page. The only thing marked on it was a door labeled Point X, which led into the basement of the Correctional Facility. There were no other doors or windows to the outside on either floor plan. What did they need such an area for?

He didn’t know any specifics about the building, but if he worked backwards from what he learned from the officer who arrested him, it was possible that he could come up with some kind of theory. He knew No. 6 had been raising him for something, and that something was supposed to culminate in the Correctional Facility. I know they eliminated my family for some reason, and they’ve been watching me since, but why? What else is there?

He recalled the numerous times the old woman dragged him into the doctor’s for check ups, even when he insisted he wasn’t ill. He often felt worse after he’d been prodded, pricked, and
assailed with a million questions about how his body felt and whether he was remembering to eat healthy. These appointments decreased as he got older, but they remained an unpleasant memory. Why did they care so much about his health?

Then there was how he’d been placed in Chronos and forced through the Gifted Curriculum. That officer said it was to make him a “more favorable subject,” and that they had invested a lot of time and money into his development. At the time, he thought that he meant they were trying to turn him into a good citizen, but the way he said it, and the way he spoke of him as merchandise that they were delivering to someone at the Correctional Facility, hinted at something more. It made it seem like all his life he was being conditioned to serve a specific purpose, like he was some kind of… Lab rat.

He swallowed and glared at the empty space on the page. Drovess of people taken from the West Block and transported to a facility that couldn’t possibly hold them all; an unmarked floor that was separated from the upper levels and completely sealed off from the outside world. I don’t want to believe it, but if I’m right...

“Nezumi?” Shion leaned over to look at his face. “Something wrong?”

“What if they’re doing experiments?” he said slowly.


“Yes,” Nezumi said. “In that room. Maybe in other parts of the building, too, if there isn’t enough space.”

“What would No. 6 need human test subjects for?” Safu asked.

“Beats me.”

Shion frowned. “Even if they are doing experiments and they’re spreading the people throughout the facility, there’s still not enough room. We have to keep in mind that there are also personnel working in the Correctional Facility, and I doubt many of them are trusted with confidential information. They would have to control all the variables, the amount of people and place especially, because they couldn’t risk people who don’t know seeing what they’re doing. So if there are experiments going on, they aren’t using everyone.”

“Then why do they take so many?” Safu asked with an edge of disgust. No one in the room liked the direction the conversation was going, least of all the West Block residents.

If they wanted to use me for something like experiments, then they put a lot of effort into controlling what I could and couldn’t do, so maybe there are specific criteria?

“Maybe even though they only need a few, they need a particular type of person. I don’t imagine the officers are willing to hang around the West Block long enough to be choosy, so they just stuff a bunch into a car and hope for the best, and then once they get to the Correctional Facility they sort out the ones they need, and the ones they don’t… Well, they don’t return, so maybe there is an incinerator after all.”

A heavy silence lay over the room as everyone tried to work out what such a conclusion could mean. Nezumi suddenly felt a giddy feeling bubbling up in his chest, and he clenched his jaw shut to stop a fit of laughter from escaping his lips. I can’t believe I’m even considering this. Maybe the Correctional Facility isn’t running human experiments; maybe it was just me they wanted to experiment on. Maybe I’m wrong about that, too.
“That’s sick,” Safu spat. “Just because we’re from West Block, they think it’s okay to sort us like garbage? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“It’s screwed up,” Kaze agreed in a dark voice. “But it doesn’t change anything.” He looked around the room. “Our goal is to stop the Hunt, yeah? So if No. 6 uses the Hunt to get people for whatever the hell they do in the Correctional Facility, then the way I see it, we just have to blow the fucker off the map.” He flashed his canines in an animalistic sneer.

The corner of Nezumi’s mouth twitched. Maybe he had been too quick to judge Kaze.

Safu sighed. “I wouldn’t mind if we did, but how? We’d never be able to get close enough, especially now that we’re on No. 6’s radar. They’ve probably doubled the security in that place in preparation of an attack. I know I would’ve.”

“And there’s already so few holes in their defense. It’s practically impossible now,” Shion added ruefully.

“What if we attach a bomb to someone’s chest and let No. 6 capture them, and then after they’re inside the Correctional Facility, we can set it off. That’s bound to do some damage to their defenses. I’d do it, if I knew it’d work.”

Nezumi blinked. *Kamikaze indeed.*

“Kaze,” Shion said sternly, “you shouldn’t throw away your life so recklessly. No one would approve of that plan. And what would happen to Yuichi if you did something like that? You’re all he has left.”

Kaze grimaced. “I don’t need to hear that from you. Yuichi freaks out no matter what I do. It’s none of his business what I do with my life. Besides, if I succeeded in blowing up the Correctional Facility, I’d be getting justice for our parents. Even he should be able to respect that.”

“And Yuki? What about her?”

Kaze was silent.

Nezumi shook his head. The conversation was getting out of his depth. “The bomb idea wouldn’t work,” he said, interrupting Shion and Kaze’s staring contest.

“Why the hell not?”

“First of all, the Security Bureau would check if you were armed before bringing you in. Secondly, everything in No. 6 is electronically monitored. You need a chip or card clearance if you want to go anywhere or bring something into another zone, and I doubt the Correctional Facility is any different—in fact, I imagine it’s ten times worse. If you did manage to sneak a bomb past the Bureau, the minute you stepped into the Correctional Facility and the computer registered a foreign object, you’d be blown sky high.”

Kaze deflated. “What other choices do we have, then?”

“I don’t think we have any choices,” said Safu. “Unless we had an extremely influential contact within the Correctional Facility, I don’t think we’d even be able to get our foot in the door before we were shot.”

Shion frowned at the floor plan. “And without knowledge of the security system inside we wouldn’t get far even if we did get in.”
Nezumi nodded. “You’d need both a way in and something to disable the security system to have even half a chance.”

“Well, I’m sure I could make something to bust our way in with, but techie stuff like disabling security systems isn’t my thing. Unless blowing up the security will do the trick?”

“It requires a little more delicacy than that,” Nezumi said dryly. “Blowing it up could cause a lockdown, depending on how the system is constructed. The best way to do it would be to override the computer, but I don’t think anyone here has the skill, so the next best option would be to upload a virus to the mainframe.”

Safu scoffed. “I don’t think anyone here knows how to do that either.”

Shion inhaled sharply beside him and Nezumi sent him a silencing glare. The other boy stiffened and ducked his head. Unfortunately, the exchange did not go unnoticed.

“What is it? Did you think of something?” Safu asked.

“No, nothing like that,” Shion answered lightly. “I got a chill from the cold.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and glanced at Nezumi. “Shion, what are you not telling us?”

*Crap. I forgot how perceptive she is. And Shion sucks at lying. Dammit.*

“It’s nothing, really.”

Kaze frowned. “What? You know something, Shion?”

Shion cast a helpless look at Nezumi and then stared down at the ground. Nezumi rolled his eyes. *Pathetic.* If this went on any longer, he was sure Shion would break under the pressure, and if he didn’t end up ratting on Nezumi himself, he’d make it obvious to Safu that Nezumi was withholding information.

But to his surprise, Safu gave up. “Whatever,” she said, sighing in exasperation. “It doesn’t look like we’re going to get any further with this. Getsuyaku, do you mind if we stop for now?”

Getsuyaku looked startled at having been addressed so suddenly, but managed to say, “I’m sure it won’t be a problem. But I’ll have to report everything that happened to Yoming.”

She nodded. “Fine by me. You’ve got the maps? All right then, I’m heading out. I have to take care of something.”

She nearly stomped from the room. Shion frowned at her back and winced when the door slammed behind her.

“Oy, Nezumi.” Kaze had walked around the table to stand beside him. “You’re kinda a punk, but you’re not half-bad for a No. 6 citizen.”

*Ever the fine conversationalist.*

“As far as a person who insists on being called Kamikaze goes, you turned out to be exactly as I expected.”

“Oh yeah?” This appeared to cheer him considerably. “I’m gonna go ahead and take that as a compliment. I guess I’ll see you around?”
Nezumi smiled blandly. “I doubt it.” He tossed a look at Shion, who made another apologetic face.

“Huh? Why not? You’re in the Resistance now, aren’t you? You’re gonna have to see me again some time, whether you like it or not. It’s better if we’re friends.”

“Heh. No, I’m not in the Resistance, nor do I plan to be.”

“What’re you talking about?” Kaze looked at Shion. “Did Yoming only rent him for a day or something? What gives?”

“Kaze,” Yamase snapped from his post by the window. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

Kaze made a face at him. “Well, can you blame me? Don’t tell me you’re not curious.” Despite his protest, he relented with a shrug. “Okay then, I guess I won’t be seeing you around, for whatever secret reason. It was nice meeting you, anyway.”

He clapped Nezumi on the back with such force it took all of his concentration not to wince. Kaze flashed him a goofy grin and went to the window to grumble at Yamase.

“Interesting guy.”

“I told you he was blunt. Sorry about that. I was careless.”

“You need to work on your lying. It’s embarrassing,” Nezumi said as he strode to the door.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, there’s a pseudo OC in here. xP Hope you enjoyed Kaze.

P.S. Please listen to this song. It's very important: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdQcddfFec
When Nezumi stepped outside headquarters, the draft of cold air made him shiver. The color in the sky was beginning to wane and clouds were rolling in from the west. It looked like it would rain later that evening. Nezumi went down the small set of stairs and scanned the shoddy structures on either side of the street. Smoke was seeping out from the tops of some of the roofs and there was the faint tang of fire in the air.

Shion came up beside him and followed his line of sight to the black billows over the rooftops. “Are you okay?”

The question caught him off-guard and he turned to look at the other boy. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“The Hunt,” he said quietly.

A burst of cold air almost made him shudder again, but he covered it up with a droll smile. “I’ve already said it once. Nothing you can say about No. 6 would surprise me. You look like you’re handling it worse than I am.”

“Believe it or not, the people you saw today are among the most well adjusted. We didn’t lose nearly as much as some have.”

“I imagine people must have been jumping to join the cause back then.”

Shion checked Nezumi’s face for sarcasm, but he couldn’t read anything he saw on it. “They were. Yoming’s charismatic, and he shared their pain. He lost his wife and son in the Hunt a few years back.”

“Is that when he went off the deep end?”

“Yoming was always ambitious. The loss of his family just made him more… focused.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

Shion seemed to feel he had shared enough, because he changed the subject and started walking. “By the way, thanks for your help with the maps.”

“I didn’t actually do anything.”

“You brought up some interesting points, though. What made you come up with that theory, if
you don’t mind me asking?”

Nezumi eyed him speculatively. “Something the officer that arrested me said.” Before Shion could inquire further on the matter, he said, “Hopefully it pleases your boss enough that he’ll give up putting me on house arrest. In the meantime, I suppose I have no choice but to go back to into my cage and behave until someone has use for me again.”

“You don’t have to say it like that…”

“Why? I’m just telling it like it is. If hearing it makes you uncomfortable, maybe you shouldn’t be in the hostage business.”

Shion bit his lip as he stared at Nezumi. “…Maybe.”

Nezumi raised his eyebrows. What’s this? Is he actually having second thoughts? Shion shifted under his scrutinizing gaze and opened his mouth to say something more, but a voice called out to him before he could.

They turned to see Safu standing at the corner of the building.

“Safu?” Shion blinked. “I thought you left.”

“Come over here. I want to talk to you. And Nezumi.”

She motioned for them to follow her. Nezumi cocked an eyebrow, but trailed behind Shion when he obeyed without any further questions. Once they were shielded behind the building, she whirled around and placed her hands on her hips.

“What is it you know that you don’t want to tell everyone?”

“Safu,” Shion said tiredly. “It’s not for me to say.”

She looked at Nezumi and demanded the same question of him. “I waited until we were in private, and you owe me for getting you out here in the first place. The least you can do is tell me what’s going on.”

Nezumi pinched the bridge of his nose. It didn’t look like she’d allow them to leave until she got an answer.

“I used to work with codes and machines in No. 6,” he droned. “If I had the resources and time, I could create the virus you’d need to get into the Correctional Facility. I already did it once.” He was feeling too jaded to take pleasure in the surprised looks the two teens gave him. “But before you get any ideas, you should know that the drives I put it on are back in No. 6, and the code took me three years to write.”

Although, it only took so long because I had to do it in secret. But I don’t need to mention that.

He had originally planned to use the drives to hack into the computer in the Moondrop and escape, but the whole thing had blown up in his face. It was a little depressing now that he thought about it. All that work for nothing.

Years ago the research institution that used to be located in the Moondrop migrated to the Correctional Facility, with the excuse that they needed a separate space in which to carry out their research. A computer identical to the one in the Moondrop, only smaller, was constructed for their use. As this became the mother system, those familiar with the city’s technology referred to it as
Mother, and its predecessor as Grandma.

Since the two computers were so similar, he could probably use the drives on Mother in the Correctional Facility. If he wanted to, that is.

“Why couldn’t you say that in front of everyone else?”

“I like being mysterious. That, and it’s none of your business.”

For once Safu didn’t snap back at him. She seemed to be contemplating something. “The drives are in No. 6? There’s no way to get them at all?”

She looked him directly in the eye and he could tell she was expecting to catch him lying. Unfortunately for her, though, he had no need to lie in this case. He smiled blithely.

“Of course there is. All you have to do is walk into No. 6 and ask to search my house. Shouldn’t be too hard.”

That got the usual reaction from her. “I got it. There’s no reason to be sarcastic.” She huffed. “You guys should go back. Thanks for the help, even though it wasn’t much.”

_Oh? She actually bothered thanking me semi-seriously._

“What?” she said, taking in his amused expression. “You managed to not be a complete jerk today and at least tried to help. That deserves some acknowledgement, even though your personality still sucks.” Nezumi smirked. “Anyway, I’m heading out. You didn’t remember anything else about that Elyurias thing by any chance, did you?”

“No.”

Safu clucked her tongue. “Figures.”

She said goodbye to Shion and disappeared between the buildings. They began walking back to the bunker, though neither was in a particular hurry. Barely a minute passed before Shion struck up a conversation.

“I didn’t know you made something like that. Were you planning to escape No. 6?”

Nezumi shoved his hands in his pockets. He was tired of talking today. “Why would I do that? No. 6 was such a wonderful place to live and I had a lot of good friends there.”

Shion was silent and Nezumi blew out a breath. The air fogged lightly in front of him. Winter would be upon them soon.

“Do you want to go for a walk through town?”

“Huh?” Nezumi stopped and faced Shion.

Shion shrugged like he hadn’t said anything out of the ordinary. “Well, I thought since we’re already out you might like to explore a little. But if you’d rather not, we can just go back to the room.”

Nezumi’s mouth curved into a smile. “Won’t your boss be pissed?”

Shion thought about it, frowning slightly. “Yeah,” he said, but then continued in a small, almost secretive voice, “If he found out.”
Nezumi’s eyebrows shot up. *He might have more backbone than I gave him credit for.* But just in case, Nezumi waited before answering. Shion did not sneer sarcastically or take back his words; he only seemed to be growing more self-conscious the longer the quiet stretched between them.

Shion fidgeted and went to rub his neck. “If you don’t want to, that’s fine. I just thought—”

“Sounds like fun. We can get me a jacket while we’re out.” To illustrate his point, he pulled the superfibre tighter around his shoulders.

“Oh. Yeah, we can do that.” Shion knit his brow and Nezumi wondered whether he only just realized how sparingly he was dressed. “We’ll get that first, while the shops are still open.”

He led the way down the narrow side street from earlier. There were still people loitering, but there were less of them. They let out of the alley and Shion turned left onto a wide dirt road. The biggest contrast between the back streets and the main road was that, while the back streets were dingy and seedy, the main road was seedy and cluttered. It was just as dirty and the air still smelt like a combination of garbage, sweat, and rotting meat, but now the sights and smells were more concentrated. The buildings that lined the sides were a hodgepodge of shapes and textures, like whoever built them just threw the pieces one on top of the other and glued them together as they fell. Electrical lines crisscrossed overhead in an intricate web, and Nezumi wondered whether they might be the only things holding the towering buildings upright.

There were people milling about in the middle of the road, but even though it wasn’t packed, Nezumi felt a slight discomfort at the sight of so many people moving with so little organization. In No. 6, street traffic was orderly, with strict rules on where, when, and which way to walk. No one ever bumped into each other and accidents were almost nonexistent. But the West Block had no such order and the streets were a mess of jostling, cursing, and leering. It would eat him alive if he wasn’t careful.

“Stick close,” said Shion as he pushed his way through the throng.

Nezumi did his best to keep up, hesitant at first to force himself past people, but after being elbowed roughly, and thoroughly cursed out by a lean teenaged girl, he decided to throw manners to the wind. Once he did so, he found getting through the crowd was much easier. He felt a light tug on his sleeve and turned to see Shion motioning to a tent. It appeared to be a used clothes shop, judging by the garments lining the walls and hanging from the ceiling.

“Ah, you’re sweet talkin’ me, Ah just know it.” Her looks turned thoughtful. “Ah don’t
suppose you know what’s goin’ on up the street?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s been an awful racket since earlier. Word is Mister Yoming and those Disposers are at it again.”

Shion pressed his lips together. “It’s possible… There have been a few incidents.”

It occurred to Nezumi that such an incident might have been the reason for Yoming’s absence earlier. When he glanced at Shion, he could read in his eyes that he was thinking along the same lines.

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” Shion said to the woman.

“Oh, no, ‘course not. ‘Long as it don’t affect my business.” She was all smiles again. “You must be looking for something special. Something for this lovely gentleman, Ah suppose? A coat or a sweater? It is awfully cold outside.”

“A coat,” Nezumi said tersely.

He suppressed a look of disgust when she raked her eyes down his body again. Instead, he smiled pleasantly at her, and she hummed in approval before flitting to the back of the room to pull out a stack of clothes.

“Choose whatever you like, sir. They’re all the very best qualitay goods.”

Nezumi sent Shion a weary look when her back was turned and the other boy grinned. He sorted through the pile, but none of them looked like they were of the “best qualitay.” Half of them had stains or tears in the seams, and the other half looked like girls clothing or stuff Shion might wear, but he wouldn’t be caught dead in. He shook his head at Shion and the other boy nodded.

Shion made a show of inspecting the goods and then looking disappointed. “I have to say, I’m a little insulted. I’ve been here before—I know you have better goods than this. Or do you really want me to take my business elsewhere?”

“Oh mah, no, sir. ‘Course not. Ah do apologize,” she drawled. She was trying to keep her tone professional, but he could see her smile tighten a little at the edges. “Let me… Oh, yes, Ah almost forgot! Ah’ve got something really fine in the back that Ah’ve been saving. Ah’ll go and get it right away. You boys don’t go anywhere now.”

She disappeared behind a dirty curtain and came out with a jacket. “Here it is. Fine, isn’t it?”

Nezumi stepped forward and took the article from her. It was a leather biker’s jacket, and although worn, it wasn’t in bad condition. He unzipped it and pulled it on. It fit snugly to his frame, and seemed warm and durable enough.

“Oh mah! Don’t you look just the handsomest!” the shop owner enthused.

“Mm. Not too bad.” He zipped it up. “How much?”

“Ah, well, for you Ah’ll give a special deal of only three silver coins. A very reasonable price for a one of a kind jacket.”

Shion raised his eyebrows. “Three silver coins? Did you steal it from someone in No. 6?”
“Why, Ah’d never.” The woman looked positively aghast. “It’s only that it’s a jacket of the very best qualitay.”

“I’ll give you two silver.”

The woman puffed up like a disgruntled bird. “It is a very special item. Ah just cannot allow less than three silver.”

Haggling was not something one did in No. 6, but the concept was easy enough to pick up on. It was all about countering and manipulation, and since his life in the city had revolved around nothing but those tactics, Nezumi figured it couldn’t hurt to try his hand at it.

Nezumi gave a sigh, loud and heavy enough to attract attention, and unzipped the jacket. “Shion, it’s fine. If she won’t sell it for cheaper, it doesn’t have to be this one.” He shrugged it off and handed it back to the woman with barely a glance. “Come on. I think I saw another clothing store a little way up the street.”

Shion looked like he was about to argue, but Nezumi gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder. He was hoping it’d look encouraging, when really he was trying to signal Shion to play along. The boy was startled by the familiar gesture, but fortunately seemed to suspect enough not to be obvious about it.

“Yeah. It’s probably best to shop around,” he agreed after a split second. “No point in spending that much without checking other stores first.”

“Exactly.” He offered the plump shop owner a winsome smile. “Thanks anyway, Miss. I’m sure you’ll find someone rich enough to buy that jacket in no time.”

They turned to leave. There were only two possible outcomes: 1) they would be called back and she would take the money or haggle for another deal, or 2) she would be stubborn and let them go, in which case they probably would go to another store. Either way, he wasn’t losing anything. He liked the jacket, but it was fine if he didn’t get it so long as he got something.

“Now wait just a minute,” the woman called. He smirked inwardly, and glanced over his shoulder. “What if Ah threw in another item? A hat or gloves for the winter. It’d still be three silver coins, but you’d get one extra item. Very generous—you won’t be able to find a better deal than that, Ah promise you.”

Shion nodded when Nezumi checked for confirmation, but instead of agreeing immediately he hummed thoughtfully and pretended to think about it.

“I suppose I can check if you have anything worth the extra silver.” He scanned the piles of gloves, hats, and socks and pulled out a pair of thin leather gloves. “These’ll do.”

The woman’s face was sour, but she didn’t dispute him, even though it was clear that she wanted to. She probably regretted offering the deal the minute the words left her mouth. Her loss, he thought smugly.

“No pleasure doing business with you.” He fixed her with a final grin after the money and the articles were exchanged. She didn’t bother responding and stomped sulkily back into the shadows of her clothes piles.

Once they stepped out of the tent, Nezumi found himself growing more satisfied with his recent purchase. The sun was beginning to set, and the temperature had dropped even lower. He zipped the jacket all the way up underneath the superfibre cloth and pulled his gloves on.
“Should’ve went for the socks.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You’ll go through them a lot quicker, especially in the winter. And they’re a lot more useful than gloves. You can even wear socks as gloves if you needed to.”

“I’m not wearing socks on my hands.”


“Don’t be. I told you before; I’m not inept. I have many useful skills, maybe even more than you.”

“You think?” Shion said with a note of amusement. “I wonder. I’ve had to work my whole life for everything I have, but you’ve always had everything given to you. I’m pretty sure I win when it comes to life experience.”

“Just because I lived in No. 6 doesn’t mean I lack life experience. Escaping detection in that city requires finesse, especially when I knew I was being watched 24/7, and I managed to do it for my entire life. My experiences should probably count more, because the odds were always against me.”

“I’m not going to bother pointing out the irony in that sentence. So, what skills do you have that I don’t?”

“I’m a better liar, for one. I don’t know how you can claim to be a veteran of the West Block and still suck as much as you do.”

Shion frowned. “I’m not a bad liar.”

“Then you must be a better actor than I am.”

“Hey! It’s Shion!”

At first, Nezumi didn’t know where the shout came from, but then a young girl and boy pushed their way out of the crowd and barreled toward them. The girl looked older than the boy by a few years, and they had the same brown eyes and slightly wavy hair. Shion seemed surprised by their exuberance, but receptive nonetheless.

“Hey, Saki. Hey, Eiji. You’re looking better. Is the cold gone?”

The little boy grinned, revealing a few gaps where he was missing teeth. “Yup!”

“That’s great.”

The three grinned at each other like old friends.

“Do you know everyone in the West Block?” Nezumi asked.

“Of course not.”

The children looked at him curiously, and the boy, Eiji, even took measures to step behind his sister. The girl for her part squinted up at him with a serious, although not unkind, expression.
“Who are you?”

“Nezumi.”

“Nezumi?”

The girl blinked and then turned to look at her brother to see if he found the name as strange as she did. He giggled and came out from behind her. Apparently Nezumi was less frightening now that the child knew his name and thought it was funny.

“Does Shion take care of you, too?”

“Uh…” He raised an eyebrow at the teen in question.

“Nezumi’s not a patient, he’s my friend. Although… I guess I am taking care of him. For now.” He sent Nezumi an amused smile, in response to which Nezumi clicked his tongue.

The little girl looked him over with pursed lips. “He doesn’t look like your friend. He looks mean.”

Shion chided the girl for being rude, but he was chuckling while doing it, so it lost all its authority. Nezumi scowled. He never liked children much and it was precisely for this reason.

“It’s late,” he said, refusing to rise to a child’s taunt. “Won’t your parents be worried?”

“Don’t got any,” Eiji replied.

Neither the boy nor the girl looked saddened or offended by this fact, so Nezumi didn’t bother apologizing, but he felt a little awkward for bringing it up.

“Nezumi’s right, though, guys. You shouldn’t stay out much longer. It’s getting cold, so make sure you keep together tonight, okay?” The children nodded.

“’Kay. Bye, Shion! Bye, Nezumi!” The little girl took her brother’s hand and led him away while he waved.

“You take care of sick orphans?”

“I take care of a lot of people,” said Shion, starting to move through the crowd again. “That’s my job.”

The throng was beginning to thin out as people ducked into food tents or made their way home. The noise of the street had faded to a low buzz, punctuated by seductive coos from dark alleyways and the occasional bout of drunken laughter.

“So you’re the Resistance’s medical man? That explains why you’re so fixated on my physical condition. You’re slightly less of a creep now.” Shion looked offended, but Nezumi shrugged and continued, “Were those kids in the Resistance, too?”

The girl couldn’t have been more than ten or eleven years old, but from what he’d seen and experienced of the West Block so far, he wouldn’t be surprised if they let children into the Resistance. It seemed no one was too young for the cause.

“They aren’t. Children aren’t allowed in the Resistance. I just know them.”

“You know, I thought it was just a coincidence, but after today I’m beginning to wonder. Why
is everyone in your group so young?"

“People don’t exactly live long here,” Shion answered as a matter of fact.

That was enough to stunt the conversation. As they meandered down the street, Nezumi studied the people along the side of the road. A woman, who was either drunk or otherwise impaired, staggered to the side of a building and doubled over. He averted his gaze before he witnessed anything unpleasant. A cloud of smoke billowed out of a tent and a group of teens coughed and growled in annoyance as they passed. The men eating inside snapped an angry retort at them. So far it seemed that downtown West Block was just as No. 6 envisioned it: dirty, loud, and coarse.

_The only thing missing is the rampant crime._

_BANG!_

He and Shion froze on the spot.

“Was that…?”

“Maybe we should—”

_BANG!_


He spun around and took off running the way they came. Nezumi followed suit, pushing past anyone who got in his path. He felt he was running a lot lately, but that was fine by him; he’d rather flee than stick around and get shot. Besides, it became a little exhilarating once you got over the possibility of your death should you fail to escape.

He looked ahead of him and realized Shion wasn’t anywhere to be found, which wouldn’t be cause for concern if he knew how to get back to the bunker from this part of town. But he didn’t, so he slowed and scanned the crowd.

“Nezumi!” He turned and saw Shion jogging behind him. “You’re faster than me,” he said with a degree of surprise after he’d caught up.

Nezumi peered back down the street, but there didn’t appear to be any dangerous goings-on. “It would seem so.”

“Huh…” Shion’s brow furrowed. “I kind of feel like I lost somehow.”

Nezumi snorted. “Don’t be so petty. Besides, it’s only natural I should be faster. I am taller than you.”

“What?” Shion leered at the top of his head. “No way. We’re the same height.”

“Yeah, if you stand on your toes maybe.” Nezumi began walking and the other boy hurried to follow alongside him. “Hey, we can add that to the list.”

“What list?”

“Of skills I have that you don’t.”

“Being tall isn’t a skill,” came the bitter reply.
“Have it your way, then,” he conceded, already having lost interest in the conversation. “Hurry up and take the lead. I didn’t come this far just to get shot standing in the middle of the street because you can’t get over your inferiority complex.”

Shion grumbled a predictable line about having no such complex, but walked ahead nonetheless. Nezumi focused on memorizing their route for future use, and felt satisfied with his effort when they reached a part of the neighborhood that was familiar to him.

“Nezumi,” Shion said without turning.

Nezumi felt a sense of foreboding at the address. Whatever Shion meant to say, he instinctively knew he wasn’t going to like it.

“About your theory.” Now he did turn, and the expression on his face was grave. “Was No. 6 experimenting on you?”

The question left Nezumi cold. All the evidence suggested that the city had been; there was no doubt about that. The only question was what benefit or disadvantage was there in admitting this to Shion?

“Of course,” Nezumi said with a wry smile. “The whole city is one big social experiment, and I was a Petri-dish elite. Conditioning by the government comes with the territory.”

Shion furrowed his brow. “You’re deflecting. There is something, isn’t there? What did they —?” All traces of humor evaporated from Nezumi’s face, and Shion flinched at the steely glint that came into his eyes. “I—I’m sorry,” he swallowed. “It’s none of my business.”

“You should do something about that interrogation habit of yours. I may be stuck with you for the time being, but I’m not going to put up with you sticking your nose into my personal life. Let’s get something straight: we’re not friends, and I don’t trust you. We’re strangers, and the sooner you accept that, the easier this will be for the both of us.”

He brushed past Shion and strode a few paces forward. “Oh, and Shion?” he added, twisting back to face him. “Why don’t you take another walk?”

Chapter End Notes

Biggest difference between Nezumi and Shion: Shion doesn’t leave you to fend for yourself in the crowded streets of West Block.
The scent of wildflowers was strong in the air. He was standing on a hill overlooking a vast field of white flowers. From his perch he could clearly see a lake over the crest of a faraway hill. The wind caressed his cheeks in soft tendrils and sent an army of white tufts drifting across his vision.

**This is that place.**

It was the same meadow, but the grasses were shorter than before, and the weather was pleasantly warm rather than suffocating. He guessed that this time he was transported into the middle of spring, rather than summer. He turned around and saw the deep green forest behind him. Without the terrifying silhouettes and raging flames, it seemed tranquil, even welcoming. The gentle sound of birdsong flowed out of the recesses of the wood. He wanted to go inside, but he resisted the urge and listened hard to the wind. There was no whisper, only the soft sound of air sifting through the trees.

*Where is She? Where are you?*

He spoke the last sentence aloud, but no sound came out. Even so, he knew somehow that his words had been heard. He stared out at the reflection of the azure sky in the lake water. It felt odd atop the hill, as though he was on a stage for all to see. The flowers and grasses below looked so soft swaying in the breeze and he suddenly felt the urge to run down into them and chase the small white tufts around the field.

*It feels like they're waiting for something. Maybe…*

He suddenly knew what it was he was expected to do. He breathed in and the words poured from his lips.

*The wind carries the soul away, humans steal the heart*

*O earth, O tempests; O heavens, O light*

*Let everything cease,*

*Let everything be,*

*and live*

*O soul, my heart, O love, my memory*

*Return home here*

*And stay*

The breeze picked up and blew his loose hair back from his face. He could hear the all-too-familiar hum riding on the wind and it told him this was what he was meant to do. He closed his eyes and savored the feeling.

*The wind carries the soul away, humans steal the heart*
But here I will remain
to keep singing

Please

Deliver my song

Please

Accept my song

He kept his eyes closed for a moment, listening to the sounds around him. All at once the wind hushed and the birdsong faded. He opened his eyes, but the view did not change, the meadow had only stilled and the white fluff was dropping out of sight.

I received your song.

Her voice fell like rain around him, but he could not see anything but the field of flowers.

You wish to speak to me, Singer?

He struggled to decide which question to ask first. He wasn’t sure how long he had.

“What are you? Why are you here?”

I am not of human comprehension. I have no name, nor reason for being. I am.

He swallowed, his doubts confirmed. Whatever the voice was, it was not human.

“But you want to destroy No. 6. Is that not a reason for being?”

I was long before No. 6 was built. Destroying that city is not my reason for being, but it is my design.

“Last time you showed me a forest fire. The man you showed me aged and a wasp hatched from his neck. The same thing happened to a man when I was running from the Bureau. Did you do that?”

You were in danger, came Her immediate answer.

A cold feeling pooled in the pit of his stomach and made his hair stand on end.

I would not let them take more than they have. Would you rather have died?

“No.”

It was quiet between them. He got up his nerve and turned to look at the forest, but it was just as still and silent as before.

You fear me, but you should not. I do not wish to harm you.

Nezumi shook his head slowly. “I don’t understand. Then why can’t I leave?”

You must remain where you are. You will understand soon.

“Why me? What do you want from me?”
She was quiet. He looked around, but although he could still sense Her presence, he did not see anything but the still field in front of him.

_I can give you what you desire, Singer. I can give you the peace you long for. It is still early, but the time draws near. Will you be ready?

“Ready for what? Tell me what you’re talking about.”

His vision was blurring and he felt light, as though his mind was crumbling piece by piece. He fought to hold on, squeezing his eyes shut and digging his bare feet into the dirt, but he could feel consciousness tugging at his body. Everything was coming loose. He was fading.

“Wait a minute! Answer my questions!”

_You know the answers you seek._

Nezumi’s eyes snapped open.

He had finally made contact with Her and She answered almost none of his questions. Instead, She added more to the list.

_I’ve never woken up so angry in my life! What the hell does She want?

He threw his blanket off and sat up on the couch. The bed beside him creaked and he turned to see Shion. The other boy was sitting up in bed with a book in his hands, but he was watching Nezumi. Nezumi ran a hand through his hair and got up to go to the bathroom.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Shion asked the moment he came back.

Nezumi imagined what it would be like if he told Shion about the voice in his head, and how it gave him cryptic messages about destroying No. 6 and prevented him from leaving the West Block.

“No.”

Shion shrugged and returned to reading his book. Nezumi checked the clock and saw that it was just past ten. Shion was usually at work by this time. “You have off today?”

“Mm-hm. I might go out later, though. What about you? You usually wake up earlier. Have you not been sleeping well?”

“That’s the understatement of the year. The couch isn’t exactly a pile of feathers, and the only way I fit is to scrunch up on my side. I feel like I’m going to develop a back condition any day now.”

Shion looked thoughtfully at the couch, but didn’t say anything. Nezumi wasn’t expecting him to. He was still annoyed from his dream conversation and he was more or less complaining for the sake of doing so. Not that he was lying about the couch; it was uncomfortable, but he didn’t think Shion could do much about it other than suggest he sleep on the floor instead.

He looked around the room for food, but the only thing in sight was the crackers on the table.

“Is there anything to eat around here?”
“Crackers.”

“Sorry, let me clarify: Is there anything edible in here?”

Shion smiled. “I’ll pick up more food when I go out today. In the meantime, maybe you can try reading this. I think you’ll like it.” Shion held out the book he had been reading.

“I didn’t realize I was taking requests,” he said, but took the white paperback from him nonetheless. “The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde. Oscar Wilde again? You must like that guy.”

“His books are interesting. That’s his most famous play.”

“What’s it about?”

“Being Earnest.” Shion laughed at Nezumi’s grimace. “Hey, that joke is really funny if you’ve read the play. Read it.”

Shion produced another book from beside him, and Nezumi wondered if he slept with them in his bed.

“You can read it out loud to the mice if you want,” Shion said, opening his book to a bookmarked page. “I won’t be bothered by the noise.”

Nezumi clicked his tongue. “If you want to hear me read, just ask.”

He plopped down on the couch and cracked the book open. The mice came scurrying at the sound and hopped onto the table, but when Nezumi looked up, he realized there were only two. One of the brown mice was missing.

“Where’s Cracker?”

“Huh? The crackers are right in front of you.”

“No, the other mouse. The light brown one. Where is it?”

“Oh, Biscuit? He’s—” Shion tilted his head. “Wait, is that what you’ve been calling him? ‘Cracker’? Has he been responding to that?”

“Shut up. Biscuit, Cracker—whatever. The names are stupid, anyway. So where is it?”

There was laughter in Shion’s eyes as he answered, “He’s at work.”

“Work?”

“The mice have jobs, too. Everyone earns their keep around here.”

Nezumi pondered this. What kind of jobs could a mouse do? The two in front of him chirruped and he stared at them. He had to admit that over his time in the bunker, he noticed Shion’s mice were notably intelligent. They always knew when he was reading a play and sat quietly throughout the performances he gave them. They even seemed to understand simple commands. Do they collect things? Or maybe deliver them?

Shion snickered and Nezumi snapped out of his musings.

“Cracker… They must really be getting to you, huh?” He glanced over at Nezumi and laughed
Nezumi swiped the sleeve of crackers off the table and hurled them at Shion.

“Hey!”

The pack burst when it hit his shoulder, sprinkling crackers and crumbs all over his bedspread and onto the floor.


“It wasn’t like anyone was going to eat them.” He peered over the couch. “Well, maybe someone will.”

The mice had apparently given up on getting a story and dashed down to the floor when the crumbs cascaded onto it. The brown mouse took a cracker in its paws and nibbled on the corner, and the black one sniffed at a piece, took one bite and then spat it back out.

Nezumi brushed his hair back from his face and grimaced. The locks were not exactly coarse, but without the luxury of shampoo and conditioner, they had lost an element of lightness. He knew it shouldn’t have mattered; he wasn’t concerned with impressing people, and besides, he was confident enough in his looks that he was certain any shortfall in the condition of his hair wasn’t going to destroy his appeal. Still, he couldn’t help but suffer a twinge of wounded vanity. He slid his hair tie off his wrist and began collecting his hair at the nape of his neck.

“I was thinking…” Shion said suddenly.

“That never bodes well.”

“If you could, would you want to contact anyone in No. 6? Like family or friends?”

Nezumi paused and glanced at Shion. “What brought this on?”

“I’m just wondering. I know they had you under surveillance, and it’d be really dangerous to even attempt something like contacting No. 6, but hypothetically, if you could get in touch with someone, would you do it?”

Nezumi allowed himself a second to contemplate the possibility, but it yielded no serious results. He wouldn’t mind sending a briefly worded “Fuck you” to the old woman and that officer Rashi, but the satisfaction of doing so would be short-lived and unequal to the risk. Even if he had a message worth sending, or a person worth sending it to, the chances of it getting safely to its destination were abysmal. Not to mention it would put the recipient in danger.

“You have nothing to worry about,” he replied as he fastened his hair up. “There’s no one in No. 6 I’d want to contact.”

“No one?”

Nezumi couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I have neither the need nor the energy for sentimentality. When I decided to leave that city, I made sure to do so without baggage of any kind.”

Shion gave him a weird look, as if he couldn't comprehend how he didn't have any connections worth contacting. He pressed his lips together in a way that Nezumi knew meant he wanted to comment, but the only thing he said was, “You should clean up those crackers.”
I need to learn to defend myself better.

This thought had occurred to Nezumi several times in the past week, and after the trouble in town the other day, he was certain that if he intended to survive outside this room, he would need to brush up on self-defense. Since coming to the West Block, the violent encounters he found himself in had not worked out in his favor. He realized trying to attack Shion the first day had been a mistake. He hadn’t been thinking properly and he was injured, but even so, he had been easily overpowered. And the gridlock with Safu had been a blow to his confidence as well.

He had considered himself relatively competent at self-defense, because of the amount of fistfights he got into when he was younger—he was definitely as good at it as one could get living in a supposedly conflict-free city—but he was painfully outmatched by West Block standards.

I could ask Shion. I’m sure he’d be happy to teach me, but… He bit the inside of his cheek. He didn’t want to ask him. Just the thought of having to take instructions from that airheaded boy made him furious.

Maybe there’s something in this library.

The first two bookcases were all novels, plays, and poetry, so he passed them and went further into the stacks. In the third shelf back he found scientific journals of Ecology, Biology, and the like, and a few rows down there were self-help books.

Where does he get all this stuff? Does he actually read these?

At last he found a section that looked helpful. The first few books were medical texts about anatomy and physiology, but the book he eventually pulled out was on self-defense techniques specifically focused on pressure points. He scanned a paragraph about the carotid artery and decided it was a good start.

He returned to the room proper and considered his seating options. The couch, with its remembrances of many a restless night, was becoming increasingly odious to him. The bed was dismissed by the mere personal nature of it, and the chair by the organ, piled high with novels and poetry yet to be read, was less a chair now than an auxiliary table. The result, then, was that he had nowhere to sit.

“Screw this.”

He covered the length of the room in two long strides, snatched his jacket off the back of the organ chair and pulled it on.

His anger dissolved in the full-bodied thud of the door slamming shut behind him, and the echo of the impact in the cavernous hall sent waves of satisfaction through his being.

He spent a long moment surveying the expanse of the West Block in the distance. This was the way it was supposed to be. He was not meant to be boxed up in an underground cubicle any more than he was meant to be boxed in by fraudulent utopian standards.

He looked westward and thought for what must have been the hundredth time, whether he should walk away again. The threat of Her interference still remained at the forefront of his mind, but his longing was equal to it. The exit was right before him, fanned out in countless solitary miles in either direction. He only had to move.

But, no, I’m trapped here like some mutt with a shock collar.
And it was all because of No. 6. He was brought to the West Block as an informant and weapon against No. 6; he was indefinitely confined here because She insisted on destroying No. 6. No matter where he turned, the conversation always led back to that accursed city. Even when he was outside its walls they bore down on him, polluting every avenue of escape.

He clicked his tongue.

*I might not be able to leave yet, but I’m sure as hell not going to waste away six feet under the ground.*

He remembered Shion mentioning a stream nearby, but he couldn't find any signs of it from where he stood. He approached the small patch of trees just a little way off from the entrance to Shion’s bunker. They were mostly stripped bare now, so there was nothing to obstruct his view of the prime branches and footholds. He chose one and hoisted himself up onto a sturdy-looking branch about seven feet off the ground. The perch was not ideal. It bowed slightly under his weight and was almost too narrow to seat him, but he wasn’t confident of climbing farther up with a book in his hand, especially when the sturdiness of the higher branches was unknown.

He settled back against the trunk and took a moment to survey the view from his new position. He had a clear view of the path into town, but that was it. No stream and no visible alternatives but the book in his hand. He placated his sour mood with a detailed passage on chokeholds.

He was nearing the end of the chapter, when movement on the path leading to town caught his attention. There was someone on the road, and they seemed to be heading in his direction. Even from a distance he knew it wasn’t Shion. The form was too small and the coat was not russet but off-white. Although, when he squinted, he thought he could make out the Resistance bandana around the person’s throat. It didn’t take long to cross-reference the physical evidence with the possibilities of who could be paying Shion a house call.

He knew the exact moment Safu spotted him: halfway up the path, her steps slowed for several paces before she adopted a more purposeful stride toward the tree.

He offered her a greeting when she was near enough. His attempt at cordiality did nothing to curb her disapproval.

“What are you doing out here?”

He flashed the cover of his book at her. “Reading.”

She scowled up at him from below the branch. “Does Shion know about this?”

“The reading? He wholeheartedly encourages it.”

“Hilarious,” she deadpanned. “You shouldn’t be out here. There are satellites everywhere, and sitting in a leafless tree isn’t going to protect you from them. In fact, it probably makes you easier to spot.”

“Well, that, Shion and I did actually discuss,”—he reopened the book to a random page and began studying the diagram on it—“and we came to the conclusion that I had nothing to fear from the satellites. But thank you for your concern.”

“What do you mean—”

“Shion went out to get lunch, but I can take a message, if you’d like.”
He didn’t look up from the page, but Safu’s silence communicated her irritation just as well.

“What are you even reading?”

“Nothing of consequence.”

“So I’m expected to believe it’s usual for you to read books about pressure points in your spare time?”

“I don’t collect the books, I just read them. If you have a problem with the selection, take it up with Shion.”

“What would you need to know that for?”

He flipped disinterestedly through the pages. “Shion gets kinda loud sometimes. Thought this might help.”

Safu bypassed annoyance and went straight on to anger. “That’s not funny. Pressure points are dangerous. You could kill the person if you do it wrong.”

He considered her words seriously. That was a problem. If it was that dangerous he couldn’t really practice. He would have to study the techniques to perfection and hope that if and when he was forced to use them, he wouldn’t accidentally kill someone. Not exactly a reliable or comforting method. It still might be worth it to look this over, but I should look for another type of self-defense book. I think there were a few on martial arts. Or I could practice by myself with Shion’s knife... His gaze sharpened on the girl below him.

“Is that so?” he said momentarily, placing a delicate frown on his face. “I guess it’s not such a good idea, then.” He tucked the book under his arm and dropped down from the branch. “What would you suggest instead?”

Safu scrutinized the change in his demeanor, looking as though she was thinking deeply about something. At last, she shrugged and folded her arms across her chest. “I could teach you how to use a knife, if you’d like.”

Her answer was so unexpected that Nezumi barely had enough time to smother his surprise and convert it to a look of confusion. Well that was entirely too easy. He raised an eyebrow at the girl and leaned against the tree trunk.

“That’s awfully kind of you. And what would I have to do for you in return?”

“Simple. I’ll teach you how to use knives, and you get me the drives you made in No. 6. And no, I’m not mocking you. This is a serious proposal.”

He smirked. “I know better than to take anything you say less than seriously. Which is why I’m going to ask you, in all seriousness, how you imagine I might go about retrieving the drives from the heart of No. 6. Has that influential contact suddenly materialized?”

“Sadly, no. But you’re smart, I’m sure you could figure out a way.” She smiled blithely. “Getting into No. 6 should be easy enough for a rat like you.”

Nezumi hummed thoughtfully. “I see. Well, if you are serious about this, then I want a few things in return.”

“You’re already getting something. The trade is knife skills for the drives. A weapon for a
weapon. It’s a fair deal.”

Nezumi shook his head. “Not quite. Infiltrating No. 6 is risky business by itself, but if I do succeed, I’d be handing over a weapon that’s theoretically capable of taking down the Correctional Facility. I’m going to put all that power into the hands of a couple of kids and their zealot leader for a few knife lessons? Not a chance.”

Safu narrowed her eyes. “You should be happy you’re getting anything out of it. I’m being kind by asking, but I could just as easily force you to do it.” That actually made him chuckle. It was the kind of thing he had expected and hoped she would say. “You think I’m joking?”

“No, I think you mean it. Which is why you lose,” he said with a smirk. “You look confused. Would you like me to explain?”

“Don’t patronize me,” she hissed.

“Heh. I’ll get right to the point, then. You’re not above threatening me to get the drives, so they must be important to you, which means I can ask for whatever I want and you have to give it to me. You have no choice but to.”

“I could always let Yoming have another go at you.”

“Mm, yes. You could use violence to get me to comply,” he said without interest. “I’ve never been tortured before; there’s a good chance I’d break and give you what you want. But I don’t think you have the guts to do it, and even if you did, you wouldn’t,” his voice dropped down to a seductive purr, “because Shion would never forgive you.” Safu’s glare wavered. “What would he think if he knew you had me tortured for your own selfish agenda?”

She clenched her fists, but made no further show of aggression. It didn’t matter to him; she could keep her pretense of control up, but they both knew he had won.

“Not only did you approach me first, but you also gave me a condition that actually means something to you. I could do without the knife lessons, but your group of freedom fighters haven’t got a chance of taking down the Correctional Facility without me.” He straightened from his slouch and curved his mouth into a predatory smile. “The one with a weakness to exploit always loses. If you want the drives that badly, the price just went up.”

“What do you want?” she ground out.

“Are we in business, then?”

“Screw you. Tell me what you need, and then I’ll decide if I want anything to do with you.”

Nezumi shrugged at her venom. “I’ll need two things. The first is parts for my project—mechanical and computer parts. Might get expensive.”

“Fine. What else?”

No hesitation at all. Then again, judging by their firearm collection and access to high-end items like superfibre cloth, their supplier must be good. I wonder who it is?

“Second, I want complete autonomy. That means free roam of the West Block, no babysitters, the works.”

Safu grimaced. “I can’t promise you something like that.”
“If you can’t promise me that, I can’t help you. Good luck finding someone else with the skills you need.”

He kept steady eye contact with Safu while she seethed. She looked like she wanted nothing more than to punch him in the face, but was restraining herself from doing so. He had seen the same look in many other people’s eyes. Sometimes they did break composure and throw a punch at him, but most of the time they recognized their defeat and chose not to in order to preserve the remainder of their pride. Nezumi had pegged Safu as the latter type, and after a moment, he was proven correct when she let out a long breath and crossed her arms.

“Fine. I’ll figure out a way to get you out whenever you want. But if I’m able to negotiate that for you, you have to promise to get me the drives without complaint. Do we have a deal?”

Nezumi smiled wanly at her. The conversation had gone better than expected; he didn’t have to flirt or use violence, and he still got everything he wanted. Best of all, he would get it without having to deliver the drives first. Once he was granted a blank check for all the parts he needed and was free to roam the West Block, he could do what he wanted. *I might not even have to get the drives at all.*

The thought came out of nowhere, but Nezumi found himself seriously considering it. He didn’t like No. 6, but he didn’t have any allegiance to the West Block either. He was sure the virus he wrote would be able to take down the security system as programmed, but the problem lay with whether or not it was wise to give such a weapon to a group with a leader whose ambitions he was unsure of. From what he had seen and heard of Yoming, he could tell the man was radical—and that was putting it kindly. Nezumi didn’t care if No. 6 was torn down, but he did care if Yoming was the one leading the demolition crew. He would almost rather that the elusive voice from his dreams do it; except that right now he wasn’t all that convinced She was any more trustworthy.

Safu was watching him expectantly. “All right, you’ve got a deal,” he said, keeping his face controlled.

“You’ll get me the drives?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

She leered at him. “Look me in the eyes and say it.”

Nezumi growled internally at her paranoia. He hadn’t given her any physical cues that he was lying, and yet she suspected him of it just because it was him. He gave her a pointed, “Are you serious?” look to see if he could dissuade her by making her feel she was being unreasonable, but she held firm.

“Look me in the eyes and promise you’ll get the drives.”

He took a step and bent forward slightly so that he was subtly, but assertively, invading her personal space. He smirked a little when she stood her ground.

“I’ll try my very best to get you the drives,” he said slowly, staring directly into her face.

“Liar.”

“Contrary to what you seem to believe, I tell the truth most of the time.”

She snorted. “That, I believe, but you’re not telling the truth this time. You’re a great actor; I’ll give you that. You control your movements and facial expressions almost perfectly, but you can’t
control your pupil dilation. I can tell you’re lying.”

Nezumi didn’t know whether to believe her or not. It could just be a ploy to make him admit he had been lying, so he didn’t say anything or change his facial expression. Safu rolled her eyes at him.

“What, do you not trust me with the drives?” She studied his face, which he kept unreadable, but in spite of his efforts, she still decided that was the case. “You don’t need to worry, I’m not as… zealous as the other members,” she said, her voice dry with mockery. Then she fixed him with a hard look. “That’s pretty low, lying about a deal. If you don’t plan on taking this seriously, you can forget it.”

He almost sighed. Since coming to the West Block it was getting harder and harder to reject the impulse. “I got it. I promise to get the drives for your glorious purpose, as long as I get what I asked for.”

“I wish I could say it’s a pleasure doing business with you, but then I’d be lying.”

“So when do we start?”

“Start what?”

“The knife lessons, of course. That was part of the deal, was it not?”

“You are so greedy,” Safu sneered. “First you act like getting taught self-defense is completely beneath your interest, and now you’re acting entitled.” She shook her head and turned to leave. “I’ll speak to Yoming about letting you out. If he agrees, I’ll send Shion with directions by tonight.”

“Speaking of Shion, did you have a message for him, or…”?

“No. It’s fine now.” A trace of suspicion swept through him, but Safu’s face gave away none of her meaning. “Oh, and by the way. If you try to use anything I teach you on Shion, I’ll kill you.”

She stood a moment to make sure her message was received and disappeared down the path to town.

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This is a conversation I’m not looking forward to.

Safu had gone to headquarters to talk to Yoming, but as he was currently deep in conversation with another member, she had been forced to wait off to the side. She was growing more annoyed and anxious by the minute, and five minutes had already passed. She had already devised a strategy for how to best present the proposal, and she believed its chances of success were high. Even if Yoming wanted to refuse out of spite, his rational side wouldn't let him turn her down without a good amount of consideration.

The man with whom Yoming was talking laughed, and Safu saw that Yoming was smiling in return. I wonder if he’s actually in a good mood or if he’s only pretending. Yoming had many skills, but if you asked her, his finest and best-honed skill was the ability to put on a good face in public. She studied his body language for a sign of insincerity.

There! she thought in triumph, only to have her stomach drop. Yoming was tapping the tabletop every so often, which was an indication of restlessness and stress for him. Obviously, he felt he...
had better things to do, and having to speak to the other man was annoying him. *I have to be really careful with what I say and how I phrase it.*

At last, the men’s conversation ended. They shook hands before the man left the building and Yoming turned back to the papers on the table. Safu crossed the room, stopping a few feet from him.

“Sir, if you have a moment, I have something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Safu.” Yoming tapped his finger against the tabletop, as though considering whether he wanted to send her away. At last, he said, “Make it quick.”

“It’s about the elite.”

“Again?” Yoming’s eyes hardened. “The little prick wants something else, does he? Let me guess: he wants to be set free, am I right?”

“There’s a little more to it than that,” Safu tried to explain, but she could tell the older man had more to say. If there was one thing Yoming liked to do, it was talk, and he didn’t appreciate being interrupted.

“He’s got some nerve, demanding more things when he’s been so damn useless. What was with that crap about experiments, huh? The deal was that I get information, not half-baked theories.”

At first Safu thought he was accusing her of not delivering what she promised, but then she realized he wasn’t looking at her, but past her.

“It doesn’t seem like he understands the concept of being a hostage.” His face darkened. “As I thought, Shion is too soft. I shouldn’t have even bothered, I should’ve shot the brat the minute he showed up.” Safu felt a twinge in the pit of her stomach. She was unsure if he was still talking about Nezumi. “Now I’m going to have to deal with this on top of all the shit I already have to do.” Yoming turned on his heel and began to strut away, either dismissing her or because he had deemed her beneath his notice.

“He has a weapon that can destroy the Correctional Facility,” she blurted.

It had the desired effect. Yoming stopped mid-step and looked back at her. “What did you say?”

Safu sighed inwardly. “Remember how he said he worked in the Robotics labs in No. 6? Well, it turns out he wrote a computer virus that can disable the security system in the Correctional Facility. He’s agreed to retrieve it for us, in exchange for full freedom within the West Block.”

Yoming sneered. “‘Full freedom’? And what does that mean?”

“To move about without permission and without an escort.”

“Mm-hm.” Yoming’s sneer morphed into a smirk. “And how do we know this virus even exists? I bet he’s lying so we let him go, and then the minute our backs are turned, he’ll make a run for it.”

There was no point in telling him that Nezumi had been left alone for the better part of a week and hadn’t run yet. The primary reason she didn’t mention it was that it would get Shion killed for sure, but Safu also didn’t want to say it because she hadn’t quite figured out why he bothered staying. Shion didn’t seem to think much of it; he was just happy that Nezumi did stay put. So it was left to her do all the analytical thinking, as was typical.
Shion was a charismatic and generally likable person, but she doubted even he would be able to win Nezumi over so quickly. The elite was far too defensive and antisocial for that, so there must have been another reason. But that’s not what I need to focus on right now.

She cleared her throat quietly. “He’s not lying. I made sure of it.”

Yoming snorted. “Yeah, well, your lying radar hasn’t exactly been spot on lately.”

She was about to contradict him, but she quickly controlled herself. There was no point in arguing with him. Even if he is wrong.

“I don’t think he’s lying, but even if he were, he’s useless the way he’s shut up now. Why don’t we make use of him? He did work among computers and machinery in No. 6, so let’s see what he can do. And you’re right; it would be unreasonable to let him be completely free. He is a hostage, after all. What if we only let him go out as long as he’s shadowed by another member?”

Sorry, Nezumi, but sacrifices must be made. You were overreaching, anyway.

Yoming ran a hand along the edge of his chin, brushing the stubble there. The action was thoughtful and promising enough that she decided to push her argument further without waiting for his response.

“I know the elite hasn’t done anything to warrant the trust, but if the virus exists and it can take down the Correctional Facility, it could be crucial to our effort. The Hunt is coming any day now. We need all the help we can get.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Yoming said testily. “Why do you think I’ve been letting that little brat get away with murder for this long? If I wasn’t so fucking busy trying to get everything in order, I would’ve taken care of him already.”

Safu watched Yoming stride to the alcove and stare out at the boxes stacked there. Each one was filled with a shipment for the upcoming battle: guns, ammunition, protective materials, and some nonperishable food.

They had known a Hunt was coming up for a few weeks now. One of the No. 6 officials let it slip to the girl he was meeting at the hotel, and she had taken no time in informing Safu of it. Since then, the Resistance’s efforts had kicked into overdrive, stocking up on weapons and explosives to prepare for the fight it had been biding its time for since its creation more than two years ago. The impending Hunt was the reason Yoming chanced Nezumi’s interception after lying low for so long.

After a moment, Yoming fixed Safu with an agitated scowl. “Alright, here’s how it’s going to be. The elite gets us the drives, but he must do all the work here at headquarters. He has mechanical skills?”

“I’m not completely sure about his abilities, but it’s probable since he worked in the Robotics lab.”

“Well, if he doesn’t, he’s going to find another way to be useful real quick. I’m not going to have him screwing around while everyone else is working. And under no circumstances is he allowed to waltz around the West Block by himself. If he leaves this building, it’s with a member escort.”

“I think that’s reasonable, sir.”

“You’re damn right it’s reasonable.”
Safu wet her lips. There was the second part of the negotiation to carry out. *It may be better to pretend like it’s my idea at this point.*

She began in a tentative voice, “Sir, he’ll need parts to do his work, won’t he? Machine and computer parts? If we want this to work, we’ll need to order them.”

Yoming’s eye twitched. “Do you have any idea how much that will cost?” Safu had a notion that the answer was somewhere in the vicinity of a lot, so she kept her mouth closed. “It looks like the elite and I need to have a little chat,” the man said after he had sufficiently stewed.

Safu merely nodded. *Nezumi, you are so screwed.*

****

*I am so screwed.*

Shion paced back and forth outside the warehouse leading to his underground bunker. He was hugging the package of dried meat and bread to his chest like a lifeline. He hadn’t intended to bring back meat when he went out earlier. He didn’t often go to the butchers, because the owner wasn’t a kind man, and his meats were overpriced for their quality. But when Safu told him the news, he decided something a little more than the usual fare was required. He called in a favor he had with the butcher, and the man begrudgingly agreed to give him a portion of his better cuts.

Shion stopped and stared at the entrance to the staircase. His pulse was already erratic, but every time he thought about descending the stairs, he felt lightheaded as well. *Low blood sugar also has these symptoms,* he thought distractedly. *Maybe I’m not nervous at all and I just need to eat something. It’s possible. I shouldn’t be worrying so much. I’m overreacting.*

He forced his legs to go down the stairs and opened the door before he got the chance to convince himself of the far more likely possibility of Nezumi murdering him when he heard the news. He yanked the door shut and bolted it behind him.

“Are we under attack?” said a smooth voice.

Shion swallowed. *Relax. The worst he’ll do is tell me to leave, and if he does, I’ll gladly do it.* He winced at how pitiful his train of thought had become. *Maybe Safu was right—I am too much of a pushover.*

Nezumi was in his usual spot on the couch, lounging with a book in hand. There was also a stack of five books next to him and Shion smiled in spite of his nerves. It was nice to know someone appreciated reading as much as he did.

Nezumi placed the book page-down in his lap and cocked an eyebrow. “What are you acting all twitchy for?”

The question brought Shion back to his present predicament, and he tried his best to behave naturally until he decided on how to break the news.

“I’m not acting twitchy,” he said as he crossed to the table.

“So you ran in here and slammed the door shut just because you felt like it?”

Shion’s eyes met the pale grey of Nezumi’s, and the amusement he saw there made his stomach plummet. “I was worried,” he said, his gaze trailing over the pile of books on the table and noting a few of the titles. “I remembered you didn’t eat breakfast and it’s already past dinner. I guess I got a
little carried away rushing over, but I figured you must be really hungry by now.”

“You’re such a ditz.”

Shion peered at him and saw that Nezumi was smirking. He felt a wave of relief. And you said I’m a bad liar.

“You figured correctly,” Nezumi continued. “I’m starving. What’d you bring back?”

“You’re not starving,” Shion chided, placing the package he was carrying on the table. “I brought dried meat and bread.”

Nezumi fished out a strip of meat and leaned back against the arm of the couch. The pose was casual, but Shion couldn’t help but admire the smoothness of his movements.

Nezumi always looks so elegant. I wonder if it’s a No. 6 thing?

Almost at the exact moment the thought came to him, Nezumi raised an eyebrow in his direction. Shion suddenly realized he had been staring and ducked his head in embarrassment.

He unwrapped the parcel, grabbed the first thing he touched—a piece of bread—and started nibbling it. But even after making all that effort to be busy, he was still acutely aware of the other boy’s eyes on him. He tore a chunk of bread off with his teeth while he deliberated over whether it was a good idea to meet Nezumi’s gaze.

Then Nezumi broached the dreaded topic. “I spoke with Safu today.”

Shion gulped down his bite and winced at the sensation of it sliding down his throat. “Yeah, I know,” he managed.

“Did she tattle on me for being outside?”

Shion frowned a little and exhaled. “I heard you made a deal. She gave me a message for you.”

Nezumi waited.

“She said Yoming wants the drives, but he wouldn’t fully agree to your terms. He won’t order any parts until he speaks with you personally, and he says you have to work on all your projects in headquarters.”

Shion searched Nezumi’s face for any of the anger he expected, but he saw only discontent. That’s good, he thought, because this next part is going to make him angry enough as it is. Okay, just like a band-aid.

Shion sucked in a breath and said the rest without pause. “You’re also only allowed to go out with an escort from the group and you have to build whatever Yoming asks you to.”

Nezumi’s reaction was just as he feared. His face had lost all traces of good humor, and although it was apparent he was livid underneath the surface, he didn’t say a word—it was somehow more terrifying that way.

I knew he was going to be furious. I told Safu she shouldn’t have done that.

When Safu had informed him of the deal she’d brokered between Nezumi and Yoming, Shion had been scandalized. He told her that Nezumi wanted his mechanical skill to stay a secret, that he had outright refused to join the Resistance, but she only shook her head. It didn’t matter in the end.
Yoming already knew and had given his orders. There was nothing Shion could do but be the bearer of bad news.

“Safu also said…” He forced himself not to look away, even though he wanted to hide more than anything. “She said to tell you that even though you might be thinking she reneged on your deal, she explicitly said that if she was able to negotiate getting you out of the room whenever you wanted, then you had no right to complain. And since she did get you permission to leave the room whenever, she fulfilled her side. It was your fault for not catching her wording and making the terms more specific—that’s a quote.”

Something in Nezumi’s eyes flickered at that and he hissed under his breath. “That conniving….” He glared murderously at the door, his lips twisted into a wry smile.

Shion swallowed thickly. “I’m sorry, Nezumi. Do you want me to leave?” A good part of him hoped the answer was yes.

Nezumi’s gaze slid smoothly back to Shion and he studied the no doubt fearful expression on it. At last, he chuckled. The sound held no actual mirth, and it sent shivers down Shion’s spine.

“Don’t be silly, Shion. This isn’t your fault. There’s nothing to be gained by shooting the messenger, anyway.”

“O-oh. Um. Okay...”

Even as he mumbled the reply he felt the blood draining from his face. He’s pissed. He looks like he wants to kill something. The knife lessons are a horrible idea. If either of them get near each other with a weapon… Oh god. I should ask for tomorrow off so I can supervise.

He bit his lip. He couldn’t do that, he knew. Yoming wasn’t informed about the knife lessons and asking for the day off might cause him to be suspicious and investigate. He didn’t think the man would take kindly to Nezumi learning how to handle a weapon. He couldn’t let Yoming find out. But I should definitely carry the first aid kit with me tomorrow, just in case.

With Nezumi being so menacing and unapproachable, Shion scrambled to find something to do. He took a huge bite out of the bread he had been gripping in his hands. After he’d swallowed, he felt compelled to say something to quell Nezumi’s anger. He couldn’t be sure that he wasn’t planning a vengeance against Safu, and even though he knew she could take care of herself, he’d rather not have to deal with anything unpleasant between her and Nezumi.

“About the deal… Um… I know things didn’t work out the way you might’ve imagined, but if you think about it, it’s not so bad. You finally get to build things like you used to in school. Important, complex things, and everyone in the group will really appreciate it. You might not see it yet, because of how intense Yoming is, but most of the people in our group are good people. Kaze, Safu, Yamase—they aren’t violent by nature. Yoming may be extreme sometimes, but at least he’s doing something. No. 6 has taken so much, and we can’t stand by and do nothing anymore. We have to fight back. We have to stop them, or no one will.

“The drives you created, they’re the first real break we’ve had in… It’s the first break we’ve had, period. The map of the Correctional Facility has always been useless. No one can tell us how much security there is or where the cameras and sensors are. We didn’t have a chance of stopping No. 6 before, but now we have hope that it might be possible. And it’s because of the drives you created. You might be angry, but… I’m grateful to you. And I’m grateful to Safu for making it possible. You’ll be helping a lot of people.”
Shion meant every word that he had spoken, but he couldn’t help but feel a little self-conscious once he’d finished. Nezumi was just staring at him. Shion was relieved that his anger seemed to have faded. There was a subtle ripple of annoyance in the hardness of the other boy’s eyes, but otherwise, his face was blank, maybe even contemplative.

Shion felt another wave of sheepishness. *Did I talk too much? He doesn't look confused or angry, but does that mean he’s stopped listening to me altogether? He probably thinks everything I said is stupid. But I don’t know how else to say it.*

“Your friend Safu,” Nezumi said suddenly. Shion blinked and waited for him to continue. “She’s something. Really, I’m impressed. She’s a real piece of work.”

Shion pressed his lips together. The anger that no longer appeared on Nezumi’s face was manifested full force in the deadly calm of his voice.

“She does what’s necessary,” Shion said evenly. “The same as anyone else. She did the best she could for you.”

Nezumi sniffed and turned away from him. The moment his piercing gaze left him, Shion felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He hadn’t realized, but he had been tensing his muscles all throughout the conversation and they were aching from the stress. He sighed softly and moved to take his jacket off. As his hand brushed over his side, he remembered that he had something in there he had planned to give Nezumi. *This might not be the best time, though,* he thought, staring at Nezumi’s profile as he resumed eating by ripping the dried meat to shreds.

“Um… Nezumi…” Shion pulled the gold cloth out of his pocket and held it gingerly out in front of him. “This is yours.”

“…What is that?” Nezumi said in a voice that told Shion he knew exactly what it was but didn’t like it.

“Well, since you’re helping us take down No. 6, you’re kind of officially part of the Resistance. This bandana is proof of your membership.”

He offered it to Nezumi, but the other boy made no move to take it or even look at it. His eyes were glinting like daggers, and they were aimed at Shion.

Shion cleared his throat and lowered his hand. “The bandanas are optional,” he said quietly, placing the square of cloth on the table.

Nezumi rolled his eyes and lolled his head back. “When’s my first knife lesson?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll drop you off after work.”

“Wonderful.” Nezumi’s mouth curved into a genuine smile. “I’m really looking forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

> w> I'm really excited for the next chapter. There's a lot of one-on-one time with Safu and Nezumi. And… Knives. Good fun.
“I don’t know what Safu told you, but I don’t know how to build weapons.”

Nezumi looked Yoming directly in the eyes as he spoke. They were standing in the middle of the Resistance’s headquarters, with only a table between them. Shion was at the back of the room, talking to a young woman who came in a little after he and Nezumi had. Shion kept tossing glances at him in between speaking to the woman and checking her arm.

*The kid can fret all he wants. I know what I’m doing.* Nezumi’s eyes darted to the crow perched on Yoming’s shoulder. It cawed at him and Yoming reached up and petted its breast without looking.

“The code you wrote is a weapon, isn’t it? You can’t write more codes like the virus you made for the Correctional Facility?”

His voice was perfectly professional. Only his eyes betrayed his hidden hostility. Nezumi assumed the other man’s restraint was due to the presence of the four or five group members cycling in and out of the building. *If Yoming has to behave in front of the general populace, working here might not be such a bad thing after all. At least I won’t have to worry about being shot. Still, it would be best not to antagonize him until I get the parts I want.*

“I’m afraid not. That code took me three years to write.” Nezumi matched Yoming’s polite tone, but upstaged him in acting ability. His face betrayed none of the disdain he felt toward the man.

“That so? Too bad. We could really use someone with actual weapon skill.”

Nezumi released a short, airy chuckle. “You know, I can’t help but think my lack of lethal capability was why No. 6 decided to get rid of me. Though it’s probably a good thing that I can’t make weapons, because then I might still have been working in No. 6, and the code would have been lost forever.” Nezumi looked pensive for a moment. “Anyway, I can’t do weapons, but if you need any surveillance equipment, I’m your man. And of course, I’ll build you something to get the drives, as agreed.”

Yoming watched him steadily. The crow lifted off his shoulder, blowing wisps of his hair into his eyes, but he didn’t swipe them away and his demeanor remained unruffled. Someone gasped off to the side, but neither Nezumi nor Yoming was willing to break eye contact to pay them any attention.

At last, Yoming said, “You need mechanical and computer parts?”

“Yes. Since I know you must be busy, I already wrote down the parts I need.” Nezumi pulled a folded piece of paper out of his jacket, smoothed it out, and pushed it across the table. Yoming checked it without bothering to pick it up.

He grunted. “What do you need these for?”

“I haven’t decided on the design yet, but the machine will be programmed to seek out and collect the drives the pieces of the code are on. Unfortunately, the most expensive parts are the ones I need the most. They’re for the chip.”
“What chip?”

“Authorization chip. Everything and everyone has one in No. 6. Without it, my chances of getting caught rise significantly. Is getting these parts going to be a problem?”

Yoming sucked in a breath and leaned a little further over the table. “The only thing I have a problem with right now is you,” he said in a low voice. “Let’s get something straight, Nezumi. You may have been the holy of holies in No. 6, but you don’t mean shit to me. Here, you’re just another street rat mooching off my goodwill. You’re lucky I’m interested in these drives of yours, otherwise this conversation wouldn’t be as civil as it has been. You’re only safe as long as you can keep me interested, and even then, if you don’t start learning some respect, I can assure you it’d suit my interests just fine if you disappeared altogether.” Yoming’s right hand slid off the table to his hip, and Nezumi didn’t have to look down to know that he was hinting at the revolver holstered there. “Do we understand each other?”

Nezumi allowed a couple of seconds to tick between them, before he said, “Yes, sir.”

“Good. You’re dismissed.” He watched the man crumple his parts list and stuff it into his pocket.

“I guess I’ll wait until Shion finishes, since I’m not allowed to leave without an escort. If you need to speak to me again, I’ll be over there.”

Yoming narrowed his eyes in response and Nezumi turned toward the alcove. It was a risky move to taunt and turn his back on the other man after he had been plainly threatened, but it was a risk he felt safe in taking. He had already surmised that Yoming wouldn’t shoot him in headquarters, and he was confident in that inference. He may have worried about being cornered and disposed of in a dark alley, but thanks to Yoming’s other stipulation that he always had to be with another member of the group, he wasn’t as concerned about that as he might have been. It was likely Shion would be the person with him most days, and Yoming couldn’t shoot them both.

Now I just have to make sure not to get caught traveling with someone I don’t know. Or with Yamase. He doesn’t seem to have any qualms about Yoming’s modus operandi.

As he approached Shion, he couldn’t help but smile at the predicament the boy was in. The young woman was still there, sitting on a box across from him, and Shion was doing his best to clean a wound on her arm—the only problem was the crow perched on his shoulder made moving more difficult than he would have liked. Shion rolled his shoulder, but instead of being discouraged, the bird sidled closer and started preening his hair.

“That’s a good look for you.”

Shion paused in what he was doing, but once he ascertained Nezumi was in one piece, he huffed in irritation and returned to swabbing the woman’s forearm. She looked old enough to deserve the descriptor “woman,” but even so, she seemed young, maybe a few years younger than Kaze. Her long, dark hair shielded her face, but he could see her flinch in pain as Shion worked.

“What happened?” Nezumi asked the woman, peering at the distinct puncture wounds on the tanned skin of her arm.

“What’s it to you?” she growled, turning on him. “Oh!” In an instant her anger was forgotten. She spent an inordinate amount of time staring at him. “Hi. And you are?”

“The lucky new conscript.”
She laughed a second too late, batting her eyelashes to cover it up. Nezumi smirked. *She has no idea what I said.*

“I’m K—”

“Kei, you’re all bandaged.” Shion’s voice sliced through the air between them, and the woman started. “Just watch out in case it gets infected. Bites can be dangerous.”

“Oh. Thanks, you’re a lifesaver.”

She smiled brightly at him and stood. Nezumi stepped aside to let her pass, but she made no move to leave. He endured her roaming eyes for all of two seconds before he cleared his throat.

She flashed him a coy look. “I would really like to get to know you better—unfortunately, though, I have to go. But, I’ll see,” she took a step forward, and tapped Nezumi’s nose, “you around.”

Nezumi merely raised an eyebrow. *I hope not.* She added a wink before pivoting away.

He turned to Shion. “Yikes. For a second there, I was afraid she was going to gobble me up. Head first, like a praying mantis.”

“She’s like that with all the new members.”

“You said she was bitten? Wild dog?”

“Hungry child,” said Shion. He got up and swept the crow off his shoulder. The bird made a host of clicking and chattering noises and flew up into the rafters.

“That sounds unpleasant.”

“You have no idea.”

Nezumi was about to ask how many children he had been bitten by, when the insignia on the crates caught his attention. It was a red stamp of a flower with a star in each of its five petals, cupped between two olive branches. He knew the symbol. He knew all the cities’ insignias.

“Your supplier is No. 2?” he said, too surprised to filter the disbelief from his voice.

Shion glanced at the crate before he began to place the bandages and rubbing alcohol into a small silver box. “Sort of. Yoming has an old friend that moved near there before No. 6 became so controlling. I don’t know exactly where or who they come from, although I doubt the supplies are sanctioned by No. 2’s government.”

Government sanctioned or not, guns and ammunition were being shipped between two cities that were not supposed to have weapons in the first place. The landmass that No. 2 was built on was much larger than the one on which No. 6 was created, so it would be much harder for the city’s government to control any illicit dealings that happened outside its boundaries. Nezumi shook his head. People never changed; it always came back to violence.

“You talk went well?”

“He only threatened to shoot me once, so I suppose you could say it went well. Better than the last one, at least.”

Shion nodded toward the door. “He doesn’t need you anymore, right? We can go now.”
Nezumi was unsure whether Yoming would allow them to leave, but although his coal black eyes stalked them across the room to the door, he did not try to stop them.

Outside the day was bright, but still cold. He slid his hands into his jacket pockets, thinking on the knife lessons ahead. Shion had refused to give him his pocketknife, insisting that if he needed an actual weapon, Safu would give him one at practice.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you with it,” he had insisted. “I just don’t think you’ll need it. You might not even get to actual fight scenarios today. You have to learn the basics first.”

Even though it seemed like Shion was being sincere, Nezumi couldn’t help but wonder if the other boy thought he was planning to harm Safu. The insinuation was a little insulting. He was angry, not homicidal, and besides, Safu was more useful to him alive and healthy. *If we’re not going to practice with knives, what are we going to do? I really don’t want to sit through lectures about safety.*

As they turned onto the main street, a child ducked out of a tent across the road with a loaf of bread. He looked like every other scrawny kid that was roaming the streets, except he had a dirty gold bandana tied around his neck.

“I thought there weren’t children in the Resistance?”

He nodded toward the child and Shion did a double take. The child stuffed the bread underneath his shirt and began walking toward them. About twenty feet out, he caught them staring. Shock registered on the boy’s face and Nezumi realized it was the sight of Shion that caused the reaction.

It only lasted a moment. The next second, the boy wrapped his arms tightly around his midsection and fled down the street. Shion watched him go with a frown and continued walking.

“You knew him?”

“Not really.”

“He knew you.”

Shion pulled his coat tighter around his neck. “Maybe he was just startled because we caught him stealing.”

“And you’re okay with that? The stealing?”

“It’s none of my business. The shop owner should pay better attention if he doesn’t want to get stolen from.”

Nezumi’s eyebrows raised a fraction. “That’s not a good mindset to teach children. I hope you’re not teaching that to all the orphans you take care of.”

“That boy wasn’t an orphan, and there’s no mindset here but survival.” Nezumi leaned forward to look into Shion’s face. The other boy drew back in surprise. “What?”

“Why are you in such a bad mood?”

“I’m not.” He sighed when he realized Nezumi was not taking that as an answer. “Really, I’m not. But I’m not in a good mood either. I’m just… in a mood.”

“You do know that being ‘in a mood’ means you’re in a bad mood.”
"Why does it matter?"

Nezumi frowned. It didn’t matter, really. People were entitled to their bad days and feelings alike; but Shion was hardly ever in a bad mood.

"You’re irritating me, that’s why." It was such a finely programmed response, he hardly even realized he said it before it was out of his mouth.

Shion shot him a sour look and snapped, "Then don’t talk to me."

If he wasn’t upset before, he undoubtedly was now. The worst part was that Nezumi actually felt a bit guilty about it. Shion continued to fume, and pout, and ignore him the rest of the way down the main road. Nezumi occupied himself with surveying his surroundings.

A cluster of men off to his right drew his attention. They were all burly types, and looked to be the kind of macho men whose padding on their midsections greatly outweighed what was in their skulls. There was an odd contraption next to them. The front part was obviously a bicycle, but it was pulling a flat slab of wood with wheels attached to the bottom behind it, and there was a large basket mounted on top of the slab. The men were gathered around something, which they appeared to be arguing over. After a heated discussion, one of the men barked a curse and hoisted the thing off the ground.

Nezumi blinked when he saw that the thing was a man. Or, rather, a body, for it was obvious by the way the limbs swung loosely from the burly man’s arms as he carried and then dumped his cargo into the basket, that the man was no longer alive.

Nezumi felt a pressure on his arm. Shion was griping his wrist, subtly pulling him across the street.

"Don’t look," he commanded in a low tone.

"I’m not squeamish." He twisted his wrist. Shion’s fingers slipped off easily, but he still continued his diagonal path, and Nezumi followed.

Once they made it to the opposite side of the street, Shion shook his head. "Those are the Disposers. If you ever run into them, just keep walking and don’t make eye contact."

In light of the information, Nezumi couldn’t help hazarding another look behind him. The men certainly weren’t the friendliest-looking bunch, but they didn’t appear unusually formidable either. Although, now that he thought about it, he had heard Shion mention the Disposers before.

"What’s your deal with the Disposers?"

"The Resistance and them don’t get along."

His line of questioning fell to the wayside, because Shion refused to elaborate further.

They turned away from town and onto a dirt path. The area was littered with dilapidated houses, which were obviously in no condition to be lived in.

*I guess they wanted to ensure that absolutely no one would see or hear about what we’re doing.*

Shion groaned quietly, and Nezumi cast a sidelong glance at him. His morose expression had been replaced by the far more familiar look of shame. He, too, glanced at Nezumi, and balked upon seeing he was already being watched.
Shion opened his mouth to speak, and the display was so painfully earnest that it reawakened in Nezumi a resigned sense of annoyance. Why is he apologizing? If you’re angry about something, then be angry. What the hell do you need to apologize for? He cut in before Shion had a chance to voice whatever drivel he was planning to say.

“This dignified silence seems to produce an unpleasant effect.” He pronounced the words in a perfect mimicry of a miffed young lady.

Shion blinked at him, and for a moment Nezumi thought the reference had been too vague, but then Shion’s lips parted in a grin.

“The Importance of Being Earnest, Act 3, Scene 1,” he said in breathless wonder. “You have a good memory!”

“Not as freakishly obsessive as yours,” Nezumi scoffed. “Do you know all the lines by Act and Scene number?”

Shion only beamed brighter. “You finished the play? What did you think?”

His immediate switch back to his typical goofy demeanor left Nezumi feeling exhausted. “…It was well-constructed.”

Shion chuckled. “Could you be any more clinical?”

“It’s a valid compliment. The ending wouldn’t have been nearly as good if the plot wasn’t framed well.”

“So you thought it was good, then.”

“Yes, it was good,” he said begrudgingly. “What’s with that smug look? You’re acting like you’re the one who wrote it.”

“I recommended it. I take pride in my taste in literature. And, no, to answer your question from before—I doubt I know all the lines in the entire play, but I bet I could get most of them. I have a notoriously good memory. Go ahead,” he said with challenge in his voice, “give me a quote from something you’ve read recently. I bet I can name the book.”

Nezumi snorted at his eagerness. It was a foolish game to play. However… He narrowed his eyes in thought, and pulled from his recent memory a suitable response, “‘If his fitness speaks, mine is ready; now or whensoever, provided I be so able as now.’”

“Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2,” Shion said immediately. A sly smirk spread across his face. “Come on, Nezumi, that was way too easy.”

It was barely a taunt, but it was irksome enough to motivate him to try and find a harder quote. How about something from farther back in the shelves?

“I am the one without hope, the word without echoes, he who lost everything and he who had everything.”

Shion’s smile shrunk a fraction. “Poetry, huh…?”

He was quiet for a while, and it was Nezumi’s turn to smirk. “Are we almost to where Safu is?” he asked, looking at the crumbling structures around them.
“That house, over there,” Shion mumbled distractedly, apparently still lost in his mental catalogue of quotes.

The building was a sorry mess of stone and wood, a storm away from complete ruin. Which is to say, it was hardly much different than the other buildings in the West Block.

Safu stepped out of the house as they approached. “Took you long enough,” she called.

Nezumi’s anger rekindled at the sight of her. It wasn’t often he was outfoxed, but when it did happen, he always found a way to pay back the favor.

“Good afternoon, Safu,” he said pleasantly.

Standing with her arms crossed, atop the house’s sagging front porch, Safu was the picture of carelessness. They spent a decent measure of time sizing each other up. Shion looked between them as if he expected them to lunge at each other any moment.

Safu’s face and voice were blank as she addressed Nezumi, “You didn’t bring your own knife, did you?”

“I didn’t think it was necessary,” he responded with a shrug. “Do I need one?”

“No, I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to get shanked before we even started.” He smirked at her use of the colloquialism. It didn’t mesh with her prim demeanor.

“Safu,” Shion chided.

“You needn’t worry about something like that,” Nezumi told her. “I’m a higher caliber than the thugs you’re used to dealing with. If I had a problem worth attacking you over, I’d tell you to your face, rather than resort to such cowardly tactics.”

“How kind of you. But a word of advice: thugs that use ‘such cowardly tactics’ tend to survive longer here than gentlemanly types such as yourself.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here, isn’t it? You’re going to show me how overwhelmingly skilled you are with a knife and I’m going to learn from it. If you can’t teach me well enough to hold my own against a couple thugs, then you’re not all you’re chalked up to be.”

Shion chided him this time, but neither he nor Safu were paying his disapproval any mind, and he noticed.

“Alright, I’m going,” he said with a note of resignation. “Be careful and come get me if anything happens.” He waited until he got a confirmation, which came in the form of a curt nod from Safu. With one last glance between them, he left the way they came.

“Don’t you want to know how my talk with Yoming went?”

“I’m guessing it went well, seeing as you’re still alive,” said Safu as she stepped off the porch.

The height difference between them was once again apparent, though she was just as unfazed by it as she was the last time they got into a physical altercation. At that time he wasn’t thinking about the possibility of a knife being pulled, but now that he was in a defensive mindset, he began to consider her smaller stature for its advantages, rather than its shortcomings. She presented less of a target and would be exceptionally quick, especially given her experience and familiarity with her weapon. If he wanted to beat her in a fight, he would need to be faster, cleverer, or he would simply
have to overpower her. Preferably, he would like to achieve all three.

He knew she noticed him evaluating her strengths, but she didn’t comment. Instead, she reached into her pocket and handed him a wooden spoon. He stared at it a moment, but it was definitely a spoon.

“I think you’ve got your utensils mixed up.”

She snorted and made her way towards the side of the house.

If she meant to throw him off-guard, it worked; he was sufficiently intrigued. He followed her behind the building and she turned to face him, an identical spoon in her hand.

“Alright, I’m just going to jump right into it,” she said. “First thing’s first, if someone pulls a knife on you, the smartest thing you can do is run. Even if you have a knife of your own, you should run, because if you get into a situation involving knives, someone is going to get injured, if not mortally wounded.”

“What if I want them injured, if not mortally wounded?”

Safu was not amused in the slightest. “Then you better be prepared to defend yourself against murder attempts by his friends.” Nezumi smiled and she continued like she had never been interrupted, “I’m not teaching you how to use a knife so you can go around waving it wildly and slashing people at the slightest provocation. The only thing that will do is make you look like an ass and get a lot of people to hate you, and you can achieve both without the use of a weapon.”

Nezumi didn’t miss the slight emphasis on the last “you,” but he chose not to rise to the taunt. He filed it away with all the other annoyances he planned to resolve when they actually started sparring.

“Your impression is skewed because the only part of the West Block you’ve been exposed to is the Resistance, but most people here don’t have guns. A lot more have knives or nothing at all. Still, no matter what, anyone that picks a fight with you is dangerous. They will kill you if you give them the chance. However, if a weapon is pulled, usually you will be given a chance to back off. Knives and guns are used more for threat effect than actual killing.

“Despite what you think, or what No. 6 told you, or whatever, people in the West Block aren’t all bloodthirsty barbarians. We’re rougher than most, but no one wants to pay the Disposers to pick up a body if they don’t have to. If someone pulls a weapon on you, they’re telling you to back off. Do it. And if you pull a knife on someone, give them the same courtesy and let them bow out with some semblance of pride.”

I guess I really am going to get a lecture today…

“I don’t know what it is with you and Shion, but I’m not impulsive or stupid enough to threaten people for no reason. I’m not looking for a fight, I only want to learn how to defend myself in case I have to fight.”

Safu seemed to consider this. “Then why even bother using a knife? Just have Shion teach you how to use a gun. That ends fights pretty fast.”

“I don’t want to learn to use a gun, and I think knives suit me better, that’s why. So are you going to teach me how to use one, or are you going to continue warning me not to kill people I have no intention of killing?”
Safu narrowed her eyes. “If you want to learn how to use a knife properly, you have to listen to everything I say. And if you’re serious about it, then you better have intentions of killing your opponent.”

“You just gave me a speech on not killing people.”

“You weren’t listening well enough. I said to run if a knife is pulled on you, because knife encounters are dangerous, and you’re better off not engaging if you want to avoid deaths on either side. If you get into a situation where running isn’t possible, then the most important thing to remember is not to fight, but survive. You have to be one hundred percent committed; any hesitation and it’s over. If you have to use your knife, you go in with the intent to end it. I’m not saying kill them, but come at them like you plan to, understand?”

He didn’t think that would be much of a problem. Even if the majority of his battles hadn’t been physically violent, he had fought to survive all his life. He would not hesitate if it came down to a choice between his life and another’s death.

“I understand.”

Safu merely nodded in response and Nezumi wondered if she could tell he wasn’t lying. “Okay, we can practice a little, then. But keep in mind, I can give you all the pointers I know, but truthfully, no amount of lessons or advice will compare to the real thing.”

“Then just fight like it’s the real thing, and that way I won’t be surprised if it ever happens.”

Safu raised an incredulous eyebrow. “All right, Mr. Gung Ho,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “I’ll give you pointers as we go along. Get in a fighting stance.”

Finally.

Nezumi’s heart quickened at the prospect of starting. After a little consideration, he decided that a normal fighting stance was probably fine. He turned sideways, dropped his right leg back, and lowered his center of gravity to his hips. Making sure to keep his weight comfortably on the balls of his feet, he raised his fists to chest level, left hand farther out than the right.

She checked his posture and tilted her head. “Big fighter in No. 6?”

“Let’s just say I wasn’t good at making friends.”

She wasn’t surprised by the admission and continued to study him. “Your hands are wrong for knife defense, though. You need to keep your left hand high enough to protect your neck and torso. Those are the parts that everyone wants to go for—kill spots. Put the knife out in front, always.”

He fixed his fists, but it felt ridiculous to prepare to fight with a spoon as his weapon. “I assume the bowl of the spoon is the blade?” he said with amusement.

“Yes. Hold the spoon handle in line with the second finger joint. Make sure it feels comfortable, and don’t grip too tightly. Keep yourself loose.” He adjusted his grip accordingly. “Your bottom hand is the force behind your slashing, and the top of your hand and wrist are used for controlling the direction. Got it? Good. Now come at me.”

Nezumi furrowed his brow. This was definitely a test, and one he was fairly certain she wanted him to fail. There was a good ten feet between them. From this distance, he was positive she would be able to anticipate any attacks he could make.

“I’m not going to charge at you,” he said.
“Why not?” She smirked. “Don’t want to get your butt handed to you?”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow. “Very mature. And yes, I’d rather not.” He walked toward her, closing the distance between them to just five feet.

“Feel better?” she said sweetly.

He sensed the danger the minute the words left her mouth, but out of stance, he could do nothing. She lunged forward and he felt the rough edge of the spoon press along the front of his throat. He exhaled in slow irritation.

“Didn’t help much,” said Safu. “You still got your butt handed to you. I told you to always go in like you plan to kill. What are you doing letting your guard down?”

She hopped back and struck a fighting stance. Nezumi followed suit, making sure to pull his left arm in to protect his throat.

_I haven’t actually learned any attacks, so there’s no shame in going for it. She’ll probably win the first few times, but I’ll eventually get the hang of her movements._ He breathed in deeply, sprang towards her, and tried a slash aimed at her neck. She stepped out of his reach and sliced his forearm with the edge of her spoon.

“I just sliced through a tendon,” she said. “If you didn’t drop your knife right there, you would definitely have trouble gripping it well enough to come after me again. In situations where your opponent slashes at you, don’t even bother trying to block. You’d have to get your timing perfectly in tune with the speed of their strike, and if you get it wrong, the best case is you get cut deeply and back off. The worst case is you get cut and then they follow up with a fatal blow to your neck or stab you repeatedly in the abdomen. I’ve seen the worst case happen and it’s not pretty.”

Nezumi winced internally at the thought. “What do you suggest, then?” he asked, dropping back into position.

“Do what I did: step back out of range, or sidestep their strike. If you can cut their knife arm while it’s extended and they’re off-balance, it’ll be a big advantage for you, and it might even be a hard enough blow to their confidence that they’ll back off. You can also swipe down for a leg slash, but the most important thing to remember is to be quick, and always retreat after a strike.”

He couldn’t help but be impressed with the petite girl’s agility and accuracy. And even though she didn’t like him, her instructions were candid and thorough. _It’s good to know what to do and what not to do, but doing it and getting the advantage is another thing._

He watched her for a moment to get a sense of her movement. She kept in constant motion, bouncing on the balls of her feet, and bicycling her hands in preparation to strike or defend.

_Accounts for her being so fast. What happens if I go for a lower cut?_

He bent his knees and jabbed at her torso. She brought her protecting arm down and redirected his knife so it missed her body completely. The next thing he knew, she had closed the gap between them and her spoon was thrust hard into his stomach. He smothered a growl of frustration and glared at her.

“And here’s the abdomen stab I was just talking about,” she sighed. “If I was intent on killing you, I’d stab you five or six times more before you even knew what hit you. If you’re not careful and quick, your opponent has time to counter, and if he knocks your knife away, your body is left wide open.”
She pulled away and gave him a thoughtful look. “But you kept your hand up and protected your neck. A shot to the stomach is less instantly fatal than one to the throat, so that’s good at least.”

It didn’t feel good. It felt like losing for the third time in a row and he felt like punching something. But that wouldn’t be productive. Or would it? I don’t see why I couldn’t throw a punch in between if I had an opening. But he decided to hold off on that. Best stick to knife techniques and strategies, and master those before he mixed in other fighting styles.

“Oh, and before I forget,” she said sharply. “What’s with your grip?”

“What about my grip?” he replied without looking down.

“Your thumb is on the top edge of the spoon.”

“It’s the most comfortable that way. Is that a problem? You said to make sure it was comfortable.”

She frowned. “Well, it’s a grip people do use, but not one I advise. If I wanted to, I could cut your thumb off pretty easily. I don’t know about you, but if I lost my thumb in the middle of a fight, I wouldn’t be feeling too deadly.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” he said, lunging at her again and slashing diagonally.

She bounced backward and moved to cut his wrist as she had done the first time, but he withdrew his arm before she could make contact. He took another step forward, building on the pressure to get her to lash out so he could hit her while her arm was extended. She did exactly as he had hoped, coming overhead to swipe toward his face. He quickly backpedaled to escape the slash—only his front foot wouldn’t move. It remained stuck as his weight fell fully on his other leg.

“Shit!”

He landed hard, flat on his back. He clenched his teeth against the pain. Thankfully, the air hadn’t been knocked out of him, so he was able to avoid that embarrassment, but this was bad enough as it was. His foot throbbed where Safu had stepped on it, holding him in place until gravity did her dirty work and brought him to the ground.

That’s a dirty trick. I almost had her that time, too, he seethed, pushing himself up and sending Safu a scathing look. She was unperturbed.

“What the hell was that?” he snarled.

“That was a well calculated and highly effective maneuver. Don’t be discouraged,” she sniffed. “I’ve been at this much longer than you; obviously I’m able to counter every single attempt you make in one move.” She twirled the spoon around in her hand a few times, and Nezumi clicked his tongue at her showboating.

“Your talent lies in how quick you are, despite your height,” she said in a tone that indicated this was a talent she begrudgingly acknowledged, “but that means nothing against my expertise. You’re fast, but you’re inexperienced, which makes you predictable. If you don’t want to keep losing, be smarter about how you attack and maybe you’ll be able to hit me.”

His previous admiration for her skill and professionalism had worn off. Now he was starting to fully understand the urge to go in with the intensity to end it. If my speed is my greatest asset, then fine. Dodge this.
She had barely finished speaking before he rushed at her. He didn’t bother putting his spoon up, focusing all his energy on closing the gap between them.

“I just said—!” she barked, driving the spoon forward to hit him in his exposed stomach.

He pivoted his body to the left at the last second, narrowly avoiding her thrust. He thought he felt her skim his jacket, but it wasn’t a deadly blow if it did hit, so he didn’t bother stopping. His hand shot out and grasped her knife hand, and in the same motion, he brought his spoon down hard against the soft spot between her hand and wrist. Safu flinched and her spoon fell to the ground. Satisfied, he released her arm and stepped away from her, in case she tried to retaliate out of anger.

Safu rubbed her wrist, looking insulted.

Nezumi smirked. *Thank you, Shion, for introducing me to that painful spot.*

“I’m not just fast. I’m also a quick learner.”

“That was reckless,” she growled.

“It seems like a well calculated and highly effective maneuver to me.”

“Just because you managed to pull it off this time, doesn’t make it a good idea. If I used a different slash—at your face, for example—I could’ve blinded you. Or I could have slashed at your thigh, clean through your femoral artery. It’s really stupid. You can’t always count on being that fast.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but apparently I am that fast, so I don’t think it’s a problem. I think you’re just upset I beat you.”

“This isn’t a game!” He blinked at her sudden intensity. “You can’t run at your opponent unprotected like that and expect it to work every time! It’s not rational! If you weren’t so fast, or if I desperately wanted to kill you, that approach can get you dead in a million different ways.” She bent down and snatched the spoon off the ground. “And grabbing the knife hand is also an idiotic move, but for some reason you seem to be extremely fond of doing it,” she hissed. “You were lucky I didn’t have my knife out the last time you did it, because if I had, I would’ve sliced your hand wide open, *and* I wouldn’t have felt the least bit sorry about it.”

He assumed she meant the day he tried to escape. When he saw the fury in her eyes and noticed her reach for something at her side, he wasn’t thinking about the possibility of it being a knife; he had been reacting strictly on instinct. Luckily for him, it paid off.

*That reminds me. I never figured that out. Why was she there in the first place? I’m guessing Shion had the dog sniff me out, or something equally ridiculous, but how did she find me first?*

“When I tried to escape, how did you find me? How’d you even know I left?”

“Oh, *that*.” She smirked. “A little mouse told me.”

He scowled and she elaborated, “Shion sent one of his mice to tell me you escaped. I almost didn’t bother going after you because I knew you were probably long gone, but then, lucky me, you had a tail. That other black mouse of Shion’s followed you out and came to get me when you pulled your little fainting spell. Guess your fellow rodents were worried about you.”
He had to hand it to the West Block residents; they never missed a chance to make cracks about his name.

*So that’s what the mice do? Send messages? And follow me, apparently.* He didn’t like that last thought. It was a consolation to know that the mice couldn’t tattle about every little thing he did, but he didn’t like the idea of them trailing him and reporting his whereabouts every time he went out alone. *I’ll have to be more vigilant in the future.*

“Fortunately for me,” he responded placidly to her rodent remark. “Speaking of worrying about others, have you always done Shion’s dirty work, or is this a recent development in your relationship?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I couldn’t help but notice the pattern. He messes up, he sends you to fetch me. He needs a favor, he makes you talk to Yoming for him. Don’t get me wrong, it’s really sweet how you protect him all the time, but it can’t be good for either of you if he never learns to take care of his own problems.”

As close as he was, he could feel the tension rolling off of her. Her stance was rigid and her knuckles stood out sharply on the hand strangling the handle of the spoon.

“Your concern is bullshit and also completely uncalled for,” she snapped. “Shion doesn’t need protecting, by me or anyone else for that matter. If you’re mistaking kindness for weakness, you’re going to get a rude awakening one of these days. Shion’s perfectly capable of taking care of himself—certainly more capable than you are.”

*It really is interesting how passionate she gets whenever Shion is involved. Definitely her biggest weakness. She should do something about that.*

Nezumi raised his hands in surrender, although he made no effort to wipe the smirk off his face. “I see I hit a sore spot. I forgot how overprotective you get when it comes to your boyfriend.”

Her eyes flashed dangerously. *Any second now.*

“Not that it’s any of your business,” she ground out, “but there is nothing between Shion and me.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle at that. “Oh, come on, Safu. I didn’t take you for the kind of girl that spouts off clichés. You’re not the only one who knows an outright lie when you hear it.”

He had been expecting her to attack, but when she sprang towards him, he wasn’t quite prepared for how fast she moved. It was pure reflex when he swung his leg back, out of reach of her slash at his calf. The shock wore off quickly, though, and he focused on what he could do to disarm the girl before him. Since she was already low, he swiped at her eyes, but she dodged by hopping back and to the side. They glared at each other as they circled, both waiting for either the other to attack, or for an opening to launch another offensive.

The feeling of such a showdown was simultaneously foolish, exhilarating, and empowering. Nezumi gave himself over to instinct, since he seemed to react faster when he did so. He kept the strategic part of his mind on, calculating possible moves and counters, but he was not going to think about being hit or beaten. It was time to see exactly what he and Safu were made of, while they were both running on sheer furious adrenaline.

He broke the stalemate by taking an aggressive step toward her and dropping his left arm to
expose his neck. It was an irresistible opportunity for someone going in for the kill, and Safu didn’t let him down. He was half elated, half disappointed when she came in from the outside to slash at his throat. He leaned away from her strike and raised his own spoon to hit her in the face. The bit of distance he gained by angling away from her attack must have convinced her that hitting him in the neck wasn’t worth an injury to her eyes, because Safu yanked her head back and poised to retreat.

In a split second decision, he shifted his weight and stomped down on her foot before she was able to move. He could see the shock register on her face when she realized she had been caught in her own trap.

But he hadn’t incapacitated her. If she fell now, it might count as his victory, but he wouldn’t have won the real fight.

*I have to end it.*

He swung his spoon down and sliced the top of her thigh as she toppled over and landed with a dull *thump* on her backside. For a moment, it was quiet. Nezumi stared down at her as she stared with bewilderment at her leg.

Then, a sudden warmth flooded into Nezumi’s chest, tingling down to the tips of his fingers. *I won,* he thought with a grin. He snorted and Safu snapped out of her daze.

“I just cut your femoral artery. You’d bleed out in minutes and definitely wouldn’t be able to attack me again,” he said in a mockery of her voice. “I just ended this fight for good.”

Safu’s gaze was unreadable. She didn’t look angry or sad or impressed. If he had to ascribe an expression to her face, he would say it was thoughtful. Finally, there was movement: she sighed, stood, and brushed herself off.

“Good job.”

Her tone was blank and unaffected—a statement of fact, rather than a compliment or surrender. He was unsure at first how to take this, but then he realized that this was the best reaction he could get from her. She was acknowledging that he beat her fair and square at her own game, using the tactics she had been teaching him to use, and he realized in that moment that an accord had been reached between them. They didn’t necessarily have to like or play nice with each other, but they had each won a degree of respect. And that was all they had been asking for from the start.

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An hour or so later, Nezumi was exhausted. He was thankful for the tough material of the biker’s jacket, because without it, he was certain he would have been sporting a medley of bruises on his arms. However, the jacket couldn’t protect his face, and his chin still stung vaguely from the left hook Safu shot at him when he drove his spoon into her stomach to cement his third victory of the afternoon. The cold air dulled the pain and helped to stave off the bruising for now, but he knew it would eventually start to purple.

*At least I won’t be the only one leaving here with injuries.* He had managed to get in a fair amount of hits, and Safu’s wrist and foot, in particular, came to mind when he thought of possible bruises on her side.

“I’m guessing it went well,” Shion hazarded.

He had arrived a couple of minutes ago, all concern, like he expected to find one of them
mortally wounded and in need of immediate medical attention. Nezumi didn’t understand what he was so worried about. *We’re fighting with spoons. They’re not exactly lethal weapons.*

Shion inspected them as he approached. His eyes lingered on Nezumi’s chin, and then darted to Safu’s face to check for similar marks, but she was unscathed. He sighed, more or less satisfied with the damages they had sustained.

“Right on time,” said Safu. “You don’t happen to have water in your bag, do you?”

Shion smiled and pulled out a canteen, which she gratefully accepted.

“You have some, too, Nezumi,” Shion said, after Safu had drunk her fill and handed it back to him. “You’ve worked hard.”

Nezumi took the canteen extended to him without a word, and poured some water into his mouth. It wasn’t cold, but it tasted good anyway.

“Time to go back to the bunker?” he asked.

Shion turned to Safu. “If you’re done?”

“Yeah, we’re done.” She gave Nezumi a perfunctory nod. “Nice job today. You might actually become a skilled fighter with a little more practice.”

He barked a laugh. “Yeah, you too. Maybe next time we can try using real weapons.”

“Careful with your attitude,” she sniffed. “Cockiness breeds carelessness.”

She held her hand out to him, palm up, and he spent a puzzled moment thinking she wanted him to shake it. Her fingers twitched in a beckoning motion.

“My spoon?” she droned.

_Ah. That makes much more sense._ He handed the utensil back to her.

“This was fun,” Nezumi said. “When’s the next lesson?”

“The end of the week, probably. I’ll tell Shion when I know.” She paused. “Oh, but I guess I can tell you myself, since you’ll be in headquarters all day anyway.”

The reminder dampened his high. He didn’t want to think about going back to that place, where Yoming would be breathing down his neck for hours on end.

Shion chuckled at Nezumi’s morose expression. “I guess we’ll be going now. Thanks, Safu. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Hey, Shion, wait.” Safu gnawed her lip. “You may not run into him, but if you see Kaze, try to avoid him if you can.” The two boys gave her questioning looks. “Just trust me on this one. Go straight home and don’t talk to Kaze tonight if you can avoid it.”

Shion agreed to do so, despite looking like he found her warning to be amusingly cryptic. They turned and left, walking side by side toward the main road.

“‘White Bee’ from Pablo Neruda’s collection *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair,*” Shion said without prompting the moment they were a fair distance away.
Nezumi raised his eyebrows in question, but it only took a second to remember. *Was he seriously thinking about it all this time?*

“You figured out where the quote was from? Congratulations.”

“Told you I could.”

“Hm…” Nezumi narrowed his eyes at the boy. “How do I know you didn’t just go back home and look it up?”

“I didn’t,” Shion said indignantly. “I remembered it almost immediately after I left you with Safu. The book was in the stack you were reading yesterday.”

“Your powers of observation leave me speechless,” he said dryly.

Shion took his gibe in stride. “How did you enjoy your lesson with Safu? From the looks of it, she seemed to have been impressed with you.”

“Did she? I couldn’t tell. She only ever glares or stares emotionlessly at me, but I’m sure with practice, I’ll learn to distinguish the nuances between the two faces.”

“Don’t be rude.” Although he meant to be scolding him, Shion’s voice still held some amusement. “Safu is going out of her way to teach you as a favor. She’s one of the best fighters I know—with and without a knife. I wouldn’t treat her with sarcasm; it’ll only make her harder on you.”

“That’s fine; I don’t want to be babied.”

They turned onto the main road. It was as packed as it was the last time he had been out on it, but Nezumi had very little trouble getting through the mass of people. As long as one pushed with enough intent to get by, but not hard enough to look like you were picking a fight, the chaos was manageable.

“Shion! Oy, Shion!”

Shion stiffened at the sound of his name and Nezumi frowned.

“Why are there always people shouting for you?”

Shion lowered his head. “I ask myself that question every day.”

“Oh, hey, Nezumi, too!” the voice crowed. “Sweet! Wait up, I need to talk to you!”

*Wait a minute. I know that voice…* He and Shion turned at the same time, and sure enough, Kaze was shoving his way through the crowd to get to them.

“So much for avoiding him,” Shion said with a sigh.

Chapter End Notes

I joked with my sister about naming this chapter "Spooning," but I didn't want to get anyone excited and disappoint them >w< But I still think it's funny.
What could Kaze want with Shion and Nezumi?! ;D
“I’ve been looking for you guys,” huffed Kaze once he’d broken through the crowd and trotted to them. “Well, mostly for Nezumi.”

Nezumi noted that he was without his shotgun today, but for some reason he didn’t look any more harmless for it. Kaze gave him a lopsided grin and Nezumi felt a twinge of apprehension at the sight of it; the smile was vaguely predatory.

“What for?” he asked.

“What’dy mean what for? You joined the Resistance! And you had the keys to the Correctional Facility the whole time, you sly dog! Was that stuff about not wanting to join up with us just so you could look cool when you walked in with the holy grail of weapons? I mean, *man!*”

Nezumi couldn’t help but be disarmed by the older man’s exuberance. Despite his calm and collected demeanor, Nezumi wasn’t immune to flattery, especially when it was given with that kind of enthusiasm.

“It benefited me to join,” he said with a wry smile. “It’s an arrangement of convenience more than anything.”

“Look at you trying to be cool again.” Kaze’s smile widened. “Well, whatever. It doesn’t matter much why you joined, just that you did. I can’t wait to see their faces when we take down the Facility.” His eyes shone as he, no doubt, imagined the Correctional Facility brought to a gloriously destructive end. He fixed Nezumi with another toothy grin. “We should celebrate your joining the Resistance. There’s a guy in the group that owns a great bar. How about we grab some drinks?”

Nezumi had never been to a bar or even tasted alcohol before. The legal drinking age in No. 6 was twenty, but that wasn’t the reason why Nezumi had yet to have these experiences. He had no qualms about underage drinking, so long as one didn’t make a spectacle of oneself; it was only that he never got the opportunity. The old woman was a straightedge stick in the mud whose only hobbies seemed to be gardening and watching him closely enough to ensure that he never got within a fifty-foot radius of anything fun. That being said, he couldn’t help but be intrigued by Kaze’s offer.

But the answer he ultimately gave the other man was, “No, thanks. I don’t need a celebration.”

There were several reasons for his refusal. The first of which being he was dog tired and his chin was beginning to ache along with the rest of his body. The second of which was he didn’t consider his new position as the Resistance’s tech monkey an occasion worthy of celebration. The third reason was Kaze struck him as the type of person that liked celebrating and drinking, and despite liking the man well-enough, he was definitely not someone Nezumi wanted to get drunk
Plus, Safu told us to avoid Kaze tonight, and he’s acting really suspicious. It’s giving me the creeps.

Kaze’s face fell. “Come on, it’ll be fun,” he urged.

“Maybe some other time.”

“Nezumi’s had a hard day,” Shion chimed in. “I think it’s best if he gets some rest.”

But the older man wasn’t taking no for an answer. “Just come for an hour. Come on, drinks are on me. Shion, help me out. Nezumi should be welcomed like a proper member, don’t you think?”

“It’s not a good time,” Shion said. “Nezumi’s really tired. He might even be coming down with a fever, so he really shouldn’t go out tonight.”

Nezumi furrowed his brow at boy beside him. There was a strangely forceful quality to Shion’s voice, and if that wasn’t enough to pique his interest, he had lied about Nezumi feeling sick. I guess he doesn’t want to go out either. That’s not surprising. He doesn’t seem like a partier to me. Or maybe he knows something about Kaze’s drinking habits that I don’t? In any case, if the king of people pleasers was adamantly refusing to go out with Kaze, then there was definitely something going on, and Nezumi wasn’t in the mood to entertain surprises.

“For real, Shion? Back me up,” Kaze grumbled. “Don’t be lame. Come to the bar with me just this once, Nezumi. It’ll be fun.”

“But gonna happen,” Nezumi said. “I already told you I’m not in the mood. But if you want to go to the bar that badly, go and have a drink for me. I don’t need to be there for you to celebrate in my honor.” He nodded to Shion and they turned away.

“No, you guys, wait!”

They stumbled as Kaze threw himself bodily at them and slung an arm over each of their shoulders. Shion knocked into a burly man and apologized profusely before rounding on Kaze.

“Kaze, get off. You almost got me killed.”

As close as he was to the other man, Nezumi could smell a sweetly sour tang on his breath that he instantly knew was alcohol. Now he was extremely glad that Kaze was unarmed. He wriggled under the man’s weight, but, python-like, Kaze’s grip only tightened the more he fought against it.

“You can’t not go,” Kaze whined. “I already told everyone you were going to be there.”

Shion and Nezumi stopped struggling and pinned him from both sides with looks of horror and annoyance, respectively.

“It was supposed to be a surprise party, but now you ruined it by refusing to go and making me tell you,” he continued, unperturbed by everything except the fact that his scheme had been thwarted.

“You can’t just set up a party like that without checking with the person first,” Shion said in exasperation.

“It was a surprise! If I checked, it’s not a surprise! Who doesn’t like parties?” he demanded of
I don’t see why I need to be there,” Nezumi shot back. “It seems like you already started the party without me, if the stench on your breath is anything to go by. Just pretend I’m there.”

“No can do. Now that the cat’s out of the bag, I have no choice but to bring you in by force. You’re going to have a good time, whether you like it or not.”

Kaze attempted to drag the two teens toward their destination, and Nezumi wished he still had the spoon because he would jam it into the older man’s gut. A few steps and many expletives later, Kaze realized he would not be able to manhandle Shion and Nezumi while they were both kicking up a fuss, so he let Shion loose and focused on his primary prey.

“Shion,” Kaze growled. “If you have any pride as a member of the Resistance, you’ll help me get Nezumi to the party.”

The words sounded completely ridiculous and Nezumi decided now would be the time to elbow him in the stomach, so he did. Kaze grunted in pain and Nezumi darted out from under his arm. He glared at the man, not feeling the least bit sorry.

Shion sighed at the display. “Alright. Nezumi and I will go to your party, Kaze.” Nezumi turned his scathing look on the other teen. “We won’t stop hounding us until we do, so let’s just go now and get it over with. But we’re only going to stay an hour,” he finished in a voice that didn’t invite negotiation.

Nezumi grit his teeth. *I’m not liking this backbone Shion’s suddenly showing.*

“Okay, okay. Just as long as he does the meet and greet.” Kaze had deflated from his high since being hit and leered at, but he was satisfied enough by this compromise. He straightened up from his doubled over position. “We gotta make a stop on the way. Make sure he doesn’t run.”

Nezumi opened his mouth in preparation for a verbal assault, but Shion sidled up to him and patted his shoulder. Normally, the forward gesture would have incited him to further anger, but a sense of déjà vu caused him pause.

“This is familiar, but why...? Then he remembered the overbearing shopkeeper from the clothes tent. *He’s telling me to play along. Is he planning something?* He made his displeasure at Shion’s presumptuousness obvious, but reluctantly relaxed. Shion dropped his hand with a small sigh of relief.

He nodded to Kaze. “Lead the way.”

Kaze skipped ahead of them and they followed at a distance. After a moment, Nezumi turned to Shion with an expectant look. The other boy glanced at Kaze to check that he was far enough ahead not to hear and leaned in.

Nezumi was expecting him to whisper a signal to make a break for it or something similar, but what actually came out of his mouth was a mysterious, “Don’t drink anything he gives you.”

“What?” he hissed, although he was more confused than annoyed.

Shion’s eyes darted to Kaze again. “He’s going to try to make you drink as an initiation. Do not under any circumstances drink the glass he gives you.”

“Why? What’s it do?”
Shion made a face like a shell-shocked veteran. “Just trust me.”

His reaction was baffling to Nezumi, but the other teen appeared to be deadly serious, so he took the advice as such. Apparently, whatever experience he had with the Resistance’s hazing ritual had been traumatizing. Nezumi was suddenly grateful he knew someone on the inside.

But now he had a dilemma: he didn’t want to go out to a bar and party, but now that he knew there was some kind of liquid terror lying in wait for him there, he couldn’t help but be curious.

*First Safu warns us about staying away from Kaze, and now Shion is acting weirder than usual. What the hell do they do at these parties?*

The neighborhood Kaze led them into looked somehow familiar, but it was easy to dismiss the feeling since all the houses and buildings in the West Block looked run down. It wasn’t surprising that they all started to look the same after a while. The majority of the structures were abandoned, but there was movement in some. They passed a house of rotting wood and Nezumi stared through the broken windowpane. There were two children huddled inside, a small boy and an older girl. He was reminded of the siblings that Shion talked to the night he got his jacket, but a closer look at the children revealed that this was not the same pair. The little boy inside met his gaze and Nezumi blinked at the haunted look he saw in his eyes.

*Wait a minute. I’ve seen that kid before. That was…* The girl nudged the kid’s side and he broke eye contact. Nezumi remembered then. *I saw this scene the day I was brought here. This is where that guy’s house is—Yamase.*

Sure enough, Kaze pivoted into an alley and banged on the door of the first house. There was a beat, but then the door creaked open to reveal a sliver of Yamase’s body and the entirety of his surprised face.

“Kaze? What are you doing here? I thought I said—”

“Don’t be a party pooper, Yamase,” Kaze said, forcing the door the rest of the way open and grabbing the startled man by the arm. “Nezumi’s coming now so you have to come, too. Saying no is not allowed.”

“Hey—!”Yamase was distracted by the crunching noise of the door slamming against the inside wall, so when Kaze tugged him forward, he nearly flew out of the house.

Nezumi stepped out of the way before the man tumbled into him. A glint caught his attention as he did so. He could see clearly into the house from where he was standing, and the hazy sunlight illuminated the metal handle of the basement vault. Looking at it from a calmer perspective, the door to the underground room did not fit with the rest of the neighborhood, or even Yamase’s house. It looked newer, or at least in better condition than should have been possible, amidst all the decaying structures.

*Definitely suspicious.*

“Kaze,” growled Yamase once his balance had been restored, “I already told you I don’t want to go.”

“But that’s so boring. No wonder you’re not popular; you’re always saying no to fun things. I should call you Yadase instead.”

“That’s fine, *Yuji.*”
Kaze bristled. “Well now you’re definitely coming, even if I have to drag you there myself. I’d do it. Ask Shion and Nezumi.”

Yamase leered at him as he crossed back to his house. But instead of disappearing into it and locking up behind him as Nezumi thought he would, he pulled the door closed, locked it with a key from his pocket, and huffed.

“Are we going or not?” he muttered as he trudged past.

“Yessss!” Kaze crowed, throwing his arm over Yamase’s shoulders. “Let’s get drunk tonight! That oughta get that stick out from up your ass!”

Yamase made a disgusted noise and angled his face away from the man’s. “You reek.”

Kaze laughed at him, and all the while Nezumi and Shion trailed behind without an ounce of amusement.

If I have to spend the night with Kaze and Yamase, I don’t think I’m gonna last a whole hour. And from the looks of Shion, I don’t think he will either. The closer to their destination they walked, the more sullen Shion became.

They ambled down the main street and eventually reached a portion that opened onto a wider stretch. The bar was easy to pick out, due to the constant buzz of conversation punctuated by bursts of raucous laughter coming from it. The party had most definitely started without them, and the guests seemed to be well into the festivities. It’s seeming more and more like Kaze went out drinking and decided on the spur of the moment that it would be a fabulous idea to drag me down for a makeshift initiation.

Nezumi caught sight of a wooden sign hanging over the entryway, which read Gin and Yang. He snorted in mild approval. If he was going to be forced to attend a party, it might as well be at a bar with a sense of humor.

The interior wasn’t well lit, and the air was thick with the potent scents of alcohol, tobacco, and something else equally as sweet and overpowering. There weren’t so many people that one couldn’t move about freely, but it was crowded enough to make someone like Nezumi, who not only wasn’t used to large gatherings, but also disliked socializing in general, feel uncomfortable. Almost every person was wearing a gold bandana.

“Over here, Nezumi.” Kaze motioned toward the counter. “Yang!”

To his surprise, the person that answered the call was a thirty-something year old woman with thick streaks of white running through her dark hair. She nodded to Kaze in greeting.

“New guy.” Kaze jabbed a thumb in Nezumi’s direction. “Make it a good one, won’t you? And I’d like my usual, too.”

Yang’s lips curved into the smallest of smiles, her gaze roving to Nezumi for a second before she slipped away to the opposite end of the counter. An anxious feeling began building in his stomach, traveling its way up into his chest when a glass of clear liquid was placed in front of him. It looked no more dangerous than water.

“Drink’s on the house,” Yang said in a smooth voice, and then added, “Enjoy,” almost as an afterthought. She left to attend to a slovenly man who looked like he had reached his limit at least five drinks ago.

Kaze plucked the tumbler off the table and held it up like a prize. “Nezumi, I’d like to introduce you to the West Block Bombshell. I coined the name, and you know why I call it that? Because
this is one lady you’ll never forget, that’s why.” Nezumi was getting far less favorable impressions of the drink’s name. “It’s top class stuff, brewed right here in West Block. Every new member has to drink it.”

He nearly shoved it into Nezumi’s hands and then raised his own glass of coppery liquid, which had been brought to him at the same time Yang delivered his drink. The wicked grin was back on his face.

“We’ll cheers and down ours at the same time, all in one go.”

Nezumi kept his face blank, but his mind was racing. How am I supposed to not drink it if he’s watching me? He glanced at Shion, who was sipping something and staring hard into the crowd as though he couldn’t care less what predicament Nezumi was in. I’m going to have to drink it, aren’t I?

“You ready?”

I guess I’m drinking it. He brought the glass to his lips. It smelled like rubbing alcohol.

“Hey, Kaze,” Shion said suddenly. “Isn’t that Yuki over there?”

Kaze whirled around. “Yuki? Where?”

“Over there, talking to that man.”

Nezumi couldn’t tell where he was looking, but whatever Kaze saw he did not approve of it. His face darkened and he placed his drink down on the counter. “Wait here a sec,” he told Nezumi, before striding into the crowd mumbling about stupid bastards not knowing their place.

“Take this.”

Nezumi turned toward the voice and saw Shion holding out the glass he had been sipping. The liquid inside looked no different from what he was holding.

“What is it?”

“Water. I grabbed it on the way in. Give me your drink and hold this, before he gets back.” Shion nudged the glass of water into Nezumi’s free hand and with his other he took the Bombshell away.

“I was kind of curious to try it, actually,” he said, only half joking.

“You really shouldn’t be. It tastes like acid.” Shion held the tumbler close against his chest as if protecting it from further curiosity.

“What does it—”

He couldn’t finish his question because at that moment Kaze came bounding back toward them, his arm wrapped around the waist of a young woman.

“Sorry about that. I had to take care of some business.”

“Hello, Yuki,” said Shion. “It’s been a while.”

The woman murmured an agreement and then Kaze remembered his manners. “Oh, yeah. Nezumi, this is Yuki. She’s my girl, so don’t even think about making a move on her,” he said
with all seriousness.

The woman offered him a demure smile and bowed her head. “Nice to meet you.”

She was petite, both in stature and build, and more cute than beautiful. She looked and dressed very like one of those fancy dolls one sees in shop windows, and there was an elegance about her bearing that Nezumi suspected was practiced, maybe even professional. However, he kept his suspicions to himself and greeted her politely in return.

“Now that that’s all settled, let’s get drinking, yeah?”

Nezumi raised his glass with a wry smile. “All in one go, right?”

“That’s the spirit! Shion, you want in on this, too?”

“No, thanks.”

Kaze shrugged. “Suit yourself. Cheers to Nezumi joining the Resistance!”

He chinked his glass against Nezumi’s and tipped the contents down his throat. Nezumi did the same, easily downing the water. But in order to keep up appearances, when he was finished he coughed and cleared his throat a little in order to simulate discomfort. He hoped that would be a convincing enough act, because the only thing he had to go on was that the West Block Bombshell was acidic.

And apparently life scarring, if Shion’s reactions are anything to go by.

Kaze looked to be taken in though. He laughed at Nezumi’s feigned pain. “Nezumi, you’re awesome. You didn’t even ask what was in it or hesitate or anything. You’ve got guts.” He slapped him on the shoulder. “You’re my new favorite newbie.”

“I feel so blessed.”

Kaze only smirked. “Well, I completed my mission. I guess I’ll leave you to enjoy the party. Have fun!” And with that, he and Yuki drifted into the crowd.

“What a poor host,” Nezumi snorted to himself.

“Isn’t that fine, though? I didn’t think you wanted to spend the entire night with Kaze.” Shion was still hugging the West Block Bombshell to his chest and he sighed when he looked down at it. “Well, since we’re here, do you want a drink? I don’t know what you drank in No. 6, but I can order you the closest thing we have.”

Nezumi contemplated throwing out a random alcoholic beverage, but in the end he just shrugged. “Whatever’s fine.”

Shion raised an eyebrow. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah. Just get me whatever’s good.”

“All the stuff here is pretty bad. But I can promise that anything would be better than this.” Shion gestured to the concoction in his hands. He stepped up to the counter and waved Yang over. “I’ll just let you taste my drink and you can decide from there.”

Shion asked for his usual just the same as Kaze did and the bartender came back with a copper liquid that also resembled Kaze’s drink. Nezumi vaguely wondered how often they had come to
Nezumi took the glass from him when it was offered and stared down at it.

“What is it?”

“Whiskey.”

The name was familiar to him, although he didn’t know much about it other than that it was considered hard liquor. At last he brought it to his mouth. It smelled sweet and he wondered if it would taste the same. Shion tilted his head and he suddenly felt like he had been caught doing something wrong. He tipped the glass back and took a swig.

Fire. That’s what whiskey tasted like. The burn going down wasn’t too bad, but he could feel it plummet into his stomach, and it sat there for an unpleasant moment. And it made his throat itch a little. He made a face at Shion and handed the glass back to him.

“That’s nasty.”

“Well, yeah.” Shion chuckled like that should have been obvious. “But it’s on the cheaper side, and if you have to drink crappy alcohol, it might as well be something with a kick. It grows on you after a while.” As if to prove it was true, he took a sip himself.

Nezumi grunted and looked out into the crowd. He could just barely make out Kaze in the back, taking shots with some burly man while a few other women cheered on the sidelines. He didn’t fail to notice a few curious looks sent his way.

“Nezumi?” He turned back to Shion. He had his tumbler raised to his lips, but he didn’t take a drink. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow. “You may, but I reserve the right not to answer.”

Shion nodded and lowered his glass. “Was that your first time drinking alcohol?”

“As far as personal questions go, that’s pretty tame.” He smiled faintly and shook his head. “What gave me away?”

Shion responded with a tentative smile of his own. “I wasn’t sure at first, but you seemed really interested in it. And you don’t seem to be especially excited about partying or drinking, so I thought maybe this was your first time.”

“Well, don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not like I’m a goody two-shoes or anything, it’s just that getting alcohol in No. 6 is more trouble than it’s worth. I didn’t see any reason to go out of my way.”

“Though… I wonder how the old woman would have reacted if I came home stumbling drunk one night? The image of the old woman trying to keep her sweet grandmotherly composure in such a situation made his smile widen. I guess I missed an opportunity there.”

Shion looked thoughtful.

“I’ll buy you a beer,” he said finally, turning to the counter again. “It’s much lighter than whiskey. Although, I have to warn you, it still tastes horrible. Actually, it’s fortunate you never got
to drink in No. 6, because if you ever got the chance to taste alcohol that’s actually good, I
guarantee you wouldn’t be able to palate anything we have here.”

Shion wasn’t lying; the beer was piss-poor, but it wasn’t so awful that he couldn’t drink it, and
besides, he stopped tasting it so much after the first few sips. They nursed their drinks while Shion
pointed to people in the crowd and told him their jobs in the Resistance, and what he knew about
them personally. Nezumi listened carefully to his descriptions. He didn’t care much about making
friends, but it would benefit him to know who to avoid and who to go to if he wanted information
or discounted wares and rations.

Shion had worked his way down from the influential members and was now on to talking about
the admirable work ethic of the lower strata and new recruits.

Nezumi leaned against the counter and raised an eyebrow. “You sure you don’t know everyone
in the West Block?” he said, interrupting the other boy’s captivating tangent on how they knew
which trees’ nuts were edible.

Shion knitted his brow. “I don’t. Why do you keep asking me that? That’s the second time.”

“You’re always spouting off facts about everyone we meet. And every time we go out someone
runs up to you singing your praises or asking you to heal their injured and infirm. You’re a regular
prince among paupers,” he said with a smirk. “Perhaps I should refer to you as ‘Your Majesty’
from now on?”

Shion looked incredulous for a moment, but then a slight smile slipped onto his face. “Are you
jealous?”

“Huh?”

“That I’m more popular than you.”

“Aren’t you full of yourself,” Nezumi said dryly. “And I took you for the modest type. I
couldn’t care less about being popular. I don’t need to be liked; I just need to be able to get what I
want when I want it.”

“That’s not right,” Shion muttered with a frown. “So you’re saying the only reason you bother
being nice to people is so you can get favors from them?”

“Isn’t that why any person chooses to interact with other people? Whether it’s companionship
or a favor, no human interaction is free from selfishness. Everyone wants something.”

Shion shook his head. “Then what about Kei? The woman at headquarters earlier. You didn’t
seem to like her and she couldn’t give you anything, but you still smiled at her. There was no
benefit for you, and if you don’t care about how you come off to other people, why would you
bother?”

“You lost me. Are you asking why I didn’t just tell her to get lost?” Shion nodded. “There’s no
reason to burn a bridge before it’s formed. I might need something from her, so it benefits me to
play nice in the meantime. Genuine or not, a smile is a powerful weapon—as effective as any gun
or knife,” Nezumi said, a sensual smile playing on his lips.

Shion blinked.

“Hey! It’s you! New guy!”
Nezumi’s gaze slid away from Shion at the shrill sound. There was a woman coming their way. Her hair was pushed back with the telltale gold bandana, and because of that, it was easy to recognize that she was the same woman from earlier. Kei. He couldn’t believe his bad luck.

Before she reached them, Shion picked up the West Block Bombshell and his whiskey from where he had placed them on the counter and backed away.

“Have fun,” he whispered.

Wait a second. He’s not leaving me alone with this harpy, is he?

“Shion, you—!”

The woman leapt into the spot that the other boy had just vacated. Shion gave him a small smile and removed to a table a few feet away.

Bastard!

“Hello, Comrade,” she chirped, pronouncing the words with a playful lilt. “Do you remember me? We met in headquarters earlier. I’m Kei.”

Cursing Shion internally, Nezumi fixed her with a haughty, but elegant smile. “I remember you. How could I forget?”

“Oh?” Her dark eyes danced with pleasure. “Glad to see I made such a good impression.”

“It was less your impression than the impression on your arm that made you memorable. You should thank whichever kid bit you.”

Kei looked down at her bandaged arm. “I guess so,” she said at last, leaning against the counter with a smile. “So… Does it feel good?” She gestured to the beer in his hand.

Nezumi couldn’t help thinking that Kei would be a lot more attractive if she didn’t try so hard to be sexy.

“What do you mean?” he responded lightly, taking a sip.

“Well, you know,” she giggled. “Since it’s your first time.”

Her expression was conspiratorial and Nezumi narrowed his eyes at her just slightly. It was unlikely that she had been eavesdropping. The bar was too loud to hear other’s conversations, unless one was standing close by, and Kei had come from either the other side of the room or she had just arrived when she spotted him. She’s fishing, then.

“It’s my first time drinking such low quality alcohol, if that’s what you mean. And I thought whiskey was bad.”

Kei looked surprised. “Wait, so you have drank before? I thought drinking was illegal in No. 6?”

So that’s what this is about, is it? For people who claim to hate No. 6, they sure like to talk about it.

“A lot of things are illegal in No. 6, but drinking isn’t one of them.”

“Oh…” Kei furrowed her brow. “I see… Well, I guess not all the things people say about No. 6...
are true.” The smile returned to her lips. “I mean, they also say that all the citizens are so well fed and lazy that everyone there is fat, but…” She made no attempt to hide her lustful look. “Well, obviously that’s not true. You’re gorgeous.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Tell me, what else do they say about No. 6?”

“Oh, lots of things. Mostly everyone here talks about how horrible the government is and how they’ll lock you up in the Correctional Facility for almost anything. But I’m sure you know all about that. Word is you got kicked out.” She tilted her head with coquettish curiosity. “How’d you manage that? If you don’t mind my asking?”

Nezumi took another long sip of his drink.

“I was arrested for reading to children.” Kei’s eyebrows shot up and he chuckled. “Disappointed?”

She pursed her lips. “Not disappointed, just… shocked, I guess. You can get arrested for something like that?”

“Drinking for pleasure may not be illegal, but reading for pleasure is. We’re only allowed to read what we’re given, anything else is considered inflammatory.” This was more or less true. He stared forlornly at his glass of beer, as though remembering something very painful. “I’ve always had an insatiable thirst for knowledge, and it was my greatest dream to read a novel from before the wall was built. I thought it was impossible, but then my grandmother gave me this book she had kept hidden from the authorities.”

“Your grandmother was so brave,” Kei interjected with an aspect of awe.

“…She was something. Anyway, the book was so good, I couldn’t help but want to share it, and so I read it to a few children in the park. It was foolish of me,” he said with a sad shake of his head. “The Security Bureau arrested me on the spot and burned the book in front of the children. To set an example.”

“That’s horrible,” Kei gasped, flaring up at the imaginary persecution. “How could they do that, and in front of those poor children, too? No. 6 is disgusting.”

Nezumi noted the genuine anger his words had inspired, though he supposed it was none too surprising. These people were in the Resistance for a reason.

She reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder. “I see why you joined the cause.”

He turned to lean with his back against the counter so her fingers slipped off naturally.

Kei gasped. “Your cheek’s bruised! What happened?”

He shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“You poor thing. It must hurt.” She reached out a second time.

He angled his head away, a flash of warning seeping into his look. “I’d prefer you didn’t.”

Kei paused and then lowered her hand. “Oh. Of course. Sorry.” She smiled, but it was a little less exuberant than it had been.

“Er… Hey, new kid.” Their attention was drawn to two youngish men who were standing
somewhat awkwardly to the side. “So it’s true what they say about you bein’ from No. 6?”

Nezumi eyed them warily. He could guess at what the men wanted from the ashamed but eager expressions on their faces, but since there was no way to hide his origins, he had to respond in the affirmative.

It was just as he feared; the moment they had confirmed that he had intimate knowledge of No. 6, he was hit with an onslaught of questions. It wasn’t long before he had drawn a small crowd of curious Resistance members, although Kei had stubbornly maintained her spot at the counter next to him, and talked constantly to make sure he never forgot it. And, of course, one of the first questions was about the alcohol he was drinking. Kei was only too kind to intervene on his behalf and tell everyone that No. 6 wasn’t as dry as they all suspected.

To prove her point, she ordered him vodka, which she insisted he try, and which he tasted, hated, and politely refused. He finally got her to drink it herself after he explained that he still had a beer to finish. This, of course, did not stop another girl in the group from buying him a second beer when he had finally polished off the first. He ignored the scandalized anger Kei emanated when he accepted it. The second beer was just as awful as the first, but he drank it dutifully. He would rather not be fully sober in the face of the nonsense going on around him.

After being asked back-to-back whether everyone in No. 6 was genetically engineered and was it true that everyone voted on when the Hunt was to be, he quickly discovered that there was a lot of misinformation and exaggerations going around about the Holy City. The majority of the questions revolved around the apparent privilege and callousness of the city’s population, and while they were true in some respects, most were skewed in such a way that it gave the impression that all of No. 6 actively supported the extermination of the West Block. Halfway through the fun ran out and he gave up on giving sarcastic half-truths and called out a bullshit question for what it was.

Where are they getting this information? Has Yoming been feeding this stuff to them? He scanned the crowd for any sign of Yoming, but he didn’t see him. Perhaps that was the reason so many Resistance members were asking about No. 6: their boss’s absence plus the alcohol had loosened their inhibitions as well as their tongues.

Whether Yoming was preaching directly to them or not, the man certainly wasn’t making an effort to dispel their suspicions. And why would he? Hatred bred more loyal soldiers, and besides, the city deserved at least some of the criticism. No. 6 was no heaven and the people there were far from saints.

But even though the city is rotted through, the majority of the people inside the walls aren’t cold-blooded killers. They’re just ignorant idiots.

“Do it! It’s just a little!”

Nezumi’s eyes settled on Shion, who was still at the table he retreated to after Kei had arrived more than an hour ago. Kaze was hovering over him and Yamase, placing shot glasses in front of them and demanding that they chug. Yamase knocked one back with a defeated look, and Shion followed suit soon after, while Kaze cheered. Nezumi felt a surge of indignation. Only an hour my ass! I’m going to be here all night answering inane questions while those three get smashed.

Eventually though, the barrage did end, and the majority, satisfied at having their suspicions confirmed or debunked, dispersed. The only people that remained were Kei and Getsuyaku, who Nezumi had hardly realized was there.
“My good graces have all but expired for the night,” Nezumi said, voice thick with boredom. “You get one question, old man. Make it a good one.”

Kei giggled and she spared her a sidelong glance. He noted the two empty tumblers on the bar counter, but he didn’t linger on them as Getsuyaku began speaking.

“Uh… In No. 6, I heard that there’s no crime,” he mumbled. “Is that true?”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow at the question, surprised by the simplicity of it. “Sure there’s no crime, as long as you don’t think too hard.”

“So everyone is safe there? You don’t have to worry about dying?”

Nezumi exhaled through his nose and reached down for his beer. However, the glass proved empty upon inspection. He had no recollection of finishing it, but then he had more or less been taking a drink per question for god knows how long. There was a brief pang of disappointment at the loss of his coping mechanism, but that was overcome by the realization that his head already felt fuzzy enough. He pushed the glass away and leaned back against the counter.

“Everyone has to worry about dying, no matter where you’re from. No. 6 hasn’t figured out how to cure that yet. But I suppose if by safe you mean safer than here, then yes.” Getsuyaku stood and nodded several times more than Nezumi had patience for.

He glanced over at Shion and saw that the boy had rose from his seat and was walking toward the bar. He stopped two people down from where Nezumi was and ordered water from Yang.

Nezumi turned back to Getsuyaku. “Is that all, or…?”

The man looked offended, but grumbled something he didn’t quite catch and left all the same. He wondered fleetingly whether insulting Yoming’s brother-in-law would have repercussions, but he dismissed it. He had other things to deal with, primarily the drunken woman beside him who had drawn far too close in the span of two seconds.

“Nezumi?” she said sweetly. “Has anyone ever told you you’re beautiful?”

“Many people, many times.”

“Oh. Well, then has anyone ever told you…” She leaned forward and he leaned back. “You have the most beautiful eyes ever? The color is so bright, like…” She squinted at him. “Like… Silver coins. You know that color?”

Nezumi blinked. “—Silver? Is that the color you’re thinking of?”

Her face lit up. “Yes! Exactly like silver!”

He didn’t know how it happened—whether it was a flash of movement or his own incredulity compelling him to check if anyone else had heard the exchange—but at that moment, his gaze met Shion’s. The other boy had been frowning deeply at Kei and when he looked at Nezumi his face was an open book of disappointment. Shion shook his head and returned to sipping his water. Nezumi smirked; now that he knew his disbelief was warranted and shared, he was able to see the humor in the situation.

He pushed himself away from the counter, ignoring the bout of light-headedness that accompanied the movement. “You’ve really outdone yourself. I’ve never had anyone describe my eyes that way before.” She glowed under his praise, and he took the opportunity to step away from
“On that note, I’m gonna go.”

“What? Where are you going? Don’t go yet, I have one more question for you.”

He smiled serenely at her, much in the same way a mother might smile at an unfortunate child. “I think you’ve asked enough questions for today.”

“No, but it’s really important. I think you’ll like it.”

He noticed the look on her face and blankly replied, “I seriously doubt that.”

She made no indication of hearing him and pushed on. “I was thinking maybe we could continue this conversation back at my place.”

The suggestion, said with such an evident attempt at sultriness, was inscrutably funny to him, and although he was able to control himself enough not to laugh, a smile still fought its way onto his lips as he responded with a crisp, “No.”

Her already flushed face turned an understandably brighter shade of red. “Oh,” was all she said.

It was precisely at that moment that Kaze made his reappearance. He was leaning heavily on Yuki, and it was evident from his staggering that he had reached his limit.

“Kei?” he barked. “What are you doin’ here?”

Kei’s embarrassment turned quickly to anger at his tone. “I have just as much right to be here as you do, Yuji. I’m part of the Resistance, too!”

“Barely,” Kaze snorted, and then seemed to notice Nezumi. He squinted between him and Kei. “Wait. She talkin’ to you, Nezumi?” He sighed in exasperation. “Come on, Kei. Why can’t you—? Can’t you see Nezumi doesn’t like you? Go away.” He waved his free hand about in a series of dismissive jerks. “Find someone else to flirt with.”

”Kaze,” hissed Yuki.

“What? What I say?”

Yuki shook her head and turned an apologetic eye on the other woman. “He’s very drunk, please excuse his rudeness.”

This explanation did nothing to placate Kei. She wrinkled her nose in disgust, but because no one said anything in her defense, she had no choice but to storm off.

“You could do so much better,” Kaze said once she was gone. “Find a nice girl. Like Yuki! Yuki’s a great girl. We’re gonna get married.” He smiled happily at the woman next to him.

“Kaze,” said Yuki in a gentle, but firm voice, “you only say that when you’re drunk. We’ll talk about this when you’re sober, okay?”

Nezumi noted that she honestly looked upset and reconsidered his assumption that their relationship was merely professional.

”Okay. Okay, I’m sorry.” Kaze nuzzled her cheek. This gesture of affection succeeded in coaxing a smile to Yuki’s lips, and after directing a resigned look at Nezumi, she reached up and patted Kaze’s head.
"It's fine, I forgive you— Ow! Kaze, stop now, you're scratching me."

Kaze pulled away and rubbed his forehead. "Oh! Hey, my eyebrows are finally growing back!" he announced delightedly to Nezumi.

Nezumi had no time to congratulate him, as the next moment Kaze snapped to attention and demanded to know where Shion was. He whirled around and spotted him at the counter, watching them and holding his glass of water tightly to his chest.

"Shion! Why're you staring like a creep? Get over here!"

The other boy obeyed, although the first words out of his mouth were, "I wasn’t staring like a creep. You were loud. And besides, it’s my job to keep watch. For Nezumi’s protection."

"My protection, huh? How noble. Tell me, how does throwing me to the wolves fall under your definition of protection?"

"Kei isn’t a wolf," Shion sniffed. But then a small smile crept onto his face. "If anything, she’s a cougar."

"She’s a dog," Kaze followed up with a scowl. Nezumi was mildly impressed that he was able to keep up with their wordplay, despite being thoroughly intoxicated. Kaze shook his head. "But who cares about animals? Tonight we’re free, so let’s party more!"

At the mention of freedom, Nezumi was once again reminded of his lack thereof and the reason this was so. He threw another cursory glance around the room, but Yoming was nowhere to be seen.

"When you say free, do you mean your boss isn’t here?"

"Yup!" Kaze cheered. "He never comes. And that’s fine by me, ‘cause he’s no fun at all!"

"Yeah," Shion agreed forcefully. "Yoming’s a super stick in the mud. If he were here, he’d just grump around and make everyone feel bad."

Nezumi furrowed his brow and turned to Shion. He had accepted the fact that he was reasonably buzzed, so he probably hadn’t heard Shion correctly. He was on the point of asking him to repeat himself, when the tangent that followed dispelled all his doubts.

Shion drew himself up and began speaking in a gruff voice, "Comrade Kaze, how dare you have fun when we are so very serious! Do you not know how serious and important and not fun our mission is supposed to be? And you, Nezumi!" Nezumi flinched away from the finger Shion jabbed in his direction. "If you don’t make me a bazooka right this instant," he lifted his thumb so that his hand was mimicking a gun, "I’m gonna empty my cartridge into your face!"

The air between them was still. Yuki was the first to recover, and she pressed a quiet giggle into her coat sleeve.

"Wow…" murmured Kaze, squinting hard at Shion with an inexplicable expression. "That was amazing! How’d you do that? It was like he was right here!"

Shion lowered his arm and nodded proudly. "Yeah, I’m pretty good at impressions. You can add that to my skill set." He grinned at Nezumi.

Nezumi narrowed his eyes at the boy. "—I’m sorry, are you drunk?"
Shion scrunched up his face. “No. I’m just slightly intoxicated,” he said, pronouncing the words precisely, as though taking extra care not to say them wrong.

“Toxiwhat?” Kaze mumbled. “What are you talking about? You had like… five drinks.”

Shion threw up the hand that wasn’t holding his drink. “Of course I’m drunk!” he shouted. “I had five whiskey shots in a row! Anyone would be drunk by then. What? Is there some law against me being drunk? Huh?”

*Oh wonderful. Now he’s picking fights.*

Kaze wriggled out of Yuki’s grip, shuffled over to Shion, and threw his arms around his shoulders. The impact caused the contents of Shion’s glass to slosh and spill over onto the ground.

“That’s dangerous,” Shion growled, and then pouted at Nezumi. “Why are you only yelling at me? Kaze’s more inebriated.”

Kaze laughed and ruffled the teen’s hair. “This guy! Did you know, Nezumi? This guy has a huge vocabulwary… Vocabrurary…” He stopped and worked his mouth like he was trying hard to identify a taste. “I don’t know what I’m tryin’a say, but he’s smart. Like, really smart. He’s gonna be a doctor or sumthin’ when he grows up. Watch out!” He rolled off of Shion’s shoulder and staggered out into the throng.

"Kaze,” Yuki groaned. She offered a quick apology and called after her runaway charge.

Nezumi felt a pang of admiration for the woman’s fortitude. If there was one thing he learned from tonight, it was that he never wanted to get drunk. The buzz he had was as far as he wanted to go; he never wanted to find himself in a situation where he was making such an utter fool of himself.

Nezumi eyed Shion, but he seemed to have calmed down. He had put his drink on the bar and was wiping the hand that had gotten wet on his bandana. Nezumi’s mouth quirked up into a smirk when Shion removed the cloth from his neck and threw it off to the side of the counter when he was done.

“What’d you end up doing with the Bombshell?” Nezumi asked, nodding his head at the glass.

“Nothing. This is the Bombshell.” He held it near Nezumi’s face, and Nezumi turned his head aside at the acrid scent.

“You’ve been drinking it?”

“Course not, you crazy? I learned my lesson.” He looked suddenly nauseated and shook his head. “Nah, I’ve just been holding it.”

“You’ve been carrying that around this whole time? Why didn’t you dump it out?”

“I don’t know… I can’t remember,” Shion said sadly.

Nezumi’s shoulders slumped. “Why are you depressed now? Geez, are you going to go through the entire spectrum? I’ve never seen anyone act so typically drunk.” He checked to make sure that Kaze was otherwise engaged and then turned back to Shion. “We might as well leave. Kaze’s so trashed he won’t notice anyway.”

“That’s it!” Shion seized him by the shoulder with his free hand. “You’re a genius!”
Nezumi backed against the counter and placed a hand on Shion’s chest to keep him from advancing any further into his personal space.

“What are you babbling about now?”

“Kaze’s trashed.”

“Yes, and you’re not much better. Back off, will you?”

“But I am,” Shion said with an impish grin. He released Nezumi’s shoulder and took a step back. “I know how we can end the party.”

Nezumi wasn’t sure how he felt about Shion’s newfound mischievousness, but he couldn’t help but be a little intrigued by the proposal.

“How?”

“The same way it started.” He swirled the West Block Bombshell in its glass. “Here, take it.”

“I don’t follow. You spent all night guarding this, and now you want me to drink it?”

“No, no, no, no. Not you. Kaze. Get Kaze to drink it. I would do it myself, but I don’t feel too good. And you’re a better actor than me, anyway.”

Nezumi didn’t argue with that. He had never seen Shion act, but his impressions left a lot to be desired. So all I have to do is get Kaze to drink this and I can leave, huh? Shouldn’t be too hard. At this point I think even Shion’s acting would be able to convince him.

He cleared his throat and shouted, “Hey, Kamikaze!”

Shion made an appreciative sound at his choice of address. It took only a moment before Kaze bounded over like a clumsy puppy.

“Someone called.”

Nezumi was pleased to see that Yuki wasn’t with him this time. She seemed to be relatively sober and to care about Kaze’s well being; if she had shadowed him, he would have to override her discouragements.

“You’ve been challenged,” he told the man. “Shion thinks you’re too drunk to handle another drink, but I told him that there was no way you have such a low tolerance. Who’s right, me or Shion?”

Kaze made a face. “You said that, Shion?”

“Yeah. You shouldn’t drink anymore, Kaze. Yuichi wouldn’t like it.”


“That’s what I told him,” Nezumi said gently. “Lightweights like Shion can’t handle their alcohol, but you? I can’t even tell. I really admire you, Kaze.”

Kaze’s anger melted into befuddled surprise. “You do?”

“I do. In fact, I want to make a toast to you. Here, take this.” He handed the Bombshell to Kaze, and picked up one of Kei’s empty tumblers. “Cheers to Kaze for throwing the best initiation party
ever!” He clinked the glasses together and then he and Shion watched as Kaze drained the entire Bombshell without a breath.

“Ugh. Gross,” Kaze coughed. “What was that?”

“The West Block Bombshell,” Nezumi supplied, with a slight tilt of his head. The way Shion treated it, he half expected its effect to be immediate, but Kaze didn’t look any worse off.

“Oh…” the drink’s victim drawled. He was apparently too far gone to register what he had just done. “That stuff’s nasty. I can’t believe you drank it.” He reached over and tousled Nezumi’s hair roughly. “You’re so cool!”

Nezumi ducked out of his reach. “You should go find Yuki now. She must be wondering where you are.”

Kaze looked confused, but then the light of realization returned to his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, you’re right. Thanks, Nezumi.” He gave him a dopey grin. “You’re awesome.”

Kaze disappeared into the crowd for the third time that night and Nezumi was hit with a reluctant feeling of concern. Neither Shion nor Kaze were in their right minds, and the former had just instructed him to trick the latter into drinking a mystery concoction that obviously made one violently ill. Normally Shion’s reputation for medical know-how would have convinced him he would never put Kaze in danger, but the boy wasn’t thinking straight.

“Will he be all right?” he asked Shion. “He was already pretty drunk. Aren’t you worried he might get alcohol poisoning?”

“Kaze? No. That stuff will clean him right out. Nothing to worry about but the mess.” He fixed him with another wicked grin. “Shouldn’t be long now.”

Shion’s diagnosis was correct, unsurprisingly. Not more than five minutes could’ve passed before Kaze, white-faced and shuddering, stumbled to the front of the bar and called the party off. He looked like he was about to vomit any second, and Yuki led him out, muttering half-concerned, half-exasperated, that he always did this. Nezumi did not envy her predicament.

The fresh, cold air outside felt glorious after spending so much time in a cramped room that reeked of cigarettes and alcohol. His mind felt clearer, and although he felt a little less self-possessed than usual, he found he rather liked the spring it put in his step. Shion, too, seemed to sober a bit from the chill. His demeanor was now more sedate, and so as long as one ignored the flush on his face, he could almost pretend he wasn’t drunk at all.

“That was fun,” said Shion, stretching toward the darkening sky.

Nezumi shoved his hands into his pockets and stared ahead. “You think so? It’s nice to know one of us enjoyed themselves.”

“You didn’t have any fun at all?”

“It’s a little hard to have fun when I was constantly being sacrificed for the entertainment of others.”

“Is this about Kei? You looked like you were enjoying yourself, smiling and— Oh. But that’s right,” Shion snickered. “You only do that to get things from people. Because, ‘a smile is a powerful weapon—as effective as any gun or knife.’” Shion quoted the words with such horribly rendered sultriness that Nezumi drew back with a cringe.
“Never do that again.”

“You didn’t like it? I sounded just like you.”

“Absolutely not. That was the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

Shion laughed. “No, but really,” he said, waving a hand as if to clear the air between them. “About Kei. I honestly thought it be good for you to know more Resistance members.”

“Ah, is that it. Pardon me for my ingratitude. I look forward to the day when I might be able to repay the debt.”

“Don’t be mad. It’s important to make friends, so—Whoa!”

Shion was grabbed by the arm and yanked into an alleyway. The culprit appeared to be a red-haired woman clad in only a thin dress and a generous application of matching lipstick. Another woman with dyed blonde hair stood next to her, similarly styled.

“Well, look what we have here!” exclaimed the red-haired woman. “I thought it was you, Shi.”

“Kimiko,” Shion stuttered. “And… Aya? What are you doing here?”

“Long time no see!” bubbled Kimiko. “You’ve grown so much, you’re practically a man now!” She smushed his face affectionately and giggled at his protests.

“What’dya mean what are we doing here?” scoffed Aya. “We’re working, duh. Yeesh, I was right, Kimi,” she said to the red-haired woman. “Once he joined up with those big shot Resistance guys he forgot all about us.”

Kimiko drew back from Shion with a frown. “That’s so mean, Shi. After all we’ve done for you.”

Nezumi watched the scene unfold with interest. It was easy enough to understand whom the women were and what their purpose was in loitering in dark alleys near bars; the only incongruity was Shion’s relationship with them. Although… He could think of one possibility.

I didn’t think Shion was the type, but if it’s not what I’m thinking, then I don’t know what is going on.

Shion put his hands up in his defense. “No, it’s not like that. I didn’t forget about you, it’s just I’ve been busy, and—” He froze midsentence and turned to Nezumi. “Oh… Uh…” The women followed his gaze and stared.

Kimiko tilted her head. “Hm? Who are you? Shi, is he a friend of yours?”

“Well, well, well,” Aya stepped forward and gave him the once over. “And who might you be, handsome? I haven’t seen you around before.”

Nezumi was fully prepared to ignore her come-ons and walk away until Shion finished his suspiciously suggestive conversation. However, on the cusp of doing so, he looked at the other boy. Shion looked like a deer in headlights as he gnawed his lower lip and traded nervous glances between people. It was obvious the situation made him uncomfortable and he wanted it to end as quickly as possible, and Nezumi couldn’t help but think to himself that it was about time someone else was sacrificed for entertainment’s sake.
Nezumi gave Aya his most serene smile. “Yeah, well, I don’t get out much. Shion keeps me on a pretty tight leash.”

All the blood drained from Shion’s face, only for it to surge back up into his cheeks as the implication of the words hit him. The two women blinked at Nezumi and then turned to Shion, but he was unable to produce any noises other than a few embarrassed stutters. Kimiko burst into laughter.

“Oh. Wow. Okay.” Aya raised an eyebrow at the blushing boy. “Shit. How’d you manage this one, Shion?”

“I always thought you were a late bloomer, but this…” Kimiko said with a kind of amused wonder. “Well, whatever. I’m happy for you either way. Oh—but does Safu know? You should probably tell her, before she hears it from someone else.”

“What? No, wait, we aren’t—! Nezumi! Don’t say things like that, they’ll get the wrong idea!”

“What are you so embarrassed about? We are living together, after all.”

“Oh my,” Kimiko murmured.

“The late bloomer moves fast,” Aya said with smug approval.

Shion blanched. “No, that’s just—! It’s not like that at all!” He turned to Nezumi with a helpless look. “Nezumi, that’s not funny! Tell them the truth.”

“The truth?” Nezumi purred, his mouth curving into a predatory smirk. “Well, okay, if you insist. The truth is he kept me locked up against my will.”

Shion let out an undignified squeak. Kimiko pressed her hand to her lips in an attempt to conceal an expression caught between shock and scandal, while Aya just looked disturbed.

Allowing a moment for the initial surprise to settle, Nezumi clarified, “Oh, but don’t worry. As you can see, we get along fine.”

“N-no, it’s not what you think,” Shion said beseechingly to the women. “Nezumi has a horrible sense of humor. Nezumi.”

Shion reached out to grab his sleeve, but Nezumi anticipated his movement and shifted so he could swing his arm around Shion’s shoulders. Shion recoiled to avoid him, but stumbled and tripped over his other foot. In an act of dexterity (surprising even to Nezumi, given his impairment), Nezumi adjusted to catch him. It ended up with him supporting Shion’s weight in a partial dip. Shion inhaled sharply at the compromising position.

“Oh dear,” Nezumi chuckled. “You’re so clumsy, Shion.” Shion opened his mouth to reply, but Nezumi hoisted him to his feet before he got the chance. “He’s a little tipsy,” he told the women, and they smiled and nodded. “I better get him back to our place. Do you mind?”

“Oh, no, of course not,” they chorused.

“Be safe,” Kimiko said with a small wave.

Nezumi treated her to a lopsided smile. “Oh, we will, don’t you worry about that.” He threw in a wink for good measure.
“Have fun, Shion. Make sure you come and visit us soon,” Kimiko called.

“And your new mouse can come, too, if he wants,” Aya added.

Nezumi couldn’t suppress a snicker at this. He turned back to Shion, only to find he had already stumbled halfway down the road. It wasn’t a coordinated effort, so he caught up easily.

“Shion, wait up,” he said in between chuckles. “Where are you running off to?”

Shion rounded on him. “Why did you do that!” He swiped at his eyes and Nezumi realized they were tearing.

“—Are you crying?”

“I’m not! I’m angry! Why did you say those things?”

Nezumi shrugged a shoulder. “It’s not my fault you demanded I tell the truth. If you just let me do the talking, it would’ve come off as sweet. You’re the one who made it weird—twice.”

“You don’t understand,” he whined, devolving into slurs as his anxiety mounted. “When I was younger—”

“Don’t finish that sentence. I don’t want to know.”

“But we’re not—”

“Seriously, I have no interest in that part of your life. Keep your dirty laundry to yourself.”

Shion groaned. “I must’ve sounded so weird!”

“You always sound weird,” said Nezumi, and slipped by him.

As humiliating as the encounter was for Shion, it put Nezumi in an infinitely better mood. Despite some unpleasantries, the day seemed to be coming to a satisfying end. And never had he been so glad that he went by the name “Nezumi.”

It had been so long since he had adopted the nickname, he no longer thought nor cared about the meanings or insinuations attached to it, and so he often forgot the effect it had on people. Names were nothing to him; they were simply a means of codifying the world. But other people seemed to find them more significant, and it was always a pain to put up with the resultant jokes and comments.

However, right now he wouldn’t trade the name for all the world.

He kept replaying the bewildered and embarrassed faces of the women who couldn’t have known that was the name he went by, who had no context for why Shion would be calling him “mouse,” apart from their implied relationship. He couldn’t help but laugh out loud again at the perfection of it.

“S’not funny…”

He glanced over at Shion and caught the tail end of a leer before Shion redirected his pout at the ground. He looked so much like a sullen child trundling beside him that Nezumi felt the urge to tease him return. He reached over and ruffled Shion’s hair. The other boy startled and pulled away, and the unadulterated look of surprise on Shion’s face had Nezumi regretting the familiar gesture.
“You looked like a dope,” Nezumi blurted in answer to the unspoken question. “You know, if you had a little more self-awareness, you wouldn’t get made fun of all the time.”

The surprise transitioned into a frown as Shion petted his hair back into place. “You’re the only one who makes fun of me.”

“That, I don’t understand, because you say a lot of dumb things.” Nezumi resumed walking. “For someone who reads as often as you do, your language ability is severely underdeveloped.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not going to waste my time explaining it to you. I don’t know what you’ve been filling your head with—romances or some other drivel, I imagine—but you need to switch subjects. Read more Shakespeare.”

“You’re the one who needs to cut back on the romances,” Shion muttered.

“Huh?”

“You dipped me!”

“I could’ve let you land flat on your butt. Would you rather I’d done that?”

Shion folded his arms and shrugged noncommittally.

“…Actually, about before, I do have one question. How do those women know Safu?”

“She lives at the hotel with them.”

So the hotel is actually a brothel and Safu lives there. Right.

“And before you say anything, the answer is no,” Shion said, looking him straight in the eye. “Her grandmother just owns the hotel.”

Nezumi was quiet as he absorbed that bit of information.
Final continuation of the knife and party day. Probably one of the most eventful days of Nezumi's 16 year old life.

The moment they got back to the bunker, Shion staggered across the room and flopped onto his bed, leaving the door wide open behind him.

Nezumi frowned at the prostrate boy. “Hey, you didn’t close the door.”

Shion didn’t acknowledge the comment. Instead, he buried his face in his pillow and kicked his boots off with his other foot.

“You’re always complaining about how dangerous it is to leave the door unlocked, but I guess caution goes to the wind the minute you take a drink. I’m surprised you’re not dead yet.”

Shion lifted his head. “Can’t you do it?”

“I’m not your servant. Get up and do it yourself.”

“But it’s all the way over there.” Shion gave him a “please?” smile. Nezumi made a disgusted sound.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered, pushing the door shut. As he slid the bolt home, Nezumi was struck with the perversity of a prisoner locking the door to his own cage.

“I’m so tired,” Shion moaned into the bedspread.

Nezumi glared at him from the doorway, wondering how a person could be so careless.

“Go to sleep,” he replied dispassionately, moving to his spot on the couch.

“Don’t wanna.” Shion pushed himself up into a sitting position and faced Nezumi. “Let’s do something.”

“Let’s not. I’ve done enough somethings for one night. You want to do something, do us both a favor: take a cold shower, read a book, and go to bed.”

Shion frowned. His eyes drifted from one object to another with the disinterest of one who spent his entire life in that very room. Nezumi shrugged off his jacket and tossed it onto the chair in front of the organ.

“Oh!” Shion exclaimed, zeroing in on him again. “Do you want me to treat your wounds?”

The question threw Nezumi for a moment, before he remembered he was sporting a number of bruises. He touched the tender spot on his chin and it twinged at the pressure. It felt like eons ago that he was taking knife lessons from Safu.
“My ‘wounds’ don’t require your attention. Don’t worry, I’m in no danger of bleeding out during the night.”

“That’s comforting,” Shion said with a hint of a smile. “But maybe you should turn the heater on and sit near it for a little, just in case. I know ice is better for bruises, but we only have ice in the winter when it snows. Maybe I can buy cabbage.”

“What? How did you get from ice to cabbage?”

“Eating leafy greens will speed up your healing. You see, bruises are just pools of blood under the skin, and leafy greens, like cabbage, are high in vitamin K, which helps blood clot—”

“Shion.”

“Hm?”

“You’re putting me to sleep.”

“Oh, sorry. I babble when I drink too much. Or so I’ve been told.”

Nezumi leaned down, lit the heater, and propped his legs up on the table. The room was well protected from the elements, but it was chilly, and it only became more so the closer it got to winter. He considered putting his jacket back on, but he couldn’t reach it from where he sat and he didn’t feel like getting up to retrieve it.

“Most people find it interesting at first,” Shion continued, “because I don’t like to talk normally.”

“Is that a joke? You talk all the time. I don’t think I know anyone that likes to talk as much as you do. Except maybe Kaze.”

“But you only think that because I see you all the time. I mean, you’re always right there,” he gestured to the couch, “so it’s easy to talk to you. And, anyway, I like talking to you.”

“What are you, some kind of masochist? I don’t think we’ve had a single polite conversation.”

“Well, okay, maybe your manners aren’t the best, but I don’t know... You’re interesting.” Nezumi cocked an eyebrow. “What I mean is, you’re not what I expected a No. 6 citizen to be like. You are in some ways, but if you weren’t so uppity, I could easily imagine you being from West Block.”

Nezumi snorted. “Maybe I was born on the wrong side of the wall.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Shion chuckled. “It’s really too bad... If you had been born in the West Block, we could have talked about plays and poetry, and had intellectual discussions.”

“Shion. We already do that.”

“Yeah, I know. I know we do, but... Like you said, it’s not polite. And that’s okay. I understand. I deserve it.”

What is he going on about now? Nezumi exhaled slowly through his nose. “I think you should go to sleep now.”

Shion stared mutely at him. Nezumi picked a random book off the top of the pile on the coffee table and began to read. Maybe if he pretended to be busy, Shion would do as he was told.
“Nezumi?”

He hummed an acknowledgement, but didn’t look up.

“I’m sorry for kidnapping you.”

Nezumi snapped the book shut and threw it down on the table.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Shion didn’t flinch at the venom in his voice, but only looked back at him ruefully. “That’s not the kind of thing you can apologize for.”

“I know. I’m not asking to be forgiven; I just want you to know that it wasn’t supposed to be like this. The mission was supposed to be about exacting justice. We thought we were going to capture a government official or someone connected to the army, or the Hunt. Someone that would prove that the people of No. 6 were monsters—but you’re not like that, and I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“Well I’m sorry I ruined the hero fantasy for you and your buddies. That must be really tough.” He dropped his legs from the table and faced Shion squarely. “But it comes with the territory, doesn’t it? If you decide to throw in your lot with a pack of radicals, there’s bound to be some innocents caught in the crossfire. You can’t half-ass war. Because I don’t know if you’re naïve, or you’re just ignoring it, but that’s where this is headed.

“Do you think you guys can just shoot a couple of officers, stop the Hunt, and No. 6 is going to back off? They have an army, Shion. People are going to die—people from No. 6, people from the West Block. That’s what you signed up for when you joined the Resistance. I can assure you Yoming isn’t having moral conflicts about this, and No. 6 certainly won’t have one either. If you aren’t willing to do what it takes, why are you in the Resistance at all?”

Shion’s eyes were bright and clear as they stared into Nezumi’s. “Because I’m not good at dealing with pain.”

The words invited no comment. Nezumi wouldn’t have made one even if they had; the conversation had entered the realm of the intimately personal, which was a place he did not want to be. But Shion looked determined to speak his mind honestly and Nezumi found that he couldn’t stop him.

“I’m not naïve,” Shion said evenly. “I know what war entails and I know it requires sacrifices. And I realize how dangerous it is to have this kind of moral dilemma when we’re already in this deep, but I can’t help it. I’m trying to do the right thing, but I—I can’t figure out what that is anymore.

“When I joined, I was grieving. I was angry and confused, and I didn’t know where to turn. The Resistance had a clear goal then: stand up for yourself and stop No. 6, and that sounded pretty good to me. It sounded right. I knew Yoming was dangerous, but at least he was doing something. And he knew what I was going through because he had also lost his family. Maybe it was foolish of me, but I wanted to be useful. I wanted to help people with everything I had left. I still do.”

Shion searched Nezumi’s face for a sign of cynicism, but there was none. Nezumi waited quietly for him to finish. Shion sighed.

“You know why I study medicine? It’s because my mom wanted me to.” A weak smile formed on his lips, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “One day she found this book of medical terms and told me I should try to learn them. She was convinced I could become a doctor one day if I tried hard
enough. She used to say that since we lose so many lives here, it’s about time someone saved a few.” He breathed a short laugh at the memory. “My mom was like that. No matter what, she always stayed optimistic. A lot of people admired her, me especially…”

The smile melted. “She died a year ago,” he said in a small voice. “I couldn’t help her. She needed medicine. She needed a real doctor. I tried everything. I even sent a letter to my mom’s friend in No. 6, but he couldn’t get us anything. I just couldn’t—” He grit his teeth. “I can’t understand that. Why couldn’t they just give us the medicine? No. 6 has more than enough, and people hardly ever get sick there anyway. People are dying here from illnesses that can be cured so easily if we just had the medicine! I don’t understand—how can they treat us like that and not care?”

He struck the wall with his fist. Nezumi felt a prickling sensation on the back of his neck. Despite the force of the impact, Shion had hardly winced. He studied the other boy’s face, but his anger had already been spent, leaving nothing but exhaustion in its wake. The fervor faded from Shion’s eyes, and he turned away toward the bookcases.

“I know it wasn’t Rikiga’s fault,” he continued in a subdued voice. “He probably tried his best with the No. 6 officials. But it didn’t matter. I was so angry and humiliated, I just… I said some really horrible things to him. I didn’t even open the package he sent me after—” Shion closed his mouth abruptly and swallowed the words. A whirlwind of emotions played on his face, but in the end, he just sighed and lay back on the bed.

“Yeah, so that’s why I’m in the Resistance,” he muttered. “Because there was a time when I would’ve given anything to hurt the people in No. 6 the way they hurt us. And until last week, I was convinced that we were right. I was dedicated to the cause; you saw it. When I shot that officer, I didn’t hesitate for a second. But now… I can’t stop thinking about it. I keep thinking, you know, he probably had a family. I did what I needed to do for my job, but he was just doing his, and I can’t stop thinking… about what my mom would say.” He bit down hard on his lip, but Nezumi could already see the tears brimming in his eyes. “This isn’t what I want. The Resistance, war—it can’t be the only way.”

A heavy silence followed in the wake of Shion’s speech. Shion had turned his face toward the wall, presumably to hide his tears, and Nezumi chose to leave him be. He didn’t know how to respond to the teen’s outburst, or even if he should. He was still annoyed with Shion’s lack of conviction, but most of all he felt tired.

Cheep cheep.

Nezumi looked down to see the three mice on the couch cushion next to him, but they were squeaking at Shion. The dark brown one sprang across to the bed and climbed onto Shion’s chest. The boy gave a snifflte of surprise and turned to face it.

“Hamlet…” he murmured.

Cheep!

The other two mice chirruped and Shion gave them a small smile. In the same moment, he caught Nezumi’s eye. He wiped the remnants of his tears away and cleared his throat. It was quiet again between them, but this silence was palpably uncomfortable rather than contemplative.

At last, Shion broke into a shaky laugh. “Sorry. I guess I’m a pretty miserable drunk.”

Nezumi exhaled softly. “I can’t help you with your moral crisis. That’s something you have to
sort out yourself.”

Shion turned away and stroked Hamlet’s nose with the tip of his finger. The pose was annoying, and Nezumi shifted his position on the couch so that he could throw his legs up onto the table again.

“For what it’s worth,” he said finally. “I’m not sorry you shot that officer.”

Shion glanced at him with a discomfited expression, but Nezumi ignored him and continued. “If you hadn’t, then both of us would be dead. I’d rather be alive and, even though I didn’t know your Mama, I think it’s safe to say she’d rather you be, too.”

Shion didn’t say anything, so Nezumi was forced to look over at him. Shion’s eyes were misty and he was pressing his lips together in an attempt to hold back his emotion.

Nezumi released a shallow sigh.

“There’s no point in dwelling on it. Just be glad you got to know your Mama. You should treasure the good memories you had with her.”

Shion blinked. He wiped his eyes and looked at Nezumi anew. “I’m sorry.”

“About what? The crying?”

“No, I mean… About your mom,” he said tentatively. “Did something happen?”

Wait a minute. When did this become a conversation about me? Then he realized his mistake. He had only meant to pacify Shion, but apparently the boy took his mention of mothers as an admission of personal loss. Why is he so persistent? What good does it do him to know about my life?

“That’s not what I meant,” Nezumi grunted. “And besides, I thought I made it clear that I won’t be answering personal questions.”

Shion set Hamlet down so he could roll onto his side to face Nezumi. “But if you don’t tell me anything, I won’t be able to understand you.”

“Huh? Geez… Do you even hear yourself? You don’t need to know someone’s past to understand their character.”

Shion pressed his lips together. “I would like to know about you.”

“Why? Why is it so important?”

“Because we’re friends.”

Nezumi clenched his jaw shut. “We are not friends.”

“We could be.”

“You are so—!” Nezumi pinched the bridge of his nose. His head was beginning to throb. “Forget it. You’re too drunk to reason with.”

“I’m perfectly lucid now,” Shion insisted.

“No, you’re not. You can’t be, otherwise you wouldn’t be spouting off such nonsense and I wouldn’t have a migraine.”
“Look,” Shion huffed. “I know you think I’m annoying and pushy and entitled and you don’t trust me, but I wish you would. Trust me, that is. I want to help.”

Nezumi laughed, but the sound was hollow. “Help, huh?” He sucked in a breath. “Fine. If it’s really so important, my parents were killed by No. 6—I don’t know why, so don’t ask. There, now you know. So tell me,” he dropped his hand and looked Shion squarely in the eye, “what shining insight did you glean about my character?”

Shion stared unblinkingly back at him. “I’m sorry, Nezumi.”

Nezumi twitched. Every damn time. How can one person be such a pain?

“There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“…How did you get by? Afterward.”

“Are you seriously trying to bond over our dead parents?”

Shion swallowed thickly and turned his head toward the wall. Nezumi scowled. What did Shion expect? He never once claimed to be empathetic or sentimental, so why was the other boy looking to him for solace? Was he really that miserable?

Nezumi clicked his tongue. “Look, I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t remember them, so I really can’t give you any pointers on how to cope.”

Shion peeked at him out of the corner of his eye, curious, but cautious not to appear overeager. “You don’t remember anything about your parents?”

In the past, Nezumi usually only thought of his parents in relation to how much he hated the old woman. He yearned for them as an escape, but although he had felt a sense of loss at their deaths, he couldn’t summon a deeply emotional response. He was so young when his parents died he couldn’t even remember their faces. At times, this bothered him, but more often he was glad for it. One could not mourn the loss of something they didn’t remember.

Nezumi shrugged a shoulder. “Not really. Just impressions. My mother singing, my name being called…”

“Your name? Your real name?”

Shion had turned back to him and the interest on his face was plain to see, but this was one piece of information Nezumi was not willing to share.

“Yeah.” He turned away from Shion’s penetrating gaze. “But No. 6 had another name for me. ‘Takashi,’” he scoffed. “I don’t even look like a Takashi.”

Shion breathed a laugh. “It really doesn’t fit you at all. But then again, neither does ‘Nezumi.’”

Nezumi smirked. “Another name the good citizens of No. 6 deigned to give me. But I’ve grown rather fond of it. It’s better than ‘Takashi,’ at any rate.”

Shion’s expression had softened and he was watching Nezumi with steady concentration. He preferred Shion not crying, but the staring was almost as bad. He was used to being looked at, but the looks he typically got were charged with lust or hatred—Shion’s gazes were neither. They were completely sincere, and that was always uncomfortable, but in light of the vulnerability he had shown, he felt the sharpness of Shion’s gaze more keenly now than ever.
He cleared his throat in an attempt to diffuse the tension, but it did not dissuade Shion from his staring.

“Admiring my good looks?” Nezumi said finally. Shion blinked once, but then a slow smile dawned on his face.

“Yeah.”

Nezumi stilled at the unabashedly honest answer.

“You’re really beautiful, Nezumi,” Shion continued, unmindful of the other boy’s reaction. “And not just physically. The way you talk and move—there’s an elegance to it. But your eyes especially… The color—” He yawned, his gaze losing its intensity. “It’s so… quiet.” He let out a soft breath and closed his eyes.

Nezumi stared blankly for a moment.

“Shion?” The only response he got were a series of soft snores. He clicked his tongue. “Idiot. You can’t just say something like that and then pass out. How hopeless can you get?”

Nezumi released a tired sigh, and flinched when he realized he had done so without thinking. A deliberate sigh was one thing, but letting one escape by accident was inexcusable. He hated that.

“Don’t sigh. Do you realize how ungrateful you sound? You live in a wonderful city where you will never get sick, or starve, or suffer at all. You should feel blessed. Don’t you ever let me hear you sigh. You have nothing to be unhappy about.”

He had lost count of the number of times the old woman had said such things to him as a child. Eventually, he had stopped sighing altogether, not because he cared for the old woman’s opinion, but because he knew that nothing good could come of it.

In No. 6, sighing often was the same as admitting that you were unsatisfied; which was to say you were a problem that needed to be fixed, likely by way of a thorough interrogation and possible incarceration. He supposed he didn’t need to worry about that now that he had escaped No. 6, but even so, he refused to give the practice up. Sighing was synonymous with defeat, and he would not lose to anyone, not even to himself.

I can’t afford to be careless, he thought.

But he had already been careless. Not only had he sighed involuntarily, but he had also shared information about his life—and for what? He wished he could say that he had been tricked or forced into it, but the truth was far worse.

I let him get to me. A wave of irritation passed over him as he leered at the face of the sleeping boy.

He always felt angry around Shion. At first it was because he was keeping him captive, but lately, even though the resentment of his captivity remained a constant undercurrent, his annoyance arose at the slightest provocation. Sometimes Shion was being nosy and deserved it, but most of the time he hadn’t said or done anything inflammatory. He even seemed to go out of his way to tiptoe around questions and topics he thought might be offensive, and that was irksome. When Shion did voice what he was thinking, he was candid about it, and the things he said were never what Nezumi expected.

Nezumi considered himself to be adept at predicting human nature. To his experience, no one
was kind out of pure selflessness; there was always something to be gained or protected. If he learned anything from the old woman and No. 6, it was that trust was a thing hard and rarely earned. It was a dangerous gamble and a weakness too easily exploited, and as far as he could tell, the people in the West Block thought the same.

Shion was the only outlier. He was trusting to the point of naivety, sincere to the point of foolishness, and no amount of disparaging comments or cynicism discouraged him. Shion was the most straightforwardly decent human being he knew, and yet he had not only managed to survive the cutthroat atmosphere of the West Block, but he seemed to thrive in it. Everyone Shion came into contact with treated him with warm respect, if not genuine affection. Even Yoming must have noticed and valued his effect on people; otherwise he wouldn’t have allowed Shion into the inner circle of his group.

The kid was an enigma. Nezumi couldn’t predict him, and that put him constantly on edge. It was exhausting. Shion was so nonthreatening, it was threatening. Nezumi smiled thinly at the notion.

“I don’t understand you at all,” he said to the sleeping boy, and this time he allowed himself a small sigh.

The mice had disappeared during his contemplation, and the room had settled into a silence punctuated only by the hypnotic ticking of the clock. The fatigue of the day’s events was beginning to catch up to him. He kicked off his boots, pulled the blanket off the top of the couch, and lay down. He was in the middle of trying to find the position that he was least likely to regret in the morning when he heard a voice call his name.

He lifted his upper body and peered over at the bed. “I thought you passed out.”

But Shion was blinking at him, apparently wide-awake as he said, “Thanks for sharing.”

“—Huh?”

“I know you don’t like to talk about yourself, but I’m really happy you did.”

Nezumi shrank away from the feeling in his voice. “Don’t go getting all touchy feely on me. This was a one-time thing. I won’t be doing it again.”

“I understand,” he said with a small smile. “I just wanted to tell you how much it means to me. This was a one-time thing. I won’t be doing it again.”

“I understand,” he said with a small smile. “I just wanted to tell you how much it means to me.”

Nezumi made an appalled face. “How— Where do you get these lines? Aren’t you embarrassed at all?”

Shion looked thoughtful. “Maybe it’s the alcohol, but I’m not. I’m just trying to speak truthfully.”

*What the hell? He’s hopeless, utterly hopeless.*

“Well, stop. You’re giving me the creeps. Go back to sleep before you say something I’m really going to regret.”

Shion chuckled, but obediently closed his eyes. After a few seconds he appeared to be just as soundly asleep as he had been previously. Nezumi waited for sleep to come to him as well, but after a few minutes staring at the ceiling, he realized it was not a possibility. He needed some air. He pushed the blankets off, grabbed his coat, and stepped outside.
Hope you enjoyed that~
The next chapter is kind of a treat, and, I admit, probably the most fillery in all the story. Apropos, considering it's titled, "Garbage." You will see some more canon characters >w<
"Did you remember your gloves?"

Nezumi pulled one leather-clad hand from his pocket and waved it in front of Shion. “I don’t see yours, though.”

Shion raised his own hand and Nezumi frowned at it. He was wearing a worn sock, his thumb poking through a hole in the cloth so that it looked like some sort of sock mitten.

“Recycling,” Shion said and smiled slyly.

Nezumi tsked. He adjusted the bag’s strap on his shoulder and returned to assessing the houses around him.

A few days ago, Shion had been struck with the idea that it might be more expedient and economical if they tried to scavenge parts for Nezumi’s projects. Before the formation of No. 6, a fairly sizeable town had existed where West Block now stood. Since electronics were of no use to those in the West Block, Shion was confident that they would be able find at least a few of the more commonplace pieces, and he had it on good authority that there might be some items worth looking at in a dump in the northwest sector.

“Who’s this ‘authority’ you got your information from?” Nezumi asked.

“Yoming’s niece, Lili. Don’t make that face. She and her friends are always exploring the outskirts of West Block. They’re experts at finding things. With their help, I’m sure we’ll be able to salvage something.”

Nezumi wasn’t sold on the profitability of dumpster diving for computer parts, but it was better than sitting around in headquarters being glared at and insulted. After a few choice words with Yoming, Shion gained approval.

The only thing left now was to pick up Yoming’s niece. They had left the main street behind and were now wandering down a quiet path flanked by homes. This area was in much better condition than the neighborhoods he had hitherto seen. There were less broken windows, and although most of the facades of the houses had been blackened and worn down with neglect, they looked high-class in comparison with the rest of the West Block. Every now and then Nezumi’s boot would scuff against a stone underfoot, and at first he thought these were discarded pieces of the homes. However, he soon realized there was a distinct pattern to their placement. Dirt and time were slowly working to erase all vestiges of it, but there was still enough visible to discern that there had been a cobblestone path laid out between the buildings some years before.

Still, despite its tenuous hold on presentability, the area felt just as dead as the lesser neighborhoods. The street was nearly deserted, and those he did see had an air of stoic determination as they passed. Nezumi made eye contact with a man sitting out on the stoop of one of the buildings. He must have been at least sixty, and appeared to have no other purpose for being there other than to show off the huge machete he had resting between his knees. The old man shifted the machete when their eyes met, and Nezumi looked the other way.

One of the houses ahead caught his attention. It was a two-story affair with the usual weary exterior, but what caught his attention was the squat van out front. He could count the number of cars he saw in West Block on one hand, so whomever owned the house must have been pretty well
off, well connected, or both. He scanned the house, and noticed that there were bars mounted on
every window.

“What’s that guy’s problem?”

Shion glanced at Nezumi and then to the house he nodded at. “Ah. Well, that’s Yoming’s
house, so, you can imagine why he might be a little cautious.”

“Yoming’s family lives altogether?” Shion nodded. “Wonderful. I love paying house calls to the
fortresses of homicidal maniacs.”

Shion snorted. “We’re here for Lili, not Yoming. Besides, he won’t be home.”

Nezumi grunted and rubbed the back of his neck. His head had been aching dully since the
morning, but he felt that the throbbing was getting more insistent the closer they got to the day’s
main objective.

“It’s strange, though,” said Shion. “Lili should’ve been waiting outside for us, but I don’t see
her.”

“Maybe she’s on house arrest.”

The windows of the house were completely dark. It wasn’t until they got closer that he realized
they had been blacked out as well as barred.

Shion knocked on the door. It opened almost immediately, revealing the barrel of a shotgun.

“Good afternoon, Getsuyaku,” Shion said pleasantly.

The barrel lowered a bit and the older man stepped out into the doorway. “Oh, it’s you.” He
gave a curt nod to Nezumi, and Nezumi was reminded of his less than civil dismissal of him a few
nights prior. “You’re here for Lili, right? I think she’s—”

“Shion!”

Before the delighted shriek could be processed, a small girl rocketed past Getsuyaku and threw
her arms around Shion’s waist.

“You’re finally here! I missed you so much!”

“You just saw me the other day, Lili,” Shion chuckled.

“I know, but I hardly ever get to see you. You never come over anymore,” she mumbled into his
shirt.

“Sorry.” Shion ruffled her hair. “Lili, this is Nezumi. Nezumi, Lili.”

The girl released Shion. “Pleased to meet you. I’ll be your guys’s escort for today.” The girl
beamed up at him, revealing a gap in the lower left-hand corner of her mouth.

You’ve gotta be kidding me.

Nezumi stared down at the pint-sized girl. She was a wisp of a thing, and her oversized t-shirt
and jeans emphasized her small stature all the more. Her bright eyes and round cheeks indicated
that the bagginess of the clothing was a stylistic choice, but why she wanted to look thinner than
she already was, Nezumi could not imagine.
This is his professional. I should’ve guessed. He had neither the skill nor the inclination to guess the ages of those younger than him, but he approximated her to be between seven and ten.

Shion seemed to be able to read the incredulity on his face, because he explained in a conciliatory tone, “Lili’s the best at what she does. If she and her friends can’t find something, no one can. Right, Lili?”

The girl nodded sagely. “Sorry I couldn’t wait for you outside like I promised. Daddy made me come inside. He still thinks I can’t take care of myself…”

“It’s dangerous,” Getsuyaku rumbled.

“He just wants to make sure you’re safe. It was my mistake.” Shion inclined his head at the older man. “Sorry.”

“Dear, the door.”

A woman stepped out from a doorway in the back of the house. Getsuyaku became animated at the sight of her. “Renka. Right. Sorry. Is it too cold?”

She was modestly pretty, although her loose-fitting clothing drained her. She looked about thirty, but there was an air of weariness about her that made her seem older than that. She paused on the threshold when she saw Shion and Nezumi.

“Hello, Shion. Oh, that’s right. You’re taking Lili out today.”

“I’m taking him out, Mama, not the other way around.” Lili pouted.

Renka smiled vaguely and turned back to Shion and Nezumi. “Won’t you boys come in?”

Getsuyaku ushered them in and closed the door before he crossed the room to stand at his wife’s side. Nezumi shifted. He was in no mood to engage in small talk.

“I have some tea, if you’d like,” the woman offered, but Shion declined it.

“We’re not staying long.”

“I see. Lili, why don’t you get your coat? It’s too cold to go out without it.”

“I was gonna get it. I was only saying hi to Shion and his friend.” She huffed and trudged out of the room, while all but Nezumi smiled fondly after her.

After Lili had disappeared into the next room, Shion turned to Renka. “How have you been? Has the morning sickness died down?”

The woman placed a hand on her stomach and smiled at him. “Oh, yes. I’ve been much better, thank you.”

“That’s good. Sorry I wasn’t too much help…”

“No, it’s fine. The tea you gave me has worked wonders. I haven’t had any trouble for a few days.”

“Mommy’s going to have a baby,” Lili announced, startling everyone with her sudden and silent reappearance. She was now wearing a mustard duffle coat and a paperboy cap.
Nezumi assumed that, as the only stranger in the group, this revelation was meant for him. He offered a brief congratulation to the woman, who accepted it graciously.

“You must be Nezumi,” she said with a motherly smile.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“I’m Renka. I suppose you’ve already met my husband and daughter—and my brother. I heard you joined his cause recently?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Nezumi agreed wryly. He didn’t miss the quietness of her tone or the vague way she referred to the Resistance. However, he couldn’t be sure if that indicated a hidden disapproval or simply that she was timid.

“You don’t wear the bandana? Do you not like it?”

Shion twitched beside him. Nezumi gave him a cursory glance before answering.

“I’m not one for accessorizing.”

Shion relaxed. Nezumi learned the reason for his nervousness when Shion explained that Renka was responsible for making the bandanas.

“Mommy’s the best at it. Everyone says so,” Lili gushed. “She made mine special.” She pulled the fold of her bandana straight, so that the small lily flower sewn into the corner was visible.

“It’s a small thing, but I like to do it. I used to be a tailor in town, but… Well, some things happened.” Nezumi didn’t miss the way Getsuyaku fidgeted, but the reason for it was impossible to guess. “And now I’ve got this little one,” she continued in a brighter tone, brushing her stomach. “My husband is always worried about me overexerting myself, but if I didn’t have those bandanas to occupy my time, I’m sure I’d go crazy all cooped up in here.” She laughed lightly.

Nezumi could only smile politely in response. Luckily, the small talk ended soon after, and Shion insinuated that they should probably be heading out.

Lili nearly bolted from the room after her mother murmured an assent. Shion and Nezumi turned to follow when Getsuyaku called Shion back.

“Here.” He held out his gun.

“Oh. Uh, I already have one.” Shion opened his coat to show the handgun holstered between his waistband and hip.

Getsuyaku shook his head. “You should have one people can see.”

Shion paused, but didn’t argue with the seriousness of the man’s expression. He uttered a brief word of thanks and gently took the gun from him. Nezumi eyed it as they left the house, wondering whether it was only Yoming’s family that exercised such protective measures, or if this was the typical process when a parent let their kid go out in West Block.

“I trust you boys to keep Lili and her friends out of trouble,” Renka called from the doorway. “Make sure you listen to Shion and Nezumi, Lili.”

As he and Shion came up beside the girl, Nezumi caught her rolling her eyes. Having been an unruly child himself, he wasn’t keen upon recognizing the symptoms in their temporary
companion. Babysitting a kid was tedious, but babysitting a spoiled, disobedient kid was a nightmare. And, of course, Lili just had to be Yoming’s niece.

Shion’s carefree voice cut into his musing. “So how’s business been lately?”

Lili turned to him, all smiles again. “Good! Yesterday I found some copper, and our client gave me a whole silver coin.”

“You’re still friends with Ei?”

“Yeah. He’s my best friend, actually.” Shion frowned slightly and she continued. “He’s waiting for us at the dump. He’s gonna make sure everyone else is there, too.”

Lili noticed Shion’s less than ecstatic expression. She looked a little lost for a second, before her face brightened with realization.

“Oh! But don’t worry, Shion,” she said quickly. “I don’t like him that way one bit. You’ll always be my one and only prince.”

Shion smiled and patted her head. “Thanks, Lili. You’re sweet.”

Lili beamed with starry-eyed wonder and clung to Shion’s arm.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Nezumi’s mouth. “Ah, I see. I was wondering how someone as simple as Shion managed to make it so high up in the ranks, but now it makes sense.”

Shion and Lili turned to him with looks of reproach and confusion, respectively.

“You make a cute couple. The niece of the resident megalomaniac and the prince of West Block,” he continued without remorse. “It’s nice to see you dating within your age range, Your Highness.”

“Very funny, Nezumi,” Shion said with patient distaste.

“Hey! You’re making fun of us, aren’t you?” Lili growled, pulling away from Shion to glare at him.

“Not at all. I’m happy for you. I’m sure you’ll make a fine bride in a decade or two.”

She puffed up her cheeks. “Uncle Yo’s right, you are a spoiled little prick!”

Nezumi cocked an eyebrow.

“Lili!” Shion gasped. Lili ducked her head with a look of immediate shame. “That was really rude,” he said hotly. “You shouldn’t say things like that. What would your mother think?”

“Sorry, Shion…”

Nezumi smirked wider with wry amusement. “Shouldn’t it be me you’re apologizing to? I’m the one you insulted.”
Lili mumbled a woeful apology.

“My, the things they’re teaching kids these days,” Nezumi said with a dramatic sigh. “What has the world come to?”

“You know, you should apologize, too,” Shion leveled at him. “You weren’t acting much better.”

“I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.”

“Technically, neither did she.”

Nezumi’s face broke into a wide grin. “Ouch,” he laughed. “And here I thought you weren’t equipped with teeth and claws.”

“Well, you were wrong,” Shion sniffed. “I’ll bite back if the occasion calls for it. Now, you really should—”

Lili tugged on Shion’s sleeve. “Shion, that man’s calling you.”

She pointed behind them, and sure enough, an extremely agitated looking young man was running toward them. He called Shion’s name repeatedly until the boy stopped to wait.

“Mister Shion, please, my wife,” the man wheezed when he managed to reach them. “My wife. She’s having a baby, you need to come right now!”

Lili gasped. “Shion, you need to help her!”

Shion instantly assumed a serious demeanor. “Yes, of course. Oh, but, uh— Nezumi…” He turned to Nezumi with a fraught expression.

“What? Do you need my permission? Obviously you should go.”

“But—” Shion bit his lip and looked back and forth between him and the man. “I mean, what about you?”

“What about me? Are you telling me you’d rather dig through trash than deliver a baby? If you want to go to the dumpster that badly, I’ll go deliver the baby.”

“Don’t worry, Shion,” Lili piped. “I’ll stay with Nezumi and be his escort. You go help that lady.”

Nezumi narrowed his eyes at the girl beside him, but after a moment, he shrugged. “Yeah. Lili’s more or less a part of the Resistance, isn’t she? It shouldn’t be a problem. Go ahead, your Majesty. Your subjects need you.”

Shion still looked a little unsure, but in the end he nodded. “Okay then. I’m going.”

The man and Lili breathed a sigh of relief.

“Here, Nezumi. Take this.”

Before Nezumi had a chance to question it, Shion pushed Getsuyaku’s gun into his hands. It was heavier than he expected, and he wondered fleetingly if it was because it was loaded.

“What I am supposed to do with this?”
“Nezumi, that’s a shotgun. No one’s going to bother you. Just carry it.”

“Mister Shion, please, my wife,” the young man whined a second time. “We have to go.”

Shion perked up at the words. “Right. Okay, I’m going. Sorry about this, Nezumi. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

He and the man turned and ran in the opposite direction. Nezumi watched them disappear around the corner and sighed.

*Today appears to be a big day for babies. And guns.*

He scowled down at the gun in his hands.

“Do you not know how to use that?” The look Lili gave him was baffled and just the slightest bit amused. Nezumi never imagined he’d see the day he was condescended by a child.

“I can teach you, if you want.” She stood up on her toes to peer at the top of the gun. “The safety’s on, so you shouldn’t be able to shoot it right now, but Daddy says that doesn’t always work, so keep your hand away from the trigger anyway. Once the safety’s off, you pretty much just point and shoot. Most of the time you can just point it at someone and they’ll run away, but Ei—his Mama lets him shoot her guns sometimes—says firing it into the air or at the ground is a good way to show you mean business.”

Nezumi stared blankly at her.

Lili pursed her lips. “I can carry the gun if you don’t want to, but I can’t shoot it, because it has too much recoil in it.”

“—How old are you?”

She crossed her arms. “That’s none of your business. Geez, don’t you know you never ask a woman her age?”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow. “My apologies. I didn’t know West Block residents became women at the age of four.”

“I’m not four! I’m—”

Nezumi walked away from her.

“Hey! I was still talking!” she howled.

Nezumi smirked to himself and kept walking so that the fuming girl had to drop her protests and run to catch up.

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There were no signs or markings for the dump. The buildings simply funneled down and then one was upon it. Although, he supposed the stench of dirt and garbage were as much a sign of its proximity as anything else. There was nothing to mark the boundary between the edges of the town and where the dump started but a line of garbage bags. Many of them were eviscerated, allowing the wind free rein with their contents.

He had expected to see a few people scrounging, and, indeed, there were some milling about by the entrance. He hadn’t, however, expected the birds; they dotted the expanse of the dump as far as
the eye could see. They perched on the mounds of refuse and pecked at them with casual concentration.

When Shion mentioned that the dump was from before No. 6’s time, he had automatically assumed that it was no longer in use, but this did not appear to be the case. There were several piles of trash that looked fresh, and the likelihood of this being so was made more certain by the density of vultures picking at them.

“Ei!”

Lili ran toward a group of kids standing near the entrance, and stopped to talk animatedly with one boy in particular. He had a brown hunting jacket slung over his shoulders and there were several small tears in the knees of his dark wash cargo pants. Nezumi noted the bandana tied around the boy’s neck, however, it was red instead of the Resistance gold.

The boy greeted Lili with a friendly smirk, but stared past her at Nezumi with a look of guarded curiosity.

“Nezumi!”

Nezumi’s ears pricked at the sound of his name. A small boy trotted over to him, and an older girl followed behind with a resigned expression. The children looked vaguely familiar, and after a moment he placed them as the pair of siblings that he and Shion had run into all those nights ago.

*Small world.*

The little boy grinned up at him. “Do you remember me?”

“I remember you.” But despite this, he couldn’t quite recall the boy’s name. He settled for, “You’re that kid Shion takes care of.”

The boy giggled. “Right! I’m Eiji. And that’s my sister Saki. We’re gonna help you find stuff!”

Unaffected by her brother’s exuberant introduction, Saki continued to frown at Nezumi. However, she did make a noise that might have been construed as a form of greeting.

*He’s Nezumi? The No. 6 guy everybody’s talkin’ about?”*

Lili’s scruffy friend, Ei, was leering at him with more intensity than before, and Nezumi found himself rather bored with the amount of staring and glaring directed at him that morning.

“Yup.” Lili chirped. “He’s Shion’s friend.”

“He don’t look so tough.” Ei stuck out his chin. “I could take him.”

Nezumi had to stop himself from laughing. “You picking a fight, kid?”

“I ain’t afraid of you. You’re on our turf now. Try anything funny and I’ll make you regret it.”

“Oh really? You and what shotgun?”

There was no way Ei hadn’t noticed the gun, but he now glanced at it with more attention.

“You won’t use it,” the boy said at last. “Everyone knows all the people in No. 6 are gutless turds.”
“You may be right,” Nezumi said, taking a step closer to the youth. “However, you’re forgetting one thing: I was kicked out of No. 6.” A wolfish smile spread over his features. “There was a reason for that.”

Nezumi was satisfied to see the immediacy with which the smugness disappeared from Ei’s face. In fact, the scare tactic was even more successful than he anticipated. Lili stared wide-eyed at him, and Eiji took a step away. Saki reached forward and pulled her brother back further.

Nezumi scanned the group, letting his gaze rest a moment on each individual child, before sweetly saying, “Shall we get to work?”

Ei was the first to regain his bearings. He trembled with anger, but instead of retaliating against Nezumi, he directed his rage at Lili.

“Where’s Shion?” he demanded. “He was supposed to be here.”

“Some lady was having a baby and he went to help her.”

“Why’d he go and do that?” Ei snapped. “He’s the one who asked us here, and he ditched us?”

“He can’t help it,” Saki muttered. “That’s his job.”

“Besides,” Nezumi cut in, “you’re here to find things for me, not Shion.” The children stared mutely and he continued, “Have any of you ever seen a computer? An old one? It’s a big box with a screen and a keyboard.”

“We know what a computer is,” said Ei.

“Wonderful. That’s what I’m building. I need you all to find me parts for it—mechanical parts and electronics are best.”

The children were proving slow to move, so he took the initiative and walked into the maze of trash bags.

“If you find anything you think might be of use, bring it to me.”

The kids dispersed, some more eagerly than others. Lili came up beside him. He spared her a glance before saying, “We’ll cover more ground if we split up.”

“I can’t leave you. I’m your escort,” she stated with an air of importance.

He had expected such an answer, and sadly, since he had more or less agreed to the arrangement, there was hardly a point in complaining. He only hoped she wouldn’t talk too much.

Neither man nor beast seemed much concerned with them as they made their way past the recent piles to the older sections of the dump. The droves of birds squawked irritably and parted for them, but either emboldened by their numbers, or jaded by human presence, none bothered to take flight. Since that was the usual, Nezumi took special notice when a murder of crows shot into the air. A dog crested over the top of the mound on top of which the birds had been scavenging and stared down at them.

It was an ugly creature with scruffy, matted fur and a watchful look that put Nezumi on edge. The dog was scraggily from hunger, but it was fairly large, and certainly capable of seriously wounding a person. A young child like Lili would be doubly at risk should it decide to attack. He gripped the shotgun tighter and the mutt’s ears twitched.
“Nezumi,” Lili said in a low voice. “Don’t stare at it.”

She tugged his sleeve and he broke eye contact with the dog to follow her a little ways away. Lili sighed.

“There are a lot of those out here, but they won’t bother you long as you don’t bother them.” The dog trotted down the slope, and Lili and Nezumi pretended to ignore it as it slunk past. “If they do get angry, just throw something at them,” the girl added as an afterthought. “That doesn’t work on the mad dogs, though—”

“Hey! Hands off, that’s ours!”

A shout from Ei diverted Nezumi’s attention. The boy appeared to be addressing an older woman. She was in the process of picking something off the ground, and when she heard Ei bellowing at her, she snatched it up and held it close to her chest.

“It’s mine. I found it,” she hissed.

Ei stopped a few feet away from her, crossed his arms, and gave what Nezumi assumed was his best impression of a small town gangster.

“This is our turf, and that means everything here is ours. That’s our copper.”

The woman snorted and Nezumi was apt to do the same. The kid was ridiculous. But the next moment Ei reached behind him and whipped out a pistol.

“Give it, or I’ll blow your brains out,” Ei growled.

Holy shit.

The woman’s expression soured, but it appeared she didn’t want to take any chances. She dropped the piece she was holding and hobbled off. Ei pounced on the discarded copper and inspected it with a grin.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, kid?”

Ei stuffed his prize into his pocket and glowered at Nezumi as he approached. “I’m protecting our claim. You got a problem with that?”

“Unfortunately, I do. Not that I have any particular regard for you, but you shouldn’t be waving around a gun like that. You’re going to get yourself shot.”

“What do you care? It ain’t none of your business.”

Was it his business? Common sense told him that anyone brandishing a weapon was announcing that they were prepared to have similar weapons turned on them. They were as good at attracting violence as they were at deflecting it. As much as he’d like to wash his hands of Ei’s foolhardiness, his conscience unfortunately forbade him from allowing the child to continue such dangerous behavior without at least commenting on it. Plus, he could think of a few people who might be extremely angry if Ei was shot on his watch.

In short, it was, indeed, his business.

“Like I said, if you want to carry that gun and be a walking target for every other halfwit with a gun or knife, that’s your problem. But,” he glanced down at the bandana fastened around Ei’s neck,
“you want to join the Resistance, don’t you? I guarantee you won’t make it if you’re dead.”

Ei snorted and turned aside, but despite his pretense at nonchalance, Nezumi could see a trace of uncertainty in his features. Some part of what he said resonated with the boy.

“Nezumi’s right, Ei,” Lili said. “Your Mama would be real mad if she saw you with that. And the gun’s broke, anyway.”

Nezumi studied the gun in Ei’s hand more closely. There didn’t appear to be anything out of the ordinary at first, but then he realized that Ei’s hold on the gun was odd. His fingers were wrapped entirely around the grip as one might clutch a hammer or bat; the pistol had no trigger.

Ei wheeled around on Lili. “You traitor! How stupid can you get?”

Lili looked taken aback. “What’re you yelling at me for?”

“Why’d you tell him it’s broke, you dumbass!”

Lili’s face colored in anger. “Don’t call me a dumbass, you little prick!”

“Both of you shut up,” Nezumi snapped.

The children quieted, albeit with looks of mutual discontent.

Nezumi sucked in a sharp breath. “You,” he turned to Ei, “get rid of that gun, or I swear I will tell your mother. And you,” he turned to Lili, “stop calling people pricks.”

He cut between them and headed for the area with the least amount of people. These children were nightmares, the West Block was screwed to the nth degree, and now he was seeking refuge from the thought of both by digging through a pile of decades-old trash. To top it all off, his headache had grown into a full-blown migraine.

He halted at a mound that advertised a mystery of stuffed trash bags and concentrated on the singular act of ripping every one of them open. He had succeeded in emptying seven or so before Lili joined him. Thankfully, she had enough sense of his current mood not to say anything.

Nezumi huffed. Not one so far had anything remotely close to what he needed. There were plastics, old shoes, shards of glass, and torrents of pulped papers and wrappers, and these merely the inventory of one pile in a hundred. He straightened and stared out at the expanse. He could see the opposite end of the dump in the distance, but so much lay between that point and where he stood. The remnants of an entire civilization were heaped at his feet, reduced to fodder for whichever scavengers found use in them.

He did not know much about the town that once stood in the spot where No. 6 now existed. It was barely a footnote in the history classes taught by the Gifted Curriculum professors. They waxed poetic about the war, the Babylon Treaty, the triumph of the six city-states, but said precious little about the Town of Roses out of which the last and most prosperous of those six had sprung. They spoke only of the town’s renowned beauty—a facet that the budding No. 6 government determined to preserve by building a wall around the better parts of the town. The greatest minds were collected to engineer a utopia for the rich, the ambitious, and the ignorant, while the rest were abandoned to squalor. It wasn’t long before the bloom faded and revealed the thorns beneath. All those pretty ideals thrown to the wayside with the rest of the refuse of the past.

Nezumi scowled and cast another bag aside. No. 6 was a parasite. It deserved to be exterminated.
“Is this helpful?”

Lili held out a rusty toaster to him. His mind went through the components of the machine, and he shook his head. Lili stuffed it back into the bag she found it in.

“Are you and Shion good friends?” she asked a moment later.

“Do we look like good friends?”

“Well,” the girl lilted. “I don’t know. You guys seem pretty different, is all.”

“Hm. You and that kid Ei don’t seem to be too friendly, so how is he your best friend?”

“Ei’s in a real bad mood today. Usually, he’s less mean.”

“Less mean,” he repeated with a short-lived smile. Something half-buried in the ground glinted. He bent down to pick it up, but it turned out only to be a piece of sheet metal.

“It seems we both have no explanation for the company we keep,” he said absently. “Although, I hardly have a choice in the matter.”

Lili furrowed her brow. “You don’t like living with Shion?”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d focus on looking for parts.”

“…But I always thought it’d be fun to live with Shion. He’s always really nice and he tells good stories, too. I mean, I know it’s safer if we live with Uncle Yo, but sometimes he makes me angry. Like, whenever Mama makes chicken, he always eats it all and I hardly get any!” A petulant shadow crossed over her face, but her anger soon deflated into a forlorn sigh. “But I should be grateful, since he works hard every day to provide for us.”

Nezumi paused in his search and turned to her. He did not like the insinuation in her last statement. It sounded like a line that had been fed to her, and he had little doubt as to the source.

What a dick.

“Anyway,” Lili said brightly, “I was really happy when Shion asked me to help today. He never comes over to play anymore. Mama says it’s because he’s busy.”

Nezumi yanked a few stalks of rotted wood out of the ground and tossed them aside. This spot wasn’t yielding anything other than chunks of wood and rocks. He picked up the gun from its resting place on the ground and walked over to the next pile. Lili followed and dropped down beside him to dig.

“Well, I guess it’s better that he’s busy,” she continued. “If he’s outside, he can’t lock himself in his room like he did after Auntie Karan went away.”

Nezumi reached for a piece of plywood that was sticking out of the pile, but sharply recoiled when something jabbed into his palm. He checked his hand, but, fortunately, the leather hadn’t been punctured.

“You okay?”

“Fine.”

He checked the underside of the plywood and discovered that there were several nails jutting
“Who’s ‘Auntie Karan’?"

“Hm? Oh. Uh…” Lili frowned and pawed through a few gutted bags. “Shion’s mama.”

“…I see,” Nezumi returned to sorting through the junk in front of him.

“She was a really nice lady,” Lili enthused. “She made these really delicious biscuits and she always brought a special batch for me. And Shion came over a lot more to play.”

Nezumi flipped over another piece of plywood with his foot, but this one was clean of nails. He kicked it out of his way and moved to the opposite side of the rubbish pile.

Lili trailed after him without so much as a breath spared in between. “Everyone was really sad when she went away. But Shion was the most sad. He wouldn’t come out of his room, and Mama and me had to bring him his food.”

“Kid.”

Lili paused in her rant and blinked up at him.

“I don’t need any of this stuff.” He gestured at the mound of broken glass and plastic. “It’s all junk.”

“I didn’t make the piles,” she said in a slightly defensive tone.

“Let’s move on.”

“Alright… By the way, Nezumi, don’t tell Shion I was talking about Auntie Karan, okay? Mama told me not to talk about it because it makes him sad.”

“You have my word,” he deadpanned.

Conversation halted as both he and Lili made a more concerted effort to search through the piles. Every so often one of the children would come up to him and show him a piece they found, although most of it was useless or broken beyond repair. Eiji was his most frequent visitor and Nezumi was growing more exasperated by the minute. The boy was certainly the most dedicated to the task and worked quickly, but no matter how many times Nezumi explained they specifically needed electronic parts, Eiji continued to bring back anything and everything he found that was remotely metal.

“Nezumi, what about this?”

Nezumi steeled himself before turning around. “That’s a bicycle wheel,” he said with passable calmness. “And a very rusty one at that.”

Eiji stared down at the browning ring in his hands. “No good, huh?” He dropped it on the ground and turned away.

“Hey, kid.” Eiji paused. “You’re looking with your sister, right? From now on, when you find something, ask her about it first. If she thinks it’s good, then come show it to me, okay?”

There was just a hint of sheepishness to the nod Eiji gave him, and then he jogged over to his sister. She was searching with another girl who appeared to be part of the ragtag group of children, although he couldn’t for the life of him remember her name, or even if they had been introduced in
Nezumi plopped down on the ground and laid the bag and gun he was holding beside him. Lili glanced at him, but made no comment and continued working. He scanned the area for Ei. So far, he was the only child who hadn’t checked in with him. He caught him milling about some fifty yards away, keeping as wary an eye on the people around him as he did on the ground. Nezumi suspected he was thinking more about copper than computers. He supposed he couldn’t blame the kid. He wouldn’t want to do this either if it weren’t for his own benefit.

“Is this something you can use?” a small voice asked.

Saki was standing behind him, holding out a computer keyboard. He sat up and took it from her. It was dirty and beaten, certainly unusable, but its existence was a welcome sign.

“Where’d you find this?”

“Over there.”

He retrieved his property and moved in the direction she pointed. The other children stepped aside as he approached. A computer monitor was protruding halfway out of a pile of recyclables. Nezumi felt a flicker of hope at the sight of it. He dragged the monitor out the rest of the way and appraised the damage. The screen had been shattered to nothingness and the husk was cracked. He hummed thoughtfully. The condition of the monitor was of less importance than the system unit, however.

“Do you see any long, rectangular boxes around here?”

Lili and Saki looked around the general vicinity, while Eiji wandered a little further. Even Ei had decided to join them, though he seemed drawn more by curiosity than by any genuine intention to help.

“What’re you doin’?” he asked.


Ei harrumphed and walked away.

“Nezumi, here! Is this it?”

Lili pointed down at a black object and Saki came over to help her clear it of debris. He bent down and inspected the system unit closely. The casing was worn down, but he would not be able to ascertain the condition of the important parts like the motherboard and processor until he cracked it open. Unfortunately, at present, he lacked the tools to do so. The screws keeping it locked shut had rusted and he hoped that the contents had faired better. The largest hurdle now was how he was going to convey both the system unit and monitor back to headquarters. It would be difficult with just Lili and himself; he realized he might have to enlist the other children’s help, and balked at the thought.

“Chocolate bar!”

Nezumi paused in his examination of the system unit and turned to see Eiji holding a short rectangle of candy over his head like a prize. Ei was nearest to the younger boy, and when he saw the chocolate bar, he descended on him with the ferocity of a terrier.

“Lemme see!”
“No, it’s mine! I found it first!”

Ei grabbed at it, but Eiji dodged and ran from him in Nezumi’s direction.

“Don’t eat that!”

The kids froze at Nezumi’s outburst, and remained shocked long enough for him to pluck the candy bar from Eiji’s outstretched hand.

“Hey!”

Ei and Eiji erupted into a chorus of protests.

Nezumi raised the dirt-encrusted wrapper over his head and far out of the reach of both children. “You can’t eat this. You found it in a dump.”

“We find everything in a dump,” hissed Ei.

Nezumi had to concede that that particular argument was not the choicest given his audience. “It’s still wrapped,” Eiji keened.

Why am I even bothering? If the kids want to eat a candy bar they found buried under piles of filth and rusted metal that’s their problem.

“Fine. Here.”

Nezumi dropped the chocolate into Eiji’s hands while Ei leered at it with an air of insidious concentration.

“I just hope it’s not contaminated with anything dangerous,” Nezumi said as Eiji started to unwrap the candy. The boy stopped and stared up at him, and Nezumi continued without interest, “It’s probably been exposed to all kinds of chemicals, what with it being out here for so many years. But go ahead and eat it if you want. It’s your funeral.”

“Erm…” Eiji glanced down at the partially opened wrapper. “I’m not really hungry, actually. You can have it, Ei.”

He offered it to the other boy, who appeared confused by both Nezumi’s musings and Eiji’s sudden change of heart. Eiji went back to his sister and Ei was left staring at the forlorn rectangle of chocolate in his hands with notably less keenness. Nezumi raised his eyebrows in challenge when the boy met his eyes. Ei’s face went bright red.

“You’re an old fart!” he shrieked, chucking the candy bar at him and bolting in the opposite direction.

Nezumi’s mouth twitched. I hate kids.

When he returned to the computer, Lili was watching him with a furtive smile.

“What?”

“Shion said you might be mean, but I think you’re secretly nice.”

“I think you’re wrong.”
It appeared she had already made up her mind, though, and his dismissal went unrecognized.

“You’re not as nice as Shion, but you don’t baby me like everyone else does. You’re okay by me.”

“As much as it pleases me to receive your stamp of approval, what I really want is for you and your friends to help me get this back to headquarters.”

He gestured to the computer and system unit, and Lili frowned down at them.

“Since I have to carry the shotgun, you kids will probably have to do most of the heavy lifting.” He gave her a winsome smile. “It’s a good thing you don’t like to be babied, huh?”
Shion walked out of the shower feeling better than he had in weeks. He owed the child born newly that day for his good spirits. When he was tending to the mother, he wasn’t thinking about anything but making sure that she and her child survived. The feeling that swept through him when he heard the infant burst into a series of robust cries was indescribable. He had witnessed many a person cling desperately to life, but none ever declared their determination to live as loudly as newborns. He never forgot he was alive, but sometimes it was difficult to remember what it really meant to live. He had been fortunate to lead a life relatively free from hardship, but almost daily his job brought him into contact with those whose everyday existence was a struggle. It was gratifying to know that not every fight for life was a losing battle.

He left the new parents’ home feeling reinvigorated and just a little bit greedy. He made a few unscheduled stops at the butcher and grocer, and though he returned home with lighter pockets, the satisfaction his bounty brought him more than made up for it.

Shion toweled off his hair and crossed the room. The mice were curled in a heap on the coffee table, and he spared a moment to smile at their cuteness before lighting the heater. He had already set the pot of water atop it before he went into the bathroom. Now the only thing left to do was put in the ingredients and wait for them to cook. He waited a few minutes for the water to boil, and after observing the light color of the liquid therein, decided to add an extra sprig of basil for good measure.

A bead of water from his hair rolled down his neck and Shion shivered. He drew closer to the warmth of the heater. It was well into the winter now and the temperature in the room was quite chilly. It was even colder outside, and he wondered whether Nezumi was still at the dump.

The sound of footsteps out in the corridor drew Shion’s attention to the door. He paused in his stirring to listen more closely. The footfalls were soft and light, schooled to be virtually imperceptible, except that the person wasn’t making an effort to hide their approach. It was a gait that Shion had often wondered at. He could only imagine how many years of careful practice it took to develop such a delicate step.

He left the ladle against the rim of the pot and rushed to unlatch the door.

“Welcome back!”

Nezumi had taken a step back when the door swung open and now blinked at him with a rare expression of surprise. He quickly recovered though, and shook his head.

“What if it wasn’t me? You just threw the door wide open, and you’re unarmed. If I were a thief intent on robbing you, I could have you dead or doubled over in a heartbeat.”
“I knew it was you.”

“You did, did you?”

“I recognized your footsteps.”

“My footsteps?”

For some reason this revelation made Nezumi sullen, and he strode past him into the room without another look or comment. Shion closed and locked the door while Nezumi paused to sniff the air and zero in on the pot on the heater. Shion smiled to himself.

“How’d it go at the junkyard? Find anything useful?” he asked as he reassumed his place at the pot.

“An ancient computer. Although I won’t know how useful it will be until I crack it open.”

“It’s a start at least. How were the kids?”

“Fabulous. I’ve never met such lovable, well-mannered children. They’ve quite convinced me to adopt.”

Shion thought back to the interactions between Lili and Nezumi. Lili was one of the more well mannered children of his association, and Nezumi had been childish and unfriendly to her. He couldn’t imagine how the other teen behaved when he was forced to interact with several kids, especially when one of them was Ei. Even Shion had trouble getting along with the boy. Although, he heard that sometimes difficult children responded better under stricter treatment. Nezumi was less tolerant than himself and more prone to speaking his mind, so perhaps he had better luck curbing Ei’s bad attitude.

“I wish I could’ve been there,” Shion said with a grin.

“They give you their regards, by the way.” Nezumi unwound the superfibre from around his neck and shoulders and draped it on the boxes beside the door.

Nezumi’s nose and cheeks were red from the cold and the color stood in relief to his pale skin. A few strands of his hair had come loose from his ponytail, but he had neglected to fix them. Shion discovered a possible reason for this when the other boy held his dirt-smeared gloves up to the lantern for inspection. Nezumi frowned at them and then peeled them off, followed by his jacket.

“Speaking of children, I’m guessing midwifing went well?”

Shion felt a flush of pleasure at the question. “It did! It was a healthy baby boy. You should’ve seen it, Nezumi. The mother let me hold him, and he was so small, I could fit him in the crook of my arm.”

When the mother transferred the baby into his arms, Shion had experienced a mixture of apprehension and excitement. It hadn’t been the first time he had delivered a child, and no doubt it wouldn’t be the last, but he always felt a little awed in the presence of newborns.

The baby had dropped off to sleep very soon after he was wiped down, and Shion was nervous of waking him. All fears dissipated, however, the moment he felt the small weight resting against his chest. Despite the winter air seeping into the house, the child was exceptionally warm, and Shion couldn’t help but marvel at how soft and peaceful he looked asleep. He voiced his thoughts to the parents and they all spent a moment of fond silence watching the baby slumber.
Shion grinned to himself at the memory.

“They were really grateful,” he told Nezumi. “The father gave me some basil as thanks. Usually I don’t accept gifts like that, but when he offered the basil, I couldn’t help but think about making soup. So…” He gestured to the pot with a good-natured shrug.

Nezumi came forward and peered into the pot. He whistled.

“Chicken and vegetables? You must be really crazy about basil.”

“Well, I thought I’d make something nice as an apology for running off on you.”

“Buying my forgiveness with soup, huh? It’s one of your more sensible ideas.”

Beneath his joking tone, Shion was pleased to perceive a note of genuine interest.

“It needs a little more time to cook. Go take a shower and then we’ll eat.”

Nezumi disappeared into the bookshelves. Nezumi was in unusually good humor. Shion had worried that the other boy would be angry he had been left to the arduous task of combing through mountains of trash with a pack of unruly children as his only assistance, but while Nezumi did look tired, he did not appear especially irritated. In fact, it seemed to Shion that he was the most relaxed he had seen him. His amiable mood was likely a result of exhaustion, but Shion couldn’t help but entertain a tentative notion that Nezumi was warming up to him. He didn’t have any illusions about Nezumi’s distaste for the West Block or his resentment at being trapped there, but he didn’t think Nezumi held any specific hatred toward him. There were moments when they were reading or talking, when Shion fancied that he was enjoying himself, even if just a little.

He felt a small surge of pleasure at the thought, which he took pains to quash. It was unreasonable to assume that just because Nezumi wasn’t acting openly hostile at this moment that he had in any way grown fond of him. It was impossible for a person to remain constantly angry and resentful; it simply wasted too much energy. Nezumi’s languidness was far more likely a sign that the day’s events had depleted his energy and he was now taking time to recharge. In any case, he was glad that Nezumi seemed as pleased as he was with the prospect of soup for dinner, and that encouragement was enough to make him focus more intently than before on his task.

When Nezumi returned ten minutes later, he crossed behind Shion and dropped down onto the couch. Shion kept dutifully stirring the pot. There was something very calming about the motion, and he was reminded of the last time he made soup.

It had been a particularly difficult season of illness. Most of the cases were nothing life threatening, but those with less means, or no means at all, were having a rough time of it. He had taken pity on a few children who were suffering from resilient colds, and thought that it might do them good to eat something warm.

While he watched the children slurping at the soup, he couldn’t help but think that it always tasted better when one ate it in the company of others. There were many evenings when his mother would come home from work and put a pot of soup on the heater for them. She was an adamant believer that there was nothing better than drinking a piping hot bowl of soup at the end of a hard day. It was a belief she claimed to have inherited from her father. The memory made him feel an affectionate nostalgia for the days of his youth, and he began to absentmindedly hum a song his mother used to sing to him when he was little. He couldn’t quite remember the lyrics, but he was certain they had something to do with elephant noses.
“I’m surprised you haven’t made soup before.”

It took a moment for Shion to register that Nezumi had spoken, but when he had, he tilted his head in a mute request for elaboration.

Nezumi clarified in a louder voice, “Well, soup’s pretty easy to make, so it’s surprising you’re only just making it now.”

Shion thought about conveying his previous thoughts to Nezumi, but in the end, he voiced the secondary reasons, which were just as true.

“The ingredients can be expensive, especially if you’re buying them fresh, so I don’t make it too often. But… I don’t know. I felt like making it all of a sudden. It’s a soup kind of day, don’t you think?”

Nezumi smiled faintly and the softness of the gesture brought a similar smile to Shion’s face. Over the few weeks Nezumi had spent with him he had been treated to a vast array of his smiles: cynical smirks; pitiless sneers; saccharine grins laced with 100 proof condescension; bleak expressions that were nothing more than a droll twist of the lips to flatter the casual observer. Nezumi possessed a never ending artillery of smiles to charm, and wound, and ensure that everyone was at least an arms length away at all times.

But the smile Nezumi gave Shion now was one of the rare few that was genuine. There were still traces of amusement in the curvature of his mouth, but there was no malice in the placid grey of his eyes. Shion thought the expression looked well on Nezumi’s delicate features.

“You’re laughing at me,” Shion observed with a small smile of his own.

“No, I was just wondering if those people gave you anything else besides basil. Whiskey, for instance?”

“I’m not going to let you ruin my good mood,” he said with mock seriousness. He ladled out a bowl of soup and handed it to Nezumi. “Here, eat your soup.”

Nezumi took the soup in both hands and blew on the surface to cool it. Shion waited on pouring himself a helping in favor of watching Nezumi sample it. The other teen brought the lip of the bowl to his mouth and took a sip. Shion noted with growing apprehension that it took several seconds before Nezumi swallowed. His stomach somersaulted when Nezumi lowered the bowl into his lap and stared down at it with unmistakable distaste.

“What’s wrong?” Shion very nearly whined.

“I didn’t think it was possible,” Nezumi said, turning slowly to face him, “but you’ve somehow managed to ruin soup.”

“What? Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s bland. The blandest thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Shion scooped a little from the pot and sipped it. It wasn’t the pinnacle of flavor, sure, but he didn’t think it was as unpalatable as Nezumi seemed to think.

“What are you talking about? It tastes fine. You have to understand that we don’t have as many resources as you do in No. 6. Of course it doesn’t taste as good as what you’re used to.”
“Bull. Shit. This—” He raised his bowl, creating small yellow waves in the broth. “This is garbage. By anyone’s standards. And I’ve sorted through enough garbage today to know it when I taste it.” Nezumi tried the broth a second time and frowned. “Did you put salt in this?”

Shion’s pride stung at the accusation. “Of course I did. I know how to make soup.”

“Well, it needs more. Where’s your salt?”

Nezumi plopped his bowl down on the coffee table and scanned the room. Shion glanced at the place he stashed the salt, but he did not offer its location to Nezumi. Since he received salt weekly in the Resistance’s rations, he had been gradually accumulating the packets. They were useful for their cleansing and sterilizing properties, and large quantities of it weren’t easy to come by. Shion bit his bottom lip.

Maybe if I don’t say anything, he’ll just drop the issue and eat the soup as it is.

The hope was in vain. Nezumi turned to him the next moment and repeated the word “Salt?” with no small degree of impatience.

“I need it for medicinal purposes,” Shion complained.

“You should have thought about that before you made soup. Now where is it?”

Shion shrank back and mumbled, “In the box over there.”

Nezumi pushed himself up and crossed to the side of the room to which he pointed, while Shion stared morosely into the steaming pot of soup. Cooking had never been a strong suit of his, but this was the first time anyone had ever said so to his face, and with so little deference to his feelings. Although he was less offended than disappointed.

So much for that, he thought with a sigh and fell back onto the couch.

Nezumi was making an awful lot of noise and Shion turned to see him rifling through the box at the end of his bed. He had pulled several items out and they lay splayed on the floor at his feet.

“Not that one,” Shion said. “The one under my bed.”

Nezumi moved to the bed and pulled the shoebox of salt packets out from under it.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered, grabbing a handful. “You have all this, and you couldn’t spare a packet or two to make your soup palatable?”

Shion slumped against the back of the couch. Nezumi grabbed his bowl on the way over to the heater and dumped its contents back into the pot before ripping open a few packets of salt and pouring them in as well. He stirred it and sampled the liquid.

“Much better.”

Nezumi measured out two new servings and held one out for Shion to take. The metal of the bowl was hot, but not enough to burn his hands. The sensation of the heat against his skin was reminiscent of the fierce warmth of the newborn, and Shion felt his spirits take a melancholic turn.

Nezumi sat beside him and began picking carrots and chicken out of his soup with his chopsticks. “From now on, if you ever get the hankering for soup, I’ll make it,” he said to Shion in between bites. “I’m not a great cook, but I have enough practice to at least make a decent broth.”
Shion sipped at the soup and acknowledged that it was better with the added sodium, but made no further remark. He couldn’t get the child out of his head. He felt happy for the parents, he was proud of bringing the baby into the world, but now that the novelty of the moment had passed, he felt a familiar dread seeping into his thoughts.

*What does the future hold for that child?*

He did not doubt that the parents would try their best to ensure his happiness, but misfortune in West Block was as common as the cold. The father could lose his job tomorrow and the family could starve within a matter of weeks; the baby could be inadequately swaddled and die of hypothermia overnight. Such accidents were not unheard of, especially among first-time parents.

Or the parents might decide that providing for the child is too difficult and abandon him. Shion’s chest ached dully. There wasn’t a person in West Block who hadn’t seen the little bundles left on doorsteps or tucked in the corners of alleyways. Shion had buried enough of them in shallow graves.

Safu hated seeing them. Whenever they came across an infant’s corpse, her face contorted into a look of unadulterated disgust.

“What kind of person does that to a child—their child?” she would hiss. “It’s cruel and it’s sick. Some people don’t deserve to reproduce.”

There were many in his acquaintance that believed such children were better off unborn. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that, but he knew as well any other West Block citizen that living wasn’t easy. They were simply too under resourced. He did not mourn for himself, but he pitied the children who paid the ultimate price of neglect before they even had a chance. It was not a reality he wished on anyone.

“Hey, come on, don’t be mad.”

The sound of Nezumi’s voice broke Shion from his reverie. Unbeknownst to him, Nezumi had long since taken notice of his deep silence and had spent half the meal trading discomfited glances his way.

Nezumi cleared his throat and continued in a jagged tone, “The soup wasn’t really that bad. Just add more salt next time.”

Shion placed his soup bowl down on the coffee table virtually untouched. The mice lifted their heads at the sound, but went back to resting when they assessed it was nothing to concern them.

“Nezumi, I’ve been thinking about what you said the other night. About how the Resistance and No. 6 are heading toward war.”

Nezumi blinked. “Oh?” He relaxed against the back of the couch. “What about it?”

“Maybe we’ve got it wrong. Maybe it doesn’t have to be so black and white. We’re always talking in dichotomies: inside and outside the wall, us and them. But who says it has to be that way? Why can’t we find a middle ground?”

Nezumi snorted. “What middle ground?”

“I don’t know, one that doesn’t result in a bunch of people dying. There has to be another way.”

Nezumi’s expression was unimpressed, verging on bored. Shion continued with desperate
resolution, “I mean, look at us. We get along just fine, don’t we? Who’s to say the people in West Block and No. 6 couldn’t see past their differences and learn to work together, too?”

A beat passed between them. Then Nezumi’s mouth curved into one of his disdainful smirks.

“How presumptuous of you,” he said with caustic calm. “And I suppose you have an ingenious plan as to how you’re going to overcome several decades worth of bad blood? I’m really looking forward to hearing it.”

Shion felt a flicker of frustration build in the pit of his stomach. This always happened when the conversation broached anything even remotely important. Whether it was personal territory or mention of No. 6, if Nezumi perceived a threat, he pulled back and an impenetrable wall came crashing down between them. In the span of a second, Nezumi became sardonic, arrogant, and unyielding, and in that same moment, Shion was reduced to a silly idealist who only thought the things he did because he was not educated or experienced enough to know otherwise.

Shion loathed it. He wanted to be understanding and respectful of Nezumi’s space, but then there were times like these when he felt the urge to crash into that wall full force and tear it down, with his bare hands if he had to. The violence of the impulse unnerved him, but he could no longer pretend that the desire wasn’t there.

If only I could breach that wall and eliminate the distance between us.

“The wall,” Shion said with breathless realization.

“Hm?”

Shion stood up and began pacing excitedly back and forth between the couch and bookcases.

“What if we were to tear down the wall? If the main conflict is the inequality, then why don’t we just remove the barriers? No. 6 and the West Block were one once. The Town of Roses, right? If they managed to exist peacefully before, then there’s no reason why it can’t work again. We could—”

Nezumi burst into laughter. It lasted only a handful of seconds, but it was enough to make Shion’s blood simmer. He waited silently for Nezumi to collect himself.

“Of course,” Nezumi chuckled. “Tear down the wall. Why hasn’t anyone thought of that before? I’m sure once the wall is gone everyone will see the error of their ways, and we can all go back to holding hands and singing Kumbaya around the token campfire.”

“Don’t treat me with sarcasm,” Shion ground out. “I’m serious. I would appreciate it if you would be, too.”

“You want my serious opinion,” Nezumi said, all mirth gone from his voice. “It wouldn’t work. If we pulled down the wall, it’d be a bloodbath. If the citizens of West Block had free access to No. 6, the first thing they’d do is exact vengeance. And if you were afraid of innocents getting caught in the crossfire before, with that plan it’s guaranteed. Nothing short of divine intervention could make that work.” Nezumi pinched the bridge of his nose and leaned his head back against the wall. “It’s a nice sentiment, but it’s naïve.”

Something inside him snapped.

“Stop calling me naïve!”
Nezumi dropped his hand and looked at him with an expression caught halfway between surprise and some other unreadable emotion that Shion didn’t care to analyze. The only thing that mattered was that he had Nezumi’s attention.

“Optimism and naivety are not the same thing! I know how hard it is, how hard it would be. But I refuse to accept things the way they are. How do we know it can’t change if no one ever tries? You claim to know so much better, but you’re complacent. You keep repeating the same lines: this is just the way things are; there’s nothing you can do about it. That’s just what No. 6 says.”

Shion knew how dangerous the words were, even as they fell from his mouth, but he couldn’t stop them, and what’s more, he didn’t want to. There was something about Nezumi, the way he spoke and acted, the secrets he kept and the harshness of his words, which stirred in Shion emotions so desperate and so angry, at times he could hardly recognize himself.

He was not an aggressive person—or at least he hadn’t been. Ever since his mother passed away things had gotten away from him. He had tried to channel his loss and confusion into work and the cause, but these only exacerbated the feelings. He didn’t want to give in to them. He wanted to be stronger. He needed to believe that no matter how hard things seemed that there was always the possibility of a positive outcome. Maybe the restrictive conditions of Nezumi’s upbringing had conditioned him to accept a reality in which he could see no hopeful future, but Shion refused to buy into such a pessimistic worldview, and he definitely couldn’t understand why Nezumi thought his way of thinking was superior.

He could see the flicker of threat in the other teen’s eyes and knew that if he voiced the words sitting on his tongue, the conversation might escalate into a full-blown fight, but he didn’t care.

“So you just keep on being cynical,” he growled at Nezumi. “That way no one will ever know how scared you are.”

The effect was instantaneous. Nezumi was not merely angry; his face lost all traces of human warmth. His features chilled into marble and his eyes held all the silent severity of blades.

“That’s rich,” Nezumi said in a voice as silken and sharp as night.

He rose from the couch and stalked toward him, and Shion felt a thrill of pure terror shoot down his spine. His foot drew back instinctively, but he stopped himself before the step was complete.

No. I won’t back down. Everything I said would be for nothing if I back down now.

He slid his foot forward and raised his head to meet Nezumi’s pitiless gaze. The other teen stopped barely an arms length away from him.

“If you think I’m so wrong, go ahead,” Nezumi said in that same dark tone. “By all means, tear down the wall and charge into No. 6 with your lofty ideals and your promises of a better tomorrow. But don’t be surprised when no one volunteers to join your crusade.” Nezumi took another step forward, and this time Shion had no choice but to retreat closer to the bookcases.

“They don’t want to be saved, Shion,” he hissed. “No. 6 might be a city of lies and hypocrisy, but it’s a hell of a lot better place to live than here. They have a constant source of food and protection, educational institutions, top-class medical centers. They’re oppressed, but they’re happy and healthy. And you wanna barge in on their carefree little lives and expect them to be grateful? They like the idea of the West Block as a garbage dump for the scum and degenerates of the world. You’re not human to them; you’re the cautionary tale they tell their children so that they can grow up to be just as meek and ignorant as their parents before them.”
“Not everyone thinks like that,” Shion said, struggling to keep his voice level. “There are victims in No. 6, too. You of all people should know. You were experimented—”

He let out a small gasp as Nezumi slammed him against the bookcase. Nezumi’s forearm dug harshly into his collarbone, but he did not reach up to pry it away. The mice screeched and jumped up and down on the table, but Shion kept his attention trained on Nezumi in a resolute glare.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Nezumi growled. “I never once said I was experimented on. That was just a theory. I wasn’t speaking from personal experience.”

“No. 6 needed you for a reason. It won’t go away just because you refuse to acknowledge it!”

Shion concentrated all his strength and shoved Nezumi roughly in the chest. The other teen staggered backwards a few steps before regaining his footing.

“You can’t keep ignoring it! We need to talk about this!”

Nezumi eyed him warily from beside the coffee table. The aura of his anger had changed. It was more subdued, though not any less intense, like a panther biding its time while it decided whether the prey was worth going in for the kill.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he said finally.

Shion inhaled deeply through his nose and held it. Although he had questions and concerns about Nezumi’s experiences within the walls of No. 6, he realized it was not a topic with which he was likely to be forthcoming. Shion exhaled slowly and tried to temper the agitation in his voice.

“I don’t know if that’s true. What about the dreams?”

The question caught Nezumi completely by surprise. He stared at him, wide-eyed and lips slightly parted in disbelief.

“What? What are you— Why are you thinking about that now, of all times?”

“Somebody has to think about it. You said you dreamt about the man dying from the wasp before it happened, right?”

Nezumi had begun to pace. He raked his fingers through his hair, muttering, “I can’t believe this,” with surly concentration.

Shion forged on. “And then you dreamt about the voice telling you it would give you the power to destroy No. 6. I know you still have the dreams. I’ve noticed. I didn’t say anything because I wanted to respect your privacy, but we have to talk about this now. People’s lives are at stake—my friends’ lives.”

Nezumi stopped abruptly and faced him. “What do you want from me, Shion? What will it take for you to shut up?”

“Just answer my questions,” Shion rejoined breathlessly. “Do you think the power the voice was talking about was the drives?”


“How can you—?”

“I am sure.”
Shion quieted. Nezumi’s words were crisp, but he heard the ring of honesty in them.

“…Okay. Fine. Do you think the dreams are in any way connected to why No. 6 needed you?”

Nezumi took a moment to consider the question, but in the end, he responded with a firm, “No.”

“Okay. Fine.”

“Fine. We done?”

Shion nodded once in reply. They stood staring at each other. Shion realized he could hear his heartbeat thudding in his ears. He wasn’t used to getting so worked up, and now that it was over, he felt a little dizzy from the overexertion. His face and neck were hot, and he could only imagine how he must look to Nezumi, flushed and nearly trembling from spent emotion. The thought made him self-conscious. He didn’t regret a single word of what he said; only that he had forgotten himself so completely in doing so.

Nezumi was the first to break the stalemate. He swiped his bowl off the table and helped himself to more soup. The childishness of the action was not lost on Shion, and it made him feel a little better about how he was handling himself. Given how poorly Nezumi dealt with the disclosure of information, he figured it would be wise to put a little distance between them, but since it was frigid outside and the room was small, the options for physically doing so were limited.

*He hasn’t told me to leave in a while.*

It occurred to Shion that Nezumi hadn’t banished him from the room since the night they had looked at the Correctional Facility maps. He wasn’t sure what to make of it, but he definitely wasn’t going to argue, whatever Nezumi’s reasons.

Nezumi had reclaimed his spot on the couch, so Shion busied himself by cleaning up the pile of papers that he had scattered on the floor in his search for salt.

He had taken inventory of and cataloged all the boxes and shelves in the room when he and his mother moved in four years ago. The box at the foot of the bed held newspapers, maps, and schematics, all of them old, tattered, and virtually useless to anyone save, perhaps, a history enthusiast. Items of that sort were the only ones he had catalogued for this box, so he was a bit perplexed when he found a large white envelope among the pieces on the floor.

He picked it up. It was unopened, which was stranger still. He turned it face up and his heart lurched at the sight of the insignia stamped there in thick black ink.

*So this is where I threw it…*

He remembered the day one of the women at the hotel gave it to him. She said a man who called himself Rikiga visited her earlier that evening and handed her the envelope with stern instructions to deliver it immediately to Shion.

“Literally, he stuffed it into my hands, left the money and ran off,” the woman said with a mixture of confusion and annoyance. “Weirdest John ever.”

Shion hadn’t cared how Rikiga acted when he passed off the letter. The only thing he heard in that account was that his mother was dead and Rikiga was paying visits to the hotel. He very nearly burned the envelope the minute he gained possession of it, but he didn’t have matches on him, and when he finally got back to his room, he deemed it too unworthy to waste precious
resources on. He stuffed it into the box by his bed and swore to never look at or think about it again.

He had been quite successful in his mission, but now it had resurfaced, and he was unsure how he should proceed. He wasn’t angry with Rikiga anymore, and he didn’t blame him for not being able to deliver the medicine. It must have been out of the man’s power to do so. Even so, if he had already made peace with these thoughts and Rikiga on his own, was it really necessary to open the envelope? It had been gathering dust in the box for so long, surely it was too late for anything inside it to make any difference.

*Don’t be a coward,* he told himself. *I should open it. I should at least see what’s inside. Maybe then I can truly move on.*

He continued to stare down at the package in his hands while the legions of anxiety, responsibility, and guilt wreaked havoc inside him.

“What is it?”

Shion did not react visibly to Nezumi’s begrudging interest, but he felt a twinge of relief that the other teen was there to break the vicious cycle of doubt and force him to face the matter at hand.

“A package from No. 6.”

Nezumi was quiet, and Shion wasn’t sure whether that meant he was satisfied with his response or that he was waiting for him to explain further. After a short deliberation, he decided that in light of the information Nezumi had divulged that evening, it was only fair he share some of his own.

“The one I mentioned before. From my mom’s friend.”

Nezumi hummed a disinterested sound and continued to watch him. “So?” he said, arching an eyebrow. “Get on with it, then.”

Shion blinked at him. “What?”

Nezumi rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. Cut the deer in headlights act. It’s painfully obvious how badly you want to open it. A blind man couldn’t miss it. So, quit your waffling and get it over with. What are you so afraid of?”

“It’s not that easy…”

Shion frowned down at the envelope. Nezumi was right, though. What *was* he so afraid of? He had treated Rikiga poorly, but he didn’t think Rikiga was the type to react hatefully.

*It’s probably an apology.*

Shion’s stomach pitched, and he suddenly felt like the worst human being on the face of the earth. Before he could second-guess his decision, he tore the seal off the lip of the envelope and poured the contents onto the coffee table. A few sheets of paper and a photograph spilled out, and the mice dove every which way to escape being buried. Nezumi clicked his tongue as Tsukiyo leapt into his lap and climbed onto his shoulder.

Shion stared at the papers, his palms sweating in anticipation. He glanced up at Nezumi. He knew the other boy had no practical bearing on the situation, but the gentle calm reflected in the pair of grey eyes opposite him took some of the edge off his frayed nerves. Shion sucked in a deep breath and picked up the paper with his name scrawled at the top.
The handwriting was thick and slanted, probably the product of agitation, for the words were perfectly legible otherwise. With a jittery curiosity, he forced himself to make sense of the sentences on the page:

Shion,

I know what you’re thinking, but before you write me off as a complete scumbag, I swear to you, I didn’t touch so much as a hair on that woman’s head. I went to the brothel for one reason and one reason only, and that was to deliver this package safely to you. Don’t think for a second that this city has turned me into some kind of heartless bastard who looks down on people just because they live in West Block. I may be a useless old man, but my morals haven’t rotted all the way through. I wouldn’t do that to you. Not when you’ve lost so much.

I’m really, truly sorry, Shion. I know that probably doesn’t mean much coming from some guy you’ve never even met, but who claims to have been friends with your mom, especially when I’ve let you down so completely, but I mean it from the depths of my heart. Karan was a great woman—she had the strongest spirit out of everyone I’ve ever known, then or since. Nothing shook her. No matter what, she always found a reason to smile. Her optimism and kindness were so infectious that I don’t think there was a person who met her who didn’t fall in love with her instantly.

When I met her, I was just a fledgling journalist writing for a small newspaper company that barely anyone had heard of, and even though there was a storm raging outside, your mother traveled through the rain and thunder to talk to me about some of the columns I wrote. Karan was a smart woman, keener than me and all the other guys working at Latch Bill put together. She knew something wasn’t right about the new city-state, and she wanted me to look into it for her. But I only uncovered a little bit about the city before I got scared. I knew there was something fishy, but I was young and selfish, and I wasn’t willing to put my life and livelihood on the line to get to the bottom of it. Some investigative journalist I turned out to be, huh? I told your mother about my reservations and she, the pure and understanding woman that she was, told me it was okay, that I’d done enough and she was really grateful to me for trying.

The wall was finished not long after, Karan on one side of it and I on the other, and seemingly overnight, the laws about going back and forth between places became absurdly restrictive. I was never able to see Karan again, but I’ve never been able to forget her indomitable spirit and beautiful smile, no matter how much time has passed. To me, she will always be that plucky student who trudged through a storm to ask a nobody reporter about his news column. If ever there was a woman who deserved all the happiness this world had to offer, it was Karan….

Shion, I tried. I need you to know that. There isn’t much I’m good for these days, but I promise you I’m a man of my word. I exhausted every resource I had to get the antibiotics you asked for, but everything led to a dead end. I realize now that I should have tried harder. I should have broken into the medical center’s supply and stolen what you needed. I was a coward and I was too afraid of the authorities getting suspicious of why I was asking to keep pushing. I haven’t changed a bit. I’m still the spineless good-for-nothing man who let your mom down all those years ago—only worse because I’ve lived a bullshit existence in No. 6 so long that I’ve forgotten what it is to be selfless and brave. I never could be as strong as your mother. I was still protecting myself when I knew how important those antibiotics were to you, and I’ll never be able to forgive myself for what it cost you and Karan.
I know it can in no way make up for what you’ve lost, but I’ve enclosed some stories and pictures I’ve kept from when Karan and I were younger, back before No. 6 built the wall and everything got so damn screwed up. I hope they can bring you some solace.

I realize in light of everything I just said, this is going to sound like a load of shit, but if you ever need anything again, I will do everything in my power. I will die trying if I have to. I won’t ask for your forgiveness, but please accept my sincerest condolences for your loss. You didn’t deserve any of this.

I’m sorry.

Rikiga

By the time Shion finished, he was trembling. He had pressed a hand to his mouth while he read to smother the pain the words brought him, but to his credit, he did not cry. His eyes burned and his throat strained to release a sob, but he didn’t make a single sound as his eyes tumbled over the page. He swallowed dryly and scanned the letter a few more times, but each line had already seared itself into his memory. He placed it down on the table and reached for a photograph.

His mother beamed at him from the picture. It looked to be a sunny day, and she was wearing a sleeveless gingham sundress. Her hair was cut boyishly short—at least a few inches shorter than Safu’s. He liked it. It made her look fresher somehow, more eager to take on the world. He ran his thumb over his mother’s smiling face. She looked so beautiful, so happy.

There was a young man standing next to her, grinning with boyish glee. For a moment, Shion wondered if he might be his father. From what his mother told him, his father was fast and loose with women as well as money, a hopeless drunk who ran off when the wall between No. 6 and the West Block was close to completion. Still, even as she described him in this way, her voice held a soft nostalgia. She had also said he was honest about his shortcomings, and always treated her and Shion with gentleness and care. He had wanted her to run away with him, but his mother was leery of traveling into the unknown with their newly born son. She refused, and he was gone the next day without so much as a backward glance.

However, the man in the photograph was not his father, but a young Rikiga, as the description, “The beautiful Karan and I posing in front of the Latch Bill!” on the back indicated. He placed the picture down next to the letter and glanced at the other papers. They appeared to be the stories about his mother that Rikiga mentioned.

I should send Rikiga a thank you, he thought with a flutter of emotion. He deserves at least that much…

“She was pretty. Your Mama.”

Nezumi was slouched over the arm of the couch, head resting on his knuckle. He nodded at the picture and Shion offered a watery smile in response. He scooped the rest of the papers off the table. A second photograph was caught in between the pages, and it slipped out and fell to the floor on the opposite side of the coffee table.

“You dropped something,” Nezumi said with a sigh.

He plucked it off the ground and held it out. Shion didn’t even have time enough to extend his hand before Nezumi pulled the photograph back to leer at it.
“I know this guy,” he said with clear disbelief.

“Who? Rikiga?”

Nezumi flipped the photograph around for him to see. It was a group photo of several men and women. His mother was in the center, but Rikiga was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was the one taking the picture.

“This man.” Nezumi pointed to a tall, quiet-looking man standing at his mother’s side. “The back says, ‘Karan and her friends from the biological research team.’ Did your Mama ever mention any of her other friends in No. 6?”

“No, never.”

Nezumi gazed intently at the man in the picture and Shion moved around the table to stand beside him.

“He looks a lot younger here, but it’s definitely him,” Nezumi said, partially to himself. “He worked in the lab with me—” His eyes widened. “Son of a—”

“What?”

Nezumi shook his head, an incredulous smile tugging at his lips. “I can’t believe this. That bastard.”

“What? What is it?”

“The day before I was arrested, this guy,” Nezumi waved the photograph, “approached me in the lab. It was weird enough that he came to talk to me, seeing as we never had so much as a conversation before, but then he starts going on about how I’m wasting too much time at work and I should be doing something more meaningful with my life. Completely out of nowhere.”

“That is a little strange,” Shion conceded.

“Yeah, but he also gave me a huge stack of papers—an extremely useless stack of papers because they were just print outs of the data I already had on my computer—but he had stuck this note on it.” Nezumi barked a self-deprecating laugh. “It was so stupid.”

“What did the note say?”

The other boy gave him a hollow smirk. “‘Be cautious.’”

Shion frowned. When one added all the pieces of the exchange together, it did seem a bit odd.

“At the time, I thought it was just prank, or him underestimating me, but now… Hell, now it seems more like a warning.”

“You think he knew somehow that the Security Bureau was going to arrest you, and that’s why he gave you that note?”

The suggestion seemed to perplex the other teen at first, but then he saw something in the quality of his expression change. The contours of his face grew rigid and he leaned back against the couch with the air of one completely immersed in his thoughts.

“Maybe,” he said at length. “But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We don’t actually know if it meant anything at all. It could be nothing.”
Despite his caution for restraint, however, neither Nezumi’s looks nor voice were as confident as usual. In light of the description of the other man’s conduct, Shion didn’t think it was unreasonable or hasty to assume that he had valuable information. The evidence about the man was suspicious at least, and incriminating at most.

“If he warned you, that means he had intimate knowledge of the Security Bureau’s plans. It’s possible he might’ve known what they were using you for. Maybe he was even part of it.”

Nezumi looked uncomfortable with the implication, but didn’t voice any objections.

“We should contact him,” Shion concluded. “What’s his name?”

Nezumi was quiet.

“What’s wrong?”

“…I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“You don’t know?” Shion furrowed his brow. “About contacting him? Why not? He warned you. If he knows what they were doing, he’s our best chance at finding out what No. 6’s plans for you were.”

“I know that. That’s not it,” Nezumi said shortly. “The problem is I—”

Shion waited for him to finish, and was amazed to see Nezumi’s cheeks color, if only slightly.

“I don’t know his name,” he said finally.

 “…But you worked with him, didn’t you?”

Nezumi continued on brusquely, “Like I said, we never spoke to each other. That’s why it was so weird that he came up to me.” He crossed his arms. “We worked in the same lab, can’t you just go from there? How do you plan on contacting him, anyway? The mice?” Nezumi glanced at the mouse still perched on his shoulder with suspicion. “How do they even know where to go? I don’t imagine they can read addresses.”

Shion ignored his questions. Not knowing the man’s name complicated things a great deal. There must be hundreds of workers in the Robotics lab, and the man in the picture had no distinguishing features and appeared to be a fairly normal, if not an altogether forgettable, person. It would take forever to find the right man, especially if he was keeping a low profile. He doubted he called attention to himself within the city, otherwise he wouldn’t have lasted long there. Shion recalled the description on the back of the photograph with a shade of confusion.

*How did a man who used to work in biology become a technician in a robotics lab?*

“Would a physical description work?” Nezumi asked suddenly.

Shion took a moment to consider the question. “It’d have to be extremely telling.”

His heart gave an optimistic jolt at the smirk that spread over Nezumi’s face.

“Well, there aren’t many people in the lab who fit his description. Zero people, in fact. He’s the only technician in a wheelchair.”
It had been a productive, albeit stressful two weeks for Nezumi. While he waited for the parts he ordered from Yoming to arrive, he took to examining the hulk of the computer he and the kids had rescued from the dump. He discovered upon opening the system unit, that the mechanisms and wiring inside were copper, which fortunately meant that they had grown the protective layer of patina that was particular to the metal. As he wiped the interior clean, he thought about how furious Ei would be if he knew he had made off with some of his precious copper.

Several pieces of the unit were salvageable, and those that weren’t, he had Yoming order along with the parts he needed for the drive recon device. Whomever the Resistance had as a contact in No. 2, they were good. The parts came in swiftly and correctly, and Nezumi entertained a distant regret that he didn’t ask for more. Although he guessed Yoming would’ve had a few unpleasant things to say about that if he had. Be that as it may, he had asked only for the most essential pieces, the barest minimum to get his projects done. The parts list for the robot was absolute, but he did not splurge on the computer, and at the end of the week, what he built was less a computer than a glorified calculator. He only needed to write code and process numbers, so the limited function was not a problem to him, but Kaze seemed a little put out when Nezumi informed him that it didn’t have any games on it.

The robot for the drives was a little more difficult of a task, and he spent several tireless, frustrated afternoons on the undertaking. He had a vague idea as to what kind of design the robot should have: it had to be quick, efficient, and most of all, inconspicuous. He was in the midst of deliberation over the question when Tsukiyo crawled up onto the table and spat a screw out in front of him with a small cheep. Shion had lent the mouse to him, because his job required that he constantly travel in and out of headquarters, and he wanted Nezumi to be able to contact him if need be. The mouse bopped up and down behind the screw, and Nezumi got the feeling it was waiting to be praised.

“So you picked up a screw. Is that anything to be proud of?” he snorted at the rodent. “You’re gonna have to do a lot better than that if you want my approval.”

The mouse stopped bouncing and surveyed him with grape-colored contempt, before hopping off the table and scuttling away.

That was when the idea to model the robot after a mouse came to him. They were small and quick enough to avoid detection, and although a mouse in No. 6 would be startling to a citizen, it would not be immediately suspected if seen. Besides, Shion’s efforts in the past had already proved that using mice as a go-between was viable.

Tsukiyo apparently did not hold grudges, because when the mouse returned, he continued to try and help Nezumi with the parts. Nezumi allowed him. He was partly responsible for inspiring the design, and although Nezumi would never admit it out loud, he felt somewhat partial to the mouse. Between the two of them, the robotic mouse was more or less completed. The only things left now
were to program it and test the mechanisms.

Shion had gone out more than two hours ago to respond to a report about a child who wasn’t doing so hot by the dumpsters, so Nezumi was left to finish the project in peace. Or, at least, he was hoping to be left to himself, but apparently everyone else at headquarters had loads of free time.

“How’s it going?”

Safu came up from behind him and peered at his work. She had been checking his progress periodically throughout the last two weeks. She claimed to be keeping watch on him to make sure he was doing his job properly, but despite her clipped comments and detached demeanor, it was easy to see she was legitimately curious.

“If I don’t get interrupted too often, I should have it done in a few hours,” Nezumi answered.

She walked around the edge of the table to stand opposite him and squinted at the product.

“A mouse?” Safu arched a critical eyebrow. “Conceited, much?”

“I’ve never claimed to be modest. However, its appearance has more practical significance than that.”

To Nezumi’s ever-growing annoyance, Kaze entered headquarters just then and, drawn in by the lure of sociability or some other compulsion equally as incomprehensible to Nezumi, waltzed over to them.

“What’s up, guys? Whoa! You finished the robot?” Kaze leaned over the table to get a closer look, but thankfully did not venture to touch it. “Cool design,” he said with a nod. “It’s like the whole thing is your signature. You do that on purpose?”

“It’s designed this way in order to escape notice,” Nezumi explained, a hint of smugness coloring his words. “It’s fast and it’s equipped with an ID chip, so it’ll be virtually undetectable. It should have the drives out of No. 6 before they even know what hit them. Plus,” he added with a smirk, “it’s adorable. Give it a couple years; every household in West Block will have one.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty sweet,” Kaze agreed. “You know…” He ran his thumb along the edge of the shotgun in his chest holster. “If you put explosives in there, it could be a really handy weapon.”

“Mm, yes. Because the first thing I want to do after spending days building them is blow them up.”


Nezumi flinched. Safu smirked, but Kaze was too busy looking away to witness the full extent of Nezumi’s revulsion.

“Hey, Boss! Get a load of this mousebot!”

Nezumi cursed internally.

He looked over his shoulder to see Yoming lurking at the back of the room. The older man was staring intently in their direction, but he made no acknowledgement of Kaze’s invitation. The crow perched on his shoulder was also turned their way, and together they presented quite a foreboding image.
“Nezumi. Would you come here for a minute?”

Yoming kept his dark eyes trained exclusively on him as he spoke the words in a clear monotone. Safu was no longer smirking, and Nezumi took that as a confirmation of his suspicions that the man’s bleak tone belied a more sinister mood. Nezumi picked up the robot on the table and sent Kaze a parting look before dragging himself over to Yoming.

“I have a new job for you,” he said without preface.

*Oh, wonderful,* Nezumi thought.

“I want you to build me a camera for my crow.”

Nezumi blinked. The crow ruffled its feathers.

“A small but durable one,” Yoming continued. “I plan to use it to record footage of No. 6’s army when the Hunt comes, and it might get violent. I need it to hold together if things happen to get rough.”

“I see. That’s very conscientious thinking. Well, if you want a camera, you’re going to have to buy me more parts.”

“I already ordered them. I’ll have them brought to you.”

Nezumi furrowed his brow. Yoming’s manner was peculiar to him. He could sense a strong undercurrent of negativity radiating off the man, and yet his conduct was stiffly businesslike. Perhaps the anger he was picking up on had nothing to do with him. The man was heading an entire organization against the likes of No. 6, and West Block was not problem-free besides. Now that he was seeing him up close, Yoming did look rougher than usual. The stubble on his chin was approaching a small beard, and the gray streaks in his hair were more conspicuous than he remembered. The man looked tired. Nezumi appreciated the professionalizing effect it had on him.

“Great,” Nezumi said, injecting a little more energy into his voice. “I’ll get right on that just as soon as I finish all my other projects.”

Yoming’s eyes narrowed just the slightest bit. “Hm. I trust your work is going well?”

“Very well, thanks.”

The man did not ask to see the robot and Nezumi did not offer to show it to him.

“And how’s that computer of yours?” Yoming said, his voice finally taking on that gruff calm before the storm quality that Nezumi was familiar with. “Lili told me all about your search for it. How nice you were to her and her friends. She says you’re nothing like I described you to be.”

*Ah. Perhaps this was the resentment I was sensing? He doesn’t like the thought of his niece and me getting chummy?*

Nezumi smiled blithely. “Is that so? That’s kind of her. However, whatever your concerns may be, I assure you, you have nothing to fear. She only has eyes for Shion.”

“Yes. Shion. And how are you finding things with him? Comfortable?”

“The kid can’t cook a meal to save his life. Besides that, I have a few more suggestions as to how my stay could be improved, if you’re interested.”
The expression on Yoming’s face hardened, and Nezumi realized he had finally overreached himself.

“I can see he’s done nothing to fix that arrogant attitude of yours,” Yoming said with stony restraint. “Then again, he always was a sentimental fool.”

*And here it comes,* Nezumi thought drolly.

“I don’t know what he’s been filling your head with, but you don’t have a place here. Your stay only lasts as long as you have something to contribute to the cause. I don’t know why you haven’t tried to run yet, but you can forget any notions you have of a future here.”

“As hospitable as you’ve been, I can think of many other places very far from here that I’d rather be. I will not overstay my welcome.”

“Good. Because as far as I’m concerned, you’re still a product of No. 6, and I think I speak for the rest of West Block when I say that no one would have qualms about letting you go down with the rest of that god-forsaken city.”

The corner Nezumi’s mouth quirked up. “I’m not so sure. I think you might be a little out of touch with the sentiments of your subordinates.”

Yoming looked affronted, but then a wry sneer twisted his lips.

“You think you know Shion?” Yoming reached up and scratched underneath his crow’s chin. The bird clicked softly. “Have you ever seen a mad dog, Nezumi?” Nezumi frowned at the change in his demeanor. “There are loads of them, all over West Block. The problem is they’re hard to spot. At first they seem perfectly tame—*friendly* even. But it’s only a matter of time before they start lashing out at anything with a heartbeat. I’d be careful if I were you.”

Nezumi tilted his head at the man’s smugness. His meaning was easy to guess, but as he was already fully aware that Shion was not a delicate flower, he found the lecture rather flat.

“That’s a very clever conceit,” Nezumi said with overt sweetness. “Have you ever considered ditching the terrorist gig and becoming a writer? The odds of success are about the same.”

Yoming didn’t bother to hide the depths of his unamusement.

“I’m gonna go back to work now, but if you need me I’ll be over there contributing to the cause.”

“You do that,” the man all but snarled.

Nezumi credited fatigue and a general sense of superiority as the main reasons for why Yoming resisted throttling him on the spot, but he also liked to pretend that the man held a secret grudging respect for his witticisms.

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Four hours later he was finished with the robot and Shion still had not returned. He waited a few minutes, but the other teen remained MIA. As Shion instructed, he scribbled an under-fifteen-word note of his status onto a slip of paper and sent Tsukiyo to deliver it. Half an hour later the mouse returned with the equally short reply:

*Ask Safu or Kaze to bring you home. Sorry.* – S
Nezumi seethed as he read the words a second time. He crumpled the paper and tossed it into the trash.

That jerk wants me to do what?

The only people left in headquarters were Kaze, Yamase, and a few other members that Nezumi didn’t know. Yoming had slunk off not long after their conversation, and Safu had disappeared a few hours ago to deal with a man’s complaints about rations, because she was actually busy doing her job on a regular basis—not that Kaze and Yamase weren’t.

It seemed like Yamase’s eternal vocation was to stand by the window in silence and watch for suspicious activity, and he performed this tedium so vauntingly day in and day out that Nezumi couldn’t help but wonder at his fortitude.

Kaze’s work schedule was more sporadic. His primary contribution was to be the only person in the Resistance crazy enough to tinker with explosives, but Nezumi had also witnessed him handling shipments of food and supplies, and he imagined he had other employments outside the confines of the church. Regardless, it seemed like he had a lot of free time, which he chose to spend in headquarters because 1) his friends were there, and 2) Yuki spent her afternoons working, as Nezumi learned one day last week when he growled at Kaze to stop hovering and go hang out with his girlfriend.

Kaze was currently entertaining himself by throwing bits of stucco he peeled off the wall at Yamase. Yamase bore the assault with an air of patience that would make the Buddha envious. Kaze caught him staring and held the shavings out in a gesture of solidarity. Nezumi shook his head in polite refusal. The older man shrugged and turned away, a few flakes escaping through the gaps in his mangled fingers.

Screw this.

He waited until Kaze turned his back to replenish his arsenal and then strode to the door.

“See ya later, Yamase.”

Yamase’s brow creased as he watched him walk out, but as no one called out to him, and he spent several minutes strolling down the street afterward without being chased down by Kaze, he supposed the other man was not inclined to rat him out. He hooded the superfibre he was wearing over his head and continued toward the bunker with a sense of smug satisfaction.

The main street was awash with people. It was nearing dinnertime, and everyone with money was elbowing to get the least rancid of the meats, vegetables, and breads, while those without money were waiting patiently for something to get dropped in the frenzy. Anything that was not food or coin was insignificant, which meant Nezumi had the pleasure of virtual invisibility as he pushed through the crowd.

He pulled his hood down once he descended the stairs into the dank corridor. He tried the door, but it was locked.

Shit. What if he isn’t home?

He cursed a second time out loud for not thinking about the possibility earlier. The last thing he wanted to do was sit outside waiting god-knows-how-long for Shion to return. He thudded three times on the door and listened. There was nothing at first, but then he thought he heard a clatter from within. He stepped to the side as Shion opened the door.
“Nezumi—”

“I’m not some child you can pass around. I’m perfectly capable of getting home by myself, so next time you decide not to show up—”

“Nezumi, quiet,” Shion hissed.

Nezumi raised his eyebrows, but the other boy’s face was pleading and he was motioning to something in the room behind him. Nezumi peered over his shoulder. There was a child sleeping on Shion’s bed.

“She’s very sick,” Shion whispered in response to his questioning look.

“So you brought her here?”

“I’m sorry. But she has nowhere else to go.” Shion stepped back so that he could come inside the room and continued in a hushed voice, “Her father died about a week ago, and apparently she’s been wandering around on the streets ever since. It’s freezing outside. I couldn’t just leave her.”

The girl was young, no more than seven years old, and she did, indeed, look “very sick.” Her skin was pale and there were dark, sunken circles under her eyes. She was propped up against the wall with the pillow wedged beneath her back, but she wasn’t under the covers. Judging by her labored breathing and the towel draped over her forehead, he guessed she had a fever, but the bucket on the floor beside the bed indicated far more unpleasant symptoms were also expected.

“What does she have?”

“Pneumonia. —It’s not contagious,” he said as an afterthought.

Nezumi hadn’t thought pneumonia was, but it was somewhat reassuring to have it confirmed.

Shion was already back in caretaker mode. He was boiling tea on top of the heater, but he didn’t look very happy with it.

“I wish I had more basil,” he muttered to himself.

Nezumi stood beside the organ, unsure of what to do. Did Shion expect him to pretend the child wasn’t there and carry on like normal? It’s impossible. But I’m no doctor, so there really isn’t anything else to do… Maybe I could go into the corridor and explore those other rooms. Now that he’d spent more time in the bunker, he was sure no one lived in them, so he assumed that they must be other storage rooms. Nezumi turned to the organ. Perhaps that’s where Shion got the miscellaneous décor.

“Sorry, but can you get me that cloth?”

Shion pointed at a cloth on the table. Nezumi hesitated. He was wary of approaching the child, but she appeared to be in the midst of a fitful sleep, her chest collapsing with each shallow breath. He stalked around the table, plucked the cloth off it, and tossed it to Shion. The other teen caught it and used it to cover the side of the teapot while he transferred it to the table.

“—Mommy?”

Nezumi’s heart leapt into his throat. The girl was looking at him with a blearily pained expression. He drew back, shooting an accusatory look at Shion. Shion’s face was drawn in fear.
“Mayumi.” He rushed to the girl’s side. “Mayumi, you have a high fever. Look at me, okay?”

Nezumi backed away from the bed toward the shadows between the bookcases. The girl was hallucinating, he supposed, but acknowledging the reason behind her actions did not make them go away.

“Mommy,” the girl croaked more desperately than before, struggling to push herself further into a sitting position.

“No, no, sweetie,” Shion shushed, pressing her shoulder gently to keep her from overexerting herself. “Don’t try to get up. Look at me. Here.” He reached over to the table and took a glass off it. “Drink this. It’ll make you feel better.”

Shion tilted her head forward so she could sip the water he held to her lips, but the girl continued to whimper.

“It… hurts,” she choked. She pushed the cup away and devolved into a spasm of coughs.

“I know. I know,” Shion repeated.

He patted her back as she wheezed, fluttery guttural gasps that induced a tickling sensation at the back of Nezumi’s throat. The fit grew more violent by the second, and Shion picked up the bowl beside the bed and placed it in front of her. She dry heaved into it, but eventually the coughing subsided.

“I want… my Mommy,” she sobbed raggedly.

Shion tried to soothe her, but she continued crying for her mother in a parched, inconsolable litany. It set Nezumi’s nerves on edge.

*I can’t watch this.*

He clenched his jaw and walked to the bed. Shion looked surprised when he grasped his shoulder and nudged him aside. The surprise turned to astonishment when Nezumi spoke to Mayumi in a soft, tranquil voice—a woman’s voice.

“There, there. It’s all right now. I’m here.”

He did his best to ignore Shion’s gaping as he kneeled down beside the child.

“Ma… Mommy?”

“That’s right. Stop crying, okay?” he said gently.

Her wheezing breaths were even worse up close. He could see how hard her chest was working to draw air into her lungs. He pushed the thought from his mind and focused on the towel on her head. It was no longer cold, so he peeled it off and brushed back the strands of hair that stuck to her forehead. The girl murmured at the coolness of his hand and turned her face toward him. Her lips had an alarmingly bluish tint to them.

“My… chest… It h… hurts…”

“Everything’s going to be fine. You’ve been very brave. I’m proud of you. Try to sleep now.”

“No,” she rasped. The force behind the word sent her into another brief coughing fit. “S-scary,” she managed in between breaths.
Nezumi instinctively knew the reason for her fear. She was afraid that if she closed her eyes now, she might never wake up again, and he knew that everything she feared was true. This girl would not be leaving this room alive; it was not even likely she would survive the next few hours.

Nezumi struggled to keep his serene expression in place. He did not know what mothers did to calm their sick children. His recollections of what a mother was were scarce. He only had one memory of his own.

“Mayumi, would you like to hear a song?”

“A… s-song?”

“Mm-hmm.” The girl nodded weakly. “Okay, I’ll sing for you. But you have to close your eyes. Don’t be afraid. Even if you close your eyes, I’ll still be here. I won’t go anywhere until you’re asleep. I promise.”

The girl trembled. Her eyelids fluttered once, and then slid closed.

“There’s a good girl.” He cleared his throat and began to sing in a clear voice.

*The wind carries the soul away, humans steal the heart*

*O earth, O tempests; O heavens, O light*

*Let everything cease,*

*Let everything be,*

*and live*

*O soul, my heart, O love, my memory*

*Return home here*

*And stay*

It had been a while since he’d sung out loud, and his throat felt raw from the effort. It seemed to have the intended effect, however. Mayumi’s forehead was still pinched a little, but her breathing had become threadier. He cast a look at Shion. His head was bowed, and under the fringe of his dark hair, Nezumi could see his eyes were closed as well. He looked like he was praying. Nezumi smoothed Mayumi’s hair and started the second verse.

*The wind carries the soul away, humans steal the heart*

*But here I will remain*

*to keep singing*

*Please*

*Deliver my song*

*Please*

*Accept my song*
Nezumi withdrew his hand. The creases on Mayumi’s face had relaxed and there was the faintest smile playing on her lips. Shion rose beside him and leaned over the bed. He placed his fingers against the side of the girl’s neck.

“She’s gone,” he said quietly. “Thank you, Nezumi. Thanks to you, her soul was carried away quickly. She died a good death.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Nezumi pushed himself off the ground and rounded on Shion. “She died a good death.’ What kind of idiotic line is that?’ His gaze fell on the still child. He wrinkled his nose. “Are all the children you bring home like that?”

The deep brown of Shion’s eyes were muted by the lantern flame.

“Yes. When I bring them here, I already know.”

“Then why do you—?”

He snapped his mouth shut. A wave of nausea washed over him and the vertigo was so strong he had to turn away to hide its effect.

“Nezumi?”

“There is seriously something wrong with you,” he muttered. A dull throbbing blossomed in his temples. “What kind of masochistic idiot brings children home to die?”

“I do it because— Because the children I bring here don’t have anywhere else to go. They’re dying, and they have no one and nothing. I can’t just stand by and pretend I don’t see it. So when it gets too bad, I take them here and try to make their last moments as full of warmth and peace as possible. They deserve at least that much.”

Nezumi shot him a sideways glare. “That’s such utter bullshit. What does that do? If they’re dying, they’re dying. One hour of warmth makes no difference.”

“It makes every difference.”

“No. You know what? Screw you. Screw you and your god complex. I don’t want anything to do with this.”

He crossed the room and threw open the door.

“Nezumi—”

“Shut up. Just talking to you gives me a headache.” He slammed the door behind him.

The sky darkened as he marched down the path to town. He had no specified destination, but his mind was too busy reeling with anger and jolts of pain for him to think too hard on that point. Eventually, the pounding in his head forced him to slow down, and he ducked out of the flow of people to lean against a wall.

*In, out. In, out.*

A few minutes of this breathing exercise helped to bring the pain in his temples down to a pulsing. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

*What is wrong with me?*
“You okay, boy?”

An older woman had stopped to peer at him. Nezumi felt a flicker of apprehension. He knew as well as any that compassionate types in West Block were few and far between, so it was very likely this woman had an agenda in talking to him. It could be as bothersome as trying to sell him mysterious cures for his ails, or as malicious as scoping him out for a mugging. A more detailed look at her showed that her arms were already occupied with a basket of flowers, so his thoughts tended toward the former. Regardless, he slipped a hand into his pocket and closed it around the knife within. He had been keeping one on him ever since his third lesson, although he didn’t think Shion or Safu knew yet.

The woman tilted her head. “Don’t I know you? Aren’t you Shion’s friend?”

Nezumi narrowed his eyes. He did not know this person’s face, but the fact that she knew his was disquieting. He didn’t see a bandana on her, but it was possible she was a Resistance member that had seen him at some point, either in headquarters or walking from there back to the bunker. Even if she was just a stranger that recognized him from one time he and Shion passed her on the street, if she happened to mention seeing him, and word got back to Yoming, it could be dangerous.

“You’ve got the wrong person.” He pushed past her into the busy street and jerked the superfibre over his head as an extra precaution.

* * *

I have to get off the main street.

He cut away from the market and headed into an alley that led to the outskirts of town. He could practically hear Shion’s protests about wild dogs and bandits, but the boy’s opinion was not one he wanted to entertain tonight.

The alleyway spat him out in a maze of ruins. There were large chunks of stone strewn in every direction, most of them crumbled halfway to sediment. An elaborately carved pillar leaned against the rusted skeleton of an arched ceiling. He approached it and found that the figures of several women clad only in thin, curve-hugging robes decorated its base. Vines wove in and out of the windows and cracks in the walls.

The magnitude of what the structure must have been was staggering, and, in fact, the scope of the ruins was too large to be just one building. More likely, a complex of buildings once existed where he now stood. His attention was drawn to a set of crumbling stairs, which led into the vine-encrusted carcass of one of them. The face of the building was more richly decorated than those around it, and Nezumi imagined that it might’ve been attractive in its prime.

* * *

Could this be the hotel?

The longer he stared at it, the more convinced he became that it was. He knew the activities that went on there, and as he was not interested in that brand of diversion, he turned away to find somewhere else to weather the ravages of his migraine. Then he remembered that Safu also lived there.

A second bout of nausea forced his hand.
He picked his way carefully up the steps and entered the cavernous lobby of the hotel. The walls were paneled from floor to ceiling in multicolored glass. The uppermost panels had shattered, their shards creating a jagged patchwork over the floor, but the bottom panes were in fairly good condition. The walls and ceiling still clung to shreds of white paint, and a startlingly undamaged chandelier swayed faintly in the wind that whipped through the paneless windows.

The rubble and leaves crunched underfoot as he strode toward the only light in the room: a candle atop a stone table. A woman was standing behind it, and although her features were difficult to make out in the poor lighting, when Nezumi drew close enough to ascertain them, he felt a wave of relief wash over him.

“Yuki. Good evening.”

“Nezumi?” She came around the table to greet him. “What are you—?” She halted a few feet away from him, her eyes performing a quick sweep of his figure. “Have you been drinking?” she asked in a small voice.

Nezumi winced internally. *I look that bad?*

He made a concerted effort to stand up straighter and try to appear like he was in no danger of vomiting, despite feeling otherwise.

“No, Yuki, I haven’t. Is Safu here? I need to see her.”

Yuki did not look convinced, and what’s more, she was now looking at him with a kind of confused pity. “Safu doesn’t work here.”

Nezumi’s face contorted. “No. That’s not what I meant. I just want to talk to her.”

Yuki stood staring at him for several excruciating seconds. At last, though, she sighed and motioned for him to follow her up another set of stairs. The hallway at the top was long and narrow, lit at intervals with a row of mounted candles.

“Does Shion know you’re here?”

“Which room is Safu’s?”

Yuki frowned. She led him to a broad wooden door and knocked.

“Safu? Someone’s here to see you.”

The door opened and the hall was bathed in the pale yellow of lantern light. Safu took one look at him and made a face very much like she was expecting flowers and got a rat instead.

Yuki murmured that she had to watch the table downstairs and said goodbye. Nezumi felt her eyes lingering on him as she walked away.

“What are you doing here?”

“Whatever you’re thinking, I’m just here to talk.”

“…Is this about Shion?”

Nezumi smiled wanly. “Yes, this is about Shion.”

She scowled and yanked the door a little more open. “You have five minutes.”
Her room was small and sparsely furnished, but the items in it had personality. There were a few books sitting on the windowsill and there were two picture frames on the wall, each with a pressed wildflower in it. Other than that, there was a short table in the center of the room and a bed in the corner.

“So?” Safu crossed her arms. “What about Shion?”

“I hate him.”

“You came here to complain about Shion?”

“You’re damn right I came here to complain. The kid’s an idiot.” Nezumi paced relentlessly in front of the table. “Completely hopeless. How is he even alive?”

“—Are you drunk?”

“He brought a dying child into the house!”

“…He does that sometimes.”

“Nothing he does makes sense.”

Safu’s arms dropped to her sides and her expression morphed into one of reluctant concern. An unsurprising reaction, considering Nezumi could feel himself losing the battle to remain composed in the face of the excruciating pain.

“Alright. You. Sit.”

Nezumi didn’t argue. He dropped down on the edge of the table and rubbed his temples. His jaw hurt from clenching it, and there was a disgustingly bright metallic tang filling his mouth.

“I’m going to get Shion.”

Safu’s voice seemed to come to him from between layers upon layers of cotton. The noise in his head had mounted until he couldn’t even hear his own breathing—just a maddening din of high-pitched buzzing.

“I can’t do this,” he growled. “I need to get out of here.”

Safu said something. Her alarm was plain now. His vision started spotting. Safu took a step toward him, but there was nothing she could do. He was already falling.

****

The meadow grass all but buried him. His hair was long—longer than he ever remembered it being. Or rather, he did remember, but it was a fuzzy time from before the shifty looks and painted smiles that were so much more deeply imbedded in his memory. It brushed his shoulders and fanned out behind him as he ran.

A voice like the dappled light of a forest canopy was calling his name and he was desperate to reach the person to whom the voice belonged. If he didn’t get to them soon, he felt like they would disappear forever. He batted away flower stalks and serrated blades of grass, growing ever more frustrated with the slowness of his pace.

Won’t I ever grow? If I weren’t so little, I would be much faster. When I grow up, I want to be as high as the trees by the river.
This thought filled him with a surge of energy so powerful he almost tumbled into the pond as he tore himself from the hold of the thick meadow grasses.

“There you are.”

His breath stuck in his throat. A woman was sitting on the bank. The tendrils of her long, dark hair fluttered in the summer wind, and the lush purples and pinks of the flowers woven around the crown of her head made her skin look pearlescent in the sunlight. She was exquisitely beautiful, and her eyes, clear as morning dew, were smiling at him.

“Come here.”

She held her arms open wide, and he climbed into her lap and rested his head against her chest. She rocked him for a moment, humming a sweet tune.

“Would you like me to sing you a song?” she asked, running her fingers through his hair. A shiver of pleasure danced down his spine at the gentle touch.

“I can sing,” he blurted. He was overcome with a near frantic urge to make her happy.

“You can?” There was an ear-to-ear smile in the question.

He nodded and clambered out of her lap. He sucked in a heady breath of air and began to sing. He put his entire heart into the melody, drawing inspiration from the still water of the pond and the undulations of the grasses beyond it. When he finished, he felt dizzy with pride, knowing that the quality of his song was sure to please the woman. He beamed and spun around to face her.

But she was gone, and she took the sunlight with her. He stood in a brown void. The air reeked of something thick and cloying, and his stomach churned as it leeched the summer scent from his nostrils. There was a stout figure ahead, staring down at two identical boxes. The sight of them made his throat constrict.

“Such a pity,” the figure said in a voice as stark as the trees in winter.

It looked at him. The eyes hiding behind its spectacles reflected nothing.

“Come here.”

He drew back.

The muted lines of its face warped into sneer. “Takashi.”

“No! No, that’s not my name! That’s—” Panic-stricken, he searched for the woman. “Who are you? Where—?”

“Don’t kick up a fuss. Can’t you see you’re bothering everyone?”

Hordes of dark shapes huddled around him, shaking their heads. They mumbled emotionless words and empty promises, but no one came to help him. A wretched sob escaped his lips.

“Please. Please, make it stop. Please.”

Nezumi inhaled sharply.
“Oh! He’s awake! Look, he—”

“Shh! Don’t yell. The poor thing isn’t well.”

“Oh. Sorry…”

Nezumi blinked. There were dark shapes in the periphery of his vision, but these were not like the ones in his dream. They were sharper. And they smelled strong. Overwhelmingly strong, like creams and spices. He cleared his throat and focused on making sense of the shapes.

He blinked the bleariness from his eyes and the shapes revealed themselves to be faces. Three women were hovering over him. One was fanning his face with a paper fan. She had peacock green eye shadow. He squinted as the air hit his eyes.

“He looks so scared,” giggled one with pixyish features. Nezumi recognized the voice as the one that shrieked when he woke up.

“Leave him alone,” said someone outside his line of vision. “Don’t you worry. Safu went to get Shion.”

Nezumi lifted his head. The redheaded woman that he and Shion met outside the bar was standing off against the wall. She smiled warmly at him.

Nezumi scrambled to take stock of his situation. The room he was in was not Safu’s. The walls were a richer red color and completely bare except for a mirror hanging on the opposite side of the room. He was lying on his back on a dreadfully hard couch. In addition to the three women crowding him and the redheaded woman, there was an old woman sitting in a chair in the corner. She was dressed simply in a blue frock, her white hair tied tightly atop her head. She had the air of an aristocratic lady, and although she seemed out of place in the realm of the West Block, she somehow seemed to fit perfectly into this moment. She didn’t stir when he sat up, and continued knitting what appeared to be a sweater.

In essence, he had no idea where he was and he knew no one in the room. This did not sit well with him. He remembered storming out on Shion and finding himself in Safu’s room, but the particulars were murky, likely due to the searing headache he had at the time. He remembered fainting.

His expression soured. Wonderful. Why is Safu always around during that unfortunate event? More importantly, why the hell did that happen?

He felt fine now. His head was pulsing softly and his neck was sore, but thankfully he was no longer dizzy or nauseous.

“Do you want some water, sweetie?”

One of the women held out a cup to him. Her lips were a deep shade of purple, and something about the color reminded him of a pair of dark eyes. His brain sputtered back into gear.

“You said Shion’s coming?” He directed the question at the red-haired woman.

“Yup! Should be here any minute now. You just sit tight, little mouse.” She winked at him.

“Mouse?” The pixie traded glances between the woman and him. “You’re Shion’s mouse? So Aya wasn’t kidding?”
Nezumi sighed and the women backed away to give him room to stand.

“As kind as you ladies have been, I think it’s time for me to go.”

“You’re leaving? But you’re not well!” squawked the woman with the peacock eye shadow. She waved her paper fan as if that proved it. “Wouldn’t you rather wait ’til Shion gets here?”

“I’d really rather not.”

But today was not his day.

The door flung open and Shion burst into the room, bright-eyed and breathless. Safu shuffled in behind him, her mouth pressed into a hard, disapproving line.

“Nezumi.”

Shion took a step toward him, and just seeing the range of emotions playing on his face left Nezumi feeling exhausted.

“I’m fine,” he sighed, holding a hand up to halt the other teen’s approach. “I had my beauty sleep and now I’m feeling much better.”

Shion backed down, but the helplessly pained look he gave him produced a niggling sensation in the pit of Nezumi’s stomach.

“Is this boy a friend of yours, Shion?”

The injury in Shion’s features cooled instantly at the sound of the old woman’s voice. A hollow passivity settled in its place. He lowered his head and turned to face her.

“It’s been a while, Madam. Have you been well?”

The Madam remained nestled in the chair in the corner, but she did cease her knitting.

She smiled primly. “Very well, thank you. I assume you’ve been keeping well, too? You haven’t visited once these past few months. You must be terribly busy.”

The atmosphere in the room felt brittle, as though both Shion and the Madam were treading the rim of a frozen lake, all too aware that one misstep would puncture the thin veil of formality they had stretched between them.

“I wish you wouldn’t be such a stranger.” The old woman tightened the threads of the sweater in her lap. “It seems like just the other day you and Safu were running through these halls, not a care in the world. But I suppose now that you’re older you have other priorities.”

“Grandma,” Safu hissed.

Shion had no visible reaction. The rest of the occupants of the room shifted uncomfortably.

“Thank you for taking care of my friend,” Shion said at last. “I’m sorry for any inconvenience we might have caused. Please excuse us.”

Shion bowed deeply from the waist and then motioned for Nezumi to follow him from the room. Nezumi thanked the women and the Madam directly for their care. The women smiled, wished him good health, and encouraged him to drop by again sometime. The Madam merely inclined her head. Safu walked them out.
“Sorry about her,” she said as they reached the bottom of the staircase.

“You don’t have to apologize, Safu. Thanks for your help.”

Nezumi cleared his throat. “Sorry,” he grunted at the girl, swallowing the bitter taste the word left in his mouth.

Safu scowled. “Next time you have a fit, do yourself a favor and stay away from me. I don’t care how annoyed you are at Shion. He’s the closest thing there is to a specialist here, so I suggest you suck it up and at least try to let him help you.”

Had he complained so much about Shion? After some thought, he did remember voicing his frustrations to the girl. But as he had already made the effort to apologize, he didn’t feel obligated to comment further.

The episode ended without further incident, and he and Shion began what Nezumi realized might be a long walk back home. He turned out to be correct, but not for the reason he thought. Shion had yet to ask him a single question—about his headache, about why he was at the hotel, about anything. Part of him was glad for it, but mostly he was uncomfortable. The quality of Shion’s silence felt like a lecture in and of itself.

Nezumi cleared his throat. “So that’s what a real grandmother is like.”

“Mm. How’d she compare?” Shion said with reasonable normalcy.

“Startlingly similar in some respects. I have a theory: a sense of passive-aggressive disapproval must be a natural side effect of old age.”

Shion attempted a smile.

“But, ‘Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humor?’ —I think not.” He chanced a second look at Shion, and was relieved to find that the quote had coaxed him into a more convincing show of amusement.

“Are you really okay?” Shion’s mood changed so abruptly Nezumi didn't have enough time to mask his surprise. “I won’t push you if you insist you are, but… This is the second time. You can’t blame me for being worried.”

Nezumi turned away. It was becoming increasingly obvious to them both that he wasn’t okay. There was something very wrong about the magnitude and frequency of his headaches.

*And this last one… It was very similar to that time.*

The symptoms had been just as, if not more, intense as the time all those weeks ago when he tried to escape and She refused to let him leave. The nausea, the migraines, right down to the deafening buzzing, it was all the same. She had not spoken to him this time, though.

*From the way She talks, She seems to be biding Her time. To destroy No. 6… Is She getting close? And if She is, why is She taking it out on me? This is stupid. I don’t know anything.*

Shion took his silence as a hint to back off and huffed. “I just…” He raked his fingers through his bangs. “I wish you’d let me help you.”

Nezumi frowned at the earnestness of his voice. Was it his job as West Block’s doctor that made him so fixated on helping others? Or perhaps it was his personality that called him to the
profession. You would think with all the work he has to do, it’d be a relief to have someone that wasn’t begging him to cure their ills. He’s some kind of workaholic.

Shion stared forlornly at a group of people huddled around a trash can fire.

*Why is it so important to him?* Nezumi felt like he had already had this same thought a million times before. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Do you have any tea at home?”

“Tea?”

“Yeah. For headaches. And sore muscles, too, if you can manage. That couch they had me on was horrendous. Even worse than the one in your room, and that’s saying something.”

Shion’s eyes widened. “Oh! Yeah. I have mint and a little bit of feverfew left over, both of which are great remedies for head and muscle pain.”

“Great. How about you make me some when we get back.”

“Yeah, sure. I can do that.”

Shion appeared to be considerably cheered at the prospect and Nezumi had to increase his pace to keep up with dark-haired teen’s springing step.

*He’s far too easy to please.*

As they neared the bunker, a feeling of apprehension revisited Nezumi.

“Is she still there?”

Shion slowed a bit. “No. She isn’t.”

“What’d you do with her?”

“I found out her father used to be a Disposer, so I brought her to them.”

“Don’t those guys hate your guts?”

“…Not all of them.”

As soon as they were safely inside, Shion went around the room and lit all the lanterns while Nezumi lit the kerosene heater. The room no longer bore any signs of Mayumi’s presence. The bed was made and the cups were neatly lined up on the edge of the coffee table next to the pot and kettle. Shion had time to clean up the mess and deliver the child’s body to the closest thing she had to kin.

*How long was I out for?*

Shion instructed him to make himself comfortable on the couch and set immediately to dropping leaves into the kettle to steep.

“The properties in these plants help control the constriction of blood vessels, which relieves the pain and nausea from migraines. If taken regularly, they can significantly reduce the frequency of headaches,” Shion explained as they waited for the water to boil.
Nezumi felt like he was watching an advertisement. He wondered if Shion always gave his patients a play-by-play of what he planned to do to and prescribe for them.

The tea was odd tasting. The brightness of the mint sat on top, but then there was a bitter undertone at the end. It tasted very much like an herbal remedy. Nezumi drank it dutifully, while Shion helped himself to his own.

He was in the middle of pouring a second glass when Shion began to make “the face,” the one that meant he was preparing to say something, but was unsure of how to do so.

Nezumi straightened and faced him. “Speak. I am bound to hear.”

Shion wet his lips. “Safu was telling me—when she came to get me after—she said you were talking about how you needed to get out of here.”

Nezumi sniffed. “Oh. Well that’s not news, is it? I never volunteered to be here in the first place.”

“I know...” Shion’s voice got quiet all of a sudden. “Nezumi,” he said with soft urgency. “You should go.”

Nezumi’s heartbeat quickened.

“Don’t stay here. If you want to leave, once you're feeling better, pick a time and make a run for it.” The uncertainty in Shion’s eyes solidified into something fierce, and the light Nezumi saw burning there transfixed him. “I’ll cover for you. If you tell me before you leave, I’ll make up some excuse to tell Yoming and the others. I can say you’re sick and need to be on bed rest. It’ll be days before they’ll know you’re gone, and by then they won’t be able to do anything about it.” Shion shook his head. “I don’t want to hold you here, and Yoming can’t make you stay. He’s too busy dealing with everything that’s coming. Get away while you still can.”

The words sounded like a plea as much as a proposition. Nezumi was rooted to the spot. His brain processed every word Shion said, but he was powerless to respond. What were the chances? Someone was finally offering to let him have what he always wanted, completely tax-free with no strings attached. The prospect of freedom was dangling right in front of him, all he had to do was reach out and grab it.

But he couldn’t. Not even if he wanted to. The cruelty of it was so sublime he felt like screaming. He laughed instead.

“You think I’m still here because I’m obedient?” He chuckled darkly. “Do I seem like the obedient type to you? Believe me, if I could, I would’ve been long gone by now, Yoming, and the Resistance, and your aspirations of destroying No. 6 be damned. I couldn’t care less about any of it.”

Shion looked shocked. There was no other way of putting it. Of course he would be; Nezumi had just dismissed the offer of a lifetime without so much as a second thought.

“I don’t understand,” Shion said faintly. “Then why haven’t you—” The meaning of his words seemed to catch up to him. “What do you mean, ‘if I could’? If Yoming or your hatred for No. 6 aren’t the reasons you’re still here, then what’s holding you back?”

Nezumi smirked, but there was no mirth in it.

Ah, yes. There’s a clever boy, Shion. Always the one to ask the pertinent questions, the
Any other day he would have brushed Shion off with a line about it not being his business, because it wasn’t. But what would that do? It wouldn’t hurt him or Shion, but they wouldn’t get anywhere either. Who was he trying to protect by hiding the truth? Himself? From the embarrassment of having to confess he heard voices, maybe, but that wasn’t going to go away by staying quiet about it. Her? It looked like She was going to do whatever the hell She wanted, regardless of what he said or did, so none of it mattered.

He was frustrated; his head hurt; he was hungry, and had been ever since he came to West Block. He was tired. And Shion wanted to help.

“That first day, when I tried to escape,” he began haltingly, “I didn’t just pass out. I—Something kept me from leaving.” It sounded disgustingly stupid when he said it out loud. He clicked his tongue.

“Something?” Shion’s face was blank as he repeated the word.

“The voice from my dreams—except I wasn’t sleeping. I was conscious, and She told me She needed me to help Her destroy No. 6, and that I wasn’t allowed to leave until it was done. If I try, I get knocked out. It sounds really stupid, but that’s the truth.”

Shion was quiet for a long time and Nezumi spent the entirety of the silence wishing he could be unconscious again.

What possessed me to confess this? I can’t remember how I thought this was a good idea.

“That’s scary.”

Shion’s voice was steady. The slight frown that tugged at his lips conveyed his hidden concern, but it was not the type of concern Nezumi was expecting. It was not judgmental, but compassionate.

Nezumi looked away just the same. “Yeah, well… It is what it is. Worrying about it won’t help.”

His half-filled glass of tea was still sitting on the edge of the table where he placed it before the conversation started. He left it untouched and sat down on the couch. Shion held his own glass in his lap, and he stared down at it as if its contents could provide some answer.
Damn it.

Nezumi glared at the computer, but the code sequence on its screen was as impervious to intimidation as it was to his efforts at decoding it.

The mouse they had sent to Rou had returned within a day of being dispatched to No. 6. Nezumi wasn’t sure what he expected to get from the older man, although nothing seemed a strong possibility. Rou might not understand the connection between Nezumi and the note, or he might think it was a trick, contrived to mark him as a dissident. Or he might believe the note, but simply choose not to answer. Nezumi considered several outcomes, and most of them ended with the mouse returning empty-handed.

But when the mouse crawled up onto the table, exhausted but triumphant, and spat out a small computer chip, a coolness settled inside Nezumi. They had been right; Rou knew what was going on in No. 6. There was no accompanying note, which spoke perhaps to the caution of the sender. It was of little consequence. The information he had sought was in his possession, and the only thing left was to get it to the computer and find time to read it without arousing suspicion.

As it turned out, getting it up on the computer was less of an issue than Nezumi anticipated. Yoming’s presence at headquarters had become increasingly rare, although when he did appear, he was enshrouded in an atmosphere even Nezumi considered too volatile to poke fun at. He kept careful watch for when Yoming entered, but he had little to fear from the other members. It was easy enough to pretend the code on the screen was for the robotic mouse.

Unfortunately, that excuse was fast becoming nonviable. The mouse was finished and he had already sent it on its way. No one at headquarters was yet privy to this fact, because he had planned to reveal it only after he had decoded Rou’s chip.

The encryption was putting up a stubborn fight, however, and he had to do it all manually. The strings of numbers and letters on the screen burned themselves into his retinas. Nezumi cursed the primitive computer in front of him. Perhaps, though, he should lay the blame where it was really due. Another headache tugged at the back of his head.

Those bastards. He pushed away from the computer with a scowl.

“Problem?”

Safu frowned at him from the other side of the table. The question was casual, but with just the slightest hint of dislike, which was to say it was her normal tone with him. Still, he read something probing in the question. Safu had regarded him with remote vigilance ever since his fainting episode. It was not the product of concern; it was the kind of watchfulness one reserves for an
insect they happen upon and fully intend to squash the minute it makes any movement towards
them.

“One can only stare at a computer screen for so long.”

She nodded. “Call it a day, then. I was just about to head out, and seeing as it’s Shion’s day off,
I suppose that makes me your handler. So.”

The scowl on Nezumi’s face deepened. He understood she couldn’t just say, “How about we go
to knife practice?” but he didn’t understand why she had to be so pointedly obnoxious with her
pretenses.

“As usual, your social graces awe me.”

He ejected the chip, laid it on the table, and shut the computer down. He then set to
painstakingly straightening the objects on the table. It took Safu all of five seconds to realize he
was doing it to annoy her. She rolled her eyes and walked towards the door, he assumed in an effort
to deprive him of his audience. Nezumi smirked and slipped the chip into his pocket while her
back was turned. This had been his aim from the start, but paying Safu back for her spite was
always a bonus.

Unlike Shion, Safu had no aversion to taking the main street, and she burrowed through the
people with impressive efficiency. Whereas Shion moved through the crowd with an air of
d deference, Safu was assertive and quick to take advantage of gaps as she came upon them. It was
the difference between wading and weaving, and Nezumi much preferred the expedience of Safu’s
method.

They parted from the crowd and Nezumi was conscious of how uncomfortably hot his jacket
was. After a brief deliberation, he removed it, and the chill of the wind brought him momentary
relief. He draped the jacket over his arm and continued after Safu.

Safu made a face when he came up beside her. “You’re not going to wear your coat?”

“It’s not bad out.”

“...Are you sure you want to do this?”

Nezumi discerned from her tone that his clothing preferences were no longer the topic of
conversation.

“Knife practice? Why wouldn’t I?”

“You passed out on my floor the other day,” she stated blandly.

Nezumi met her mention of that hateful incident with an equally bland smile. “Am I detecting
concern?”

“I’m not going to fetch people for you anymore.” A defiant light blazed in her eyes as she said
this. “I want to make sure we’re clear on this. If you faint again, I’m going to leave you there.”

“That’s not very comrade-like of you, Safu. Isn’t the Resistance about brotherhood and all that
jazz?”

Safu sniffed. “Sure, the Resistance is, but West Block as a whole operates on the ‘every man for
himself’ principle. A concept I’m sure you’re more than well acquainted with.”
“Quite,” Nezumi responded with a meditative air. “Well, I don’t feel the least bit faint right now, but if I foresee an attack, I’ll try to make it outside your sightline. That way you can claim complete ignorance to Shion when he asks after me.”

He could feel her glare, but he continued to stare straight ahead like he was none the wiser. She was far too susceptible to that piece of ammunition.

A door opened up a little ways down the street and Nezumi’s eyes were drawn to the russet coat of the figure that stepped out.

“Speak of the devil.” He nodded to the house.

It was always interesting to note the change in Safu’s demeanor whenever Shion appeared. The hardness faded from her eyes and the lines of her mouth relaxed into something gentle, if not altogether good-humored. Despite her austerity, she never appeared more emotional than in the moments she looked at Shion. Nezumi wondered whether she realized the full extent of Shion’s influence on her. It seemed ironic that Safu might be unconscious of a change that was so conspicuous to him.

Shion spent a moment speaking to the elderly woman inside the house, which gave Nezumi and Safu ample time to get to him.

“I’m sorry to drag you down here for something so silly. It isn’t much, but please take this.” The old woman took Shion’s hand and placed a rather small and sad-looking bunch of grapes into it.

Shion held the offering gingerly. “Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Nonsense. There’s no need to be shy. I have a little fish, too, if you’d like that instead?”

Shion continued to mumble excuses as to why accepting the fruit was impossible, while the woman smiled and muttered to the contrary. It was painful to watch. Safu was frowning at the exchange, but she made no indication of intervening.

“Really, it’s fine,” Shion insisted with a clumsy smile. “I don’t need any compensation.”

*That idiot.*

Nezumi stepped around Safu and strode over to the gently bickering couple.

He slipped his arm around the other boy’s shoulders. “Fancy seeing you here, Shion.”

“Nezumi.” Shion blinked at him. “When did you…?”

“I just happened to be walking by. Oh,” he said with a note of interest as his gaze slid to the fruit resting in Shion’s outstretched hand. “Grapes? It’s not often you see those around here. What a nice treat.” Nezumi flashed a bright smile at the old woman and she, in turn, seemed gratified by his show of pleasure.

“Did you thank the lady, Shion?” He turned the dazzling smile on boy beside him.

Shion balked at the sweetness of his tone. His halfhearted explanation was cut short when Nezumi pressed a hand against the back of his head and forced him into a shallow bow.

Shion had no choice but to surrender in such a position. He uttered in a tone of sheepish gratitude, “Thank you very much, Ma’am. I really appreciate it.”
“You have to excuse him,” Nezumi explained. “Shion is terribly modest; accepting gifts makes him so nervous he often forgets his manners. He’s always saying he considers his patients’ happiness a payment in of itself.”

The woman blinked between them, but her expression soon settled into a genial one. “Is that so? He’s a very sweet boy,” she conceded, with just the slightest hint of laughter.

“That he is. We must be going, but thank you again for the grapes. Come along, Shion.” He steered Shion back towards Safu, who had been watching with an expression that managed somehow to be detached and interested at the same time.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Shion said, once he was released.

“Are you kidding me? I absolutely should’ve done that. Even I know it’s bad form to refuse people’s gifts.” Shion furrowed his brow. Nezumi sighed in exasperation. “You can’t really be this dense. What have you been doing for the last sixteen years?”

“It’s no use,” Safu said. “I’ve told him countless times, but he keeps doing it anyway.” She folded her arms across her chest and shook her head at Shion. “It’s a matter of pride. Not accepting their payment is like saying you think you’re above them.”

“I don’t think that at all,” Shion protested. “It’s just… I get a ration every week, but most people barely have enough to live on every day. And this…” He stared down at the grapes in his hands. “There are so many other people who need this more than me.”

“You think you’re doing them a kindness by not taking their food?”

Shion met Nezumi’s narrowed eyes warily.

Nezumi released a second sigh, this one more woeful than the last. “Anyone who’s ever met you knows what a sap you are; they wouldn’t compensate you unless they felt like they needed to. They’re not giving gifts for the hell of it; they’re trying to rid themselves of any obligation they feel towards you. You’re not doing them any favors by refusing. You’re robbing them of the ability to clear away the debt of your service, a debt that only becomes more of a burden the longer it’s left unpaid. Quit being so self-centered and accept what little dignity they have to offer.”

Safu nodded and frowned at Shion. “It’s a little embarrassing that Nezumi understands this better than you.”

Shion’s eyes darted back and forth between her and Nezumi, an edge of suspicion working its way into his pout. “You know… I’m glad you two are getting along, but if that means you’re going to start ganging up on me, I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

Nezumi snorted. “If you’d use that brain of yours once in a while, interventions of this sort wouldn’t be necessary.”

“Why aren’t you wearing your jacket?” Shion demanded, glancing from Nezumi to the jacket over his arm.

“You’re changing the subject.”

“He said he’s not cold,” Safu snitched.

Shion gaped. “It’s freezing out! You need to take better care of yourself.”
He gave him a loaded look, which Nezumi assumed was meant to remind him of several nights past. However, his current headache was barely a bother, and although his body temperature had cooled from the crisp winter air, he was not uncomfortable. He considered that he might already be running a low fever, but he wasn’t much concerned with this either.

“You’re going to get sick,” Shion said sternly.

“Not a problem. I know a good doctor.”

The admonishment on Shion’s face faltered, but he still grumbled, “I have enough work as it is.”

“What’s with that stingy remark?”

Shion sighed. “Here. I was on my way to give this to you.” He pulled a canteen out of his pocket and held it out to Nezumi.

Nezumi took the canteen and stared at it with an aspect of amusement. “Thanks. —You didn’t pack a lunchbox by any chance, did you?”

“…No?”

“Too bad.” Nezumi tucked the canteen into his pocket. “Your impression of a housewife was almost perfect.”

“That’s not funny,” Shion mumbled. His reproach was considerably weakened by the color rising in his cheeks.

Safu cleared her throat loudly. “If we’re going to practice, we should get going.”

She began walking. A few paces in, she looked behind her. “You tagging along, Shion?”

“I’ll see you to the end of the road,” he answered, pulling up alongside her. He turned to Nezumi. “Did you have any luck breaking the code?”

Nezumi glanced at Safu.

“He told me about the chip.”

He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. She would’ve gotten suspicious anyway, and it was somewhat of a comfort to know he didn’t have to worry about her bludgeoning him with questions about his activities.

“No dice. It’s gonna take a little longer to decipher.”

Shion tilted his head at him.

“What?”

“No, it’s just… Well…” Shion rubbed the back of his neck. “Do you want me to try for a little?” he said at last. Nezumi detected an element of eagerness to his words.

“Be my guest,” he said with a shrug. Nezumi fished the chip out of his pocket and deposited it in Shion’s palm.

“You’re finished with the robot, right?” Safu framed it like a question, but she seemed certain of
the answer.

“Yup.”

“Maybe we should talk about where we’re going to send it, then.”

“I’ve already taken care of it.” If she knew about the chip, there was no point in hiding the fact.


“We have a plan.”

“You never said anything about a plan.”

Shion smiled apologetically. “Well, we—”

“I have a contact in No. 6,” Nezumi interjected. “Don’t worry about it.”

Nezumi’s voice expressed an indifference that could easily be taken for confidence, but, in truth, he wasn’t entirely sure how his decision would pan out.

At the very least, they’ll be curious enough to look into it. After that… Well, we’ll just have to hope for the best. Nezumi smiled wanly to himself. Blind faith wasn’t his forte. Perhaps Shion is rubbing off on me. I’ll have to be more careful.

“You could’ve at least mentioned it to me before you sent it off.” Safu was clearly offended that they didn’t see fit to consult her on the matter, but seeing as she could do nothing about it now, she turned away without further comment.

A man stepped out of the alleyway in front of Nezumi and he hopped back just in time to avoid a collision. The man likewise teetered backwards, and in the seconds before he steadied himself, Nezumi had a sightline into the alley behind him. He noticed two other men, pulling a bicycle-drawn cart between them. The cart, coupled with the large stature and rough appearance of the man in front of him, left their identities plain. Nezumi’s spirits sank.

Just my luck.

After the initial surprise, the dull look on the man’s face hardened into one of which malice was the least repulsive component.

“Ey… I ain’t never seen you before,” he drawled, the corner of his mouth quirking up. “You new ‘round here?”

The man had a leather patch strapped over one eye, giving him a beefy pirate look that Nezumi found difficult to take seriously. Still, he resisted the impulse to show any emotion on his face. He knew well enough not to engage the Disposers. Apart from the evident risk, it was a waste of time and energy, and he was in no mood to entertain slobbering half-wits. Nezumi stepped to the side and walked around him.

“Hold on now—”

Nezumi sensed the danger as soon as he passed, and slipped out of reach of the man’s fumbling grasp with little trouble. In the process, he caught a whiff of a sour stench rolling off the man’s person, which no doubt explained his bloated and ruddy complexion. Even though he was more than able to dodge the swipe, the man’s perseverance made him wary of turning his back again.
There seemed little choice but to deal with him.

“Is there a problem here?” asked a feminine voice.

Nezumi kept his attention on the Disposer in front of him, but he noticed Safu step beside him. He suspected Shion was not far behind. The Disposers were not to be outdone; the two men pulling the bicycle drew up beside their drunken comrade and turned unfriendly eyes on Safu. No doubt they recognized the gold bandana.

“Oh,” the one-eyed man chuckled. “You’re Resistance, huh? What a waste!” His lips twisted into a wry smile. “Hey, how ‘bout you ditch those stiffs and hang with us a while? We can show you a better time.”

Nezumi answered with a patronizing smile. “Might want to show yourself to a better pick-up line first.”

“Nezumi.” Safu’s voice was calm, but the flat edge to the word indicated a hidden disapproval. “Let’s go.”

“Oh, come on, sweetheart. Loosen up,” called the mustached Disposer to the left of One-eye. He looked younger than his companions, but not by much. “I know we Disposers and the Resistance don’t get along, but who says we can’t treat each other good, huh?” His brows arched suggestively. “Why don’t you come play with us, too? I’ll treat you real good.”

“Hey.” Shion stepped to the forefront. “Come on, guys. There’s enough trouble between our groups as it is. Let it be, alright?”

The man looked inclined to respond, but the right-hand Disposer beat him to it.

“You guys hear that yapping? Sounds like Yoming’s bitch,” the third man quipped. He was scrawny in comparison with the other two, but apparently he made up for this fact with his superior wit.

The other two men took a minute to guffaw at their buddy’s latest gem while Shion stood by with an expression of resigned patience, and Safu seethed at their complete lack of respect. Nezumi, for his part, was astounded at the level of idiocy some people possessed.

“Like mother like son, eh?” the mustached man chuckled.

Nezumi felt Shion tense beside him.

“Nah, the kid’s got standards,” said One-eye. “He only answers to Yoming. But Karan…” He crossed his arms and eyed Shion with a lazy grin. “She’d lay down for anyone.”

A dull crack vibrated the air. The Disposer’s head whipped to the side and the force of the impact sent him tumbling to the ground. By the time Nezumi registered that Shion had punched the man in the face, Shion was already on top of him. The man’s already red complexion turned an even brighter shade, and the alarm on his face was enough to draw the onlookers out of their stupor. Shion’s fingers were wrapped around the man’s windpipe, and he was steadily but resolutely strangling him.

Nezumi’s eyes widened.

“Whoa, hey, kid! He didn’t mean it!” The mustached Disposer scrambled to pull Shion off, while the scrawny one attempted to heave their partner in the opposite direction.
“Shion!” Safu shrieked. She grabbed Shion’s arm and tugged. “Shion, stop!”

The man had begun to cough and sputter, but despite the efforts of Safu and the Disposers, Shion refused to loosen his grip.

“You take that back,” he hissed at the writhing man. He jerked him violently when he didn’t—couldn’t—answer. “Take it back!”

Nezumi took a step forward and grasped Shion’s other arm. “Let him go, you idiot.”

Between him and the Disposers, they were able to wrench Shion’s hands from the man’s throat. Nezumi and Safu held Shion back while the other men dragged his victim safely out of reach.

Shion struggled in their grips. “Let me go,” he snarled. “I’m fine! Let go!”

He elbowed Nezumi forcefully in the sternum. It was a well-placed blow, and painful enough that he released him. There was something animalistic in Shion’s rage that spoke to an equally primal part of Nezumi’s being. This person was a threat; his instincts screamed at him to recoil.

It made him angry.

He held Shion’s livid gaze with glacial disgust. At last, Shion broke the glare to check his hand. The knuckles were red, but not split. He turned his leer on the Disposers. The drunken one was still coughing and wheezing, but the other two flinched back. Without another word, Shion turned and stalked off.

A small circle of people had stopped to watch the fight, and they parted soundlessly to let him pass. Nezumi cast a look at Safu, but her stricken countenance followed Shion.

“Look, man, we didn’t mean anything by it.”

Nezumi returned his attention to the Disposers.

“He’s drunk,” the scrawny one whimpered. “He didn’t mean it. Right?”

One-eye had recovered himself some, but he wasn’t up to speaking. He spat out a mouthful of blood and nodded weakly in response.

“Please don’t tell Yoming. We won’t say nothing either, promise.”

Safu sent them a cursory glance. “Let’s go, Nezumi.”

She strode off.

“What the hell was that?”

She stared straight ahead and didn’t answer.

“Does that happen often?”

“Drop it.”

Nezumi cut in front of her. “I don’t think I will. I have to live with that.”

“Nezumi, shut up!” she snapped.
He studied the raw emotion on her face. It lasted barely second. She pushed past him and barreled through the crowd.

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“What was that?”

Safu knocked his arm away with a precise slap. Nezumi grimaced, bouncing back to avoid a downward slash at his leg.

“Your strikes are sloppy,” she sneered.

She stutter-stepped forward and jabbed. He voided the hit and retreated once more, but she followed. He raised his free hand to protect his face, checked the impulse to swipe at her exposed neck, and watched for the rush. No doubt she intended to pressure him until he lost his patience and acted recklessly. Although, guessing her objective made it no less difficult to counter—especially when his body seemed hell-bent on sabotaging his concentration.

He had put his jacket back on to spar. Safu’s hits left bruises even with the leather blunting the blows, and he had no desire to experience what welts might form if he chose to forgo what little protection it offered. But he was still unbearably warm and it was wreaking havoc with his focus.

“Pay attention,” Safu rebuked him.

If she noticed his discomfort, it did not sway her from attempting to drive her spoon into his face. He managed to narrowly escape.

They had practiced enough that they were past keeping score of wins and loses, but Nezumi was aware of having taken more hits that day than Safu. She had been irritable before they began, and her mood had not improved in the slightest, despite the passage of an hour. It only grew worse and worse, and she became proportionally more critical of his missteps.

Normally, Nezumi had no trouble matching her intensity. He had just as many frustrations to vent, and he had the speed, and now the skills, to do so. But he just felt so exhausted. Every movement was twice as much effort as usual, and anticipating Safu’s attacks took a significant chunk of his energy.

A few strands of his bangs clung to his damp forehead, and although his natural impulse was to wipe them away, he repressed it. It was barely a passing thought, a decision that took less than a second to make, but Safu was especially keen that evening, and that flicker of irresolution was all she needed. She sprung forward, her spoon trailing a clear path down the length of his knife arm.

It was a crippling blow, and both he and Safu were aggravated at his glaring lack of defense.

“These are beginner’s mistakes,” Safu howled. “I can’t practice like this. Take a break. Get a drink and come back when you’re ready to fight seriously.”

The gibe stung Nezumi’s pride, but the flash of anger produced by the insult only survived long enough for him to scowl at Safu and head to where his canteen rested against the wall of the house. He plucked the container off the ground and stared down at it. His head felt heavy, and there was a pressure behind his eyes that continued to build in time with the furious pounding of his heart.

*Something’s wrong with me.* That much he already knew. The symptoms he had now were nowhere near as intense as the last time, but they were distressing just the same.
Nezumi took a swig of the canteen and almost choked, assaulted as his taste buds were with a bitter minty tang. The contents were not water, but herbal tea—the same Shion had made him for his headaches. It tasted worse cold than it did hot.

How could the boy who would come all the way downtown on his day off to deliver an herbal remedy be the same person who would remorselessly strangle someone on the street? Shion was an airheaded bookworm who smiled too much and empathized with the misfortunes of others to the degree of personal injury. He nursed sick orphans and theorized about world peace in his spare time. He was a diehard altruist in an environment that not only sanctioned egocentrism, but in which selfishness was practically a necessity of life.

And yet, despite those things, Nezumi knew Shion was not innocent—he had known since the start of their acquaintance. There had been several warnings since he had come to reside with him, derived from Nezumi’s own observations, as well as from Safu and Yoming. Something ruthless lurked behind Shion’s gentle demeanor. Nezumi knew this.

But then how is it so easy to forget? Most of the time, he’s so clueless and naïve he could easily pass for a No. 6 citizen. And just when I think I’ve never met anyone more blind to the world, something like that incident this afternoon happens, and I’m disgusted with myself for having forgotten.

No matter what he did, his mind refused to reconcile the two images of Shion.

“Nezumi,” Safu called.

The white of Nezumi’s breath fanned out before him as he exhaled. He tipped the canteen back and downed half of the tea.

“I think we should stop for today,” said Safu when he returned to her.

He was surprised by this announcement, although not altogether adverse to the suggestion.

“Why is that?”

“You’ve violated the first and most important rule of combat: you entered a fight you couldn’t win. Worst of all, you knew you couldn’t win from the start, and you still agreed to it.”

“What makes you think I can’t win?”

Safu’s eyes narrowed to mere slits. “You’re pale, you’re sweating, and you look like you’re going to vomit. You’re completely useless and I refuse to waste any more of my time. I’m taking you back.”

“So I’m getting mercied, is that it?” Nezumi smiled drolly. “What happened to leaving me for dead?”

“If you want to stay out here, be my guest. But I’m leaving.”

Nezumi decided to cut the repartee short. His headache was growing more insistent.

For all her talk of going home, Safu did not seem to be in any particular hurry. She headed in the opposite direction of the bunker when they hit the main street. He was baffled for a moment, but as soon as she began heading in the direction of Gin and Yang, he remembered it was ration day.

He had gone with Shion to pick up his ration several times, although Nezumi himself never
received one. Shion encouraged him to claim his share at the beginning, but after Nezumi made it quite clear he intended to take nothing from the Resistance, Shion backed down.

Safu took her bag of rations from Yang with terse thanks. On their way out, she asked Nezumi to confirm that he was in no danger of fainting on the walk back. She received his playful negative with a sober, “Good,” and proceeded on the familiar route to the bunker. She didn’t so much as look at him again until they neared the warehouse.

A slight apprehension visited Nezumi at the sight of it. He wasn’t the only one with reservations; Safu’s pace slowed and she stared at the building ahead without seeming to see it. They paused outside the entrance and Safu set an appraising eye on Nezumi.

“If Shion needs anything, send for me.”

Nezumi’s mouth quirked into a semblance of a smirk. “I think Shion’s more than capable of taking care of himself, don’t you?”

Safu scoffed. “Go to bed, Nezumi.” She spun around and walked off.

Nezumi went into the warehouse and pressed the section on the wall to reveal the staircase. The dark corridor yawned below him. He approximated that he and Safu had been out for two hours or so. It was a decent chunk of time, and certainly long enough for Shion to have cooled off, but it was also just short enough that it was just as possible that Shion could still be agitated. Nezumi himself had harbored grudges for longer.

He stepped down onto the top stair and the canteen shifted in his pocket. Well, even if he is still angry, it has nothing to do with me. The minute he realizes I’m feeling the least bit poorly, he’ll go back to being unbearably accommodating, anyway.

The door inched open before he was halfway to it.

“Welcome back.”

The words gave Nezumi pause. Shion’s voice was tight and he swore he heard an underlying tremor to it. Perhaps it was the acoustics of the corridor that caused it, but then there was Shion’s body language to be considered.

“Somebody looks guilty,” he remarked, stepping inside.

Shion furrowed his brow and fluttered away from the door to stand in the middle of the room.

“I deciphered the chip,” he said after clearing his throat.

“You did?”

Shion nodded.

“Well? What’d it say?”

“It’s… strange. It talks about the history of No. 6…”

Nezumi frowned. He didn’t know what he expected to be on the chip, but that wasn’t it.

“And it mentions Elyurias,” Shion said slowly.

“Oh, that’s good. Safu will be happy to hear that.”
Nezumi blinked at the force he put behind the word.

Shion bit his lip. “I don’t think we should tell her,” he said in a meeker voice. “I mean, unless you think we should—after you read it.”

Nezumi’s surprise gave way to suspicion. “What’s with you? You’re freaking me out.”

“It’s strange,” he repeated with a shake of his head. “You’ll see when you read it.” Shion took a notebook from the table and held it out to him. “Here. I copied what was on the file. Take a look at it.”

Nezumi took the notebook from him and flipped through the pages. Shion’s cramped, slightly slanted handwriting filled a good number of them. Nezumi cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Your efficiency is both impressive and disturbing.”

“You should sit down.”

Nezumi took a seat on the couch. Shion remained where he was, a disquieting and restlessly contemplative fixture in the middle of the room. Nezumi tore his eyes away from him and focused on the source of his distress.

The first few paragraphs were things he already knew: the world was destroyed through humanity’s folly. There were barely any habitable lands left. Despite the destruction, the forests around which the Town of Roses was founded were still vibrant and healthy. The refugees thought it a good omen and chose that spot to start anew.

They failed to realize there were already people living there. A civilization of forest people, whose rites and rituals were the reason why the land remained relatively unscathed through the atrocities of war. They lived in harmony with nature, respected it, offered it their protection, and nature responded in kind.

The information was interesting, but Nezumi couldn’t see anything in it that could be the cause for Shion’s nervousness. He scanned the next few lines and found the word “Elyurias” near the bottom of the page.

Elyurias was the name the No. 6 researchers gave the being the Forest People worshipped as a god. The Forest People appeased the god with songs and offerings, which guaranteed the happiness and health of their people and the environment in which they lived. Like nature, Elyurias was impartial: neither good nor evil, beneficent nor malevolent.

Nezumi turned the page.

Among the Forest People, there were a select few who were able to communicate with Elyurias and quell her wrath. They did this with their beautiful voices, and thus they earned the title of “Singer.”

Nezumi’s mind grinded to a halt. He read the sentence a second time. He reread the previous page and flipped back again. A sickening tumult of emotion began building in his stomach as he pushed on.

Halfway between a spirit of nature and a god, Elyurias had enormous power. Although sexless, the Forest People and researchers alike had taken to calling her “she” because the being embodied...
the form a large wasp and perpetuated its existence by laying eggs in other living beings. To avoid becoming hosts, the Forest People maintained a Godly Bed composed of animal brains. The Singers would lead her to the Godly Bed with song, and the altar would remain fresh until the new queen hatched and the brains rotted away. As long as the Forest People made this offering and protected the Godly Bed, Elyurias would safeguard the forest until she returned and the ritual was repeated.

Nezumi looked up. Shion was gnawing his thumbnail. He let his hand fall away when he caught Nezumi’s gaze. He seemed to be waiting for him to speak first. Nezumi forced himself to finish reading. Less than a page remained.

No. 6 discovered Elyurias and coveted her power. The walls of the city were just about completed, and the officials were drunk on the idea of eternal utopia. What was a revered god to the Forest People was merely an intriguing insect to No. 6, and they meant to study it and harvest its potential for themselves. The Forest People were the only things standing in their way.

No. 6 invaded the settlement they had in the Mao area and massacred the residents. They set fire to the houses and the surrounding forest. Men, women, and children perished in the flames, and those who tried to run were gunned down before they had a chance to make it to the tree line. The entire population was annihilated in a matter of hours, and No. 6 took the Godly Bed back to their labs to be studied. These events happened just twelve years ago.

Nezumi had never heard of the Forest People, but he knew the Mao area. There was an airport there now. No. 6 committed systematic genocide and paved over the bodies with a landing strip. He had been alive when it happened. Twelve years ago would have been right around the time his parents were killed. Burned alive in their home.

He felt sick.

There were more notes at the bottom detailing experiments with the Godly Bed, but he couldn’t look at the notebook anymore. He needed to think.

Rou sent this information for a reason. Everything he needed to sort out where he fit into this scheme was there. He felt a suffocating foreboding of what it meant, but he forced himself to focus on the most pressing facts. He knew nothing of the Forest People, but he had been called “Singer” a number of times.

He told Shion he didn’t think She was a product of No. 6. He was certain of that. She felt more ancient, more powerful than anything the city could have conceived. What’s more, She wanted to destroy No. 6. And She needed him to do it.

Now he knew why.

He snapped the notebook shut and stood. Shion made a motion toward him, but Nezumi was already out the door.

No. 6’s meticulous care of him, the Bureau officer’s threats, Her cryptic messages. The pieces were sliding into place, and every stab of realization brought a fresh peal of fury.

His feet carried him away from town, into the stark, rocky expanse. He was vaguely aware of being followed, but he kept straight on his course until he reached the ruined building. The sun was just beginning to set, and the brilliant oranges and yellows provided a fiery backdrop to the scene. Nezumi entered the ruins with murderous purpose, and his thoughts grew ever more lethal when the vertigo hit him and his vision blurred.
Nezumi opened his eyes. He was in a fucking meadow. He wheeled around to face the forest.

“Where are you, Elyurias?” he shouted noiselessly into its dark recesses.

She seemed to sense that the time for mysticism was over. A fierce wind whipped through trees, and then he felt a stifling presence bear down on him. He repressed a shudder.

_It has been a while, Singer._

Nezumi grit his teeth at the address.

“The power to destroy No. 6—what kind of bullshit is that?”

_Your role is integral,_ She answered mechanically.

“My role? And what is that, exactly? Your Godly Bed?” His face contorted into a look of unbidden revulsion.

_As one of the Forest People, you should understand. No. 6 has grown arrogant and conceited. It must be destroyed._

“Why do you need me?” he ground out. “Just destroy No. 6 yourself.”

_That is not possible._

“You’re a god, aren’t you?”

_Destroying No. 6 requires a human hand. I have kept you whole for this purpose._

“No.”

_No?

“I didn’t agree to this. I’m not going to be your vessel.”

_It is already done._

Nezumi strangled the scream that clawed its way up his throat. He wanted to lash out, but although he could feel Her around him, there was nothing tangible at which he could direct his rage.

_There is no cause for anger._ Her voice was an inflectionless hush. _It is a great honor._

“Fuck you.”

_Why do you fight it? Our goals are one. Is No. 6 not responsible for your misfortunes? Many have died and many more will follow. I will end that cycle of suffering. They have tried to chain us both, but I will set us free. It is a noble sacrifice for your kind._

“So that’s it, then. You’re condemning me to death and you think I should be honored.”

_You are arrogant. Why should you cling to a meaningless existence when I can give you purpose? You will prevent the deaths of countless innocents, inside and outside the wall._

Her reference to those outside the wall gave him pause. “Is West Block a part of this?”
Their fate is uncertain as long as No. 6 thrives.

As much as he hated to admit it, Her reasoning was sound. The Resistance was planning to fight the city when the Hunt arrived, and there was no telling how many would perish. If the revolt failed, No. 6 might decide it would be in their best interest to annihilate the West Block to ensure they would never be challenged again. After all, they had done it before.

The wind picked up. It rushed past him and was vacuumed into the forest. The force was enough to carry him forward a few steps, but he planted his feet firmly and leered into the maelstrom.

“We’re not done,” he snarled.

The time is nearly at hand. I trust you will be more reasonable next time we speak.

“You—"

His eyes slid open. Concrete stared down at him from above. He twisted his neck and came face-to-face with three pairs of grape-colored eyes. Tsukiyo cheeped softly, and Hamlet and Biscuit twitched their noses. Nezumi lifted his gaze a few inches higher to meet Shion’s.

“I brought you back home,” he stated gingerly.

The blanket draped over him slipped into his lap as he sat up on the couch. He pulled it off him and tossed it to the side.

“Did you speak with Her?”

Nezumi eyed him. He was in no mood for Q&A, but then again, he wasn’t feeling up to rebuffing Shion’s concern either.

“How much did you figure out?”

Shion bit his lip, but he kept eye contact as he spoke, “Are you a Singer?”

Nezumi’s mouth curved into a wan smile. Whenever emotions ran high, he seemed to automatically fall into this defense.

“My dear Shion, my role is so much greater than that.” He spread his arms wide. “You are looking at the holy and magnificent Godly Bed.”

The color drained from Shion’s face. He stared wide-eyed, rigid, uncomprehending. Nezumi thought he might’ve even been trembling. But he couldn’t be sure. His own powers of observation were significantly dulled by the haziness of his faculties.

“Yes, apparently, I’m playing host to a wasp god.” He was not ignorant of the feverish catch in his voice. “I’ve been informed I should be grateful for the honor.”

Shion pressed a hand to his mouth and turned sharply away. There was no doubt that he was trembling now. He began to pace, quick, tight lines along the edge of the coffee table.

“No,” he moaned, fistng his hands in his hair. “No, no, no, no.” Nezumi watched him, his own fervor chilled by the hysteric display. Shion halted. “This is No. 6’s fault. They did this to you.”
It was as though the voice had come from another person. Shion was still shaking visibly, but his tone was not one of agitation or pain; it was leeched of any human emotion. His words were a certainty, not a lament.

“Stop that,” Nezumi snapped. The command sliced through the atmosphere with more intensity than he thought himself capable of in his weakened state. “If you want to whine about No. 6, I want no part of it. I’m not going to be your excuse.”

Shion turned his face to him. There remained no trace of ferocity in his features, only a starved terror.

“How can you be so calm?” he gasped.

Nezumi settled against the back of the couch. “What’s there to be upset about? This is perfect.” He fixed Shion with a ruthless smile. “It’s that other option you pined so dearly for. No. 6 will be destroyed and none of your friends have to die in the process. It’s everything you ever wanted on a silver platter, and all it requires is one small sacrifice.”

“How… How could you say that?”

Shion crumpled to the floor, his look suffused with a helplessness too crippling to name, but that made itself oppressively clear in the pallor of his complexion and dark anguish of his eyes. It smarted to see what a mess he was.

This is my problem. What right do you have, sitting there and looking at me like that? Nezumi found he no longer felt like smiling.

“Can’t you stop it? Maybe if you explain,” Shion said feebly.

“It is already done,” Nezumi pronounced in a haughty monotone. “She made it clear there would be no negotiation. The only thing left to determine is when.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Yeah. Leave me alone. I want to be alone.”

Shion cast his eyes down and swallowed thickly. “O-okay.”

Shion couldn’t pick himself up without using the table for support. Nezumi turned away. If it were him, he wouldn’t have wanted anyone to see. But he and Shion were different breeds; Shion was never ashamed of looking vulnerable.
The flakes trickled down from the sky in a steady stream. Every slab of concrete of the ruined house was blanched with a thin coat of snow, and under the grey light they resembled the calcified remains of some long dead beast. Nezumi leaned against the still-standing doorframe, staring out into the haze. He had lost track of how long he had been out there, but it was long enough that he had since become desensitized to the cold and insensible to the snow. He needed quiet, and the hush of winter was preferable to that of the bunker.

His concentration was violated when a stifling weight settled over his thoughts.

*Singer.*

Nezumi tensed. “Buzz off.”

*You have questions.*

Nezumi focused on the snowflakes drifting in front of him. There was no way to face Her and no way to escape Her, so he might as well stay still and look disinterested, even if they both knew it was a pretense. He did have questions, though, and as much as he hated Her, he hated his ignorance more.

“How much of my situation is No. 6’s fault?” he growled.

*No. 6 has tried to cultivate my power for many years, but it is not for them to control. They are foolish creatures with no comprehension of their own arrogance. They planted the seed, but I chose you among the many to serve my purpose.*

Nezumi bristled at Her condescension. That was bad enough, but She also seemed to be incapable of giving straight answers, so he was forced to make meaning of Her mystical mumbo jumbo. That No. 6 intended to use Elyurias’ power he already knew from Rou’s chip, but the reference to the many gave credence to the experiment theory, which, the more he reassessed the information he’d gathered, was beginning to seem like fact.

If No. 6 had decided to use human hosts for the parasite wasps then it made sense. It’d be easy to implant larvae during annual doctor’s appointments by disguising the injection as a routine vaccination. A No. 6 citizen wouldn't think twice about it, and the standard of life in the Holy City would be conducive to the wasps’ growth.

*I had thought it fitting given your heritage, She continued evenly. You could communicate with me and your hatred for No. 6 is strong. Your temperament was not accounted for, and your current conditions are not ideal. It has been difficult, but I have done everything in my power to ensure your health and safety.*

“Don’t act like you’ve been doing me any favors; everything you’ve done is for your own wellbeing.”

*They are one and the same.*

Nezumi clicked his tongue.

*I will continue to protect you until we reach our goal. I can promise you will live to see No. 6 destroyed.*
“How do you plan to do that?”

My design is not so different from your current one.

“You plan to destroy the Correctional Facility?”

The core of No. 6’s power lies at the center of that place, but I cannot enter it without human assistance; this is why you were chosen.

So Her aim was the Mother, the super computer inside the Correctional Facility. Destroying the computer and the Facility itself would definitely deliver a crippling blow to the city. It was the natural target for any enemy of No. 6.

You understand all now. You will save many and restore balance to the land. There is no fault in my logic or intent. There can be no more objections.

Her monotone somehow managed to sound smug. Nezumi crossed his arms and gazed out into the white expanse. “I agree that destroying the Correctional Facility is the best method for taking down No. 6. However, as you pointed out, I already intend to do that, and my plan doesn’t end in sacrificing myself to the will of an archaic supernatural being. Logically speaking, I’d much rather go with my plan.”

Nezumi inhaled sharply as a flutter of pain passed at the back of his head. Her next words, however, were as inflectionless as always.

My assistance ensures success. I target only the infection; those who are blameless I will not touch. They may continue in peace.

He knew what thoughts Her insinuation was meant to inspire. If he were to follow through with Her plan, none but the most guilty and corrupt of persons would die. Those in West Block would not have to risk their lives in a bloody revolt against the far better trained, equipped, and numbered forces of No. 6. The process would be so clean, so easy.

The snow had ceased to fall and a bitter chill settled in the air.

More than death, I offer release. Suffering will end, your anger will pass, and you will be free from your frustrating and unsatisfying existence. You long for escape, do you not?

Nezumi clenched his jaw. To pervert his desires into some kind of pathetic death wish—he could not speak for the bile rising in his throat.

I know you can see the truth in my words, and yet you fight. Such resistance is incomprehensible, as it only causes unnecessary distress. Can you not see that acceptance is the best choice?

“Leave.”

She did not answer, but neither did the oppressive weight lift from him, so he knew She still lingered. There was a slight consolation, though, in the fact that, for once, She was silent instead of plowing blankly through his insults and protests as She had hitherto done.

I will give you time to come to terms, She said at last.

The tension in his neck and shoulders uncoiled and his thoughts returned to him in a disorienting rush. But now that his mind could once again run unfettered, he found it too restless to contemplate
in stillness. He pushed away from the doorframe and trudged back towards civilization.

She could not have picked a person more unsuited to Her purpose. He despised humanity on good days, and now he was expected to play the part of the noble sacrifice, to lie down and die for the sins of the few and salvation of the many. All because some relic of a people he had no connection to from a past he had no memory of demanded it. It was some kind of cosmic joke. No one was that selfless.

Shion is. He’s just the type of self-sacrificing fool She was hoping for. He’s so desperate to save everyone, he’d say yes in a heartbeat.

Shion had more or less said it himself: he wished there was a way to avoid war and spare the lives of innocents. Elyurias promised to do so. If She succeeded in incapacitating the Mother, No. 6 would implode without any need of outside assistance. The city would cease to be a threat and those in the Resistance could return to the lives they led before the cause. West Block was not without its dangers, but their chances of survival would be higher than they were currently. It was every bit the solution Shion wanted. But what about what he wanted?

Nezumi sneered. He hadn’t done anything yet. Every moment of his life had been managed and manipulated to suit the needs of others. He hadn’t lived a single day for himself, had not a single genuine experience of his own. Hell, he hadn’t known what a decent novel was until two months ago. If anyone had a right to be selfish, it was him. He refused to accept that his life met its limit in suicide for a cause he didn’t give a shit about. It was his life; he should have been entitled to do with it what he willed, without paying deference to vengeful gods, power-hungry governments, or even the greater good.

****

He made the effort to mute his footsteps as he neared the bunker. Maybe it was foolish, but he didn’t want Shion to hear him coming. However small a chance there was that Shion would be up to opening the door for him, he wanted to bring it down to zero. Shion had been giving him the kid-glove treatment ever since they deciphered Rou’s chip, and he could barely move or speak to Nezumi without appearing like a wounded animal.

He waited a moment outside the door. It was not locked, he knew. Nezumi had been in and out of the room so often in the past few days that Shion had ceased to lock up, so that no matter when he returned he would be able to get back in. He drew in a breath and pulled the door open.

The first thing he saw was Shion. He was perched on the edge of his bed, his hands knotted in his lap. His dark eyes widened at Nezumi’s entrance and made a nervous sweep downward to the coffee table. Nezumi’s gaze was quick to follow. The table was covered end to end with food. All the staples of West Block decadence were present: assorted nuts, a few small apples, strips of dried meat, and half a loaf of bread miraculously free from mold.

Nezumi exhaled softly. “What is this?”

He could almost hear Shion swallow from across the room.

“I called in a few favors…”

“I can see that. Add a few candles and this would be little short of a five-star dinner.”

Nezumi’s voice was flat. Shion didn’t react apart from twisting his hands in his lap. Lately, there was scarcely enough emotion between them to constitute communication.
“Look,” Nezumi tried again. “I get what you’re trying to do, but don’t. It’s a waste of money, not to mention food. How are we expected to finish that?”

“We don’t have to eat it all at once,” Shion answered meekly. “We have time.”

Nezumi raked his fingers through his hair and tried not to sigh. He collapsed onto the couch, snatched an apple off the table and sunk his teeth into it. The crackle of the fruit’s skin breaking resounded throughout the room. Shion shifted.

“Have you spoken with Her again?” Shion asked, once the remains of the apple were tossed into the paper bag beside the couch.

“I have, and nothing has changed. I’m still a dead man walking.”

Shion nodded bleakly.

“She did, however, share Her holy mission with me. She plans to destroy the Correctional Facility and restore balance to the world. A noble cause, don’t you think?”

“How is that different from what we’re already doing?”

“Glad you asked.” Nezumi gave him a lopsided smile. “In essentials, it’s not, but Her deal comes with a significantly lower body count. West Block was granted a full pardon. You can go on enjoying life and I can end mine, as scheduled, in glorious self-sacrifice. It’s the deal of a lifetime.”

“But—” Shion clenched his fists. “That’s not fair.”

“Fair?” Nezumi scoffed. “Since when was fairness a factor in war? It’s a matter of priorities. Which is more important? Me or No. 6? I think most people here would pick the latter, don’t you?”

“That’s not their decision to make.”

Nezumi shrugged a shoulder. “It’s a simple question of value. The lives of the many outweigh the one. You must admit, it’s an incredibly easy solution to everyone’s problem.”

“No,” Shion said lowly. “You can’t really believe that.”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. Elyurias decided it’s the best, and therefore, I have no choice but to come to terms with my fate and die like a good little host.”

“You shouldn’t come to terms with it! It’s bullshit!”

Nezumi blinked. He could tell his detached reasoning was upsetting Shion, but he hadn’t expected such a violent outburst. Shion straightened, and speared Nezumi with a glare of absolute indigance.

“Why are you trying to justify this? If you think it’s noble to sacrifice yourself for everyone, that’s stupid! There’s nothing noble about having your will striped from you. Even if it is for some higher cause, even if it meant justice, it’s not your sacrifice to make. It’s...” He sucked in an agitated breath. “It’s not you.”

Nezumi was so transfixed he hardly realized he was holding his breath. It felt like time had stopped. What was he seeing here? Did Shion really just say it was stupid to save people? Was Shion... Was Shion being selfish?
Shion was furious, for him and because of him, and Nezumi was dumbfounded. He had not expected to inspire this level of anger. It was so raw, so straightforward. Shion was trembling and shaking his head with breathless disdain.

“You’ve been fighting for your right to live ever since the day I met you. People are always using you: No. 6, Yoming, and now this thing—this Elyurias. You’re not some tool to be used for everyone else’s ends! You’re a person—the strongest person I know. You should get to travel like you want; you should get to live like you want, and no one has the right to take that from you. Not even Her. I don’t care if She’s a god. That’s not justice, that’s— That’s just bullshit.”

Nezumi swallowed, but his mouth was dry.

Shion, why are you… Just what are you saying? Everything Elyurias offered was in Shion and West Block’s favor. If he truly wanted to save everyone and still ensure that No. 6 paid for its transgressions, taking Her deal was the obvious choice.

But why am I surprised? Shion’s always been different. He’s highly intelligent and logical, but he’s also one of the most emotional and irrational people I know. He’s always been an enigma. And he’s right. It is bullshit.

Nezumi had fought his whole life against every obstacle forced into his path, and he had made it this far. Giving up was not an option. It was not in his nature.

He had thought he was fighting still, but now he realized part of him started to slip down into pitiful resignation. He had resolved to be petulant and belligerent to the end, but that meant that he had secretly been making the concession that there would be an end. He was angry with himself, and embarrassed that he needed Shion’s painfully earnest rant to wake him up.

What the hell am I doing?

It was true he couldn’t do anything while Elyurias had control over him, but She likewise needed him for Her plan to work. He had two choices at the moment: die to destroy No. 6 or refuse and die resisting Her. Are those my only options, though?

“How steady are your hands?” he snapped.

The passion in Shion’s expression muddled.

“The wasp is what connects me to Her,” Nezumi said a little slower. “The only way to stop this is to sever that connection. I need you to cut the wasp out.”

Shion blanched. “What?”

“If you want to help me, this is the only way. I’m sure you’ve treated worse cases in West Block. This shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I— I’ve only ever assisted in surgeries,” he said weakly. “But there’s another man—Yuichi—who has more experience. If we go to him, maybe…”

Nezumi cut him off with a shake of his head. “And tell him what? That I have a wasp god in my brain and would he please do me a favor and cut it out?” He smiled blandly. “It would take too long to explain. My time is limited as it is. If this is gonna happen, you have to do it.”

“But…” Shion swallowed thickly. “I have no training. I could kill you.”
“Doesn’t matter; I’m dead anyway. But my chance of survival is at least slightly better in your hands.”

Shion quieted. He swallowed a second time and spent a number of seconds studying the food on the table. But at last he drew in a ragged breath and looked Nezumi in the eye.

“I’ll do what I can.”

Traces of nervousness still remained, but he was working up to his usual professionalism. He rose and gnawed his lip. Neither of them seemed to know what to do for a moment. Finally, Shion gestured to the bed. “You should lie down.”

Nezumi moved to sit on the bed, but he didn't lie down. With a word about finding his first-aid kit, Shion left him and disappeared into the bookshelves. Nezumi cleared his throat. Now that they had decided to undertake the no doubt unpleasant task of excising the parasite wasp from his body the mood was completely off. He didn’t quite know what to do with himself. He settled for pulling his hair back into a ponytail in preparation for the procedure.

This is so fucked up, he thought, dropping his hands back into his lap. The sound of water running in the bathroom caught his attention. Shion returned shortly after, carrying a small silver box.

“I don’t have any anesthetic,” he said with equal parts gravity and apology. “If only I had some ice, or...” His gaze wandered to the door. “Or I could go outside and get some snow. It’s not great, but it might help—”

“Shion. Forget the snow; it’s not thick enough. Anyway, it’s fine. I can bear it.”

Shion looked helplessly lost and Nezumi found himself sighing.

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this.”

“What?”

Nezumi was slightly surprised at himself for saying it, considering his life was on the line, but the way Shion was carrying on it was useless.

“I don’t want to do this if you can’t handle it. The last thing I want is for you to be so freaked out you slip up and kill me on the spot. That would be counterproductive, to say the least.”

They stared each other down for a beat. Then Shion sucked in a deep breath.

“No. I can do this.”

His apprehension had disappeared completely. He spun around, took something off the table, and held it out to Nezumi. He recognized the object as a chopstick.

“When the time comes, bite down on this,” Shion said sternly. “It’ll keep you from hurting yourself.”

Nezumi couldn’t help the nervous twinge in his stomach when he took the chopstick from Shion. The other teen set the first-aid kit on the table and removed a scalpel, a swab, and rubbing alcohol.

“It’s in the neck, right?”
Nezumi wet his lips. “Yeah. Should be at the base of the skull.”

Shion nodded. He dribbled some of the rubbing alcohol onto the blade of the scalpel and set it aside. “I don’t have great means for sterilization, but I’ve cleaned the scalpel already and the rubbing alcohol will help kill most of the lingering bacteria. Now that I think about it, the incision won’t be very large. A full-grown wasp couldn’t be bigger than an inch. So there shouldn’t be much blood, either, I think. It’s not really brain surgery.” A pallid smile flitted across Shion’s lips before it was replaced with a grimace of concentration.

Nezumi found that Shion’s methodical babble, rather than being niggling or amusing as he usually thought it, had an almost soothing effect on his nerves. As Shion dampened the swab with alcohol, it occurred to Nezumi that talking while he went about his procedures was probably as much as a coping mechanism as it was thoroughness on Shion’s part.

“I’m going clean the incision site now.”

Nezumi pressed his lips into a hard line and lowered himself onto the bed. He instantly hated it. Lying on his stomach, bearing his neck to another person, was one of the worst feelings he could imagine. He turned his head to face the wall. Shion applied the alcohol to the back of his neck with a few light strokes. It wasn’t cold, but Nezumi’s skin still prickled at the contact.

“Okay. I’m going to cut now.”

Nezumi hummed in acknowledgement and placed the chopstick in his mouth. The wood was rough against his tongue. He stared at the concrete wall and waited. He remained still when he felt the pressure of Shion’s fingers at the base of his skull, and he didn’t flinch when the tip of the scalpel bit into the skin.

Shion had just begun to drag the blade down when the back of Nezumi’s neck started to burn. The burning flared out and sent a series of needlelike stabs all throughout his body. He jerked and clamped down on the chopstick with all the force he could muster. The muted crunch of the wood as he gnashed it between his teeth was all but drowned out by the furious roar in his ears. He clenched his jaw tighter to keep from screaming, but it made it worse.

What are you doing? She demanded. And he could tell She was angry now. Her words ripped through his consciousness with a jagged, glacial intensity. Yet his body was on fire. Wave after wave of nausea slammed into the back of his head and he had begun to sweat profusely. The pain was excruciating, sharp and molten as it swept through his veins and slashed his resolve to pieces.

“Nezumi!”

You would protect them? Those who are responsible for the destruction of your people and the ruination of a once hallowed land? You would allow the injustices to grow unchecked. You are selfish.

He was screaming. He knew it, but he couldn’t hear anything over the horrendous noise of insects. They swarmed inside his head, squirming and crawling all over his brain, the deafening vibration of their wings slicing him down to the very core of his being. He was being eaten alive.

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“Don’t give in!”

He was being dissected. Stripped down. There would be nothing left to call human.

“Fight it, Nezumi!”
He could just barely hear Shion’s voice in the din and hollow of the pain. He hated it. How dare he make demands when he knew nothing about anything. Shion didn’t know how it felt. He wasn’t the one dying.

Nezumi latched on to that anger. He clung desperately to Shion’s voice. He was still alive. He could do this. He—

*I did not have to offer you anything.*

A concentrated stab at the base of his skull knocked the breath from his lungs. He spent a terrified eternity suffocating on the bile rising in his throat. He thrashed, but there was a weight bearing down on him from above, pinning him in place.

“I’m almost done. Please—Hang on just a little longer.”

*I could have killed you.*

Shut up.

*I could kill you now.*

Get out.

*What is so important about human life? What have you worth living for?*

Get out, dammit!

*You are determined to destroy No. 6 without my assistance. You have no certainty, and yet you are so adamant.*

I can do it.

*Can you? I wonder.*

The needles still pricked at his insides; his body still smoldered with indescribable pain; tears escaped from the corners of his eyes and sunk into the bedspread. He could bear it. He would. He could bear anything if it meant he would live one moment more.

*You are insolent and arrogant. But you do possess a singular force. I am curious to see this will. Just this once I will show mercy. You will destroy No. 6, Singer. You will do this soon or everyone in this land will perish. There will not be another chance.*

The pain fell away and an expansive emptiness rushed in to fill its place. The transition was so immediate that he was sure he had died. She lied. He wouldn't put it past Her. But then…

“Nezumi. It’s over. You survived.”

*It’s over. I’m still alive. I’ve made it.*

Relief slogged through him when the words echoed back in his own voice. His body felt weak and feverish. He couldn’t move a muscle. But that was fine. He just wanted to sleep. His heartbeat thudded in his ears. It was the most magnificent sound he had ever heard.

“Nezumi? Can you hear me? Nezumi?”
Hello! What's this, you ask? I'm going on vacation next week with no internet access, and I didn't want to disappear without an update, so double chapter! *coughs* As always, thanks, everyone, for your support and comments!

The man burst through the doors and strode into the lobby of the Correctional Facility. His position as mayor of a quiet and prosperous city made it so he hardly had to journey outside the walls unless he wished it, and he had only entered the Correctional Facility a handful of times in the past few decades.

He preferred to keep a distance between himself and the activities of the research team. It wasn’t as though it would hurt his reputation to be seen visiting every so often—it might’ve even raised him more in the citizens’ esteem to show he kept an active interest in the health and progress of the city—but he felt the goings-on of the building were beneath him. He appreciated the benefits he reaped from their efforts, but he had no desire to sully his hands by frequent contact.

But the current circumstances made it absolutely necessary that he visit that day. He clutched the newspaper he held in his hand. This was a conversation that must be had in person.

A young woman leapt out of her chair and scrambled around her desk to hurry toward him. She was plump and her lips were painted a bright shade of red that he thought looked horrendous against her pasty complexion. She bobbed her head to him in greeting, and he chalked it up to years of practiced civility that he managed to only look grave instead of thoroughly disgusted.

“Mr. Mayor, sir, welcome. It’s so good to see you. It’s such an honor for you to come down here when things are so—”

The man’s eyes narrowed slightly and she swallowed her words.

“With you being so busy, and all,” she fumbled. “It’s really an honor, sir.”

“Yes, well.” The man gave her a political smile. “As we discussed on the phone, this is not merely a courtesy call. If you’ll pardon my frankness, would you be so kind as to show me to his room? It’s a matter of urgency.”

“Oh! Yes, of course. Right this way, sir.”

The heels of the woman’s shoes made quick little clicking sounds as she led him down the hall. They passed a few doors along the way and through their small windows he could see several white-coated men and women bustling to and fro.

_I can only hope they’re working to find a way to fix this mess_, he thought bitterly.

She stopped at a door and tapped in a code on the adjacent keypad. It was almost completely silent when the door closed behind them. A few rooms later, she approached a second door and typed in the code to open it.
“He’s just inside here, sir.”

The room into which he was led was stark white and impeccably clean. There was hardly a thing in it, apart from an IV stand and a bed. A man lay in a heap under the covers. He wore nothing but a white hospital gown and the plainness of it made his features more conspicuous. His hair was a coarse white, even though he was not quite so far in age, and there were red marks winding up the length of the man’s face, slashing one vivid streak across his chin while another band disappeared under the bandages over his left eye.

So it’s true, the man sneered as he took in the changes in his old friend. How repulsive.

“We weren’t able to save the eye, but the surgery went well; no complications whatsoever,” the woman said cheerily. “And as for the room, none but the most trusted medical staff is allowed in this area. He’s in good hands; we’re just as well equipped as any hospital within the city. You can expect that with the proper rest and care, he’ll make a full recovery and be back to work in two to six weeks.” She looked especially proud to be giving him this news.

“Wake him up.”

The courteous smile slipped off the woman’s face. “Excuse me—sir?”

“I need to speak to him.”

“He’s still recovering from the anesthetic. He should be up in a few hours—”

“Immediately.”

She quailed at the authority in his voice. “Y-yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

She fluttered over to a cabinet at the opposite end of the room and fiddled with the contents. His eyes followed her as she crossed to the IV stand and stuck a syringe into the tube’s applicator.

“How long until he wakes up?”

“A minute?” she answered quietly.

He nodded. “Thank you for your hard work. I’ll call you if I need anything.”

The woman cast a nervous glance between him and her patient and then scurried off. The man stalked toward the bed, alternating the newspaper in his hands as he waited.

The bedridden man jolted. His eyelid fluttered open and he blinked blearily at the ceiling.

“Can you talk?”

The other man lifted his head to leer at his visitor. He did not answer immediately. His eye roamed a little to the side and he reached up to feel the bandage over his head. Finally, his hand dropped back down onto the bedspread and he opened his mouth.

“I… Yes.”

“Good.” The man flung the newspaper he held as hard as he could into the patient’s chest. “What the hell happened!”

The hapless victim flinched back and made a face at this brusque treatment.
“Thirty-eight people in the hospital! Twenty-two of which were not on your samples list. Two died from complications, and now their families, and every other person in the godforsaken city, is whining at my door.”

The bedridden man didn’t appear to be listening. He turned aside and peered at the IV. “Did you give me Ritalin?”

“The citizens are in a panic! They want answers and I have absolutely no explanation to give them!”

The other man held the paper close to his face to read. “Something went wrong.”

“You think?” the man scoffed. “I thought you had this under control. You said the tests were going well, and now this. The Project is over! Everything I’ve worked for these past twelve years has been ruined.”

“Everything you’ve worked for?” The hospital gown crinkled as the man sat up in bed, exposing his red, scar smeared throat. “This was my life’s work. Do you think I planned for this to happen? I was not on my samples list.” He gestured impatiently to his bandaged eye. “This is your fault.”

“My fault?”

“We lost control of the Project the day you lost my primary sample.”

The man’s ears twitched. “Again with the sample? What was so important about that one sample? I’ve provided you with two elites of equal, if not more, value. Why couldn’t you make do with them?”

“It’s not about ‘making due.’ Those elites weren’t compatible. That sample was perfect. His heritage had him primed for a successful eclosion. If it was him, I know it would have worked… If you really wanted the Project to be a success, you could’ve gotten my sample back any time in the last few months, but you frittered away every opportunity. Why haven’t you eliminated those revolutionaries in West Block yet? You found out their supplier, so what’s taking so long?”

“I don’t expect you to understand the delicacy of the situation,” the man sniffed, folding his arms across his chest. “I can’t just go down there and shoot them all.”

“You’ve done it before.”

“Organized revolts must be dealt with differently. The head of the beast must be cut off, and assassinations take time as well as finesse. I already have a plan for that, but right now there is the more pressing issue of the city in uproar.”

“I can’t do anything about that. If it’s as you say, then all my previous samples have been ruined. I still have larvae, but I’ll have to begin the trials all over again. It could take years for me to find and raise a sample with the right qualifications to breed Elyurias.”

“Then everything really is over.”

The other man lowered himself back down onto the bed. “Perhaps not,” he murmured. “There still may be a chance. The sample your revolutionaries stole had the ability to speak to Elyurias. If we could bring him back here and I had the chance to study him, I might be able to salvage the Project. Maybe.”
“Maybe, huh?”

A meditative silence passed between them.

“I’ll speak to Rashi, and we’ll see what can be done,” the man said gruffly. He glanced down at his watch and cursed. “I have a press conference this afternoon that I’m entirely unprepared for. This conversation hasn’t cleared up the matter at all.”

His companion nodded and rotated the arm with the IV into a more comfortable position. “It’s unfortunate that I’m not able to offer you any answers at present. But I’m sure throwing the news in my face was at least of some consolation.”

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Kaoru stormed along the path through the Forest Park while Pup frisked alongside them, panting merrily. It was a little past noon and the Moondrop cast a dark pall over the trees. The last traces of the meager snow that had fallen at the beginning of the week had melted away, and the weather was bitterly cold. Hardly anyone was in the Park, which was no big surprise considering everyone had been freaking out since yesterday.

Kaoru’s ID pinged and blinked rapidly. They opened the message and a live feed sprung up. *Speak of the devil…*

Kaoru was a little surprised to see the mayor himself on screen. He hardly ever appeared in broadcasts—in the last few years, Kaoru had only seen him do so once, when he was on his way to a conference for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Babylon Treaty. There were plenty of programs on the news that referenced the mayor’s opinions and decisions, but, for the most part, he ran the city from safely inside the Moondrop.

He was nodding compassionately at his audience as people fired questions at him one after another. He raised a hand and the noise hushed.

“I understand your concern,” he began in a smooth baritone. “It is only natural that you should be a little confused by what has happened, and I am very sorry to those who have a family member or friend in the hospital. But there is no need to panic. I have spoken to the medical team and we have discovered the cause of the seizures. It seems that the flour we recently acquired from outside the city had a compound which may cause an allergic reaction in some individuals.”

Kaoru’s brow furrowed. *An allergic reaction to flour?*

A startled gasp arose from the audience on the screen. The mayor raised his hand again and smiled gently.

“All the flour containing this compound has been recalled. Whatever you may have heard, I want to make it perfectly clear that the seizures the patients suffered were the result of an allergic reaction and nothing more. The condition is not contagious, and the lives of the patients are not in danger.”

“But there have been two deaths already!” shouted a voice from the audience. The camera flashed to the face of a young man and then back to the podium.

The mayor nodded somberly. “Yes, that is true. My heart goes out to those families. However, both cases resulted from complications, not from the allergy itself. One of the individuals was a man of advanced years and the other had a previous heart condition. The doctors at the medical institution have examined the other patients thoroughly and declared them all in good health. The
seizures, and a case of mild hallucinations in a select few, seemed to have been the worst of it. Every person who suffered these symptoms has since been stabilized, and there is nothing to worry about as to their full recovery.”

“What about the white hair and these—these marks that appear on their bodies? Will they go away?”

“The physical changes are a symptom of the allergic reaction. Regrettably, they appear to be permanent, but they are not life threatening in the slightest. All of your family and friends are in good hands. They are in the care of the best and brightest doctors in the world.” The mayor shuffled the papers on his podium. “We are certain that all the contaminated flour has been removed from circulation, however, while our researchers are double checking, please refrain from eating any products which may contain flour until further notice.” A collective murmur rippled through the audience. “I apologize for any stress these events might have caused, and I wish all in the hospital a swift and easy recovery. Thank you for your time and understanding.”

Kaoru’s ID emitted a low tone and the screen blinked out. A request for confirmation that the feed had been seen and understood popped up, and they submitted the report.

Kaoru had stopped to watch the broadcast, and they stood a moment afterward to consider the information. An allergic reaction to flour…

They had seen it with their own eyes. Right in the middle of class, the teacher froze partway through his lecture and collapsed, screaming in pain. His hair turned white as he writhed on the floor and then he went still. One of the students had rushed out to get help, and when they brought back another teacher, she told them they were all dismissed for the day. Kaoru was almost certain the teacher had had some kind of freak heart attack and was dead.

And they’re saying that was because of some allergic reaction? That didn’t look like any allergic reaction I’ve ever seen. They didn’t know the first thing about chemistry or allergens, and they had no other explanation as to what else it could’ve been, but something was off.

A couple sitting on a bench a little ways down the path were talking excitedly about how terrible the whole affair was, how sad it was for those in the hospital.

“Oh, but wasn’t it nice for the mayor to give the press conference in person?” piped one of the women. “I can’t imagine how busy he must be, but he really seems to care so much about the victims.”

“We’re lucky it wasn’t worse,” enthused her partner. “It’s a good thing the mayor acted so quickly to remove the contaminated products. I hope he puts the supplier out of business, whoever they are.”

Kaoru listened to their prattle with narrowed eyes. The couple was not alone in their praise for the mayor. Everyone in No. 6 admired him. There could be no exaggeration of his positive qualities or leadership ability. He was touted as the smartest, gentlest, and most gentlemanly of men; and if there were any citizens who thought otherwise, they had not made their opinions public. The mayor had won his position twelve years ago, and as he had not had any competitors in subsequent elections, it seemed that the city was happy enough with his leadership that they were content to let him reign indefinitely.

Kaoru didn’t like the mayor at all. They had always felt there was something dishonest about a guy who only ever ran the city from the shadows, and now that they had seen him in person, they were even more convinced he was seedy. There was something about him, something about the
The way he carried himself and looked at the audience. He looked at people like a predator looked at prey. And his ears… When that man brought up the deaths, the mayor’s ears twitched. The resolution on the display was top quality, so Kaoru knew they were not mistaken. Yet, they seemed to be the only person who wasn’t buying into his act. They seemed to be the only person who found any fault with the city.

The geniocracy under which No. 6 was run had never sat well with Kaoru. Those who were naturally gifted were given priority, while the rest were shoved into Lost Town and left to fend for themselves. There was no welfare system in No. 6, only a hierarchical insurance system which operated exclusively on merit. If you did not meet the city’s exorbitantly high contribution standards—standards that only a handful of the citizens were even close to fulfilling, and then only because they were genetically predisposed—then you received neither aid nor insurance. Apart from a place to live in No. 6, the lower strata of society had nothing.

Then there was the information system in the city. Nothing ever appeared on television but the weather and specials on the newest fads or food. Watching the news was like watching your brain melt, one vapid cell at a time. There had to be other things going on—they knew other things were going on.

The incident of the old man who died in Forest Park all those months ago was never reported. Kaoru supposed it wasn’t particularly strange if it was just an accidental death, but even so. They’d have thought it would be worth mentioning in memorial, but the Bureau had completely brushed over it like it had never happened. Kaoru had a good nose for lies and deceit, and they were pretty sure there was something dishonest about their negligence. And now there was this announcement about allergenic flour.

*This whole city reeks.*

But no one ever questioned anything in No. 6. *Everyone’s so gullible and obedient, they just swallow whatever the news feeds them. It seems like I’m the only person who ever feels like something’s off. The only other person who ever had suspicions was—* Kaoru looked down at the slip of paper in their hand.

*Nezumi, you piece of shit.* They crumpled the paper in their fist and continued their trek down the path. *Just when I thought I was finally rid of him.*

****

After the incident with the Law Enforcement officer, Kaoru had kept a low profile. They were home by curfew, leashed Pup in public places, and they completely avoided all of Nezumi’s usual haunts. Life went on like so for a little more than a week, but since no officers ever came knocking, Kaoru assumed they hadn’t been added to the Bureau’s hit list.

Routine returned and Kaoru’s days were once again tediously boring. They had no friends to speak of, which years of ostracism and Kaoru’s own vehement dislike for the vacuity of their classmates contributed equally to. Dogs were much better than people anyway, and Pup was as stalwart and loyal as any, and more than enough company. But just because they kept their distance from people, didn’t mean they were ignorant to the goings-on of the general populace, and, in fact, Kaoru’s ability to see through the polished pretenses of the city gave them an added sensitivity to shifts in the balance of things.

To their chagrin, they couldn’t help but notice a conspicuous lack of pests in the span of two months. They had been adamantly avoiding Nezumi, but not meeting him and not seeing him at all were two separate things. Kaoru really didn’t care about it personally, but Pup had begun to look
forlorn when he trotted through the Forest Park and didn’t run into the resident asshole.

After a few days of paying particular attention to the shops and cafes in Lost Town, and still no sign of Nezumi, Kaoru had to admit it was suspicious. Given how flippant and generally rude he was, they had to wonder if Nezumi’s luck had finally run out and the Bureau had decided to do something about that smart mouth of his. If that was the case, then fine, good riddance, but there wasn’t any way of knowing for sure without checking with the Census Bureau. Kaoru wasn’t especially keen on going out of their way to ask after Nezumi, but it was more annoying to be constantly wondering, so they bit the bullet and went.

“Citizen Takashi of Chronos?” the man at the reference desk droned.

Kaoru’s mouth twitched into a frown. “Yeah. That’s the guy.”

The man cast a critical look their way, but continued clicking around on his computer. “Citizen Takashi, ID number CVC-00103221… It says here he’s been transferred. Effective two months ago.”

“Transferred?”

“Yes. To No. 5. Apparently, he was promoted.”

Kaoru furrowed their brow.

“Will that be all, young man?” They were way too engrossed in their thoughts to do anything but nod, and the man turned back to his screen.

Transferred and promoted. Kaoru had trouble imagining that Nezumi was diligent enough at his job to earn a promotion, but stranger things had happened. Regardless, the investigation was over, Nezumi’s whereabouts ascertained, and the fact that he was little more than a begrudging acquaintance made accepting that they would never meet again blissfully easy. Kaoru had made peace with Nezumi’s removal.

So to say they were disturbed to receive a message from him not more than a week ago was an understatement.

The event occurred on a rather inopportune day. The long-awaited time for the return of midterm exams had arrived, and once again, Kaoru’s marks in Composition were less than stellar. They were by no means the most promising student, but their progress in their other classes was never nearly as bad as this. It didn’t matter what they did or how much they studied; every effort they put into trying to improve their performance in Composition ended with a more bitter disappointment.

They huffed and dragged themselves back to the pitiful little house shoved in the backend of Lost Town. The old man happened to be home when they walked in. He had a face like a canvas, gaunt and tanned, and ridged with the lines that a piddling existence as a waste disposal worker was apt to produce. It must have frustrated him to no end to have to deal with a child in addition to all the other crap he handled on a daily basis.

Kaoru shucked off their shoes and headed for the stairs to their room without planning to acknowledge him.

“Kaoru.”

They stopped in their tracks and eyed the old man. “What?”
“Your midterms came back today, didn’t they?”

*Crap. You hardly say a word to me for weeks, and now you’re taking an interest in my life?*

Kaoru watched him wearily.

The old man exhaled and rose from his chair. “Let me see.”

He held out his hand with an air of foreboding. Kaoru measured their options. If they refused to give him the paper, he would find out eventually when the scores were sent to him. They may already be in his email, waiting to be opened.

Kaoru sighed and dug the report out from where they’d crammed it in their backpack.

“A 67%?” The heat in his voice was palpable. His dark eyes bore into theirs. “Did you even try?” Kaoru crossed their arms and held his glare with quiet resentment. “Well? Don’t you have anything to say for yourself? No? Of course you don’t,” he spat.

The old man crossed to the kitchen counter and flung the paper down. “Why do I even bother? Ever since that bitch dumped you on me, all you’ve done is make my life difficult.”

Kaoru twitched. Pup’s ears perked, but they reached down to soothe him. “That’s your own fault,” they sneered. “I never asked you to care.”

“You’ll never amount to anything with grades like these,” he roared, whirling around to face them. “What are you going to do if you can’t get a job?”

“Just because I got one lousy grade doesn’t mean my life’s over. Grades don’t mean everything, old man.”

“They do here, and you better start taking your classes more seriously, or you can forget about ever being useful to the city.”

“Fuck the city! I don’t give a damn what they think!”

The old man slapped them hard across the cheek. Pup snarled viciously. For a moment, Kaoru was too shocked to react, but then a searing rage ripped through them. They swung their fist at the old man, but the second of hesitation cost them the blow. He caught their arm and pulled them close.

“You can’t say those things!” he hissed.

Kaoru grit their teeth and yanked their arm out of his grip. “Don’t touch me.”

They turned toward the staircase. Pup continued to growl lowly as they reached Kaoru’s room. Kaoru plopped down on the floor and pulled him to them. Pup whimpered and licked their stinging cheek.

“Thanks, boy,” they murmured. “Who cares about that bastard, anyway? Or the city. I don’t need any of them.” They ran their fingers through the glossy fur on Pup’s neck. “You’re the only one I care about.”

Pup barked and wriggled out of their grasp. Kaoru grimaced, but the offended remark died on their tongue. A small rodent had just darted into the middle of the room and was leering at them. Mice were rare, even in Lost Town, so what was one doing in their room?
What if it’s some kind of surveillance tactic? Kaoru’s mouth went dry. What if the house is bugged? Shit. Did they hear me?

Pup yapped at the mouse, but it remained still and unresponsive. He sniffed at it, and then took a step forward.

“Pup, no—!”

Pup scooped the rodent up in its mouth and trotted back to Kaoru, his tail swishing proudly behind him. They barely had time to protest before the mouse dropped into their lap in a moist heap. They flinched, but the feeling that something was off kept them from pitching the thing across the room.

The mouse hadn’t made a sound, and it hadn’t so much as moved since it first entered the room. Pup sat, his tail still flopping back and forth over the floor. Kaoru inhaled and gingerly reached down to pinch the mouse between two fingers. It was firm to the touch, and heavier than expected, but the most telling feature was the lack of warmth. Kaoru blinked and turned it over.

A robot? It was amazingly lifelike, but the cold, blank sheen of its eyes was not that of a living creature. The fear returned. It really could be a camera meant for spying on citizens. They squinted at it. There’s something in its mouth. It looked like a small capsule. Kaoru plucked it from the mouse’s mouth.

Suddenly, the mouse kicked. Kaoru yelped and released it. Pup began to bark excitedly and chased the mouse to the door where it scurried underneath and disappeared. Kaoru tried their best to calm the erratic beating of their heart. The capsule had fallen to the floor in their shock, and as the only clue as to what that robot was and why it was there, they felt there was no choice but to open it. Kaoru unrolled the paper stuffed inside and stared at the writing.

What the hell?

The note, penned in a dainty, but unhesitating script, read: NW Quad. Apt. 3, ask for Rikiga. – Nezumi

Kaoru’s eyes widened. No way. Nezumi? That didn’t make sense. Nezumi was gone. How could they be getting messages from him—and ones delivered by robotic mice at that? It was ridiculous. And what did he expect them to do with such a weird message?

Maybe it’s a trick. Maybe the Security Bureau sent this so they could lure me out and arrest me. But that didn’t make any logical sense. The Security Bureau didn’t need to use such convoluted methods, they simply pulled up to your door and took you. No. 6 was “crimeless,” so there was no court system, which meant no trial. If you were arrested, that was it; you were carted off to the Correctional Facility never to be heard from again. So then this note was real?

He wants me to go to this address? Why? Kaoru couldn’t reconcile the reason in their mind; so they put the slip of paper on their desk and lay down to think.

For a week Kaoru left the note on their desk, and for a week they tried to forget about it. Nothing Nezumi-related was ever good, and getting a mysterious note with directions on it from him, when he was supposedly thousands of miles away screwing up everyone’s lives in No. 5, screamed danger. They didn’t owe him anything, and they certainly weren’t close enough with him that they were willing to put themselves on the line to carry out a summons without an explanation. And yet a desire to get to the heart of things had always been a strong trait of Kaoru’s, and in this case their nature was working decidedly against them.
This better be pretty damn good, Kaoru grumbled inwardly as they entered the apartment complex of the Northwest quadrant of the city. It was a pretty posh establishment, meant for the upper echelons of the non-Chronos citizens. As close to Chronos as regular folks could get.

Nezumi knows someone here? Kaoru frowned and bent down to secure Pup’s leash.

There was an older woman sitting at the desk inside the entrance. Kaoru crept up to her and cleared their throat. “Erm… I’m here to see Rikiga?”

The woman at the desk stared at them. Kaoru shifted awkwardly.

“Sorry,” the woman said after a moment. “It’s just, you’re not his usual visitor.”

Well, at least I know that this Rikiga guy actually exists.

She tilted her head and looked at them for another long moment. Kaoru had almost decided to leave when she spoke again. “I’ll need to scan your ID first and then I can buzz you in.” When the woman finished, she pointed off to the side. “There’s an elevator around the corner. Take that up to the third floor, and Mr. Rikiga’s room is 300. Very easy to remember.”

Kaoru nodded and began to walk away.

“Oh! Wait, sweetie. You can’t bring pets up there.”

“Huh?” Kaoru glanced down at Pup. There was no way they were going up to some stranger’s room without him. If they couldn’t bring him, they’d rather leave. But it would be such a waste of time and energy to come all this way and not achieve what they set out to do.

“It’s his dog,” Kaoru said quickly.

“Pardon?”

Kaoru cleared their throat and tried to look convincing. “The dog is his. That’s why I’m visiting. To return it.”

“I didn’t know Mr. Rikiga had a dog…” The woman tilted her head again. Kaoru was starting to perspire under her steady gaze. “Well… I guess it’s okay. Just keep it leashed.”

The tension building up in their shoulders slackened. They jangled the leash to get Pup’s attention and made their way around the corner to the elevator. The ride up only lasted a handful of seconds, and when the doors pinged open, Kaoru stepped out into a neat and gaily lit corridor. They scanned the door numbers, but apparently the elevator spat them out at the completely opposite end of the hall. They continued walking, their eyes counting the numbers off one by one, and about halfway down, they became aware of a terrible ruckus from one of the rooms down at the end. By the time they’d reached 320, the argument was pretty clear.

“You pig! I know you’ve been cheating on me! I saw you!”

The man gave some kind of mumbled response, which elicited an even more colorful answer from the woman. Kaoru cocked an eyebrow, but proceeded without pause. The door at the end of the hall flew open and a voluptuous woman, clad entirely in black and with the severest haircut Kaoru had ever seen, stomped out.

“Don’t bother coming back, then!” a man’s gruff voice called from inside the room.
Kaoru stepped aside when the woman passed. Their eyes drifted toward the end of the hallway. Please don’t be that door, please don’t be that door, please don’t— Damn it. Standing in front of room 300, Kaoru felt morbidly depressed. They glanced down at Pup, but he was watching the woman climb into the elevator. With a sigh, they knocked on the door.

It opened instantly, revealing the smug face of a middle-aged man. “I knew you’d come back —”

His face fell when he realized he was staring into thin air. He was a tall man with broad shoulders. He was fleshy around the middle, although not exactly obese, which was fortunate, because his moustache would have looked even worse if he was twenty pounds heavier.

His eyes finally made the journey downward.

Kaoru leered at him. “You’re a scumbag.”

The middle of the man’s forehead pinched.

“A kid? What do you want?” They were able to distinguish, out of the numerous layers of cologne and other equally potent odors, the distinctly sour stench of alcohol emanating from his person.

“I can’t think of a single thing I’d want from you. This is obviously some big joke.” Kaoru sighed. “You don’t happen to know Nezumi, do you?”

“What? Mice? What’re you—?” Suddenly, the clouded look on the man’s face cleared and his eyes turned shrewd. “Did Shion send you?” he asked in a hushed voice, becoming scarily sober in a matter of seconds.

“I don’t know any Shion, just some dipshit who calls himself Nezumi. I got a note with this address.”

The man nodded once, quickly, and stepped back from the door. “Come in.”

Kaoru remained where they were. “I’m not going anywhere. I don’t even know you.”

“Name’s Rikiga. Now, come on, kid. It’s not safe to talk out here. Come in, before someone sees you.” His eyes drifted down. “But leave the dog outside.”

Kaoru shifted defensively. “Anything you wanna say to me, you can say in front of him.”

“What? No, kid. This is a classy apartment. Animals aren’t allowed in here.”

“They didn’t seem to have any trouble letting you in.”

Rikiga pressed his lips into a hard line. “You’re a real piece of work. Now, for the last time, get in here.”

“Hey!”

Rikiga reached out and pulled Kaoru into the room by the shoulder. Pup narrowly slipped in before the door slammed shut behind them. Rikiga released them immediately to lock the door and Kaoru took that time to spring a good distance away from him.

“You weren’t followed, were you?” the man asked, peeping through the peephole.
“What gives, old man?” Kaoru bristled. They glanced down at Pup. He looked unharmed, but his ears were pinned back and he looked none too pleasantly at Rikiga.

“You can never be too careful,” the older man muttered. “But we should be relatively safe in here.” He strode past them and to the couch, but he was too restless to sit, and so he just hovered there.

Kaoru did a quick sweep of the apartment, in case an escape route was necessary. They had Pup if things got out of hand, but it was always better to be prepared. There was a leather couch and a television in the center of the room, and a kitchen to the right-hand side. Every flat surface was littered with bottles, which Kaoru assumed by the scent, were, or had recently been, filled with alcohol.

They wrinkled their nose. “Classy apartment, my ass. It reeks of booze in here. Aren’t there laws against having this much alcohol?"

“You’ve got some mouth, you know that?” Rikiga sniffed. “You certainly took your sweet time getting here.” He narrowed his eyes at them. “But you’re here now, so I guess I can deal with a little lip. God knows I need the help. I was beginning to think I’d have to do something desperate.”

Kaoru tore their eyes away from the fire escape they spied out of the window. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“What’dya mean, what am I talking about? The plan. For Shion.”

“What plan? Who’s this Shion you keep talking about?”

“I thought you said you got a note.”

“For the last time, my note was from Nezumi, and it said nothing but this address.”

Rikiga grunted. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a carton of cigarettes, but instead of taking one out to smoke, he dumped the pack into his hand and held it out to Kaoru.

“Read these, commit them to memory, and then give them back to me.”

Kaoru was convinced they had just been suckered into walking into the apartment of the biggest lunatic in No. 6. They leered at the white cylinders in the man’s hand, and realized, upon closer inspection, that they were not cigarettes but rolls of paper.

Rikiga got bored of holding his hand out after a few seconds. “We don’t have all day, kid. We’ve wasted enough time.” He poured the pile on the table in front of the couch and strode to the back of the room to stress smoke a real cigarette. With the man a comfortable distance away, Kaoru stalked to the table and inspected the papers.

The strips were the same as the one that they had received from Nezumi, but these were written in a softer, less refined hand. Kaoru scanned them one by one. Each had a number scratched into the right-hand corner, so it was easy to suss out their order. The first appeared to be an apology, but the rest seemed to be pieces of a request for help and then details of where and how to find some computer drives, which were apparently hidden in Nezumi’s house and were meant to be retrieved with the help of a mouse. The last note must have been the one the man kept referring to.

Help may arrive. If not, please find a way. We’re counting on you. –S

“What’s going on here? What’re these drives these notes talk about?” Kaoru narrowed their
eyes at the man. “You some kind of spy or something?” He didn’t look like any spy they had ever seen, and if he was, he must have been a piss poor one.

No wonder this Shion guy thought he needed help. But why me? And what’s his connection to Nezumi?

Rikiga coughed, dropping his cigarette into an empty beer bottle on the windowsill. “No, nothing so grand. I work at the Information Bureau. The head of the Information Bureau, actually.” He flashed his teeth in Kaoru’s direction. “You don’t recognize me?” he asked, cockiness seeping through his nervous demeanor.

Kaoru raised their eyebrows. “Information Bureau, huh? Explains why you’re such a schmuck.”

The grin on the man’s face faded. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.”

“Show some respect. I could get you arrested for talking bad about the city.”

Kaoru snorted. “I ain’t afraid of you. Seems like you’d be in some pretty deep shit with the city yourself if they found out what you’re planning to do.”

Rikiga frowned and came toward the table. Kaoru stepped behind Pup, but had grown bold enough not to retreat any further.

“You’re right about that,” the man confessed, bending down to pick an astray off the table. He brushed the papers into it and set them on fire with a lighter from his pocket. Kaoru watched them blacken and crumble with tense fascination.

“Which is why I need your help.”

They broke away from the dying flames in the astray and stared at the older man. “Me?”

“Yes, you. I need you to infiltrate Chronos and get the drives.”

“—Huh? Are you out of your freaking mind, old man? Why would I do something as suicidal as that for some guy I don’t even know? Or like, for that matter.”

“It’s not for me, it’s for Shion. You might not know him, but I can vouch that he’s a really understanding and capable kid. And he needs those drives.”

“If he’s so capable, why doesn’t he get his own drives?”

“Well…” Rikiga cleared his throat and reached up to scratch his neck. “That’s because he’s in West Block.”

Kaoru blinked. All right, this just got a whole lot weirder. Kaoru had heard enough about West Block to know that was not a place one admitted they had connections to. If there was ever any doubt in their mind that this was a situation they didn’t want to be involved in, they were pretty sure now that any association with this man and his note-writing buddy Shion was asking for trouble. Nezumi sure knows how to pick ‘em.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Rikiga said sternly, “but Shion’s a good kid. He’s nothing like the lowlifes that live there. His motives are pure.”

“Sounds like a pretty lousy guy to me. He’s asking you to waltz into Chronos and steal things
from Nezumi’s house. It doesn’t get more dangerous than that. Do you even know what he plans to use those computer things for?”

Rikiga’s expression clouded a little. “He didn’t say.”

“That’s really sketchy, old man.”

“I trust that he has a good reason, though,” Rikiga said passionately. “This Nezumi kid must trust you enough to bring you in on this operation. If you won’t do it for Shion, then do it for him.”

The notion was so ridiculous Kaoru laughed. The older man glared at them.

“Trust me? Nezumi?” Kaoru snorted. “That guy’s so paranoid he wouldn’t trust his own reflection. Forget about trusting me. And unlike your friend, Nezumi’s motives are never ‘pure,’ so if it’s all the same to you, I’m gonna pass.”

Rikiga was now leering at them like they were the scum of the earth. “Why’d you even show up, if you weren’t going to help?” he growled.

“Look, old man, if Shion’s so special to you, why don’t you do it yourself?”

“If it meant only me going down, I’d do it, but if I get caught before delivering the drives, it’ll be all over for Shion. I can’t afford to let him down again. I made a promise, and I plan to keep it this time.” This inspiring speech lost much of its conviction when Rikiga stumbled over to his counter and took a swig of a half-finished bottle of brandy.

Kaoru folded their arms across their chest and studied the man anew. “You sure are willing to put a lot on the line for this Shion guy. He your bastard or something?” That would at least explain why he was living in West Block.

Rikiga flushed up to his ears. “No, it’s nothing like that. I owe him a debt.”

“Hmph. Well, I have no such thing, and I’m not gonna put my life on the line. Have fun getting arrested.”

“Hey, wait a second! You can’t just—!”

Rikiga nearly dove in between them and the door. Kaoru took a step back. The old drunk’s faster than he looks.

“You gotta help me. I told you, I can’t do this alone. Don’t you have any compassion? Shion needs those drives. Something horrible might happen if he doesn’t get them.”

“Not my problem.”

“I’ll make it worth your while. Name a figure and it’s yours.”

Kaoru wrinkled their nose. “I don’t need your money. What use is that in this stupid city?”

“Alright, fine. What do you want? Just tell me what it’ll take.”

Kaoru clicked their tongue. This geezer was incorrigible. His desperation reeked of some kind of deep-seated guilt. It would be better to just leave now and have no part in this. But then again… Kaoru scrutinized the man. He was a shmuck, but he was a professional shmuck.

Kaoru considered for a moment longer before replying, “A job.”
“Huh?” Rikiga blinked his red-rimmed eyes.

Kaoru crossed their arms. “You heard me. A job. And not some shitty one either—one that pays.”

The man furrowed his brow. “You’re a pretty weird kid. What do you need with a job at your age?”

“I’m not a kid. And I don’t have to explain my reasons to you, old man. Those are my terms.”

“Alright, alright. Whatever you say. If you manage to get me the drives, I’ll see what I can do about a job for you. Though, if you don’t clean up that nasty attitude of yours I don’t think anyone will take you.”

“That’s your problem. If you go back on me, I’ll sic Pup on you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m a man of business—apparently, so are you. I’ll keep my word, so long as you hold up your end.”
More InuKaoru and Rikiga! (yay)

I promise, though, right back to West Block next week! ;D

The Chronos gate loomed in the distance. Kaoru could just barely make out the guard sitting in the security booth and they could swear he was watching their approach. They pulled the cap down lower over their face and, for the fiftieth time in ten minutes, brushed their hand over their pocket to make sure the robot mouse was still there. The weight of it against their thigh insisted that it was, but some irrational part of their mind compelled them to check, just to be sure.

When Rikiga produced the mouse the day after their first visit, Kaoru was only momentarily surprised to discover it was the same one that delivered their message. So this is where you scampered off to, they mused, turning it over in their hand. It really was an amazing piece of work; one couldn’t tell it wasn’t a real mouse unless they were holding it. Only then did the cold heft of the machinery dispel the illusion.

Did Nezumi do this? Now that they thought about it, they recalled that Nezumi worked in the robotics lab, so it wasn’t impossible that he had been the maker of the robot. But that thought was immediately succeeded by, If he did, where did he get the tech? I can’t imagine this stuff is just lying around. What is he up to in the West Block? That train of thought wasn’t leading to any definitive answers, so Kaoru tried to tune-in to Rikiga, who had apparently been talking the whole time.

“…take these surveys in and talk to a few people. Go to at least five houses, otherwise it’ll look suspicious. The safest thing to do would be to actually poll all of Chronos, but it’d take too long and, besides, it’s a waste, since I won’t be publishing the surveys, anyway. The main objective is to get into your buddy’s house for the drives.” Rikiga sat back in his chair and took a drag on his cigarette. “Got it so far?”

“I wasn’t listening. Repeat everything you just said.”

Rikiga wrinkled his nose. “Kid. This is serious business. One wrong move, and it’s over for all of us. We don’t have time for your bad attitude.”

Kaoru swallowed their comeback. The reminder of the danger this undertaking presented to their lives was enough to crush their sarcasm.

“Now listen up, because I’m not saying this again. You’re going to pretend you’re taking a citizen satisfaction survey in Chronos. You’re going to ask a handful of people for their feedback, and one of the houses you go to will be Nezumi’s. You drop the mouse inside, it does its thing while you distract the people, the mouse comes back, and you get the hell out. Easy.”

“Yeah, maybe for you,” Kaoru scoffed. “You just sit back nice and comfy while I have to waltz around Chronos with phony surveys. The Security Bureau will be on me in a second—especially because I don’t have permission to be in Chronos. What’re you gonna do about that, old man?”
“You’ll be going in under my jurisdiction, so you shouldn’t have a problem getting past the gate. Did you forget I run the Information Bureau? Once I put in the paperwork at the office you’ll have temporary clearance to get into Chronos. It shouldn’t raise any red flags at the Security Bureau, but if they do come, forward them to me.” Rikiga glared sideways at them. “I’m hardly sitting back and relaxing. If you get arrested I’ll be in twice as much trouble. So do us both a favor and don’t get caught.”

“…I have to talk to people?”

“It’ll be suspicious if you don’t. Like I said, you don’t have to go to every house. Just enough to create a cover.”

_I’m not good at talking to people_, Kaoru thought morosely. They flipped the robot mouse over in their hand. “And all I have to do is drop this in the house and it’ll find the drives on its own?”

Rikiga shrugged. “Supposedly.”

So their main purpose was to provide a distraction. They had to distract Nezumi’s old lady. Kaoru swallowed. In truth, they had no solid explanation for the feeling of foreboding that blossomed in the pit of their stomach at the thought of meeting the old lady face to face. They had never seen her, and Nezumi didn’t like talking about her. But it was obvious that he went out of his way to avoid her, and if that guy was wary of the woman, then she must be more than just a harmless old lady.

Kaoru growled. “I hate talking to people. What do I even say?”

“The hell if I know.” Rikiga smothered his cigarette in the ashtray on the coffee table. “I don’t do the interviewing anymore, I just edit them. Talk about the weather—or the city. Chronos elites love to wax romantic about the city. Look, it’s not rocket science, kid. You can put up with it for an hour or two. We made a deal, remember?”

“Yeah, I got it. I’m not backing out.” Even as much as they wanted to now.

“Speaking of our deal…” Rikiga’s eyes slipped down to the dog lounging next to Kaoru’s chair. “Do you bring that mutt everywhere you go? Because if you want any kind of respectable job, you’ll have to leave it at home.”

“The dog stays.”

“I’m not saying it just because I don’t like the things. The city has a policy.”

“If you have enough authority to get me into Chronos, you can get me a job where I can keep my dog.”

The man harrumphed and pushed the subject off to be discussed at a later time. The first order of operation was to get the drives.

So here they were, marching to Chronos. The security booth was now only a few feet away, and even though Kaoru tried to keep their face neutral, they were pretty sure they looked suspicious. The cap was supposed to help shield them from the cameras once they were inside Chronos, but it was doing them no favors with the security guard. His hard eyes were glued to them as they approached the window of his booth. If it weren’t for Pup’s company, Kaoru felt they would have already abandoned the operation.

“State your purpose, citizen,” the guard demanded.
He was leering at them like they were scum. Kaoru felt a familiar irritation flood them. They hadn’t even said anything and they were already being treated like a delinquent. Just because they didn’t live in Chronos didn’t mean they were any less deserving of respect. This stooge probably didn’t live in Chronos either, otherwise he wouldn’t be doing something as mundane as manning the gate. Where’d he get off acting so superior?

Kaoru collected every bit of their annoyance and layered it into a tone of confidence. “I’m on official business for the Information Bureau.” They brought up the permit on their ID and thrust their wrist out for the guard to see.

“That Rikiga guy again?” The guard muttered under his breath. “He doesn’t have nearly as much clout as he thinks he does…”

Kaoru’s spirits relapsed at the man’s depreciating drone. Of all the things they discussed might go wrong, being rejected at the gate was never considered a possibility.

The guard sighed, however, and pursed his lips. “What exactly is the Information Bureau’s business in Chronos today?”

“I’m taking a survey. Of the citizens.”

“Can I see the survey?”

Kaoru shed their backpack and pulled out a mass of papers. The guard glanced at them, but not long enough to actually read the information. The papers could have been blank for all the attention he gave them.

The guard fixed them with another hard look. “Behave yourself while you’re inside,” he growled, slapping the button to open the gate.

Kaoru was unable to keep the scowl off their face. What did he think they were going to do? Trample someone’s flowerbed out of spite? They stuffed all but a few of the papers back into their bag and began to walk away.

“Hey.” Kaoru glanced over their shoulder to see the odious man sticking his head out the window of his booth. “No pets inside.”

“He’s leashed.”

“No foreign pets inside Chronos. It’s policy.”

So Chronos’ exclusion principle included pets, did it? Kaoru felt inclined to sneer, but one look at Pup and their mouth twisted into a frown. This venture was stressful as it was, but without the familiar comfort of Pup beside them, their nerves would be stretched to the limit. Pup had hardly left their side since they got him. The only time they separated was when it was absolutely necessary.

Pup seemed to sense their unrest. He nudged Kaoru’s hand with his snout and let out a low whine. *He’s right. It’s not good if I hesitate too long.* They turned and led Pup back to the security booth.

“So, what? I leave him here with you?”

The guard looked inclined to answer, but the heavy frown tugging at his mouth prevented him from doing so just yet. Kaoru had already discovered the usefulness in letting their anger do the
talking for them, so they let it dictate the conversation as it pleased.

“I ain’t bringing him home and coming back, if that’s what you’re thinking of saying. I’ve got a deadline.”

“Leave it outside the booth,” the man grunted. “Tied up.”

Kaoru didn’t trust themself to respond civilly. The man’s condescension had been flirting with their self-control since the start of the conversation; he was one more nasty command away from having Pup sicced on him. Kaoru looped Pup’s leash around a bar of the gate and knotted it.

“See you soon, boy.”

Pup plopped down and licked their hand as they withdrew it. Kaoru patted his head once and then wheeled around to jab an accusing finger at the guard.

“If anything happens to him while I’m gone, you’re the first one I’m coming after.”

The guard narrowed his eyes, but Kaoru was already past him and through the gate before he could make any sort of retort. Perhaps threatening the man was not a smart move, but it made Kaoru feel better to have said it. Plus, he was a virtual nobody just like they were, so repercussions any more severe than a sour look when they returned for Pup were unlikely.

Kaoru found themself smack dab in the middle of the street. Houses—no, fricking mansions—sprawled in an isolated patchwork as far as they could see. Kaoru had only been inside Chronos once before, and although the enormous homes had awed them back then, they seemed grotesquely large now, all flower gardens and fountains in the ponds out front. Families in No. 6 hardly ever exceeded four or five people; what did anyone need with that much space?

And the flowers were still in bloom. Bright explosions of yellows, pinks, and whites quivered in the breeze. Kaoru stared at a vivid cluster of tulips and shivered for an entirely different reason. Maybe they should stomp some flowerbeds; the things were unnatural.

They had, however, a mission to execute, and as quickly as possible. According to Rikiga’s information, Nezumi’s house was located midway through the neighborhood. That gave them ample time to build up to their task. It hardly mattered in which direction they headed, since the map of the area indicated that roads and wildlife bridges connected all the plots in Chronos. Kaoru wandered in the direction of the first house in sight, absently clutching the surveys in their hand.

Rikiga had given them a spiel to rattle off to each person. Three lines max, easy to remember: I’m from the Information Bureau, this is a citizen satisfaction survey, fill it out. Essentially. There was nothing to be afraid of. These Chronos residents wanted nothing more than to prove their allegiance to the city. And in light of the allergenic flour incident, the citizens would probably jump at the opportunity to give their input on the situation.

Unfortunately, their sound reasoning held no sway over the beating of their heart, which was going double-time now that they were standing in front of the door. Kaoru smoothed the slightly crinkled edges of the papers and reached out to buzz the intercom.

“Who is it?” came a bright, feminine tone.

“Um…” Kaoru cleared their throat. Stick to the script. “I’m from the Information Bureau.” The person on the other side of the line was quiet. Kaoru pressed the button again after a moment. “Hello?”
The door swung open and a young woman popped her head out. “You’re from the Information Bureau?” she asked with a quirk of her eyebrow. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah. I, uh, have a survey. A citizen satisfaction survey.”

The woman’s eyes lit with recognition. “Oh, I see.” She stepped back from the door, and Kaoru thought with a pang that she was going to invite them in. Instead, she bowed shortly. “No, thank you. I’m quite busy at the moment. If you’ll excuse me.”

The door swung closed with a definitive thump. Kaoru stared at the polished wood for a moment before turning away. That wasn’t too bad. If the rest of the houses went like that, then the job would be over quickly.

The people at the next house appeared to be out, for no one answered any of the three times Kaoru buzzed the intercom. As they trudged across the lawn to get to the adjacent house they couldn’t help but think that things were going swimmingly so far.

When they buzzed the third house, the door was wrenched open almost immediately. A tall blonde woman stood on the threshold, and she held up a single manicured finger to signal Kaoru to wait while she finished her call on her ID bracelet.

“Yes, of course I am. Did you not just hear me say I was on my way—” she half yelled at the screen.

“Our daughter is in the hospital! You should have been here an hour ago—”

“Give me a break, Jun. I just got off from work. Does she look better?”

“She’s fine, but she’s asking for you.”

“I’ll be there in twenty.” The woman terminated the screen and flicked her eyes down to Kaoru. “Sorry, things are kind of hectic this morning.” She left the door wide open, but walked away to begin stuffing things into a large purse. “My daughter was one of the victims yesterday. You know, the flour allergy?” The woman glanced up. “She’s about your age—Emi. She’s a math prodigy, maybe you’ve heard of her?”

Kaoru’s mouth twisted into a sneer on impulse. Yes, they knew Emi, that sorry dog-stealing excuse for a human being. What luck that of all the houses in Chronos they had to visit it was the one belonging to Emi’s mother. So Emi was one of the victims, huh? Hmph. Serves her right.

However, they supposed sneering at the thought of Emi in front of her mother might not be the best course of action. Kaoru quickly wrangled their scowl into something they hoped resembled a contemplative frown. They needn’t have tried to hide the unfavorable reaction; the woman was too intent on packing random objects into her bag to have noticed.

“Nope,” Kaoru said in case she was waiting for an answer.

“Mm. What did you say you were here for?”

“I have a citizen satisfaction survey from the Information Bureau. They want all Chronos residents to take it.”

“The Information Bureau?” The woman finally looked at them. Slinging her purse over her shoulder, she walked back to the threshold to peer at them. “Then do you know what’s going on with this allergenic flour business?”
Kaoru shrugged. “Not a clue.”

The woman clicked her tongue. “Allergenic flour! Can you believe that? How could they let
this happen? You know, of course, that the allergic reaction completely ruins your appearance.
Emi’s beautiful hair is bleached such a ghastly white color now! Imagine that! A little girl, and her
hair looks like it belongs on a sixty year old. And that horrible scar!” The woman wrinkled her
nose. “She’ll have to dye her hair for the rest of her life. God knows where we’re going to get the
money we need for the skin grafts. I’d sue, except I don’t know which company sold us that bad
flour. Do you know which it was?”

“No.”

“Emi had such a promising future, too. I don’t know what we’re going to do now.”

Geez, lady. It’s just hair and a scar. No need to eulogize her.

The woman huffed and checked her ID display. “Shoot. I’m going to be late.”

She shifted her purse higher onto her shoulder and stepped out of the house. Kaoru moved aside
so she could get past. I guess that’s another miss on the survey. Not that Kaoru really mourned it.

Just before she walked off, however, the woman turned back to narrow her eyes severely at
them. “You said you’re doing a citizen satisfaction survey? Well, I don’t have time to do one right
now, but you can tell them that I am very dissatisfied with how they’re handling this situation.
Someone better take responsibility for this, be it the flour company, or the mayor, or whoever! You
tell them I said that.”

The woman stormed off and Kaoru was left feeling inexplicably empty. There was a lot of
emotion thrown at them in that brief encounter, and they were pretty sure that last speech verged
on treasonous by city standards.

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Five houses later, Kaoru found themselves standing in front of the house. In physical
characteristics it was very much the same as every other in the neighborhood: grandiose,
impossibly big, and rather lacking in effect now that they had seen its likeness near ten times over.
They slipped their hand into their pocket and wrapped their fingers around the robot mouse within.

How am I going to drop this in there without the old lady noticing? A few of the people they
went to invited them into the house, but not all. If they were left out on the doorstep, things would
get a lot more complicated. The directions Rikiga received from his West Block friend basically
said the robot had no capacity for stealth; apparently their resources weren’t good enough to make
it have functions beyond the simple seek and return. It was therefore imperative that Kaoru distract
the old lady while the robot scampered about its business.

This sucks. Why do I have to do this? Their thoughts turned darkly to the source. You’re gonna
have a lot to answer for if I ever see you again, Nezumi. I’m gonna make you pay up, with interest,
for all the crap you put me through.

They rang the house. No one answered.

Great. This is just great.

They rang a second time, and still nothing.
Wonderful. Figures I did all this for nothing. Kaoru set their teeth against the growing frustration. What now? It’d be stupid to wait for the old lady to return. That could take hours, and it’d be too dangerous to lurk in Chronos so long. Breaking in was impossible. Even Lost Town homes were equipped with security systems, so breaking and entering was definitely not an option. They would have to find another way. Kaoru’s stomach quailed at the thought of doing this all over again.

Then the door opened.

Kaoru stepped back and raised their eyes to find a bespectacled old woman staring down at them. She was a little stooped from age, but even so, she wasn’t a small woman. Her lips were painted a red reminiscent of the tulips Kaoru had seen earlier, and although she appeared to be regarding them with curiosity, her expression was not altogether unkind.

“…Can I help you, young man?”

Kaoru had recited the script so many times by now they hardly registered they were saying it. The old woman nodded when they finished, a placid smile flitting over her lips.

“A citizen satisfaction survey? How interesting. I suppose this is because of that terrible incident the other day?”

“I suppose so, ma’am,” Kaoru mumbled.

There was something weird about the old woman. She wasn’t absolutely terrifying as Nezumi’s dislike of her insinuated, but she felt off. She didn’t have the scent of threat about her. She didn’t smell of anything, actually, and that was the slightest bit unsettling.

“Well. I’d be happy to take the survey. Won’t you come in?”

Part of Kaoru was relieved at the invitation. Another part of them, however, wanted to run. Stepping over the threshold into the entryway felt like entering a dark cave, in which one suspected a dangerous beast lurked, and yet could not be certifiably sure. The old woman smiled a grandmotherly smile.

“I won’t keep you long, so you may keep your shoes on, if you’d like.” She turned and shuffled around the corner, perhaps expecting them to follow.

Should I drop the mouse now? This seemed like the best time to do so. They were in the house and alone at the moment, and the longer the robot had to collect the drives, the better. Carefully, Kaoru slipped the mouse out of their pocket and pressed down on its eyes. It jolted to life, wriggling in their hand. Kaoru stifled a sound of disgust, lowered it to the floor, and it darted away.

Kaoru kicked their shoes off in order to provide some explanation for their delay. The woman was sitting in a chair, her hands folded primly in front of her atop the kitchen table. The light flashed over the lenses of her glasses as she watched their approach.

“I hope you weren’t waiting long at the door. I was out in the garden and I didn’t hear you ring.” Kaoru nodded, but didn’t meet the woman’s eyes, focusing instead on a smudge of dirt on the sleeve of her dress. “Now, where’s that survey, dear?”

Kaoru cringed at the endearment, but covered it up by swinging their backpack to the floor and fiddling with the contents. They extended a paper and pen to the old woman, but she only smiled.

“Would you mind reading the questions to me? My eyes are not as good as they used to be, even
with the glasses.”

“Oh. Okay...” Kaoru cleared their throat and tried to read like they were taking a survey and not creating a diversion while a robot scampered around the house collecting illegal computer drives. “What is your—”

Kaoru snapped their mouth shut when they realized they were about to ask the woman her gender. A flutter of embarrassment settled in the pit of their stomach, sending ripples of anxiety through their attempt at composure. The old woman knitted her brow.

“Something the matter, dear?”

“Uh, no.” Kaoru avoided her eyes and let their gaze wander toward the living room. “It’s just—you have a cat!”

The small, puffy creature had been creeping over the back of the couch, but froze and turned its large green eyes on Kaoru when it heard them yell.

*Nezumi never said anything about a cat! Why the hell would he design a mouse robot if he had a cat?*

The woman blinked at Kaoru’s excitement and twisted her head to look. “Oh, yes. My little Shiro-tan.”

She clucked her tongue and the kitten’s ears twitched. It meowed and hopped down from the couch to waddle over. The old woman ran her fingers through its fur and it arched its back up to meet her hand.

Kaoru hadn’t the slightest idea where the robot was at the moment, but the cat had to be removed before it returned. *I need to get that thing out of the way.*

“Are you alright?” The woman’s face was tinged with a mild concern. “You look a bit pale. Oh dear... You aren’t allergic, are you?”


The old woman stared at them. Kaoru’s stomach plummeted. The old woman knew. She knew, and soon the Security Bureau would come, stuff them kicking and screaming into the cruiser, and throw them into the Correctional Facility to rot. They would disappear and no one would ever know—or care.

The seconds ticked by and the woman still held that same blank, relentless stare. Kaoru felt like they could vomit. Gradually, a smile stretched the red line of the woman’s lips. “I suppose so. But he’s still quite young, so be careful.”

The good-natured tone of her voice didn’t match the placidity of her smile. The hairs on the back of Kaoru’s neck began to prickle. They placed the survey on the table and approached the kitten, ignoring its reow of protest when they scooped it up.

Since cats were strictly indoor animals in No. 6, Kaoru had little experience with them. They knew only the particulars of dogs, and although the kitten was about the same size as Pup when they first got him, it felt nothing like a puppy. Alien was the only word they could think of to describe the sensation of the cat in their hands, a seemingly weightless ball of white fur and bones. It took little effort to drape it over their shoulder, but considerable self-control not to show any
displeasure at the feel of it pressed, warm and ticklish, against their neck. *I miss Pup,* Kaoru thought.

“Shall we continue?” the old lady prompted.

*I swear to god she’s testing me,* Kaoru thought with a degree of anxiousness that was approaching exasperation. *Where’s that damn mouse?*

Kaoru snapped the paper up and read the next question. “How many people are in your household?”

“I’m afraid it’s always been just me—and Shiro-tan, now. But he’s good company, so I’m never lonely.”

*Wow, Nezumi. She hated you. Guess the feeling was mutual.* Kaoru pressed their mouth into a line and kept their eyes trained on the paper.

“How satisfied are you with the city?”

The old woman’s smile faltered. “What a question. Why would that be on there?”

“It’s a citizen satisfaction survey.”

“How peculiar.” Her eyes narrowed behind her glasses. “Has anyone said they’re dissatisfied?”

“It’s anonymous,” they said, feeling somehow like they were doing humanity a favor by shielding them from the disapproval of this woman.

“Anonymous?” she scoffed. “That’s very strange. What does anyone have to hide?”

Kaoru glanced down at the paper. “What can the city”—the kitten shifted, and they could feel its whiskers brushing their cheek as it turned its face to theirs. *Ugh. Please don’t—*“do to improve your happiness?”

Unaware of Kaoru’s inner protest, the cat sniffed their cheek and licked it. Its tongue was like sandpaper, not at all pleasant or soothing like dog licks, and certainly unwelcome when they were already trying their utmost not to freak out. Kaoru shivered and rolled their shoulder a little to try and slide the cat further down their arm. The cat, however, was uncooperative, and proceeded to wriggle in their grasp.

“Ah. He’s getting restless,” murmured the cat’s owner. “As I said, he’s quite young. He doesn’t like being held long.”

Suddenly, the kitten tensed and craned its head in the direction of the living room. Kaoru’s heart leapt. Nothing looked amiss at first glance, but they knew where to look. Under the couch they perceived the gleam of the robot mouse’s eyes.

*Oh no.*

The robot poked its head out and, heedless of the danger, scuttled toward them. The cat began struggling with greater vigor, and Kaoru was thankful it was only a kitten, for its small size made it a lot easier to hold in place. The claws digging into their arm were a little less easy, though.

“It’s best to let him go, dear.”

*For you maybe, but for me…* Kaoru grit their teeth. *Just a little bit more.* The robot was at
edge of the table. A few more steps and it’d be safely inside the backpack. Kaoru thanked whatever powers that be that the old woman was completely fixated on her cat; the mouse robot had just snuck by her feet. There was a slight frown on the woman’s lips, and Kaoru realized it was probably directed at them for failing to unhand their precious pet when she told them to, but Kaoru would rather risk her displeasure than incarceration if she managed to see the robot.

The minute the mouse dove into the backpack, Kaoru dropped the cat. The animal didn’t seem to have expected its sudden release. It clung to their shoulder with its claws for a moment before it plopped to the floor and set upon their backpack.

“What has gotten into you, Shiro-tan?” The old woman’s frown deepened in the corners. “Something seems to have excited him.”

“It’s fine.” Kaoru plucked the bag off the floor, ignoring the kitten’s incessant meowing. “Great timing, actually,” Kaoru slipped the survey and pen into the open section of the bag, stealing a glance into the compartment to make sure the mouse was really there. “That was the last question.”

“Really? What a short survey.”

“Well, it’s not meant take up too much time.” Kaoru backed out of the room. It felt as though something horrible would happen if they turned their back too early. The old woman stared silently from her chair with her hands folded in front of her. Kaoru nodded once, though they weren’t entirely sure why. “Thanks for your cooperation. Good luck gardening.”

They made it into the entryway. Kaoru struggled to shove their shoes back on quickly, but without looking too desperate. They didn’t hear the woman follow or call out to them, but the pounding of the blood in their ears made it difficult to hear anything else. The hair on the back of their neck was standing on end, but they didn’t check over their shoulder to see if she was there. There was only one thing they could think of: get to the door. Get out.

Kaoru was halfway down the road before their heartbeat even considered returning to a semi-reasonable pace.

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Rikiga was waiting in the park, as planned. When he saw Kaoru marching toward him, he got up from the bench he was sitting on and hurried over. His attempt at rushing would’ve been funny, if Kaoru wasn’t in such a foul mood.

“You got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Where is it? Is it safe?”

Kaoru shoved the backpack at him. “Just take it and give it to your beloved Shion before the Bureau comes knocking.”

“Don’t give it to me here,” Rikiga hissed, tossing the bag back at them. “Do you know how ridiculous I’d look carrying that thing around?”

“No more ridiculous than usual.”

“And there’s no reason why the Bureau should be after us. Unless you screwed up.”
“I didn’t screw up,” they snapped, slinging the bag over their shoulder.

“Good. Then bring the bag to my house after—”

“Mr. Rikiga?”

Kaoru and Rikiga jumped. A man in a suit paused on his way past. His face broke into a genial smile as he made his way over. “I thought it was you.”

“Ah. Conk.” Rikiga shifted to face him, his face professionally grim. “What’re you doing here?”

“Coffee run.” He held up a takeaway cup. “But why are you here? I thought you were working from home today?”

Kaoru raised an eyebrow at the man. He was huge, well over six feet tall, with a bulky frame that his suit was struggling to contain. His largeness, plus his neatly shaven head had Kaoru thinking “thug,” but the pair of red-rimmed glasses he was wearing was off setting the stereotype. Conk was also smiling brightly, in a dopey, puppy dog sort of way at Rikiga.

Who is this guy? The old man’s secretary, maybe?

“I am,” Rikiga said gruffly. “I was just getting some fresh air.”

“Oh, I see.” The man turned a friendly eye on Kaoru. “Hello. I’m Conk. And you must be…” He looked meaningfully, albeit perplexedly, from them to Rikiga.

Kaoru fixed the man with a look of unrestrained disgust. “I’m not his kid, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Huh? Oh! No, I didn’t think so…” Conk rubbed the back of his neck and laughed nervously.

“The kid works for me.”

Both Conk and Kaoru blinked at Rikiga in disbelief.

“He approached me about an internship and I decided to take him under my wing for the winter.”

“Eh? You never mentioned anything about wanting an intern, sir.”

“Just decided today. I’ll make it official when I get back to the office. Why don’t you prepare the paperwork for me?”

The man kept the perplexed expression, but answered, “Yes, sir,” anyway.

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Conk bowed and walked off.

Kaoru glared at Rikiga. “What was that?”

“A job offer.” Rikiga shrugged and fished for the carton of cigarettes in his jacket pocket. “The Information Bureau is as good a place as any to work. Plus, it makes it easy for me.”

“I said I wanted a good job.”
Rikiga paused mid-search and leered at Kaoru. “This is a good job. I worked my whole life to get where I am.”

“That’s inspiring.”

“Shut up, you ingrate. You start tomorrow. Be in my office at nine a.m. sharp.”

“I have school.”

“Four, then. Don’t be late.”

“I’m not going to spend all my free time fetching coffee for your hangovers, old man.”

“I don’t get hangovers on work days,” Rikiga muttered. He withdrew his hand from his jacket, but instead of cigarettes he held a small notepad. He pulled a pen from his chest pocket, scribbled on a sheet, and held it out for Kaoru to see. “This is what you’ll make working for me. It’s nothing to sniff at. It’s more money than a kid your age could ever hope of seeing.”

Kaoru had to admit it was a decent figure for an internship. They tore the page from the notepad and inspected it. “Hm. I think I should receive extra for the Chronos bit.”

Rikiga snorted derisively. “You do, do you? I thought you didn’t want my money?”

“Changed my mind. After what I went through, I think some kind of compensation is in order. And since the only thing you have that’s worth anything is money, I’ll take that.”

“You’re not a cute kid at all.” Rikiga pursed his lips. “Alright, how ‘bout this? I’ll give you a bonus if you lose the dog. Deal?”

“No deal.”

“The dog’s—”

“Not allowed in the building. Yeah, yeah. You’re beginning to sound like a broken record, old man. Look, the way I see it, I got the short end of the stick. I went into Chronos and I got the drives, and you did next to squat. I’m entitled to some perks and that includes the bonus and keeping my dog. I told you from the start, Pup was part of the deal.”

“It wasn’t, but you know what? Fine. I’m tired of arguing with a snot-nosed kid. I’ll just put “Pup” down as a service dog, if you’re so damn attached to the thing.” He pulled up a screen on his ID bracelet and stabbed the buttons on the keyboard display. “There. Happy?”

Kaoru’s mouth quirked. “Pleasure doing business with ya.”
Unwraveling

Chapter Notes

*Sorry*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*It’s been a week.*

Safu drummed her fingers on the table. The other Resistance members drifted around her, but she hardly noticed. A few glanced her way, but those with business of their own passed without much more than that, and the rest knew the expression on her face invited no pleasantries. The byword for West Block was “back off,” and scant few bothered to involve themselves in matters that did not directly affect them. Safu knew only one person who constantly and voluntarily got involved in the affairs of others, and it was on this boy that her mind had been wholly fixed for the better part of a week.

She knew her worrying would do no good; Shion had smiled and laughed away her concerns enough times that she had resigned herself to just letting him alone to sort out his feelings. He would return to her side, quiet but cheerful, when he was ready, and the matter that disturbed the balance between them would smooth out and fade into obscurity. It would take a heavy blow to create a rift between them, however small, but there were times when it happened.

*Like when Shion attacks people.* Not that she resented him for that. The Disposer had spoken out of line, and while it didn’t warrant a death sentence, she could understand Shion’s aggression.

That was not the first time she had seen him react violently, but it had been a long while. They could not have been more than nine years old, running about the market and trying to figure out what to buy with the pocket money Safu’s grandmother had given her. She had just decided on an orange, when it was snatched from her grasp.

“Hey! That’s mine!”

The culprit was some ratty little boy. She had seen his kind before, an orphan turned to common thievery.

“That’s Safu’s. Give it back,” Shion said.

The kid leered at Safu. “You don’t need it,” he sniffed at her. He tossed the orange up and down in his hand. “Richy like you? You could probably afford a bunch of these. What’s one to ya?”

“I’m not rich.”

“Sure ya are. Only a richy would be caught in that getup—ugly as it is.” He sneered at her shirt. “You’d a thought with all the money the old hag makes you’d buy something more fancy, but I guess money can’t buy taste.”

Safu didn’t bother explaining to him that she didn’t buy her sweater at all, that her grandmother had knitted it for her the winter before. She didn’t need to explain herself to anyone, and though the boy’s insults smarted, she was determined not to let it show.
“Give Safu the orange back,” Shion repeated, more sternly than the last time.

The boy glanced at him, a smile playing at his lips. “What’re you, her bodyguard?” Shion pursed his lips and the boy snorted. “Well, I guess the princess of the whorehouse would need a guard.”

Shion wasn’t a big kid, but Safu learned that day that he was a lot stronger than he looked. He punched the boy hard enough to give him a bloody nose, and before the hapless bully could cry out, Shion caught him by the front of his shirt and yanked him forward.

“Apologize to Safu,” he commanded.

“My nose!” the boy whimpered, his voice thick and watery.

“Say you’re sorry!” Shion repeated.

“I… I’m s-sorry.”

Shion released his shirt and the boy ran from them, sobbing incomprehensible slurs all the way.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Safu mumbled.

“Of course I did. He was a jerk.” Shion shook his hand out. “He shouldn’t have said those things to you if he didn’t want to be hit.”

Safu bit her lip and pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. “Your hand’s hurt. Use this.”

Shion took it gratefully, and while he wiped his knuckle, he stared at her. She felt her face heating up at the unexpected attention. She didn’t know why she should be so embarrassed; it wasn’t as though Shion had never looked at her before.

“I don’t know what that jerk was talking about,” Shion scoffed. “That sweater looks great on you.”

That was Shion all over. Warm and so unreservedly honest it was hard to look at him sometimes. He was fiercely protective of his loved ones, would do anything for them, and that included stooping to violence if he felt the reason was just. And yet, Safu knew Shion felt ashamed of the ferocity of his outbursts, even if he didn’t regret defending the cause that inspired it.

If Shion needed a little time to sort through his feelings, she would wait until he was ready to face her. *A week’s a bit much, though.* She slapped the table with a sigh.

“You with us now?”

She was unsurprised to find Kaze hovering a few feet away.

“Got a delivery for you.” He sauntered over with a cheeky smile and dropped the object into her hands. She recognized it immediately as Nezumi’s robot. She flipped it over and opened the bottom. Two mini drives fell out into the palm of her hand. *It actually worked. Nezumi will be smug.*

“I’m sure Yoming will want these looked at as soon as possible,” she said, slipping them and the mouse into her pocket for safekeeping.

“Yeah. Too bad Nezumi hasn’t been around… Come to think of it, I haven’t seen Shion around either.”
Safu straightened. “You haven’t?”

“Nope. Not in, like… three or four days, maybe."

Safu tried to swallow the feeling of foreboding that rose up in her throat. It was one thing to want to avoid people for a while, but he still had a job to do. He still had to eat. Calm down. It’s fine. Just because you and Kaze haven’t seen him doesn’t mean anything’s wrong. You’re just two people, you could have missed him any number of times.

Kaze could either read the unease on her face, or his thoughts were traveling along the same track, because he frowned and turned towards the window. “Oy, Yamase! You know where Shion or Nezumi are?”

Yamase paused to think. “Isn’t Nezumi sick?”

“Sick?”

“Yeah… We got a mouse from Shion saying Nezumi was sick and couldn’t come in for a while. The boss was pissed.”

“When did you get the mouse?” Safu asked.

“Three days ago.”

“Have you seen Shion since?”

Yamase’s brow knitted. “I… don’t think so, no.”

“You haven’t seen him either?” Kaze traded glances between Safu and Yamase. “That’s kinda weird. I mean, I get Nezumi, and Shion probably has to take care of him, but you’d think we’d at least see him around sometimes. And the note was sent three days ago? Nezumi must be really sick.” Kaze raked his bad hand through his hair. “…Think he’s dead?”

“Excuse me?” Safu choked.

“Nezumi. It’s possible. I mean, he’s so delicate looking, I wouldn’t be surprised if he caught something he couldn’t handle.” Kaze’s face was contemplative. “And he lives with Shion, right? So what if Shion caught whatever Nezumi got and that’s why we haven’t seen him?” Kaze’s eyes widened. “Do you think Shion’s dead—”

“Kaze, shut up,” snapped Yamase.

“What, it’s—” Kaze closed his mouth when he noticed the other man’s pointed look in Safu’s direction. “Oh. Right. Uh, he’s probably not. He’s probably fine. Shion’s a doctor, after all.”

Safu missed the exchange, however. She only had room in her thoughts for one thing.

“I’m going to check on Shion.”

She turned for the door, but a torrent of Resistance members flooded in. There wasn’t a meeting that day, so what were all these people doing rushing into headquarters? Unless… Safu’s stomach constricted. The Hunt.

Yoming stalked in. He looked more haggard than she had ever seen him. His hair was long and matted, his chin unshaven and grizzled. The superfibre shawl he wore about his shoulders was dirty and torn in one corner. He looked almost like a man defeated, except his eyes flashed with a
fervent light. He looked around, but the crowd did not need to be told to hush.

“No. 6 has made its move,” Yoming began, his voice overflowing with an emotion caught somewhere between excitement and dread. “This morning when we went out to collect the shipment, we were ambushed by an assassin.”

A few gasps ricocheted around the room. Some people’s faces were drawn in fear, while others stared resolutely ahead, their eyes never leaving Yoming.

“He sunk the ferry with all our supplies on board and then fired upon our party. Two of your comrades were wounded, before he turned his gun on me.” Yoming grabbed the edge of his shawl and yanked it emphatically. “He aimed straight for my heart, and if I hadn’t been wearing this, I would not be here talking to you now.

“We managed to incapacitate him despite our causalities, and when we asked him, comrades, who his employer was, do you know what he said?”

The name was on everyone’s breath, permeating the air with a silent threat.

“Yes,” he hissed. “No. 6. No. 6 attempted to use one of our own to kill our cause. Those who were there with me can attest that what I speak is the truth.”

A man and a woman who were leaning against the wall behind him lifted their chins gravely. They appeared to be the wounded comrades Yoming mentioned. Blood dribbled down the woman’s arm from beneath her sleeve, and the man, too, left a thin trail over the floor as he dragged his leg to stand beside Yoming.

“No. 6 tried to assassinate me, comrades. There is only one reason why they should do such a thing: so that we would be in chaos when they arrived. So we would not be able to fight back. They have failed in their aim, but they have succeeded in making one thing absolutely clear. They’re coming.” He inhaled gravely. “The Hunt is upon us.”

Someone near the back whimpered. Safu had gone cold down to her fingertips. No. 6 had made their move. If No. 6 knew their supplier and had tried to assassinate Yoming, they must have been watching the Resistance very closely. They had expected that satellite surveillance on the West Block would increase after the mission to secure the elite was carried out. They had therefore been meticulous in their activities, conducting meetings in secret, and moving shipments in small groupings and under the cover of night. They had taken every precaution. The only way they could have been more clandestine was if they had taken their entire organization underground.

Yet, if No. 6 had discovered, despite their efforts, that Yoming was the leader and No. 2 their supplier, then nothing was safe. They could know everything. They could know Nezumi was hiding with Shion.

“No. 6 will bring troops down, just like they always do, and they will be armed—heavily. But you must not panic, comrades! Stick to the plan. Do not shoot first! Do not give them a chance to paint us the aggressors and claim they killed in self-defense.”

The noise in headquarters had gone from nonexistent to uproarious in an instant. The members erupted into a frenzy of cries and growls, and even Yoming had to raise his voice in order to be heard above the clamor.

Safu was sure he’d have everyone in control again soon so he could give them detailed instructions on how to act when the time came, but she couldn’t wait for that. She pushed through
the chaos, shoving people out of her way until she burst out of the building. As soon as her feet hit the ground, she broke into a run.

Who was to say that the assassin that came for Yoming was the only one? There could be more, dozens, even. No. 6 wants Nezumi, and if they know about Yoming, they know about Shion. And if they’re willing to kill— She changed to a full-on sprint when she turned onto the main street. How could I have been so stupid! I should have checked on him! Yoming was attacked hours ago!

The warehouse was in sight now and the only thing Safu could think was, Please. Please let him be safe. She said Shion’s name like a prayer, repeating it over and over as she raced down the dirt path.

When she pressed the switch and the stairs revealed themselves, she paused. The dark stretch below snuffed out the fire in her, and an icy terror crystallized in its stead. This isn’t the time to freeze up, she told herself. She focused on leveling out her breathing as she descended the stairs.

“Shion?” She thumped on the door twice. “Shion, it’s Safu.”

The corridor was frigid. Safu wrapped her arms around her shoulders. Come on, Shion. Answer. She banged three more times.

“Shion! Please open the door. I—”

The door clicked. She felt it beneath her fist as much as heard it. Safu drew in a ragged gasp and stepped back. Shion poked his head out to peer at her and the smile forming on her lips retreated.

He looked as bad as Yoming. His hair was a disheveled mass, flattened more on one side, as though he had fallen asleep hunched over a table. But the deep purple smudges under his eyes indicated that he had not often allowed himself the luxury of sleep. He remained half hidden by the door and squinted at her. His expression was too dull for her to be able to discern the reason behind it, whether he did so from the darkness or confusion, weariness or annoyance, she couldn’t tell.

“Safu?”

“Shion.” She didn’t mean for her voice to come out so soft, but she was glad of it when she saw a glimmer of life return to Shion’s eyes.

“What is it? Is something wrong?”

He searched her face and her heart sputtered. He was worried about her. He was okay.

“I’m fine,” she answered gently, “but Yoming was shot this morning.”

“Oh.” Shion’s eyes flicked to the side. “Okay… Take him to Yuichi and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“No, he wasn’t wounded, but No. 6 arranged it. I just came… to warn you. You need to be careful. Nezumi, too.”

“Mm.”

Safu balled her fists at her sides. Shion. Look at me. Why won’t you look at me?

“Are you alright? No one’s seen you for days.”

He gave a minute shrug. “I’m just a little tired. I… I’ve been busy. Nezumi…” Shion glanced
behind him, but she couldn’t follow his gaze into the room. He kept the door only open enough for him to stand and peer out from behind it. “Nezumi’s sick,” he finished. “I sent a mouse.”

“Yeah, I know. I heard.” He looked so small and tired. She wanted to reach out to him, but she was afraid that he would shrink from her. She bit the inside of her cheek to remind herself to stay in the moment. “Is it serious?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. It’s complicated,” he sighed. “I don’t know what will happen, so that’s why I can’t leave. If someone needs me, send them to Yuichi. I can’t do it right now. Nezumi needs me.”

“Oh.” There seemed to only be enough air in her lungs for that weak syllable. She knew she should say more. She needed to push on if she didn’t want him to see, but even though she knew all this, she did not speak for a long while. The silence seeped between them, an awkward eternity that only Safu seemed to be able to feel.

“Do you need anything? You have food?” she managed at last.

“Yeah. It’s fine, we—”

“What about water? You have to stay hydrated. I can get some, if you need it.” Shion finally looked up, but it was Safu now that averted her eyes.

“…Sure. Thanks.”

“Great. Be back soon.”

She took the stairs by twos, desperate to reach the dank light of the afternoon above. What am I getting so worked up for? Shion’s just doing what he always does, putting others before himself. He’d do the same for me—for anyone.

That wasn’t true, though, was it? Under normal circumstances, it might’ve been, but this was different. When he heard Yoming was shot, he was disinterested. She saw it. He hesitated, and even when he said he would go check on Yoming, he looked like he’d rather not go.

No one had seen him in days, and Shion didn’t even seem to register that this was alarming. He was too focused on Nezumi, so focused that he was willing to neglect everyone else and hole himself up in his house for days on end. This was more than professionalism or kindness. Shion was giving Nezumi the same undivided attention he used to pay his mother. Safu had thought after Karan’s death that the only other person that could inspire that level of dedication in Shion was herself.

She and Shion had known each other since they were toddlers, but somehow Nezumi, this snide, arrogant elite whom Shion had only known a few months, had managed to gain the same level of regard as her. Perhaps more.

Safu bit down hard on her lip, but she knew there was no point in repressing the suspicions that flooded into her thoughts. Did it really matter? She already knew. She had known for years that she had no chance, but she had willfully deceived herself into thinking different.

After Karan passed away, Shion was broken. He never left his room, hardly ate or drank anything unless you brought food to him and stayed to make sure he finished it. She couldn’t bear to see him suffering week after week alone in his room, but there wasn’t much she could do but offer her presence. He seemed better when she came to visit, though, so she began to think that maybe she could help him. One night, she gathered her courage and said the words that she had
wanted to say ever since they were nine.

“I can be your family.”

Shion had looked confused then, and socripplingly sad it made her heart ache. He couldn’t understand her words; she had never been much good with them when it came to communicating the matters of her heart. So she decided to show him.

She leaned in and pressed her lips gently to his. It hadn’t lasted more than a second, and it took even less for the look on Shion’s face to shatter her.

“Sorry,” she blurted. “That was insensitive.”

“No, Safu, I—”

“No, please don’t. Please.”

Of all the horrible decisions she made in her life, she regretted that moment the most. How could she have thought that was a good idea? Shion just lost his mother, his only real family. It wasn’t the time to be approaching him about that sort of thing. Shion’s flinch at the contact; the velvet despair of his eyes when she pulled away; the way he whispered her name when he saw she realized—she would forget all of it. She had moved too fast; he wasn’t ready.

Perhaps one day when things settled down, she would try again, but until then, she should do everything in her power to make sure that things returned to normal between them. Shion made it easier for her. He did try to bring up the incident once, but she dodged the discussion and he never asked again.

The days went on, and Shion’s condition improved. He grew strong again, went out, laughed more, and started helping people just like he used to. He joined the Resistance, and she followed after him. The fervor of her feelings had never faded, but no matter how well he seemed to get on, no matter how strong their relationship grew, she could not work up the confidence to confess to him.

And now it was too late. Or rather, it had always been too late. Despite what she deluded herself into hoping, Shion never felt more than friendship for her, and no amount of pretending could change that. Someone else was destined to occupy his heart, and it seemed, whether Shion realized it himself yet or not, that he had found that someone.

But why him, of all people? Why Nezumi?

The stream was in sight now and Safu reached into her pocket to retrieve her canteen. I still have the drives with me. She had almost forgotten she pocketed them. But what good was remembering that right now? Nezumi was apparently very sick, and Shion wouldn’t care about anything else until he was better. Safu considered dropping all of it, robot included, into the river, but the thought stopped there.

She filled the canteen and made her way back to the bunker. She placed it out in front of Shion’s door, knocked, and walked away.

“Safu?”

A moment passed, as she stood frozen at the top of the stairs, waiting. Then the sound of the door closing reverberated through the empty space. That was stupid. What was I expecting?
She wandered after that, lost in her own thoughts and feelings, which were becoming more suffocating and unrelenting the longer she dwelt on them. She hardly knew where she was going, or if she had been going anywhere at all, until she found herself in front of Gin and Yang. It was not a place she often visited. There wasn’t much she wanted from the bar, apart from the rations it handed out once a week, but she didn’t feel so picky today.

The bar was busy, but despite the number of people, it was uncharacteristically quiet. She spotted Yuki in the corner, a man on either side of her. She was smiling politely at one of them, but Safu turned away before she saw any more. For some reason, seeing Yuki annoyed her and she didn’t want to accidently catch her eye.

Yang was fixing another young woman a drink, but when Safu waved her over she came immediately.

“Get me something strong.”

Yang’s eyebrow raised a fraction. She picked up a bottle of clear liquid and poured it right there. “On the house,” she said, sliding it to her before drifting away.

Safu slipped onto a recently vacated bar stool and took a swig of her drink. She got two gulps down before it burned too much. How people did this on a regular basis, she could not understand. Safu knew a good number of Resistance members spent their afternoons at Yang’s, but she couldn’t seem to find more than a handful of gold bandanas in the crowd. A longer look produced a few familiar faces, ones she’d seen at meetings, but the telltale gold cloth was nowhere to be found on them. She tore her own bandana from her throat and stared at it.

A year of her life, that’s what this piece of fabric represented. An entire year spent spying and collecting information for Yoming, while all the time watching Shion, making sure he was safe, making sure he didn’t break. She was only ever in it for Shion. He had decided he was going to join the Resistance and help people with all he had left, and, like always, she followed. It was pathetic, but she convinced herself he needed her as much as she did him.

Her grandmother hated the idea from the start. “Shion’s a nice boy—a good boy—but he’s grieving and confused, and I can’t bear to see him drag you down with him. I know what he means to you, Safu, but you shouldn’t build your life around a man. You’re going to get hurt.”

“Shion’s not one of your men, Grandma. I know what I’m doing.”

Or at least she thought she did. But now she wasn’t so sure, because here she was drinking god-knows-what in a bar like some washed up cliché. She gripped the bandana tighter, feeling the fabric bunch between her fingers.

She knew he wasn’t in love with her. She knew. Even when she hid from the realization, she always knew. So why did it hurt so much now? It felt like she had been punched in the stomach and she was still reeling from the shock of the betrayal. How could she have let herself fall so far, knowing it could never come to anything but this?

Why him? Why, why, why? That one question tortured her. Why did she keep asking when she knew what she really wanted to know was why not her? Why couldn’t it be her? What did she lack that Nezumi had? It must be something exceptional, because he had captured Shion’s affections in the blink of an eye, when she could hardly get him to look at her half the time.

No, I can’t let myself get dragged down with self-pity. I’m stronger than this. I—
“Safu?”

She gasped and turned to find Yuki watching her. Only one of the men was with her now, his arm snaking around her waist. Yuki’s eyes widened and she immediately turned to her partner.

“Sorry. I can’t go today after all.” Ignoring his protests, she slipped out of his grasp to Safu’s side. “Safu, what’s wrong?”

Safu blinked at her, and something hot rolled down her cheek. It was only then she realized she was crying, and had been for a while. Her hands were dotted with tears, and the gold of the bandana had turned gray where the droplets had soaked into the fabric.

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Shion placed the novel he failed at reading back on the shelf. He checked the heater again to make sure it had enough fuel. He had wrestled it closer to the bed to make sure Nezumi would be warm, and although running it twenty-four seven was costly, he was willing to make the sacrifice if it meant Nezumi would get well. So far, though, Nezumi had hardly woken more than a handful of times in the past three days, and those were only to ask for water before passing out again.

Shion caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and stopped to assess the damage. There was no denying he looked horrible. That explained the startled look on Safu’s face when he answered the door earlier. I really should get more sleep, he supposed. I won’t be any help to any one if I don’t take care of myself. I should take a shower at least. Instead, he raked his fingers through his hair so that the flattened side looked as unruly as the rest. He sighed and collapsed onto the couch. Safu’s canteen sat on the table, sweating droplets onto the wood.

Safu… She was upset with me. I’ll have to apologize. But right now...

Shion glanced over at Nezumi. He slept deeply, but not soundly. More often than not his brow was creased, and he would twitch occasionally as if he were experiencing a sudden and sharp pain. Shion wished he could help him with whatever trials he faced in his dreams, but as it was he could only tend to the physical manifestations, and hope that time and attention would bring Nezumi out of his fitful slumber.

The length of Nezumi’s unconsciousness was distressing, but he could understand it. Removing the parasite wasp had been a stressful procedure for them both, but it was Nezumi who suffered the most from it. To think that something like that existed. It was there; the wasp was actually there. That, and… and something else.

The moment he cut into Nezumi’s neck he could feel the atmosphere in the room shift. It was as though something large and powerfully charged had jolted up the edge of the scalpel and buried itself in his fingertips. He could feel the ghost of electricity in his arm even now. And at the very last moment, when he excised the wasp, he could’ve sworn he had heard a voice… There were forces at work here that Shion couldn’t even begin to understand, and he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to.

There are the other things, too… Shion stared at a tendril of hair resting on Nezumi’s cheek and swallowed. There were no medical explanations for such things—at least as far as he knew—but he had already determined that these changes were not life threatening. They could wait to be looked into. For now, Nezumi needed rest.

“Three days is a long time,” he murmured.
Nezumi broke into a fit of coughing.

Shion sprang off the couch. “Nezumi?”

The other teen didn’t respond. The dry, breathy coughs were the only thing he could manage, and a small groan escaped his lips when they finally subsided.

Shion snatched the canteen off the table. “Can you drink this, Nezumi? Here, I’ll help you sit up.”

He worked a hand underneath Nezumi’s head and angled the canteen to his mouth. He drank greedily, emptying half the container before turning aside. Shion caught a flash of grey before Nezumi’s eyes slipped closed again with a soft sigh.

He waited a moment, hoping for another, longer glimpse, but it seemed Nezumi had fallen back into sleep. *I guess I’ll have to wait a little longer.* Shion placed the canteen down on the table and wiped his hand on his pant leg to rid it of condensation. *He seems better, though.* The thought soothed his harried nerves, but there was still something… *He feels a little warm.*

Shion rested his fingers against the inside of Nezumi’s wrist. His pulse thrummed steadily against the pads of his fingers, slightly elevated, perhaps, but nothing too unusual. He was already past the point when the possibility of infection was a danger.

“What’re you doing?”

The question was quiet and thick with sleep, but Shion flinched back as though Nezumi had shouted. His eyes were still closed, and if it weren’t for the groggy frown he was wearing, Shion would’ve thought he was still asleep and hadn’t spoken at all.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.” Although now that he knew Nezumi was somewhat conscious, he kind of wanted to keep him that way. “I’ll be done in a minute.”

Nezumi’s wrist did feel a bit warm, so Shion reached a hand out and laid the back of it against Nezumi’s forehead. It confirmed what he suspected: he was running a fever. It was a low one, though, and would likely break on its own. Nothing to be alarmed about.

“Enough,” he mumbled, reaching up to pull his hand away. Shion smiled in spite of himself. Even when he was sick and half-conscious, he was still the same Nezumi.

Nezumi huffed through his nose like a miffed dog. Except that the Nezumi he was used to would have tossed his hand away immediately after moving it, but the seconds ticked by and Nezumi’s fingers remained curled around his hand. Shion felt a heat spread through him that had nothing at all to do with fever.

*This is…* But Shion didn’t know how to finish that sentence. Was it awkward? Nice? Not a good idea, considering Nezumi probably didn’t know what he was doing? It was all those things, he supposed, but then what should he do about it?

Nezumi’s palm was hot, and it prickled in the places where their skin touched. Shion’s heart lurched in a way that was uncomfortable and yet exquisitely pleasant. He realized with a degree of embarrassment that his hand was starting to sweat, but even so, he didn’t want to let go. *I mean, he’s the one that didn’t let go first, so it might be okay to keep holding it… right? It’s not like I’m doing anything indecent.*

He watched Nezumi’s face for signs of disturbance, but it was tranquil. That made one of them;
Shion’s heart was going haywire, and he was pretty sure if Nezumi could see the state of him he would laugh. Or tell him to stop being an idiot and let go of his hand. Probably the latter.

*I don’t want to wake him up,* Shion decided at last. *Besides, it’ll be easier to monitor his heart rate and temperature this way.* But now he had a problem. He couldn’t just stand there all night. The past three days had been spent in a constant state of anxiety, and he was exhausted from the effort. What he really wanted was to sleep.

His eyes swept the room, and he caught the gazes of the mice as he did so. They blinked curiously at him and then scrambled onto the bed. Hamlet curled up in the corner and Biscuit settled on the top of the pillow. Tsukiyo, always the most daring of them all, climbed over the sheets and nestled himself in the curve of Nezumi’s neck without the slightest bit of hesitation. Shion was almost ashamed of the pins and needles that raced up his arm when Nezumi shivered and squeezed his hand tighter.

*Well.* Shion bit his lip. *It is my bed.*

Chapter End Notes

*w*
Snake

Nezumi would’ve liked to sleep longer, but as it was, his body was slowly dragging him into conscious. *It’s warm,* he noted with hazy pleasure. There was a draft over his face, but everything from his neck down was the perfect temperature. He couldn’t remember the last time he had woken so peacefully; it had been years. He was vaguely aware that he had fallen asleep in a bed and was extremely grateful for the softness and pliancy of the mattress beneath him. *Never going back to the couch,* he muttered internally.

He buried his face further into the pillow and decided he would stay there just a little longer. It had been so long since he had had a good night’s sleep. Something on his stomach itched, though, incessantly. After a minute of trying to ignore it, Nezumi couldn’t take it anymore. He growled and wrenched himself awake.

He opened his eyes and froze, the itching sensation instantly forgotten. It took him all of a second to work out that he was, in fact, awake, and that Shion was, in fact, lying inches from him, apparently fast asleep, but his guesses at how this could have happened were a little less forthcoming. *He looks horrible,* was the only thing that he could decide on with absolute certainty. Fortunately, Shion began to stir, so he figured he wouldn’t have to wait long for an explanation.

Shion’s lashes fluttered once, twice, and then he was awake. His dark eyes were bleary with sleep at first, but the speed with which they focused on his was almost comical, if it wasn’t so damn unsettling to be stared at inches from his face.

Nezumi held his gaze for a moment, before he formed his mouth into a lazy smirk. “Good morning, honey,” he purred.

Shion’s eyes widened, and he shot up so fast Nezumi wondered how he escaped whiplash. “Nezumi! You’re awake!”

“Indeed I am, and very curious as to the sleeping arrangements. Care to explain?”

“And you’re making jokes,” Shion breathed. “You’re so much better.”

Shion looked like he couldn’t decide if he should devolve into raptures or sob, and Nezumi feared what other unwelcome situations he might find himself in if he let Shion decide on doing either.

He shifted to prop himself up on his elbow. Some hair swept into his eyes and he reached up to brush it away, only to freeze for the second time in minutes. He pulled the lock he was touching out in front of him. It shone white and glossy against the fading lantern light. He pulled harder and a strand came away with a light twinge. It looked like a thread of silk. This couldn’t possibly be his… could it?

He sat up, and was reintroduced to the itchy pressure around his stomach. He yanked back the blanket to find a bandage wrapped around his midsection. Nezumi glanced up and raised his eyebrows at the dark-haired boy before him.

“Oh. Um. Right.” Shion wet his lips. “There were some things that happened after I cut the wasp out… Hold on, let me…” He stumbled out of bed to grab the mirror hanging on the wall. He hugged the glass to his chest. “Try not to freak out, okay?”

Nezumi made no promises, and continued to stare at the lustrous strands woven between his
fingers. Only when Shion approached with the mirror did he tear his eyes away.

His hair was white, so white it faintly shimmered when the light thrown from the lanterns flickered across it. It looked like it belonged on the head of someone fifty years older, yet his face showed no signs of aging, and his hair felt soft and healthy. What most struck him, though, was how drastically the change had sharpened his features into something almost otherworldly.

He grasped at the bandages around his torso. Shion had done an exemplary job wrapping them, and Nezumi grew impatient with how hard they were to unwind. He started ripping them any which way.

“That was another anomaly,” Shion said in an almost whisper. “It started to form around the same time your hair changed.”

The bandages fell away to reveal several red bands coiled around his stomach. The meandering line started at the jut of his hip and slithered up his torso, ending out of sight somewhere on his back.

“I checked, and the mark is only skin deep. Your circulation system hasn’t been damaged or anything, so whatever it is, it isn’t dangerous. But it doesn’t seem to be fading either.”

Nezumi ran his fingers over one of the bands. The skin was slightly raised, but otherwise it felt normal.

“We can’t do anything about the scars,” Shion continued. He adjusted his grip on the mirror, his hands leaving smudges on the glass in their wake. “We don’t have skin grafts or any medical technology of that kind here, but they can easily be covered by your shirt, so that’s good. As for your hair, we could dye it. That’s perfectly manageable—”

“No need. I like it just fine as is.”

“You… do?”

Nezumi raked his fingers through his hair, enjoying the reflection of it falling back into place with an almost translucent ripple. “Yeah. It’s kind of alluring.” He flicked his eyes up to Shion’s. “Don’t you think?”

“I…”

Nezumi meant to act innocent when he asked, but he found he couldn’t help a smirk from spreading at the confusion that played across Shion’s face.

“I think you’re taking this very well,” Shion huffed. “A little too well. Did you know this was going to happen?”

“No, but as far as battle scars go, these are pretty nice.” He tilted his head at himself in the mirror. “The scar kind of looks like a snake, doesn’t it?”

“That’s a little ironic, considering snakes eat rats.”

Nezumi chuckled. Shion lowered the mirror to rest against his feet and frowned at him.

“What? You envious?”

“Hardly,” Shion muttered. “I was just thinking that now you’re going to stand out—even more
than you usually do. I didn’t even know that was possible.”

Nezumi ignored the possibility of this turning into a conversation about his manifold attractions and focused instead on Shion’s appearance, the finer points of which were his raging bed head and the bags under his eyes.

“Speaking of looks,” he drawled, moving to the edge of the bed, “did you perhaps embrace West Block grunge while I was out?”

“What?”

“You look like you’ve been run over by a freight train.”

“Oh…” Shion’s hand flew to his hair. “I haven’t been sleeping much. Last night was the first decent sleep I’ve had in days…” His face suddenly soured. “It would’ve been better, though, if you hadn’t kicked so much. You kicked me twice, you know.”

Nezumi shrugged. “Your fault for crawling into bed with me. The reason for which you never explained, I might add.”

“Well, it’s fine,” Shion sighed, his indignance receding just as quickly as it washed over him. “I didn’t mind the kicking so much. At least then I knew you were alive.”

Leave it to Shion to effectively kill the mood.

Nezumi reached to feel the back of his neck. There was a small bandage there over the incision. Shion caught the movement and dropped his eyes. He replaced the mirror on the wall and began fiddling with a pot on the table, moving it to the top of the heater. Nezumi cleared his throat.

“Thanks. For the help.”

Shion nodded at the pot. “Of course.”

“I have to admit, I was worried you wouldn’t be able to handle the pressure. But you did pretty well, considering it was your first time putting someone under the knife.”

Shion laughed nervously. “Doing it myself was a lot more stressful than watching Yuichi.”

Nezumi furrowed his brow. “Yuichi…”

“He’s Kaze’s older brother. You’ve probably heard him mentioned.”

“Hm. So he’s a doctor-type like you, then?”

Shion shifted from side to side, his gaze glued to the pot. “Eeh… No, not really. He’s the barber…”

“What? You learned surgery from a barber?”

“He’s the only person around here who doesn't use a knife to kill people. And actually, there’s a historical precedent for barber surgeons, so it’s really not that weird.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Nezumi shook his head. “Yoming was right; you are dangerous.”

Shion smiled a little at the thought.
Nezumi reached for a shirt at the end of the bed. He had no idea if it was his or Shion’s, but it was going on anyway. The air was too cold to be without one long, and he was feeling a little exposed as it was. Nezumi pushed himself up and peered over Shion’s shoulder.

“What’s that?”

“Potato soup. It’s already made, I’m just heating it up.”

Nezumi resisted the urge to cringe. He figured he might as well give Shion the benefit of the doubt, but he couldn’t help remarking, “I thought I told you to leave the soup to me.”

“You weren’t exactly available the past few days. Next time. Besides, I put more salt in, so it should be okay.”

Nezumi hummed under his breath and plunked down on the couch. The soup, when it was offered to him, looked innocent enough. But then so did the last one. He did not attempt to hide his wariness when he took a sip, and Shion was doing an even worse job of looking confident.

Nezumi’s throat constricted.

It was too salty. *Does he not taste test these before feeding them to me?* Shion had been watching for his reaction, and he looked stricken when he perceived Nezumi’s flinch of disgust.

“It’s bad!” he squeaked.

Nezumi opened his mouth to tell him that, yes, yes it most certainly was.

“No, it’s fine. You did a lot better with the salt this time.” And then he took another sip.

*The fuck did I just say? It’s not fine! I’ll have a heart attack if I eat this!*

“I’m sorry, Nezumi. I guess I just really suck at making soup.” Shion smiled sadly. “You don’t have to force yourself. Here, there’s still bread, eat this.”

Nezumi gratefully accepted the alternative, while Shion took the soup and dumped it back into the pot with an unappetizing *slosh*. Nezumi nibbled the corner of the bread and Shion got up again to cook something else over the heater. He hoped it was tea. He wouldn’t mind something to wash away the briny taste in his mouth.

Shion, however, returned to sit next to him with a plate of fish and chopsticks in his hand. He picked at it while Nezumi munched his bread with a frown.

“Why do you get fish, and I got soup?”

“You haven’t eaten in days. I thought I’d start you out with something light, but…” Shion grimaced. “Anyway, you don’t like fish.”

“When did I ever say that?”

Shion lowered his chopsticks. “Last time I made it you said, ‘If I wanted food poisoning, I can think of better foods to get sick on.’ I formed an opinion from there.”

“That’s different. The fish here is a health hazard, but just because I don’t want to get worms doesn’t mean I don’t like fish. I ate it all the time in No. 6.”

“Mm. I’m sorry that our seafood falls below city standards, but there’s nothing I can do about
that. And I also don’t have any more fish.”

Shion plucked a crescent of bone from the meat with his chopsticks before popping the morsel into his mouth. He somehow managed to make the action look condescending. Something in his attitude reminded Nezumi of a conversation they had long ago.

“Shion, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

Shion stiffened partway through chewing. “Okay…” he swallowed, his voice dropping in apprehension. Nezumi realized his mistake in wording his sentence so ominously. No doubt Shion was expecting more bad news.

“Caviar is actually fish eggs.”

“…What?”

“I lied. Caviar’s not shark meat, it’s fish eggs.”

Shion gaped at him.

Then: “Pft.” He burst into a grin. “Oh, that. I looked that up the minute you fell asleep. It was the laughing that tipped me off. That was a mean joke, Nezumi.” He tried to sound cross, but a series of airy laughs escaped his lips.

Even Nezumi felt inclined to smile at the memory. “You were being an ass. Still are sometimes.”

“Yeah, okay, I know, but… I didn’t know you back then.”

“And you think you do now?”

There wasn’t much venom in the words, but they both paused a moment to gauge the other’s reaction.

“I hope so,” Shion said carefully. “I mean,” he bit his lip, “we slept together after all.”

Shion peeked at him through his bangs. The violet of his eyes stood out more with the remnants of three sleepless nights to underscore it. There was a faint blush on his cheeks, and Nezumi couldn’t help but find his demure reaction to his own tease amusing.

“Well played,” he said, settling back against the couch. “Although next time, try not to blush like a virgin. It ruins the effect.”

Shion’s smile was soft, and when he turned away to polish off the rest of his fish, Nezumi detected an aspect of sadness to it. He waited while Shion ate, hoping he would open up about the reason on his own, but it didn’t seem like he was going to be so lucky.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you acting gloomy all of a sudden?”

“I’m not. I was just thinking.” Shion placed his plate down on the coffee table. When he faced Nezumi again, the traces of sadness were gone, replaced by a beaming smile that was almost too kind to be real. “So have you thought about when you’ll go?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“The operation was a success. There’s nothing holding you here anymore. You can leave any
Nezumi’s eyes widened. That’s right. The wasp had been cut out and Elyurias dispelled; he was free to do as he pleased. He could leave this place far behind, today if he chose. There was no reason to stay. Except… There was something scratching at the back of his mind.

You will destroy No. 6, Singer. You will do this soon or everyone in this land will perish. There will not be another chance.

Elyurias’s parting words. The single proviso She attached to her leave-taking. Of course, he could ignore it and walk away still, but that meant he’d be abandoning West Block to the mercy—or rather wrath—of Elyurias. Was he willing to make that sacrifice?

Shion tilted his head at his silence. Nezumi frowned.

“Yeah, about that… I’ve decided to stay until you guys destroy the Correctional Facility.”

Shion’s smile melted. “Why? I thought you didn’t care about that.”

Nezumi shrugged, aiming to be cavalier. “I started the project, I might as well finish it. I don’t really care for your cause, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t enjoy watching No. 6 burn. I’ve said as much before. Besides, I’d feel guilty if you guys died failing to use my drives, and I don’t want to deal with that kind of emotional baggage.”

That was weak reasoning and they both knew it. Shion was looking at him like he thought every word he spoke was bullshit, and Nezumi knew it was unlikely that he would be able to come up with an excuse that would convince him fully.

Of course, he could just tell Shion the truth. But it seemed a bit cruel to have to inform him that although he succeeded in preserving one life, he did so only to condemn everyone else, himself included, to death if they failed to destroy No. 6 in a timely manner. He already had enough pressure with the impending Hunt and the Correctional Facility job; Nezumi was reluctant to add anything more to his plate. There must be a better justification. One that Shion would at least have some trouble dismissing.

“Think of it as payback,” he continued lightly. “I’m fulfilling my debt.”

“Your debt?”

“You helped me out, so I’m honor bound to repay the favor. I don’t like to leave favors outstanding, so until my debt is cleared, I won’t feel comfortable skipping town. That’s just how it is.”

“Nezumi. You don’t have to feel indebted to me. I wanted to do it. It was as much a selfish decision on my part as it was anything else.”

Nezumi narrowed his eyes. “Are you looking down on me?”

Shion started. “What? No, I’m—”

“I know you have difficulties understanding the concept of pride and its aversion to obligation, but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t belittle my rationale.”

That shut him up. Shion didn’t look completely convinced, but Nezumi had planted enough seeds of doubt in his mind that he wasn’t likely to question his motivation again. This would
Nezumi steered the conversation in another direction, toward a question of his own.

“So,” he lilted, breaking the atmosphere with a coy smile. “Was that joke before an invitation for me to sleep in your bed? Because now that I know you have a halfway decent mattress, I have absolutely no intention of returning to the couch.”

Shion’s mouth popped open, but he had the decency to close it immediately. “Oh. Um, sure. If you don’t mind sharing, that is.”

“I do mind, but seeing as it’s your bed, I’m not really allowed to complain, am I?”

“I guess.”

“All I ask is that you keep your hands to yourself. I know I’m hard to resist, with the new hair especially, but I won’t tolerate any nighttime groping.”

Shion laughed. “Don’t worry, I know better than that. You’d probably kick me if I tried.”

“Damn straight.”

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Shion suggested that they pay a visit to the Resistance headquarters as soon as Nezumi was well enough. He was anxious to assure everyone that they weren’t dead and apologize for the long absence. Plus, he wanted to deliver the rifles he had stashed in his organ back to headquarters. If the Hunt was coming, they needed all the firepower they had. Nezumi reluctantly agreed to make an appearance the next afternoon. Whether he liked it or not, thanks to Elyurias he was more invested in the cause than he ever wanted to be. If their plan for the Correctional Facility was going to work, he had to focus all his skills into it.

He hoped the robot had returned with the drives by now. When Shion asked if he had any useful contacts in No. 6, Kaoru was the first to come to mind, partially because they were the only person he ever talked to—period—and partially because they were the only person he knew that was suspicious of the city. Whether Kaoru decided to help Shion’s contact out, Nezumi could trust they wouldn’t endanger the mission by tattling. He had less trust in their inclination to risk their safety for him, but it was worth a shot, even if it was a long one.

*If the drives aren’t here by now, then they’re probably never coming. And then we’re screwed.* Such dispiriting thoughts were not to be dwelt upon, however.

When it came time to leave, Shion fretted over Nezumi’s hair, asking several times if he wouldn’t rather borrow a hat, despite Nezumi’s firm rejections. He didn’t think his hair was anything to be embarrassed about; it was proof that he had survived, he was proud of it, and he wasn’t going to hide it, no matter how many stares it drew. Staring he could handle.

“It’s not a matter of pride, but precaution, Nezumi,” Shion groused. “Will you at least pull the superfibre up while we’re in the street?” To this Nezumi finally relented.

The atmosphere in the market was tense. He could see the worry and anger pinched into the creases of people’s faces. It had the effect of making them more conversational than they were prone to be any other day. Nezumi caught snatches of conversation as he and Shion threaded through the crowd.
“The Disposers and Resistance got all the guns in this place! What about us, huh?”

“I ain’t staying. Soon as I sell the rest of this junk, I’m outta here.”

“Just because someone shot at him, doesn’t mean the army’s coming. You ask me, it was probably some guy with a bone to pick with Yoming.”

This last tidbit intrigued Nezumi, and a little bit longer eavesdropping and a few questions to Shion informed him that someone had apparently tried to assassinate Yoming. They failed, unfortunately, but the result was that the Resistance was in chaos. The Resistance and its perils were a frequent topic of conversation amongst the townspeople, but the words whispered most under everyone’s breath were “the Hunt.” The attempt on Yoming’s life was a harbinger.

*At least they have forewarning,* he thought. He said as much to Shion.

“I suppose. But it doesn’t make defending ourselves any easier. Since Yoming started the Resistance we’ve had a little more hope, but still… It’s a good thing Yoming wasn’t killed. Morale is already bad enough.” Shion’s face was solemn as he looked around at the West Block residents. “We have our hands full.”

The mood in headquarters was equally strained, but while the chatter on the streets was fearful and belligerent, the members spoke in level tones, working diligently all the while. They were stressed, clearly, but they presented themselves with reasonable composure. Yoming occupied his usual place at the back of the room. He and a woman were locked in what looked like a heated debate, but they kept their voices too low for any of it to be intelligible. A young man and woman were watching them with weary faces from their perches atop the boxes in the alcove. They had splints on their leg and arm respectively, so it was more likely they were reacting to personal pain rather than whatever they overheard.

Everyone looked so busy, that Nezumi and Shion placed the rifles they were carrying on a pew off to the side, rather than trying to find someone to hand them to. Yamase caught their eye as they walked a little farther into the room. He smiled and inclined his head. He looked genuinely happy to see them, although perhaps more because of Shion than him. The inherent relief in the greeting felt out of place among the somber attitudes of the rest of the company.

Nezumi flicked the superfibre cloth off his head just to see what effect it would have on him. Yamase blinked and frowned a little, but as far as reactions went, it was unsatisfying. He should’ve expected as much from a man who was known and valued for his discretion. Kaze would be a better object of study. Kaze was leaning against a table at the center of the room talking to Safu, who appeared to be listening with one ear only.

“Safu! Kaze!”

Their heads weren’t the only ones to whip around at the sound of Shion’s cry, but it was only Safu and Kaze who continued to stare. Safu’s eyes widened, and the expression with which she studied Shion was odd, almost terrified. Nezumi would have expected her to rush over and rain questions and concerns upon his head, but she remained rooted to her spot by the table. When her dark eyes panned to Nezumi they narrowed to slits. He could tell she noticed his hair, but she showed no shock, only barely reined in contempt. Nezumi almost whistled; it’d been a while since she’d glared murder at him.

He was distracted from his observations by Kaze’s gaping. “Shit, man. What happened?”

“Hello again, Kaze.”
“Don’t ‘hello’ me all casual.” He walked to him and leered. “What’s up with that hair? Is it real?” He reached out to feel it, but Nezumi drew back.

“You can look, but don’t touch.”

Kaze raised a single eyebrow, and Nezumi realized that the hair had at last grown back completely. Now he could make expressions of disapproving confusion as well as anyone else.

Shion stepped up. “Some stuff happened. It’s a long story.”

“Mm.” Kaze sobered. “Speaking of stuff that happened, Yoming was shot at, did you hear?”

“I did.” Shion’s gaze drifted momentarily toward Safu. She had gone back to looking down at the papers on the table and appeared to have no intention of speaking to anyone. “But I also heard he wasn’t injured,” he finished.

“Yeah, well, he wasn’t, but two of our guys got shot for real. Yuichi’s fine at surgery, but he sucks at everything else, and those guys aren’t looking too good. I’d check on them to make sure they don’t have infections or something.” Shion leaned over and peered at the sorry-looking couple slumped on the boxes. “But careful with the boss. He was pissed about you going AWOL, and now he’s in a worse mood because of everything that’s gone down. Tread lightly, alright?”

“Thanks, Kaze.”

Nezumi smiled drolly when Shion went directly to Yoming and invited him to chew him out. He supposed it was the safest way with the man. He could only hear bits about duty and respect and other cause-related vocabulary, but Shion bore it with quiet apology and bowed low when Yoming had finished. Yoming scowled and pointed in the direction of his wounded comrades.

Nezumi felt a light tug on his hair and turned to glare at Kaze. “It’s real. And what did I say about touching?”

Kaze held up his hands defensively. “Alright, alright, but it’s killing me. I mean, you disappear for three days and you come back with a dye job? What’s with that?”

“It’s not a dye job.”

“Yeah, okay. Whatever you say. So?”

Kaze didn’t look like he’d give up. *Shouldn’t have rejected the dye excuse...* Telling the truth was impossible, obviously, so he went with sarcasm.

“Spending three days shut up in a room with Shion made me age a century.”

Kaze snorted, but Nezumi was more interested in Safu. She had barely moved a muscle since Shion and he came into headquarters, but she moved now.

She pushed back from the table and stalked toward them, and there was such a familiar seething rage emanating from her that Nezumi knew what was coming, even before Safu’s hand came down with dizzying force across his cheek.

The sharp *crack* of the slap reverberated through the church, thanks to the excellent acoustics, and everyone’s attention was drawn to them by the time the echo died. Safu didn’t stick around to be gawked at. She looked barely placated as she stepped around him and headed straight out the door. Nezumi probed the inside of his cheek to check for cuts. It was clean, but he could still taste
the vibrations of the hit on his tongue.


“I’m fine.” It had hurt a little, but he was more surprised by Safu’s ferocity.

Kaze glanced at the door. “I don’t know what’s gotten into her, but Safu’s been in a really horrible mood lately… Guess you just pushed her last button.”

The comment was almost funny, considering he had been using Shion to push her buttons since the day he met her.

*That was a lot of rage, though. I’ve said worse, so why is she snapping at me now? It feels like I’m missing something.*

He caught Shion’s eye. The boy had been crouched in front of the wounded man’s leg, wrapping his calf with a medical dressing, but he had twisted around when he heard the slap and was now gaping openly at Nezumi. Shion turned back to the man and appeared to have said something, for he nodded and took the gauze from him. Shion pushed off the ground and hurried over.

“Are you okay?” He reached up, but stopped himself and dropped his hand. “What happened?”

Nezumi sighed. “It’s fine. I deserved it.”

“How did you deserve that?”

“Don’t you have patients to take care of? Get back over there before Yoming murders you.”

Shion shook his head. “I’m sorry, Nezumi. It’s me Safu’s mad at, not you. I’ll go talk to her.”

“I already told you it’s fine.”

But Shion was already on his way to the door. Nezumi pressed his mouth into a line and turned to Kaze. He half-expected him to walk out the door, too. Instead, Kaze gave him a quizzical look.

“Stress,” he observed as if it was the answer to all of their mysteries. Maybe it was. Kaze scratched at a patch of skin on his forearm and Nezumi realized it was pink and shiny. He had similar, although milder, burn marks on his hands. “Well!” Kaze said. “I guess since Safu ran off, I get to tell you the only good news we have: the drives arrived.”

Nezumi picked the mouse off the table and poured the drives from its compartment into his hand. He frowned.

“There were only two when the mouse came?”

“Hm? Yeah. Why?”

*What happened to the third one…? One under the desk, one under the couch, and one in his bag, separated just in case any were discovered. Nezumi cursed under his breath. My bag. Of course. They must have destroyed it. How could he have forgotten? He had placed the third drive in his workbag for safekeeping, and he had left the bag behind when the Security Bureau ambushed him. Naturally, when they erased him from the city’s records they would’ve done away with all of his personal property.*

Nezumi mussed his bangs. “How tedious.”
“What? Are we missing one?” Kaze paled, and Nezumi realized that he was just as panic-stricken as the rest. He covered it up better than the others with jokes and an easiness of manner, but the bliteness had evaporated from his demeanor.

“We are, but it's not a problem. I'll just rewrite that part of the code when I compile them. It'll be annoying, but I can do it.”

There was a reason why that drive was kept on his person. It was the easiest and most innocuous string of code, the least incriminating should someone check through the contents of his bag. It wasn’t impossible to rewrite it by memory.

Kaze nodded. “Good. That’s good. I’ll let you get to it, then.” Kaze clapped him on the shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “You’re a lifesaver, man.”

Nezumi watched him walk away. He shifted his jaw and then turned to boot up the computer.

“They’re all fools,” he muttered.

He uploaded the codes on the drives and began hunting in the sequence for the holes in the program. The missing data wasn’t too much or too complicated, but even so, he realized that rewriting it would take a day or two. *Let's just hope the Hunt doesn’t come before then.*

Twenty minutes into his work, the crow swooped down from the rafters and alighted on the table. It clicked a few times and Nezumi spared it a glance, catching a glint against the sleek black down of its chest. Nezumi was pleased with how well the miniature camera blended in with the crow’s feathers. He had done an excellent job, if he said so himself. Not that Yoming acknowledged it with anything more eloquent than a grunt of approval. However, knowing the capabilities of his surveillance, he didn’t want it anywhere near him.

He made a sharp noise and waved it away. The bird squawked angrily and fluttered to its master. Yoming didn’t even flinch when it landed on his shoulder. He was too focused on checking through their boxes to notice, perhaps, because he seemed to be just as ignorant of the young man loitering behind him. He looked vaguely familiar, although Nezumi couldn’t place why. Regardless, it was evident he was in earnest to speak with Yoming, judging by the way he was wringing his bandana.

Nezumi returned to the computer screen, but he couldn’t help checking the man’s status every once in a while. It took him eight minutes standing there to finally muster enough courage to speak.

“Mr. Yoming, sir?”

Yoming turned half around. His eyes immediately fell on the bandana in the man’s hands, and he turned fully to face him. “Yes, Comrade?”

“S-sir.” The man shifted. “Sir, I’m very sorry to bother you at such a critical time, but I have a request. I…”

Yoming crossed his arms and waited, his black eyes scarcely ever blinking. Nezumi couldn’t see how the young man took it, but he couldn’t imagine it helped to soothe his nerves.

“I would like resign from the Resistance!” the man blurted. He doubled over into the straightest, deepest bow Nezumi had ever seen. “Forgive me! I know it’s cowardly, but I have a family that needs me. If I die in combat, there will be no one to provide for them, and I— Please understand, I can’t stay!” The desperation of the man’s voice jostled Nezumi’s recognition, and he realized that he did know him; this was the man who had begged Shion’s help when his wife was
in labor.

Yoming was impassive. He tapped his finger intermittently against his arm, but other than that he made no indication of responding. The young man remained bent over as the seconds ticked by. Finally, Yoming sighed.

“Get up, there’s no need for that. What’s your name, son?”

The man straightened. “Aki, sir.”

Yoming nodded. “Well, Aki, I can’t fault you for wanting to protect your family, and if you truly feel that being in the Resistance is a death sentence, then I won’t hold you back. I’m sorry you feel that way, of course, and I’m sorry to see you go, but I won’t stop you if that’s what you decide to do. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, I really am, but…” The man hung his head and held out his bandana to Yoming. “It’s been a pleasure serving under you.”

Yoming didn’t even look at the bandana. He kept his gaze trained on the other man’s face. “Before I take that, I have to warn you that it’s highly probable you will be targeted by No. 6, even if you cut ties with the Resistance.”

The man flinched back. “Sir?”

“We’ve known for some time that No. 6 has satellites watching our every move. It’s very likely they know our numbers and the faces of our members, and when they come down here, we’ll be the first people they’ll be gunning for. Do you have any weapons issued to you by the Resistance?”

“Yes, sir, a rifle.”

“Just a rifle?” The man nodded. “Right. Well, you’re going to have to return that.”

“What?”

Yoming shook his head. “I wish I could furnish every civilian with a weapon, but as it stands, the Resistance can only afford to give guns to those who are willing to fight for the cause. You understand, don’t you?”

The young man didn’t say anything.

“If you don’t have any other way of protecting your family without that rifle, the only thing I can suggest is that you lie low until the Hunt passes.” Yoming frowned. “I’m not trying to scare you, Aki. I’m just laying down the facts, so you’ll be prepared when the time comes. As I said, I won’t try to change your opinion if you’re set on resigning, but before I take that bandana from you, I’ll ask again. Are you sure you want to leave the Resistance?”

“I…” The young man balled the bandana in his fist. “I… think I’ll stay.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Alright, then.” Yoming nodded, a proud smile ghosting over his lips. “I know times seem dark right now, but stay strong, Comrade Aki. There is nothing to fear; we will be victorious.”

“That’s bullshit.”
Yoming’s genial mask slipped off. “You have something to say, Elite?”

Nezumi pushed out of his chair. “Yeah. You’re an asshole.”

“Nezumi,” someone hissed from off to the side. He was fairly certain it was Kaze.

“You’re dismissed,” Yoming barked to the young man, who shrunk back and away. Yoming did a quick sweep of the room and Nezumi realized he must have been looking for Shion.

“I have to give it to you; you are by far the most manipulative bastard I’ve ever met. Are you really so hard up that you have to threaten your underlings to keep them from running off?”

There was a clamor from behind him and Nezumi tossed a brief glance back. Yamase was ushering people from the room. The members looked disgruntled, some curious, some actually angry, but hardly anyone protested as they were herded out. In the end, only he, Yoming, Kaze, and Yamase remained. Yoming rolled his shoulder and the crow, too, departed.

So this is to be a private performance, then. Too bad.

“I suggest you keep your mouth shut about things that don’t concern you,” Yoming growled. “I never threatened anyone, everything I told that man was the truth.”

“The truth? No, what you just told that man was a fallacy. And if you didn’t intend to bend the truth to suit your own wishes, then that makes you stupid as well as manipulative.”

The thrust landed just so. Yoming tensed and Nezumi allowed a wry smile to grace his lips.

“You’re referring to what I said about No. 6’s armies, I assume.” Yoming squared his shoulders and faced him, a power stance to combat Nezumi’s condescension. He realized he had to play the game if he was going to save face. “The city perceives us as a threat, do you think there isn’t a real possibility they’ll want every one of us eradicated?”

“Oh, sure, the possibility is there, but it’s so infinitesimal it’s hardly worth entertaining. No. 6 may have satellites trained on West Block, but I can tell you they sure as hell don’t give a shit about small fry like that guy. How much free time do you think they have? They’re not going to waste ammunition on headhunting the entire organization when they could just go straight to the source. The only person that has to worry about attempts on their life is you. But I’m sure you know all this already.”

“That’s your opinion, and since you can no more prove it than I can prove mine, it’s moot. Fine, yes, I admit I gave that man a little push, but it had to be done. We need every man and woman to unite against No. 6—and I mean every last one. The Hunt is designed to cull our population, keep us weak and scared so we won’t be a threat. The Resistance is the only thing standing in the way of that happening again. We represent order and strength, and if my men start running off, as you so eloquently put it, that image falls apart, and so does West Block’s future. We don’t have the luxury of cowardice. I’m trying to save lives.”

“By dictating how your people should use them, and under what circumstances you’ll allow them to be sacrificed? That’s not really your decision.”

Well this sounds familiar.

Yoming shook his head. “I was charged with defending this town against the likes of No. 6. The men and women who join the Resistance are aware of the risks and they trust me to use our resources wisely; that includes manpower.”
“It’s not trust in you that keeps them in the Resistance. It’s fear, and you’re preying on it.” Nezumi sneered. “I seem to recall a certain Holy City that uses similar tactics to keep people in line.”

A feral snarl tore from Yoming’s throat. “How dare you!” He took an aggressive step toward him and Nezumi’s hand closed around the knife in his pocket. “I work tirelessly day in and day out for this organization, and I do it for everyone. For these people who have lost their sons, daughters, wives, husbands—for my wife and son, who committed no greater crime than walking down the fucking street when No. 6 open fired! You have no right to criticize me or my methods when it’s you, your people who are responsible for this and for every fucking nightmare that’s ever happened to this place.”

A dangerous light glinted in Yoming’s eyes and Nezumi did a quick run through of all the vital points on the human body. He tensed when the man took another step closer.

Kaze slipped between them.

“Whoa, whoa, chill out, guys! C’mon, is this really what we want to be doing right now?”

“Get out of my way,” Yoming ground out.

“With all due respect, didn’t you just say that we need every single one of us if we’re going to—”

“No. Not him. He’s one of them.”

“No anymore. He’s one of us now—”

“Goddammit, Kaze!” Yoming roared. “I’d expect this from Shion, but you? You know the shit we’ve had to pull just to make this work, what we’ve been through—what I’ve been through. I’ve poured two years of my life into trying to maintain some sense of order in this hellhole, and for what?”

The words rang out, crackling like thunder in the hollow of the church. No one moved for a few savage moments. The threat in Yoming’s eyes still glowed hot, and Nezumi had yet to relinquish his hold on his hidden knife. Kaze swallowed between them.

“It doesn’t matter what he thinks,” Yoming hissed at last. “This is our cause. I’ll do what it takes to make sure justice is served, and if a few men are sacrificed in the effort, then so be it.” Yoming’s glare held enough acid in it for Nezumi to feel its burn, even through Kaze. “Now get out.”

“Let’s go, Nezumi,” Kaze said. When they were halfway across the room, he added in a barely audible whisper, “Before he fucking kills us both.”
The Hunt

Chapter Notes

The moment we've all been waiting for… or is it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shion sucked in a breath and winced at the cold burn at the back of his throat. The sky was gunmetal grey, and the brittle air threatened snow. He pulled his scarf tighter around his neck, and did another sweep of the crowd in the hopes of finding Safu. She had neglected to show up at headquarters the last few days, and people had started to talk. Yoming was trying his best to hold everyone together, but despite his efforts, there were several members who resigned after the news of the coming Hunt. Some made formal apologies, but still more simply took off their bandana and disappeared.

Safu was a notable personage in the group, and her absence was swiftly noticed and just as quickly suspected. Shion assured those who asked that she had not deserted, but in truth, he wasn’t sure. He hadn’t spoken to her in three days, and that was by her express instruction. She said she needed space to put her feelings in order. At the time, Shion was more than willing to give her what she asked, since she had made some unsettling insinuations about his and Nezumi’s relationship, and he wasn’t quite sure how to face her in light of them.

When he had chased after her on the day he and Nezumi returned to headquarters, Shion had been leery of finding her. Safu had a knack for making herself scarce when she didn’t want to be found. He was relieved, therefore, when he found her leaning against the wall just down the street, and took it as a sign that she wanted to discuss her actions against Nezumi.

“Don’t bother asking me to apologize,” she said when he approached. Shion balked at the acid in her voice, and Safu released a remorseful sigh.

“Look,” she said more kindly. “I’m not sorry for what I did, but I’m sorry for taking it out on you right then. This is going to take some getting used to, and I’ll be the first to admit that I’m not handling it well. But even if I can’t understand why you chose Nezumi, of all people, I—” Safu’s expression soured, and then soured further at the slip-up in her control. “No, nevermind. I’m not going to pretend I’m okay. I’m not going to say it doesn’t hurt, but I promise I won’t interfere again. I’ll spare you the guilt trip, as long as you spare me the pity.”

Shion furrowed his brow. “What are you talking about? Is this about the other day? I know you were mad at me, but Nezumi—”

“He’s not good to you, Shion!” Safu grit her teeth and turned aside. “Maybe he’s different when you’re alone—I hope he’s different, because whenever I see him he’s a complete jerk. He doesn’t treat you like he ought to, and I can accept that you don’t love me like I love you, but don’t expect me to sit by and watch you be with someone who doesn’t respect you.”

“Wait, hold on.” Shion’s stomach roiled as his mind tried to slog through the implications of Safu’s rant. “Wait,” he said again, feeling the heat creeping up the back of his neck. “You think Nezumi and I… That we’re…”
Safu watched him with a patient frown, as though she expected this slow response and was prepared to wait until he recovered. He reached full comprehension, just as the heat climbing up his neck succeeded in painting his face pink.

“Nezumi and I are not…” He choked, trying to find the right words to describe what they were not, but his language centers seemed to be fried. “Like that,” he finished weakly.

“But you like him.”

Safu’s voice carried the weight of fact, and Shion was too flustered from denying her first accusation to come up with any sort of response to this new one. The patient look had returned to her face, but it didn’t look like she was waiting for a confirmation. The seconds ticked by and her stoicism softened. She finally turned away with a sigh.

Shion studied Safu’s profile. Her hair had grown out, the strands curling over her ears and her bangs so long neglected they would cover her eyes if she hadn’t swept them off to one side. She looked older, sadder, and more beautiful than he had ever seen her, and Shion felt a twist of guilt in the pit of his stomach. He opened his mouth, but Safu cut a look at him.

“Don’t you dare say you’re sorry, or I’ll slap you too.” Her voice was firm, but there was a small smile on her lips and distant tenderness in her eyes. “You don’t have to apologize for what you feel—or don’t feel, for that matter. I’ll get over it eventually. Just…” The emotion on her face struggled a little, but she wrestled her features into a look of resolution. “Just,” she repeated with more force, “make sure he treasures you.”

Shion flushed even now at the memory. He hadn’t known what to say to that, and since then he’d been trying just as hard to sort out his feelings as Safu was. He hadn’t been aware of any shift in his relationship with Nezumi, or at least, he had not tried to put words to what he felt for him. But Safu was perceptive, and if she was convinced that there was something, then…

Shion had gone home from their talk confused and contemplative. He was hyperaware of Nezumi once they were enclosed in the small space of the bunker together, but he didn’t shy away from the nervousness. Instead, he sought to find out its source. He watched his roommate, measured his own responses and thoughts, and tried to pinpoint the strength and variety of his feelings.

He thought Nezumi was beautiful; there was no denying that. Every movement he made was an act of grace, and more times than not Shion was caught dumbfounded. He often wondered if Nezumi’s poise was specific to him, or if all citizens of No. 6 possessed that level of elegance. Nezumi’s perfection was such that he could hardly believe he was human. His eyes were too penetrating, his skin too pale and unblemished as porcelain. Shion couldn’t count the times he went lightheaded holding his breath, waiting for Nezumi to breathe, blink, make some sign he was mortal and not a finely crafted doll.

The changes to his appearance after the wasp incident made the illusion even harder to dispel. Sitting across from him, his white hair loose over his shoulders, he seemed more like an ethereal being come for a short visit than the moody teen with which he’d spent the better part of two months.

Nezumi had, of course, noticed his staring, as he was apt to do. He lifted his eyes from his novel and pinned him with a languid look, and the stirring Shion felt in the pit of his stomach was undeniable. Nezumi’s eyes exceeded the beautiful, bright and cool as mercury and just as volatile. They emoted more keenly than any he’d ever known, and yet, they always looked quiet. Even when Nezumi was furious—especially when he was furious—his eyes were still, but never mute.
In the moment Nezumi glanced up from his novel, his expression communicated boredom on the surface, but the light in his eyes told Shion he was curious, if not mildly amused. The candid emotion in Nezumi’s looks always made him want to reciprocate his honesty.

“I’m glad you’re alive,” Shion confessed in reply to his questioning gaze.

Nezumi recoiled, snapping at him for being an airhead, and returned to his novel, disgruntled. Shion smiled and decided he liked this part of Nezumi, too, the part that shied away from tenderness. For someone who hated pretense so much, he was rather uncomfortable with sincerity. Shion could understand that, though. Nezumi’s upbringing in a false paradise with liars as his only company had ill prepared him to trust the intentions of others. And yet he had never been broken by the deceit. Nezumi had an unshakeable self-assurance, and strength of spirit that Shion envied.

So what did this all amount to? He admired Nezumi, respected him, and saw in him qualities that he longed to possess. He was drawn to Nezumi, but whether that attraction translated to love, he wasn’t sure.

Love.

Shion paused and tasted the word. All around him he heard the bump and clang of people packing their belongings for flight, the shouts and scrapes in preparation for fight or fortification. The air reeked of apprehension, and each fresh breath pulled it deeper into his body, until every nerve sang with fear. West Block was on the brink of war, and here he was contemplating what it took to love someone. This wasn’t the time for such a thing. *Or maybe it’s the perfect time.*

What if he lost Nezumi?

*I don’t want that.* He didn’t need to think on it to know it was the absolute truth. *I don’t want him to leave. But he is; he will. He’s staying for the time being, but soon enough...* Shion clenched his fists and let the certainty of that eat away at all the layers of his doubt and fear, until he was empty of all but the pain.

Yes, he loved Nezumi, but putting a name to his feelings changed nothing; Nezumi would go and Shion would love him too much to ask him to stay.

He grit his teeth and hurried on. *Safu,* he reminded himself. *I need to find Safu.*

He finally found her in front of Gin and Yang, packing rations with other members, judging by the gold bandanas around their necks. Safu’s own neck was bare.

She spotted him before he was close enough to speak to her, and she paused halfway in her trek to load a box of food onto the back of a cart. “Did Yoming send you?” she asked when he was in range.

“No. I came because I was worried.”

“That I had quit the Resistance?”

“Have you?”

“No.” Safu carried her box the rest of the way to the cart. “We’re in too deep to back out now.”

Shion nodded, but he didn’t have a chance to comment. Someone behind him screamed, and another voice soon joined, and then the street was awash with shrieks. Those Resistance members with weapons dropped the boxes they were holding, snatched their guns, and held them at the
His blood turned to slush in his veins. It was not the army they expected. Two armored vehicles were rolling up the street, obstructing almost the entirety of the space. The tanks themselves looked like relics of a lost time, likely salvaged from before the Babylon Treaty. They skimmed the sides of the buildings in the areas where the road narrowed, tearing free tents and awnings with relentless indifference. A woman manning a food cart barely escaped as one of the tanks rammed into her stall and dragged it beneath its belly. Shion flinched at the sickening crunch of the wood splintering under the wheels. Some of the fleeing people had enough wits about them to dive into alleyways or building entrances, but the majority was pushed in a blind forward frenzy down the road.

*No one has been crushed yet,* Shion thought. *Not by the tanks, at least.* He watched an older person trip and scramble to right themselves while the crowd crashed against them. They managed to ride the force to their feet and continued their desperate flight.

Shion swallowed at the faded gray panels mounted on the roofs of the vehicles. He couldn’t be sure what they were, but there was no doubt in his mind that they were some manner of weapon. Previous survivors of the Hunt said that No. 6 had been using West Block to experiment with acoustic shock weapons. If the panels had such capabilities, and No. 6 decided to fire them, the Resistance wouldn’t stand a chance, not with just rifles. Still, the members held up their guns like they intended to try, regardless of their odds.

*But they won’t fire until fired on. Yoming was explicit in that instruction.* But if No. 6 attacked first, the destruction would be catastrophic. Acoustic weapons didn’t aim for kills, but utter devastation. Everything in the vicinity would shatter on impact, whole buildings would crumble, and those who weren’t crushed under the rubble would find escape difficult among the wreckage. A few of the guns behind him twitched, and he wondered if the others were thinking along the same lines.

“Shion,” Safu breathed. Her eyes glinted at him from under the eaves.

*It’s dangerous to stand there if the tanks fire,* he realized.

A second wave of screams yanked his attention back to the road. The army they had expected had arrived. It filtered in at the opposite end of the road, equipped with riot shields and sleek firearms, effectively blocking off any escape route. They were surrounded, corralled like animals destined for slaughter.

“Please remain still. We do not intend to shoot. Repeat: we do not intend to shoot.”

A booming voice echoed throughout the street, and for a moment Shion couldn’t place where it came from, but as the announcement repeated a few more times, he had no choice but to accept that the tanks were the source. There were murmurs from the crowd. The Resistance members shifted, trading furtive glances between them.

*If they don’t intend to harm us, why did they bring tanks?*

Shion shot a look at Safu and she nodded at his suspicion. The broadcast ended, and there was silence. The people in the street stood stock still, the Resistance members kept their guns poised to fire, and No. 6’s army waited.

“Good morning, citizens of West Block.” This was a different voice from the one that gave the
announced. It was colder, smugger, and it made Shion’s skin crawl. “We apologize for any alarm we may have caused with our procession, but given our history, you must understand our caution. However, I can assure you this isn’t a Clean-up.”

“Clean-up”? Is that how they think of it? Shion grit his teeth.

“We have no interest in harming you, we come only to reclaim something that a few of your comrades stole from us. A boy who goes by the name ‘Nezumi.’ The Resistance has been sheltering him for some time, and as they’re not exactly shy about their activities, I’m sure more than a few of you know Nezumi, or at least know where he can be found.”

Shion’s vision began to spot, and he realized he had stopped breathing. He choked down a breath and forced himself to focus.

“Now, I understand that many of you don’t have a high opinion of our city, but we’re willing to make it more than worth the betrayal. Whomsoever brings the boy Nezumi to us—alive, I should probably add—will be rewarded thirty gold coins.”

The soldier heading the army produced a fat bag, and pulled out a handful of coin for the crowd to see. The metal gleamed dangerously in the pale light. The air hissed with gasps and exclamations of disbelief. One gold coin could buy you half a year’s worth of luxurious living; thirty gold coins was a preposterous sum, more money than any person in West Block could ever hope of seeing in a lifetime.

Almost every head roved in the direction of the Resistance, and Shion could perceive more than one Disposer in attendance. He wanted to bolt. He could think of very few people who would value loyalty over money, Resistance members included. One sentence was all it took to turn the whole of West Block into a nest of vipers.

“Easy as that,” the smug voice drawled, dipping into sickly sweet tones. “You hand over the boy, we hand over the money, and everyone parts ways without a drop of blood spilled between us. I don’t much care how you manage to secure the boy, so long as we have him in our custody within the next few hours.

“But before we turn you loose, let me make a few things clear: no compensation will be given for information on the boy’s whereabouts; either you bring him to us, or lead us to him. And if any of you decide to be clever and take the money by force, we will not hesitate to respond with violence. Similarly, if you do not cooperate, or if we don’t have the boy by… let’s say two this afternoon, then we’ll be forced to take things into our own hands, and you know what that looks like. I have no trouble with that option, but it would be such a waste of an easy thirty gold for you. Your choice.”

The army at the opposite end of the street parted in the middle to allow people through, but no one moved just yet. The crowd continued to leer at the Resistance with ravenous concentration, and if it weren’t for the guns, Shion feared they would have already pounced. The Resistance members reacted instinctively to the predatory intent directed their way by keeping their guns raised and steady, but even they looked uneasy. Shion didn’t wait for them to decide where their loyalties lay.

He pivoted and ran into Gin and Yang. The main road was dangerous; could be followed, could be attacked, and anyone who knew the least bit about the Resistance knew that headquarters would be the most likely place to find Nezumi. Safu fell into step beside him.

“Through here,” she barked. She pushed through the employee door and he followed. The back
entrance to Gin and Yang led to an alleyway just parallel to the main street. Shion took the lead from there, diving in and out of alleys and buildings, calculating which routes would be fast as well as provide the most cover.

How long would it take for the whole town to know? If No. 6 had spread its forces out, if they had broadcast that message simultaneously in several locations, they had only minutes before headquarters was mobbed. Shion willed himself to run faster. The street to headquarters was not yet flooded with people.

*Nezumi.*

“Nezumi!”

Shion hurtled through the door, startling every single person inside headquarters, but the only one he cared about was sitting at the computer, wide-eyed with alarm. Nezumi rose.

“What—?”

“Come with me. Now.”

Shion took him by the elbow, and Nezumi allowed himself to be lead to the back room of the building. Safu slipped in after them and closed the door.

“What’s going on?”

“No. 6 came.”

Nezumi’s brow twitched. “The Hunt?”

“Kind of, but not really. They’re looking for you, only you. They’re bribing the townspeople to find you and bring you to them. It’s not safe to stay here.”

“We should take him to the safe house,” Safu said. She was leaning with her ear pressed to the door. “I didn’t see Yamase on the way in, so he must be there.”

Shion nodded several times. “Yes. You’ll be safe there.”

Click.

They started at the sound, and Shion cursed internally when he remembered that there was a back door to this room. It was almost entirely obscured by boxes, so it was easily forgotten, unless one used it frequently. All three of them pulled out their weapons and pointed them at the intruder.

Kaze froze, his eyes sweeping from Nezumi and Safu’s knives to Shion’s pistol. “You’re pretty quick with that,” he said to Nezumi with a lopsided grin.

“Kaze,” Safu exhaled. She lowered her knife. “Sorry. It’s just—”

“Everyone and their mother has got it out for Nezumi? Yeah, I know. Hence me coming in the back door.” He glanced at Nezumi. “You guys got a plan?”


Kaze nodded. “Yeah, that’s probably best. We should get going now, then. People are starting to realize you’d be here, and,” he frowned a little as he finished, “unfortunately, I’m not sure everyone wearing gold is as trustworthy as I am.”
“We need the drive before we go. It’s still plugged into the computer out there.”

Shion blinked at Nezumi. “You don’t need the drive.”

“I do if they manage to catch me. Think about it, they’ll deliver me straight to the Correctional Facility. The least I can do is fuck the place up while I’m there.”

“That won’t happen. I won’t let them take you,” Shion insisted. Nezumi was unaffected by his resolution, and only frowned at him with the kind of disapproval one reserves for troublesome children.

“I’ll get it,” Kaze said. “I’ll draw the least suspicion. Be right back.”

Safu stepped aside and let Kaze slip through the door. It took only a minute or so, but every second they waited was spent in the slow agony of uncertainty. Shion’s eyes darted between the doors, and between Safu and Nezumi, carefully counting down the moments. Tsukiyo popped out of the folds of superfibre around Nezumi’s neck and gave a soft cheep. It was a small kind of relief to see that he was safe.

A short rhythmic tapping signaled to Safu that Kaze had returned. She cracked the door just to be sure it was him, before pulling it open enough for him to slink in.

“Got the drive,” Kaze said passing it over to Nezumi, “but we’ve got a problem. There are people out front making an awful lot of noise. I didn’t get a good look, but I think at least a few of them are Disposers.” Kaze’s dark eyes fell on Shion. “They’re yelling for you.”

“Shit—”

“Dammit,” Shion and Nezumi muttered at the same time.

Kaze nodded, silently agreeing with both sentiments. Shion raked his fingers through his bangs. He had expected the Disposers would be among the first volunteers for the manhunt. They despised the Resistance and anyone that had to do with it. Shion had very few enemies, but those who had taken a disliking to him were Disposers. They accused him of robbing them of jobs, and Shion resented their mercenary perspective on the nature of life and death. That the Disposers had chosen to go after him and not Nezumi, though, was encouraging. If they were asking for him, then that meant they weren’t certain if Nezumi was in headquarters.

If we could distract them, trick them into staying here, Nezumi will have a better chance of escape.

“Where’s Yoming?” Safu demanded. “He should be here.”

Nezumi snorted. “I don’t think Yoming would be too keen on helping me out right now.”

“Maybe not, but he could at least control that mob outside. He would at least make sure headquarters was defended.”

“As it stands, the mob’s not going away,” Shion murmured. “Alright. Here’s what we’re going to do. Kaze and Safu, you take Nezumi to the safe house. I’ll stay here and keep the men out front distracted so you have time to get away.”

“No,” snapped Safu. “We all leave together. They haven’t caught on to the back door; if we run now, we’ll be long gone before they come looking.”
“Maybe, but if I show them that I’m here, and make them think Nezumi could be, too, they won’t be chasing you at all. And the crowd might even draw more people in. The more people that think Nezumi’s in here, the less people on the street searching for you.”

“It doesn’t have to be you, though.”

“I’ll do it,” Kaze said. “You go with Safu and Nezumi, Shion. I can handle keeping a few Disposers busy.” He rested his hand on the grip of his shotgun.

Shion smiled wanly. “That’s kind of you, Kaze, but I have to be the one to do it. You said they’re asking for me specifically, right? That’s not a coincidence. They know I’m close with Nezumi—the whole town does, likely. But that’s just it; they all know me, not Nezumi.” Shion’s violet eyes locked onto Nezumi’s grey ones. “With Nezumi’s change in appearance, people who did know him before will be less quick to recognize him, and if he pulls the superfibre up he’ll be even less noticeable. If anyone sees me with him, however, it won’t matter how well disguised he is, we’ll be hunted. I’m not trying to play the hero; I’m literally the only one of us that it’s safer to leave behind.”

Nezumi held his gaze through the entire explanation. He had yet to speak out either for, or against, the proposition, and although he didn’t look happy about it, there was an air of calculation to his expression that Shion was banking on.

“We don’t have time to argue,” he insisted. “You need to leave now.”

“He’s right,” Nezumi said flatly. “We’ve done enough waiting around, and I, for one, don’t plan on being mobbed and kidnapped today.”

“Kaze can take you, then,” Safu said. “I’m staying with you, Shion—”

“Safu, no! You’ll be safer with them. Please, if you want to help me, go with Nezumi.”

The shadow of something like realization flashed across Safu’s face. Shion couldn’t be sure what exactly she comprehended in his looks or tone, but he was relieved to see the fight go out of her.

“Come on.” Kaze tapped her arm and turned toward the door.

Safu followed Kaze, but her eyes lingered on Shion. “Promise me you won’t do anything reckless.”

“I promise. I can take care of myself.” He smiled, but it didn’t reassure anyone.

Nezumi was the last to move. The frown he had worn since Shion burst through the doors of the building was still etched onto his face. It flitted through Shion’s mind that this was the first time he’d seen Nezumi since realizing his feelings, and when Nezumi turned to leave, the intensity of his anguish almost suffocated him.

Before he had time to reconsider, he reached out and grasped his hand. “Nezumi.”

The grey glimmer of Nezumi’s eyes on his replenished Shion’s courage, but could not give articulation to his emotion. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he didn’t have the words, and there wasn’t time to find them. Somehow, though, Nezumi seemed to understand.

He nodded once. “I’ll see you when this is over.”
He disappeared out the door and Shion was left alone with that promise and the slightest sensation of pressure around his fingers.

Shion crossed the room and locked the door to ensure that no one would be able to ambush the building. He stood a moment, and then pushed a few boxes in front of the door for good measure. With that settled, he charged into the church proper. Most of the people were huddled around the table at the center of the room, but a few were peeking out the corners of the window. Nearly all the members jumped when he entered, but they relaxed a little when they saw who it was.

“Comrade Shion.” A woman stepped a little out of the group around the table. She was one of their newer members, who joined only a few months back. A quick survey told him that all those in the room were young members, some in age and others just in the amount of time they’d been a part of the Resistance. “There are people outside calling for you. What’s going on?”

They don’t know. That’s right. They couldn’t, if they’ve been in here the whole time. There was little they could gain from knowing the whole truth of the situation, so he just answered, “No. 6 came and everyone’s in chaos. The streets aren’t safe, so you all need to be careful.” Every member’s face drained of color. “Just stay put. I’ll take care of the people out front.” The woman made no other acknowledgement than nibbling the edge of her thumbnail.

They had apparently been frightened enough that they had taken measures to barricade the door with one of the pews that lined the walls. That was good. They might be able to wait it out. Shion sidled up to the window and peered out of it. He felt sick. He recognized the men outside. They were definitely Disposers, and their leader was the one-eyed drunk he had assaulted. The man looked much soberer and infinitely crueler.

“You better get yer ass out here, Shion,” One-eye called. “My buddy here’s got one of them fancy Resistance-type guns, and he’s dying to try it out.”

Shion couldn’t see any men with guns from his position. He chanced leaning in a little more to see around the window frame, and yes, there was One-eye’s mustached companion holding a pump-action shotgun.

“There he is!” whooped a man he wasn’t sure he knew. He couldn’t get a good look, because when the gunman spotted him he raised his weapon, and it was all Shion could do to dive down behind the window as an explosive shot blew a hole through the glass.

The other group members yelped, and those around the table dove for cover, while the ones by the windows flattened themselves against the wall. Luckily, the stray bullet hurt no one, but Shion stared numbly at the glass shards.

Maybe he had got this all wrong. Maybe they weren’t interested in finding Nezumi at all. This might just be a vengeance mission. Apart from nasty comments, or the occasional spat, the Disposers usually kept out of the Resistance’s way, for fear of Yoming’s wrath. But now, with Yoming missing, the Resistance in disarray, and resident pitted against resident by No. 6’s design, they grew bold. They would use the Hunt as a cover to carry out their personal vendettas.

The men outside guffawed. Another click and report, and this time the shot ripped through the top of the door, too high to be a serious attempt at harm. A taunt, he assumed. Everyone waited for the next shot, but it didn’t come. There was a scuffling sound outside, however, and grating voices. Shion strained to hear.

“What’dya mean there’s no more? The hell is wrong with you? Didn’t you check?”
“Get more!”

“There isn’t more!”

*Did they run out of shells?* A tentative hope blossomed in Shion’s chest. He crawled to the window on the opposite side of the room and hazarded a peek. The Disposers were glaring at and cursing out the mustached man for his stupidity in not checking how many shots they had. Shion had never been so happy that guns and ammunition were few and far between among West Block citizens. It didn’t look like they had any other weapons on their person, or at least none that were long range. They were safe for now.

“Idiot,” One-eye snarled. “I’ll get him myself.” He whirled around in search of something. He found what he was looking for in a thick piece of wood jutting out from one of the buildings, and tore it off. “Ey! Shion! Either you get out yer ass out here now, or I’ll burn the damn building down. How ‘bout that?”

Shion’s eyes widened. *He can’t be serious.* But the man looked deadly serious as he struck a match and ignited the wood. One-eye barked an order to the others to make more torches. Shion scanned the room. He could gamble with his own safety, but no one else’s.

He turned to the nearest person. “Help me pull this pew away from the door. Once it’s moved, get everyone out of here through the back, understood?”

The man jerked his head and scampered over to push the bench, while Shion pulled until it was at a wide enough angle for the door to be opened. Shion waited until the last person disappeared into the back room, collected his breath, and went to open the door. He stopped with his hand on the knob, and rested the other on the grip of his pistol.

*I could shoot them. There’s only five, one bullet for each of them.* The mere thought made him feel dirty. The Disposers might hate him, and though he didn’t like them much either, he didn’t want to kill them. Besides, five bullets were all he had. If he used them all now, he’d be defenseless later, and what if he missed? *It’s no good. I can’t do it.* Shion removed the pistol from its holster and placed it under the pew. He wasn’t going to use it, and he didn’t want to give the Disposers access to another firearm.

Shion willed himself to look confident as he stepped out.

“Finally wised up, eh?” One-eye spat. “Just in time.”

Shion hardly heard the second statement. *There were five men. Two I don’t know, and the three from before.* But only four stood before him: the leader, the two strangers, and the mustached man, whose hands were now empty. *Where’s the gun—*

Something moved at the edge of his vision, but Shion had barely enough time to feel alarmed, before the butt of the shotgun smashed into his face.

Chapter End Notes

Well shoot o-o
Nezumi kept watching for a glimpse of No. 6’s army, but he had yet to see it. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe the West Block residents’ testimonies about its existence, but he wanted to see it with his own eyes, no matter how morbid it was. The only things he saw, though, were dirty back alleys and the just as filthy people that lurked in them.

He kept a vigilant eye for any dangerous persons, but the superfibre must have been doing a decent job of making him inconspicuous, because no one seemed to be too interested in him or his companions. He didn’t even stand out with the hood; there were plenty of people with shawls or coverings over their heads, especially now that the temperature had dropped. As long as one moved quickly, no one paid any mind. The gold bandanas, however, attracted all kinds of attention.

Safu hadn’t been wearing one, but a little while after they’d set off she told Kaze to take the cloth from his arm. It had brought a few stares their way, although no one by that point had been brave enough to trifle with a man with a double barrel shotgun strapped to his chest. He removed the bandana nonetheless.

Others in gold had less luck. They had come across several spats between Resistance members and the general populace, some of them violent, and every moment Kaze and Safu were looking more nervous. The last time they passed a man with a gold bandana, he was lying in a pool of blood off the side of the road.

“I’m going back for Shion.”

Nezumi and Kaze turned to face Safu. She was glaring, as though challenging them to refute her decision. Or maybe it was an expression of self-directed rage. Regardless, no one tried to dissuade her.

Nezumi had no doubt Shion could take care of himself, but if he was honest, it made him uneasy to leave him to fend for himself against a horde of angry people, most of which were likely Disposers. Shion’s reason for staying was logical, and Nezumi’s survival instinct agreed with it. Shion was a danger to his safety and should therefore be abandoned—but a quieter, unfamiliar impulse simmered beneath the instinct. It wasn’t quite protective, but if Nezumi dared to put a name to it, he might have placed it somewhere in the vicinity of loyalty.

It had needled him when Shion grabbed a hold of his hand, compelled him to make reassurances he couldn’t be sure of making good on, and the disquiet had been smoldering in an unvisited corner of his mind ever since they left. The pressure of it eased a little, though, now that Safu was determined to go back for Shion.

Kaze nodded at her. “You’re gonna need more than a knife to take on the Disposers. Here.” He pulled his gun out of its holster and offered it to her.

Safu blinked at it and then at Kaze, but took it from him anyway. “Thank you.”
“Bring him back, yeah?”

Safu nodded without the slightest hesitation. Her gaze slid to Nezumi. “Don’t get caught. Stay in the safe house and lie low until this is over.” She turned on her heel and ran back the way they had come.

“Well, I guess it’s just you and me now,” Kaze said with faux lament. “Best get a move on. These streets aren’t getting any safer, and now I’m unarmed.”

“Good thing I’m quick with a knife.”

Nezumi pulled the superfibre closer about his face and walked ahead. Kaze chuckled. He was taller than Nezumi, so it didn’t take long before he caught up and then overtook him by a several paces. They hadn’t traveled more than a few minutes before someone called out to them.

“Nezumi.” The voice was feminine, and for a moment Nezumi thought Safu had returned, but it was too deep. He turned to see a woman exiting the alley just behind them.

“Kei.”

“I almost didn’t recognize you,” she chirped. Kei’s smile was tight at the corners, and her hands were clasped behind her back.

Nezumi slipped his hand into his pocket. “Kind of the point.”

“Yeah. No. 6, right? Everyone’s going crazy out here.” She didn’t try to approach, but Nezumi kept a wary eye on her arms.

Kaze stepped next to him. “What do you want, Kei?”

The woman’s smile hardened. “Yuji. I didn’t realize you were here, too.” Nezumi didn’t miss when her gaze fell to the empty holster on Kaze’s chest. “Where are you guys going?”

“None of your business.”

“I came to help.” She took a step forward, and Nezumi and Kaze drew back in the same motion. Kei winced with hurt. “You can trust me.”

“I can, can I? Mind showing me what you’re hiding behind your back?”

Kei’s brow pinched. Slowly, she brought her hands out from behind her. Kaze exhaled with a hiss when he saw the knife in her hands.

“It’s for protection,” she insisted.

“I’m pretty sure we’ll be a lot safer without you,” Kaze sneered.

Kei growled under her breath. “Fine. I don’t know why I even bothered. I hate both of you cocky bastards.” She dropped the innocent pretense all at once and held the knife out in front of her in an offensive stance. “Alright, look. I don’t want to hurt you, Nezumi, but you have to come with me.”

“You don’t want to hurt me, hm?” Nezumi’s mouth curved up at the edge. “Sounds like you picked the wrong weapon, then.” He pulled his own knife from his pocket and snapped it open.

Kei’s eyes danced up the length of the blade. She seemed to recognize that he was no amateur
with his weapon; she adjusted her grip on her own knife. Kaze glanced between the two of them and stepped out of the way.

Nezumi inched a foot forward and was delighted to see Kei flinch. “I’ll give you the option of backing out now.”

Kei wet her lips. “I need to bring you in. It’s nothing personal. You understand, don’t you?”

“Sure I do. If you’re going to betray your beliefs and do No. 6’s bidding, you might as well get compensated. Maybe then it won’t seem like such a cowardly decision.”

Kei’s face darkened. “You don’t get it at all. If you cared about any of the people here, you’d turn yourself in. But I guess you’re still one of them—”

Nezumi shifted and swiped at Kei’s leg. She stumbled back quickly enough to avoid the strike, and attempted to put a little more distance between them after she regained her footing.

With that one move, Nezumi was able to discern all he needed. She was scared, she was half-hearted, and she was violating the first rule of combat: she picked a fight she wasn’t confident she could win. Nezumi continued to push into her space so there was no hope of escape unless she cut her way out.

As he expected, Kei did not perform well under pressure. Her thrust, when she finally made one, had too much extension. She was wide open to a number of fatal attacks. He could jam the blade into her stomach, or plunge it into her exposed neck.

End it.

Nezumi sidestepped her strike and slashed the back of her knife hand. Kei dropped the knife instantly and he kicked it off to the side where she couldn’t reclaim it. Although, the chances of her wanting to continue were slim, considering she looked well enough spooked by the stream of blood from her hand.

“You cut me!”

“It’s nothing personal.”

Kei whimpered and covered the gash with her other hand to stem the bleeding.

“That’s nothing,” Kaze scoffed. He moved to where Kei’s knife skidded and plucked it from the ground. “I would’ve went for the whole hand. Taking bribes from No. 6? That’s the lowest of the low.”

Kei snapped out of her daze and rounded on him. “You are such an asshole, Kaze! You think this is about money? I don’t care about that. I’m trying to save us—all of us! They just want him,” she spat at Nezumi. “They’ll kill us all if they don’t get him! Or do you really think we stand a chance against No. 6?”

Kaze let out a feral growl, almost too animalistic to be called human. “They’ll attack us anyway! They’re just using this to weaken our forces. The point of the Resistance is to protect our own and fight back against greedy pricks like No. 6, not do their dirty work.” Kaze scowled and shoved the knife into his empty holster. “You’re a disgrace, Kei. To the cause and to West Block.”

Kei turned away. She made a half pained, half frustrated sound when she realized there was still a steady flow of blood coming from her hand. “I can’t believe how selfish you are,” she seethed.
Nezumi didn’t know at which one of them the words were directed, and he didn’t really care. She was unarmed and wounded, and thus no longer a threat. He wiped the knife on his pant leg, closed it, and dropped it back into his pocket.

Kaze gave Kei one last look, and then they set off.

“She won’t follow us,” Kaze grumbled.

“I’d be impressed if she did.”

They slipped through the streets and alleys quicker now than before. An unspoken decision made between them, inspired in equal parts by wariness and weariness. Perhaps he was growing paranoid, but it seemed to Nezumi that there were more people around now, and these were more watchful than before. They stared longer and looked more desperate. Nezumi and Kaze ducked into the doorway of a house to avoid a small pack toting bats and other unpleasant looking implements.

“So if no one delivers me to No. 6, the Hunt goes on as planned?” Nezumi asked, after they began moving again.

Kaze glanced behind them. “That’s what the announcer guy said.” He reached for his holster and gripped it so hard his knuckles stood out sharp and white on his hand. “Fucking No. 6, man. They messed everything up with their shitty mind games. We were supposed to stand united against the city, but we’re tearing each other apart. I was prepared to die in battle with my comrades, not against them. But if something like what happened back there happens again, I don’t care who they are, I’ll do what it takes to survive.”

This was the first time Nezumi had seen Kaze angry. I would be angry, too, if I were him. No. 6 undermined everything the Resistance had worked for. In light of that, he wouldn’t have blamed Kaze if he wanted nothing to do with him. After all, it was him they were after, and him that West Block was tearing itself apart over. Yet, here Kaze was, helping him to safety. Not for the first time, Nezumi wondered why Kaze was so loyal to him.

Kaze shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’ve gotta survive,” he said in a more subdued voice, “because after this I’m gonna propose to Yuki.” He looked at Nezumi in earnest, like he needed someone to bear witness to his resolution. “I promised her if I survived, we’d get married, and I plan to stick to it. I’m gonna get a real job, and she won’t have to work anymore.” Kaze nodded to himself. “Yeah. I’m not going down without a fight.”

Nezumi hummed in acknowledgment. He recalled that Kaze had mentioned marriage before, when he was drunk. Yuki’s distressed reaction back then made more sense now that he knew the proposal hinged on survival of the Hunt. It was almost too cruel of a promise to have made.

“So,” Kaze lilted, arching a suggestive eyebrow, “what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You gonna propose to Shion when all this is over?”

“—Huh?” Nezumi almost halted, but retained enough self-control to speed up instead.

“I saw you two back there.” He flashed his canines. “No need to be shy; I support you.”

Nezumi glared straight ahead. Only Kaze could say something so stupid. Feelings, Shion’s or his own, romantic or otherwise, were the furthest thing from his mind.
“Are you embarrassed?”

“I was thinking about stabbing you, actually.”

Kaze’s laugh was loud and annoying. “You’re a good kid, Nezumi.”

Nezumi didn’t dignify that comment with an answer. They had come to the end of the path and there were now two ways to go. He glanced at Kaze for instruction on which to take.

“Oh, right. I forgot you don’t know the way.” Kaze took the left road. “You’ve been there before, though. But I guess you wouldn’t know that. The hideout’s super secret; only a handful of us know its location.”

Nezumi glanced around. The neighborhood was familiar. This was the way to Yamase’s house. The safe house. Of course. He was better acquainted with their secret hideaway than even Kaze probably knew. It was the first part of West Block he was shown, and almost the last part, too. He wasn’t too excited about seeing the safe house when Safu first mentioned it, but any curiosity he might’ve had was irretrievably lost.

The Resistance had chosen their safe house’s location well; there was hardly a soul in sight, and certainly no one who looked like they could put up much of a fight.

Kaze rapped on Yamase’s door and waited. Nezumi caught movement at the window. The glass was too grimy to properly see through, but he could make out the silhouette of a person standing behind it. The figure was there for only a moment before disappearing. Nezumi wondered if the window was somehow two-way, but immediately dismissed it.

“Yamase,” Kaze said, loud enough to be heard through the door, but not enough to call attention. “It’s Kaze and Nezumi. Open up.”

The door clicked and Yamase peered out. There was a terrible air of anxiety rolling off the man. It made Nezumi’s skin itch. Yamase’s brow pinched with an emotion very like dismay when he looked at Kaze. When he changed his focus to Nezumi, the expression morphed into something more guarded, but not any less agitated.

“You gonna invite us in?” Kaze groused, pushing past his friend into the house. “We weren’t followed or anything, if that’s what you’re worried about. Nezumi cut down everyone in our way.”

“That’s reassuring,” Yamase said, despite looking anything but reassured.

“Hey, really, don’t look so worried.” Kaze gave Yamase an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “We’re safe here.”

Yamase’s eyes followed Kaze as he moved to the vault door and started twisting the dial. He was biting his lip, and Nezumi noticed the man couldn’t seem to stand still. He flexed and fist ed his fingers by his sides constantly. Yamase caught his eye and swallowed, before dropping his eyes to the floor. It could just be the result of nerves, but his antics filled Nezumi with a sense of déjà vu.

“Gotcha!” Kaze cheered. “C’mon, Nez.”

Nezumi kept his eyes glued to Yamase as he moved towards the basement door. “Don’t call me that.”

“I don’t, Yuji.”

Kaze’s face soured. “Yeah, alright. Geez,” he mumbled as they descended the stairs.

It was bright down in the basement, and Nezumi realized that the room must have electricity. He hadn’t seen that at all yet in West Block, but this room somehow managed to have it. And I guess that means the whole interrogation by lantern was just supposed to be intimidating. Nezumi shook his head wryly.

When they reached the bottom of the staircase, a different motive for the lantern occurred to him. The room was crammed with boxes and shelves, some of them weapons, and all of them advertising danger. A couple of the barrels in the corner were literally marked with a red inked, capitalized “Danger.” No wonder they didn’t want any but a select few to know where the safe house was or what it contained; there were enough weapons in the room to fuel a small army.

I suppose that’s the point, though.

There was only one other person in the room, and Nezumi almost groaned aloud at the sight of him.

“Yoming?” Kaze’s voice rang with disbelief. “What are you doing down here?”

Yoming spared Kaze a glance, but didn’t say anything. He was sitting on a box, his eyes watchful, but calm, and his ever-present crow perched like a gargoyle on his shoulder. There wasn’t a trace of the animosity he unleashed on Nezumi a few days prior. He was still haggard and scruffy, but he looked more like the man that interrogated Nezumi on the day he arrived than he had in weeks. Whatever the stresses and responsibilities that had been weighing on him, he had conquered them for the moment.

“I don’t know much about leading revolts, but I at least know you don’t win by hiding underground,” Nezumi said, allowing only a trace of disdain to color his tone. “What’s wrong? Did you get cold feet?”

Yoming shrugged. “It’s a little hard to wage war when your forces are divided against you.” He pushed himself up and fixed Nezumi with a mirthless smirk. “Word on the street is No. 6 is paying big money for your return. After I heard that, I came back here to wait. I knew you’d show up sooner or later.”

Nezumi raised an eyebrow. “You plan on turning me in, old man?”

“Of course not.” Yoming pulled his gun from its holster. “I’m going to kill you.”

Nezumi tensed. He was underground with no escape routes, and he was inadequately armed; he had quite literally brought a knife to a gunfight.

He could feel Kaze bristle beside him.

“Boss—”

Yoming turned his gun on Kaze. “I’m not in the mood.”

Kaze pulled his chin back and scowled like a wounded animal. His eyes darted toward Nezumi, but Nezumi didn’t notice. He was too busy trying to come up with an escape route and preparing to dodge when Yoming fired.
His gaze flicked toward the barrels. Kaze had glanced nervously at them when Yoming pulled the gun. Nezumi inched toward them, while Yoming’s focus was trained on Kaze. In a flash, the gun swung back to him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Nezumi put his hands up with a guilty smile. Yoming scowled. “I should’ve done away with you a long time ago. This was West Block’s chance to overcome No. 6 and gain some self-respect, but now we’re back to tearing each other’s throats out—because of you. You claim to have no connections to No. 6, but you’re poison just the same. You ruined everything, everything the Resistance worked for.”

“Killing me doesn’t make any of that go away. Instead of wasting your time down here, you should be up there salvaging what’s left of your forces.”

“I will, just as soon as you’re dead. No. 6 might’ve thwarted our rebellion, but at least this time, I can keep them from getting what they want.” He cocked the hammer on his revolver.

“Careful!” Kaze yelped. He eyed the area where Nezumi was standing. “If you miss—!”

“I’m not going to miss,” Yoming said, but there was the slightest tremor across his concentration.

_I picked my spot well, then. If this is what I think it is, he won’t shoot._ Nezumi stepped closer to the barrels. Yoming’s eye twitched, but he curled his finger over the trigger.

The crow squawked shrilly, and the scrape of footfalls interceded in the deadly silence. All eyes went to the stairs, and all widened in confusion when they saw Yamase take a step into the room. It was alarming enough that their lookout had left his post, but one look at Yamase, and Nezumi knew something was terribly wrong. His face was pale and drawn, his movements robotic. Whatever he had come to tell Yoming, it was devastating.

Nezumi slipped off to the side behind a stack of boxes and crouched down. He was confident no one saw him; everyone was riveted by Yamase’s appearance. His sightline was limited from his new position—the sliver between the boxes showed him mostly Yoming, and just the slightest glimpse of Yamase by the stairs—but it was well worth what protection it provided.

“Sir,” Yamase started, but his voice trailed off. He stepped beyond where Nezumi could see him, and another figure moved into his place. Nezumi could tell it was another man, but he was standing a little too far back to discern who he was.

Yoming’s mouth twisted in disgust. “Getsuyaku, what the hell—” His livid expression faltered, and in the lapse of control, Nezumi could read horror on his face. The crow on Yoming’s shoulder chittered, sensing his master’s distress.

Nezumi leaned to the side to try to get a look at what, or who, had struck the man dumb, but he only managed a fuller view of Getsuyaku’s anxious face.

“You bastard!” Yoming spat. “You brought _them_ here?”

“No, it’s not like that,” Getsuyaku sputtered. “I mean, I did, but it’s… They won’t hurt anyone. They just want the boy.”

Nezumi clenched his teeth. _No. 6. He brought No. 6 down here?_ He suddenly wished he had been more accommodating towards Getsuyaku. He hadn’t thought enough of the man to even imagine he could be a threat. How many soldiers had he brought? More importantly, how well armed were they?
Getsuyaku shrunk from the murderous air rolling off Yoming.

“You selfish ingrate. How do you think Renka’s going to feel knowing you chose money over loyalty—over family?”

“I did this for Renka! It’s not just about the money, it’s—it’s more than that.”

Both men looked like they wanted to say something more, but shame checked the former, and outrage strangled the latter.

“Don’t blame the poor man, Yoming,” a third voice cut in, and when Nezumi recognized the airy condescension, his heart beat double-time.

Rashi. He couldn’t see him, but even the thought of the man left a bitter tang in his mouth. He had hoped he might’ve been a fatality of the crash, but Nezumi knew well that luck had never been on his side.

Yoming recoiled at the man’s words, but if this amused Rashi, it didn’t show through in his voice. “He’s only thinking of his family, same as you. Isn’t that why you started this little group of yours, to create a safer world for your family? Thanks to your friend here, you have nothing to fear regarding your sister and niece’s welfare. We’ll take good care of them inside No. 6.”

Yoming’s face froze white with shock, but as he processed the words, the color returned in darkening shades of fury.

“What did you do?” Yoming’s voice crackled.

“I made a deal for us,” Getsuyaku answered in a small, pleading voice. “They promised that everyone here would be safe, and Renka, Lili, and I… The city is safer than West Block—you know it is—and I have another child to think about. Please, Yoming, you—”

“You imbecile!” Yoming roared. “Like hell No. 6 is going to let you live in their city! They don’t want to help you, they want to exterminate every last one of us, and you led them here? You gullible, fucking idiot! People are going to die because of you!”

“N-no. That’s… No one will get hurt. They said they wouldn’t hurt anyone, as long as I bring them to the boy. You said…” Getsuyaku shifted, and Nezumi assumed he was turning to confirm with the soldiers that they meant to keep their word.

“I can’t guarantee anything until you produce the boy.” Nezumi could imagine the smarmy smile Rashi must have been giving the man.

The man nodded weakly and turned back to Yoming. “Where is he?”

Yoming sneered back at him, but the thought of securing his family’s protection steeled Getsuyaku against his brother-in-law’s disdain.

Nezumi hunched more into the shadows and eyed Yoming speculatively. Would he dare turn him over to the city he hated so much? To do so would be to submit to No. 6, an act that his pride would violently rebel against. But if he complied, it would save the people of West Block.

Well, in theory. But there’s no way No. 6 will spare them. If they don’t kill them today, then they’ll definitely be back to finish the job at some later date. Yoming must know they’re screwed no matter what.
Yoming crossed his arms and tossed a lackadaisical look around the room. “Does it look like he’s in here?”

“I saw him come in. With Kaze.” Getsuyaku glanced off to the side, but Nezumi couldn’t see Kaze’s reaction from where he was crouched, and the man didn’t say anything. “I saw him,” Getsuyaku insisted.

“If you’re lying you’ll get nothing.” Rashi’s voice was bored.

“He’s here. Yoming, please, you don’t even like the kid. Think of Renka and Lili. Help me, if only for their sakes.”

“Don’t you dare bring them into this. You’re a disgrace to them both.”

A low whine escaped Getsuyaku’s throat. He turned to Rashi again. “He’s here, I promise. He’s probably hiding somewhere; you just have to look. I’ve done my job, I’ve brought you to where the boy is, so…” There was silence for a moment as Getsuyaku wrung his hands. “The reward,” he finished faintly.

“Ah. You’re quite right.” There was an edge to Rashi’s words that made Nezumi’s skin prickle. “You’ve done what was required of you.”

Click.

The noise was soft, no more threatening than the sound of a lighter being flipped open, but someone gasped. Getsuyaku crumpled to the ground, and Nezumi watched, transfixed, as blood soaked into the fabric of the man’s shirt. Silencer, his brain supplied, even though the rest of him seemed to be frozen.

The spell was broken only by a bright flash of gold, as numerous small, metal pieces rained over the body and hit the concrete with a series of dull chinks. A few of the objects rolled across the floor towards the boxes, and Nezumi sneered with recognition: the shower had been composed of gold coins.

“Your reward, as promised,” Rashi drawled.

Yoming stared at Getsuyaku’s motionless body and the coins splayed over it. His face was blank, but his body was rigid, as though he could at any moment leap back to his senses and tear Rashi’s throat out. Nezumi hoped he would; the officer deserved it, and more.

“You should’ve been more cooperative, Yoming,” sighed Rashi. “Maybe then we could’ve avoided all this unpleasantness. How much of your family are you going to get killed before you finally give up this pathetic notion of rebellion?”

Yoming didn’t bother with words. He raised his gun and pulled the trigger.

Click. Crack! Click.

The sound of Yoming’s gun was eardrum shattering in the enclosed space. Nezumi couldn’t see if his shot met its target, but that Rashi had hit his was excruciatingly clear.

Yoming fell hard against the concrete floor, his gun skittering out of reach. The crow on his shoulder squawked and kicked up into the air in a storm of feathers. After the furious beatings of the bird’s wings died away, there was not a noise save for Yoming’s labored breaths. He released a guttural sound, half a hiss, and half a gurgle of agony. Rashi had placed his shots well, avoiding
the superfibre shawl, and electing instead to blow out his knees.

“Bastard.” Yoming gripped the tops of his legs and gasped. “Cheap shots.”

“I know. But you have only yourself to blame; your chest and neck were so well protected by
the superfibre, your legs were the only option. Although, I can’t say I dislike the symbolism.”

Rashi stepped into view, and Nezumi bristled. He was wearing the dark, crisp uniform of a
Bureau officer, and still without the sunglasses. He looked no different than the last time Nezumi
had the displeasure of seeing him.

The man gave Yoming one of his mirthless smiles and extended his arm. The gun he held
inches from Yoming’s forehead was outfitted with a long, black tube. So he had been right about
the silencer.

Yoming’s face was bright red, a combination of pain and hatred that made him look fearless, in
spite of the humiliation he was facing. Blood had begun to pool around his knees, but he was
determined to die with his pride intact.

Rashi grinned at the display of bravado. “That’s it. Show your men how strong you are ‘till the
last.”

“Fuck you.”

Rashi tilted his head, as though he had been expecting a response along those lines, and was a
little disappointed he was right.

Fwp.

Yoming’s death was quick, but it didn’t look painless. His head snapped back with the force of
the shot, causing him to arch backwards and land in an awkward heap. It was disorienting to see
the man who had plagued him for months dispatched in a matter of seconds. Two dead in the span
of minutes. No. 6 was nothing if not efficient.

No one made a sound, and Nezumi realized that neither Kaze or Yamase had tried to intervene
—not in the conversation, or the slaughter that ensued, nor the silence that settled in its wake. He
could only imagine what they were thinking as they watched their leader’s execution. Probably
that they should keep still and quiet, or else they could be next.

“Messier than I intended,” Rashi said. He sounded more pleased than put-off. “Well, the higher
ups will be relieved to know he was finally put down. To business, then.” His black eyes skimmed
over the boxes. “Isn’t it about time you showed yourself, Citizen Takashi—or shall I call you
Comrade Nezumi now? You’re certainly a survivor; I’ll give you that. And still just as good at
getting people to take the bullet for you.” Rashi nudged Yoming’s body with the tip of his boot.

Nezumi felt a twist of disgust in the pit of his stomach. He didn’t like Yoming, but he despised
Rashi, and no one deserved to be disrespected after death.

“We’re really not so different when you think about it. We neither of us are afraid of stepping
on a few people to get what we want.”

Nezumi set his teeth, but he had used that baiting tactic on other people enough times to know it
was never worth reacting to. So what if he was callous and self-serving? Sharing attributes with
No. 6 didn’t make him the same breed of monster.
When Nezumi didn’t answer immediately, Rashi filled the silence with his own grating voice.
“Why don’t you come out? You were never so shy before.”

*Why don’t you come looking for me yourself? Then I can stab you in the neck.*

But maybe Rashi guessed Nezumi’s murderous intentions, and that’s why he was staying where he could see all and remain in control. He could send other officers to look in his place, though. Surely there were other men with him; he wouldn’t waltz into the Resistance’s stronghold alone, no matter how little he thought of the West Block.

Annoyance flitted across Rashi’s face. “Alright. I’ve had enough of this game of cat and mouse. If you don’t come out, I’ll start shooting at random.”

“No!” Finally, another voice—Kaze’s again. He sounded more panicked than ever. “You can’t. This place is loaded with gunpowder. One stray shot and we all go up.”

A beat followed this revelation. Rashi’s glanced curiously off to the side, and Nezumi realized he must have noticed the barrels in the corner.

“I see.” Rashi’s face smoothed out in a way that had Nezumi’s heart leaping into his throat. “Well then, I’ll just have to be more precise. How about this: either you surrender yourself, Nezumi, or I’ll start shooting your friends. You have ten seconds before I shoot this helpful comrade of yours.”

Kaze snarled. “You motherfucking—”

*Five seconds.*

Nezumi swallowed thickly.

“Three... two...”

Nezumi stepped out and raised his arms in surrender.

“There you are,” Rashi crooned. “I was beginning to think I killed these people for nothing.”

“The people you killed would probably agree.”

Nezumi’s gaze met Kaze’s. The expression on the man’s face was conflicted, and more than a little ashamed. Nezumi kept eye contact only for a brief moment before his attention slid toward the staircase. As he had guessed, Rashi hadn’t come alone; two stout, sunglasses-wearing officers had planted themselves in front of the exit.

“Restrain him,” Rashi said to the men. Evidently he had expended his witty dialogue on his previous victims, and had nothing left for Nezumi but a pair of handcuffs.

One of the men came forward and glared at him like he found it extremely disrespectful that he didn’t hold out his hands to be restrained. Nezumi smiled sweetly and slipped his hand into his pocket.

“What do you have there, hm?” Rashi gestured to him with his gun.

The officer shoved his hand into Nezumi’s pocket and ripped the knife out. Nezumi almost snarled at the violation, but part of his mind thought it might be for the best. He mourned the loss of his weapon, but he hoped that the officers would be enough satisfied with catching him with it,
that they would forgo a thorough search of his person.

Inside his boot, the drive dug into the side of his foot as he shifted. He had judged it as the securest place to hide it, and he experienced a surge of relief when the officer patted him down and declared him clean. He hadn’t even found Tsukiyo, tucked in the folds of his superfibre cloth.

The handsy officer clamped two thick white bands over Nezumi’s wrists, and took out a small remote. When he clicked a button, the cuffs tightened, and Nezumi shuddered at the cold, almost wet, sensation of them adhering to his skin. He noticed that they linked with a thin white cord, rather than metal. These were no cuffs he’d ever seen.

As if he could hear his thoughts, Rashi informed him, “Those cuffs are special issue. Don’t want you escaping like last time.”

Nezumi realized just how much he really hadn’t missed the city’s hospitality.

Once he was sufficiently restrained, Rashi approached. “That’s an interesting look,” he said.

For a moment, it looked like he was considering touching his hair, and Nezumi gave him a glare that promised instant death if he even dared. In the end, Rashi just shrugged.

“We’ve lingered long enough, I think. Would you like to say anything to your friends before you bid them farewell?”

Nezumi could see Kaze and Yamase hovering in his peripheral vision, but he kept his eyes trained on the officer in front of him. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“So cold,” the man chuckled. “I have a feeling you’re going to regret that, but have it your way.” He nodded to the stairs. “Up you go.”

Nezumi squinted as he emerged from the basement into the natural light of Yamase’s kitchen. It was just as quiet as it always was, and Nezumi thought fleetingly that the isolation of the safe house was more a liability now than an advantage.

With more space at their disposal, the other officers flanked him and pulled him aside to make room for their commander. Rashi reached the top step, but rose no further.

He glanced from one person to another with an odd smirk on his face. “Who would like to do the honors?”

The men on either side of Nezumi exchanged looks. Nezumi’s throat constricted. What honors?

The man to the right of him grunted and walked back to the vault door. Rashi pulled a small coin from his belt and deposited it into the man’s hand.

No. Not a coin. That’s…

Nezumi bucked hard against the officer’s grip. The suddenness and force of his action won him his freedom, and he charged toward Rashi.

He only got a few steps before the officer caught him by the scruff of his jacket and yanked it. The muscles in his back and shoulders screamed with the strain, and Nezumi pooled all the pain into a deadly hiss.

“You sick fuck!”
Rashi blinked. “Ah, so you know what this is.”

He did know. Nezumi had seen Kaze tinkering with enough of them to know what a micro-bomb looked like, and the damage it could do. They were equipped with timers and blast-strength modulators, so one could fine-tune the exact time and size of their destruction.

*How could I have been so stupid! Of course they wouldn’t let them go!*

“I couldn’t resist doing a little bit of cleaning up,” Rashi said with a shrug. “Besides, the higher ups would prefer it if the Resistance went away.”

The officer tossed the micro-bomb into the basement and Rashi slammed the vault door closed behind it. For a moment there was nothing, and Nezumi had no awareness but the pounding of his heart and his own ragged breaths.

Then came the banging. Bile rose into Nezumi’s throat. Muffled shouts vibrated through the thick door, and the pound of flesh against metal was frantic and incessant.

Rashi signaled his men to move out. They didn’t bother turning Nezumi around to walk; the two officers hooked a hand under each of his arms and dragged him backwards out of the house, towards the idling van. Nezumi kept watching and listening, and even though the cries and banging became fainter, he could still hear their echoes in his head.

*They can’t do this. They can’t get away with this. I have to—*

A sharp flash caught his eye, and he glanced up to see Yoming’s crow circling above them. It was letting out short squawks, and every time it swooped down, the sunlight glinted off its neck.

Nezumi’s eyes widened, and in the same moment an idea formed. He sucked in a deep breath.

“You can’t do this!” he yelled. “There are people in there!”

His captors looked a little startled by his outburst, but responded no less roughly for it. They gripped his arms tight enough to bruise and pulled him at a quicker pace.

Nezumi didn’t let up. He thrashed ruthlessly in the officers’ holds. “No! Please, don’t do this!” His voice broke into hysterical tones. “They’re not even armed! Let them go!”

“Geez, shut up,” growled the officer on his right.

They had reached the van now. Soon he’d be shoved inside it and silenced.

“You’re murderers!” he screamed.

He kept on screaming over and over until they managed to stuff him into the back of the vehicle, and one pulled out his gun to threaten him against another sound. Nezumi’s throat was raw, so he complied. He had done everything he needed to do, the only thing he could do.

He just hoped the crow caught it all on camera.
The Disposer’s fist connected with Shion’s jaw. Once. Twice. Three times. There was enough force behind the hits to knock him to the ground, but the men holding him in place made sure he stayed up and open for the next punch. The rusty tang of blood was all around him: on his tongue, down his throat, dribbling from his chin, the droplets sinking into the fabric of his coat. Shion’s nose throbbed, but it was only bleeding, not broken; he had turned enough with each punch to avoid that. But his left cheek and eye were on fire.

“Stubborn brat!”

Shion’s vision exploded as One-eye’s fist cracked across cheek again. How many was that now? A lot. Too many, Shion’s battered brain warned him. Bright stabs of pain radiated from the spot on his face where the man’s punch connected—the same spot he had hit with dizzying precision every time he raised his fist. Shion grit his teeth and swallowed the whimper that threatened to escape his throat.

His temple pounded where the Disposer had hit him with the rifle butt, and each successive blow left him teetering on the edge of unconsciousness. And yet his mind refused to shut off. Each labored breath that whistled through his mouth; the blood on his tongue; the shift and crack of muscle and bone; all this he heard, and tasted, and felt with perfect clarity.

I can bear it, he told himself. As long as it takes. As long as they’re safe.

Shion fought back a wave of nausea and lifted his head. The whole side of his face felt heavy, but he did his best to meet the Disposer’s eye. He saw nothing but malice in it, and the promise of pain. The man’s vengeful delight had died quickly, after he realized Shion had no intention of making a sound. He could get neither information nor a plea for mercy—so he got more violent.

“You Resistance think you’re so much better than us,” One-eye growled. “You and your stupid comrade act. Is loyalty really worth getting the shit kicked outta you? Huh?” He fist his hand in Shion’s hair and pulled until their faces were inches from each other. Shion winced, but didn’t struggle. “Tell me where your little friend is.”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?” He gave Shion’s hair a sharp tug. “You protect that No. 6 brat and you screw us all over.” The man leered at him and his expression turned mocking. “Or maybe you’re just screwing him. That it?”

A white-hot spike of anger burst through the haze in Shion’s mind. He swung his foot back and slammed the Disposer between his legs.

The man stumbled backward, wheezing. A few of his companions snickered. A spark of
murderous intent glinted in the man’s eye when he recovered, and Shion swallowed in spite of himself.

“I’m gonna destroy you. I’m gonna hurt you so bad even you won’t be able to doctor yourself better.”

*BANG!*

The Disposers stiffened at what was definitely the report of a gun. A powerful gun. The men looked between them to make sure they weren’t wounded, but Shion looked past them, and what he saw made his heart quicken.

Safu stood in the middle of the street, Kaze’s double barrel shot gun held high over her head. She leveled the barrel at One-eye when he turned to her.

“Get away from Shion.”

“You sure you wanna get into this, girlie? There’s five of us, and only one of you.”

“I have a gun,” Safu said blandly. “And I have a feeling I only have to shoot you to get my point across. You have five seconds before I render you incapable of reproducing.”

The Disposers glared at Safu. She matched their looks with cool intensity. She would shoot if it came down to it, but Shion trusted her judgment, and knew he had nothing to fear regarding her aim.

One-eye clicked his tongue and turned back to Shion. Safu raised the gun into position.

“Don’t think I’m done. With any of you,” he hissed into Shion’s face.

He nodded stiffly to his men and the pressure under Shion’s arms disappeared. He slumped bonelessly onto his hands and knees. One-eye spat at the ground, inches from him, and then it was over. Shion remained still as the crunch of the men’s footfalls drew away from him, and attempted to school all traces of pain from his features in the seconds it took for Safu to reach him.

“Shion!” The next thing he knew Safu was kneeling on the ground in front of him, her eyes bright with concern as she cupped his face in her hands. She winced at the vicious bruise that swelled from his jaw to his eye. “I never should’ve left you,” she breathed.

Shion gave her half a smile. “I’m glad you came back.”

Safu helped him up, her eyes darting over his person to take inventory of his wounds. For some reason, it made him feel self-conscious. Shion turned away and wiped the blood from his face with the edge of his bandana.

“You made it to the safe house?”

“I left halfway there, but we didn’t run into any trouble. I’m sure they made it fine. They can take care of themselves.”

Shion nodded, but said, “We should go.” He turned toward headquarters and moved carefully in that direction.

“Where are you going?”

The tightness and swelling made talking uncomfortable, so he replied briefly, “Left my gun.”
He heard Safu sigh behind him, but she didn’t follow.

_They’re fine. Kaze doesn’t need a gun to defend himself, and Nezumi is great with a knife. Even Safu’s complimented him._ Shion repeated these assurances to himself as he slipped through the doorway, but they didn’t relieve the dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. _I need to get over there._ He retrieved his gun and tucked it into its holster.

The next moment, there was a molten flash. Shion stumbled back, catching himself on the pew. The blinding light flared out and then sucked itself back in with an explosive crack. It sounded like the world shattering.

Shion locked eyes with Safu, and he knew she arrived at the same conclusion as he had. She looked about to say something, but he moved too fast to be certain.

“Shion!”

He flew by Safu, ignoring her calls, ignoring the strain on his body, ignoring everything but the swirling orange-yellow cloud in the distance. _Not an accident. The timing is too coincidental._ Shion swallowed and it tasted like blood. _Nezumi. Oh god, Nezumi. Please, no._

He turned the corner and saw hell. Everything was on fire. The explosion had catapulted fiery shrapnel yards in every direction, and the tinder-dry buildings were defenseless. Shion shoved his way through the crowd of fleeing bodies. Fearful cries and wretched sobs mingled with the hungry hiss of destruction. The flames devoured too quickly; there would be nothing left. The blaze roared with the conquest.

_No. 6 lied._

People were hurt. The sickly sweet scent of singed flesh filled Shion’s nostrils as he pushed by more people.

_They lied, they always lie, and people always, always get hurt._

He tripped as he tore himself from the last of the crowd. His palms were rubbed raw against the hard packed earth, but he pushed himself back to his feet—and stopped.

He was face to face with a wall of fire. The neighborhood was an inferno, crackling and hissing like a serpent in the throes of death. Wood and glass and chunks of stone littered the ground, and in the center of it all, a blackened pit of smoke and flames where Yamase’s house once stood.

_Yamase. He’s supposed to be keeping watch._ But he wasn’t. He was nowhere, and there was no one. A twisted, half-melted lump was impaled in the side of a house several feet away. A metal door. Yamase’s basement door.

His friends were supposed to be here. He sent Nezumi and Kaze here to be safe, deep underground where no harm would come to them. The fire danced in front of him, eating up everything it licked.

_No one could survive this._

Shion moved toward the burning wreckage.

“Shion! Stop!”

Something crashed into him from behind. He barely put up a fight as the weight dragged him to
the ground. It was impossible; he had no legs to stand on, and no air to breathe. The fire stole all
the oxygen just like it stole everything else. A mindless, greedy thing, it took without remorse or
malice.

“It’s too late,” a voice trembled in his ear. “There’s nothing we can do.”

No, there must be something I can do.

“Life is full of misfortune, Shion.” Karan smiled at him as she took the blanket from her
shoulders and draped it over his. He was only twelve then, and miserable, staring up at the soggy,
broken hull of what used to be their home. His birthday had turned into a storm-plagued nightmare
when a ruthless hurricane ripped through West Block and destroyed everything they owned.

“It’s easier to lose things than to fight for them, but you must never give in to misfortune. When
you feel like you’ve lost everything, like it might be better just to lay down and stop trying, there’s
only one thing you can do: take a deep breath and say, ‘I’m still alive.’ You’d be surprised how
many things that realization can cure.”

Karan ruffled his hair as she said this, and he believed her. There wasn’t a single time he could
remember that her advice failed. No matter how many times life knocked her down, she always
found a way to stand tall. There was a reason for everything.

Losing her bakery was for the best, because it allowed her to make more friends at the hotel,
and it brought Shion together with Safu. It was destiny that the hurricane that tore through West
Block had flooded them out of their home, because if it hadn’t, then they never would’ve found the
underground bunker, and Karan wouldn’t have been able to give Shion the best present he’d ever
received: a library filled with more knowledge than he ever dreamed of attaining.

“You have a gift, Shion.” Karan handed him a medical textbook, her eyes shining. “You have
the ability to make a difference in the world, and now you have the knowledge, too. We lose so
many lives here; it’s about time someone saved a few. I believe you’re the man for the job.”

But you were wrong, Mom. I tried. I did everything I could to save you, but I was too late. I’m
always too late.

How many times had he washed the blood and tears of children from his sheets? How many
hands had he held, promising something better when he knew nothing of what they would face
once the light faded from their eyes? Everywhere he looked people were suffering. He reached out
to them, but their lives slipped through his fingers like sand through a sieve. For every person he
saved, a dozen more were lost, and his failures clung to him, thick and choking as the smoke from
their funeral pyres.

And now Nezumi was gone. Kaze and Yamase, and who knew how many others were gone.

I sent them here to die.

Shion retched on a lungful of smoke.

What am I going to tell Yuichi? Yuki?

“Shion.” Safu’s voice was barely audible.
Nezumi... We were supposed to meet when this was over. Isn’t that what you said? His hands throbbed; the fall had burned away every trace of Nezumi’s reassuring touch.

Break it.

“Maybe they didn’t even make it here. They could be safe, hiding somewhere, or—” The pressure around his arms and chest tightened. “Nezumi’s fine, Shion. There’s no way he was in there. No. 6 needs him. They wouldn’t hurt him.”

That’s not true. No. 6 already hurt Nezumi, and they’ll hurt him again, just like they hurt everyone else.

Destroy it.

Destroy what?

All the disease, all the starvation, the violence, the misery, every life he wasn’t able to save, it was because of that city. No. 6 gorged itself on misery and bloodshed, a parasite intent on devouring its host. No. 6 took the things you loved. It took his mother, it took his friends, and now it wanted to take Nezumi.

It can’t have him.

The roar of the flames cut out. Shion’s skin prickled as a cool sensation spread through his veins. Something was slipping. His body and mind were no longer one, but which had been cut away, he couldn’t tell. There was nothing of him now except a tumultuous surge of emotion, and a voice that echoed in his head, commanding him over and over:

Break it.

Destroy it.

Destroy what?

Everything.

****

Safu’s eyes were watering, but no tears escaped.

Smoke and fire—that was all that was left of the neighborhood that once harbored their safe house, where one of her friends had lived. Where at least one of her friends had died. She had no illusions about Yamase’s fate. If someone had gotten close enough to blow the explosives in the safe house, then Yamase had not been around to stop them, and he was always around.

And who knows how many more we’ve lost.

The Resistance was dangerous, she knew that, but it was one thing to be told that death was waiting in the wings, and another to actually see it swoop down on everything and everyone you know.

Safu squeezed her eyes shut to block out the flames and thoughts that ravaged her mind. Horrible. How could someone do this?

Shion retched and Safu steadied him in her arms.
Nezumi and Kaze. Shion had been closer to them than she had been. It would be crippling if he lost them.

“Maybe they didn’t even make it here,” she blurted. “They could be safe, hiding somewhere, or —”

She didn’t know what she was saying; she just let the words tumble out of her mouth. She needed to hear something other than the deafening rush of flames, no matter how unlikely her words were.

Shion hadn’t moved or spoken since his dash toward the wreckage. Safu desperately wished to see his face, but she was terrified of what she would find there. She had seen him break before, and it had broken part of her, too, to watch while she could do nothing to help. She held Shion tighter, as if that would be enough to keep him from falling apart.

*I have to be strong. I need to be there for Shion now.*

This destruction was No. 6’s doing, there was no doubt about that. Only a few members of the Resistance knew of the safe house, and all of them were extremely careful not to disrupt the explosives in the basement.

*Someone betrayed us.* Safu ground her teeth against the realization. *And if No. 6 was reckless enough to blow the place sky high, they found what they were looking for.*

Nezumi was alive, then. Yamase and Kaze meant nothing to No. 6, but they wanted Nezumi.

“Nezumi’s fine, Shion. There’s no way he was in there. No. 6 needs him. They wouldn’t hurt him.”

She didn’t know what she expected to get from Shion—some sign of relief, or perhaps a declaration that they go after Nezumi and steal him back—but she knew she had been expecting something when Shion remained mute and immobile and her heart sank.

The seconds ticked by and still nothing. *He’s shut down,* she realized, her heart falling faster. *I need to get him away from here—what was I thinking holding him here in front of this for so long?*

Shion shifted then. She let him detach himself from her and stand up, and she followed him to his feet.

“Shion?”

“We should go.”

Even though she was about to suggest the same thing, when Shion said the words they sounded odd. He used too much force, as though he had a specific place and purpose in mind.

“We can go to the hotel,” Safu said. It sounded more like a question than a statement, and she hated herself for it.

Shion didn’t face her and he didn’t acknowledge her suggestion, but he must have heard because he answered, “Yoming’s house.” He turned and strode by her.

*What…* Safu twisted around and watched Shion move farther and farther away.

“Shion.”
He didn’t hear her. She walked briskly after him and called his name a little louder than before.

“Shion, hold on.”

She was close enough now that he should’ve been able to hear, but still he did not respond. He’s ignoring me. The thought hit her like a slap in the face.

She reached out and grabbed the sleeve of his jacket. “Would you just slow down and look at me?”

Shion halted abruptly and glared at her. Glared. Safu snapped her hand back. The Shion she knew would’ve softened instinctively in response to her pain, but the boy in front of her didn’t even flinch. His dark eyes bored into hers, hollow and uncharacteristically cold.

“What?” The word was impersonal, almost angry. “We don’t have time to slow down. They should almost be at the Correctional Facility by now.”

Safu almost apologized, but she held it down. She didn’t need to be sorry. She didn’t need to be afraid of Shion… did she?

“Come on.”

He walked away again. Safu adjusted the strap fastening Kaze’s shotgun to her back and followed carefully in his wake.

He’s not angry at you, she told herself, but that consolation made it worse. If he was upset with her, she could fix it; there was nothing she could do to fix this. She watched his back, and all around them were people—crying, angry, desperate people. A few were injured, and they called out for help in a confused, lost way, hoping against hope that tragedy had brought out sympathies in the usually hardhearted masses.

Shion paid no mind to the shouts. He strode on, blind and deaf to everything but which direction would lead him to his goal. Yoming’s house.

“Why Yoming’s house?”

She received an immediate response this time.

“I need something to get Nezumi back.”

So he planned to go to the Correctional Facility after all.

Could he be after the maps?

The Correctional Facility was a personal source of anguish to Yoming, with the amount of people it swallowed up. He had been near obsessed with breaking into it when he started the Resistance, but it was impossible. They didn’t know anything about the security inside, and no one could tell them, since her grandmother had forbidden them to shake down her elite customers after the first incident. Perhaps Shion wanted to review the maps before attempting the rescue?

Yoming’s house loomed ahead. Its dark, grimy exterior looking more desolate than ever. Yoming’s van was sitting out front, a squat, rusty piece of junk that somehow still managed to work. The house was far enough away from the flames as to not be affected, but she could still see the thick clouds of smoke rising from the town center.
Shion rapped on the door, but no one answered. He tried the handle, but it was locked, of course. Shion exhaled with a knowing hiss. Safu glanced around the building for possible openings, but then she realized that every window had been blacked out and barred. The bars themselves were rusty, but not in such bad shape that they could be kicked out easily.

**CRUNCH!**

Safu whipped her head back to the door. It swung loosely on its hinges, no match for Shion’s expertly placed kick.

She gaped between Shion and the door. Shion shrugged a shoulder and glanced inside the house. It was dark. With no light streaming in from the windows, they’d be fumbling around blindly once they were outside the range of the doorway. Safu spotted a lantern on the table, and hurried over to light it before Shion closed the door behind them.

The hazy yellow cast of the flame danced over the furniture as they moved toward the stairs. The poor lighting caught every imperfection: the tears in the cushions, the spider-web cracks in the walls; a dingy collage of images that reminded Safu that even the most well-off person could only do as well as their environment would let them.

Safu had never been on the second floor of Yoming’s house—she had hardly been to his house at all. Shion, however, must have been to the upper floors before, because he went deliberately toward the door to the left. The hinges creaked quietly when he pushed it open. It was dark and quiet, and Safu got goosebumps as she took a step inside.

“What are we looking for?” she whispered.

Shion pointed to another door.

Something clattered in the corner of the room. Shion whipped out his pistol and aimed it in the direction of the noise, faster than Safu had ever known him capable of.

“Shion?” said a small, frightened voice.

Safu’s stomach swooped in relief. “Lili. It’s just Lili.”

The girl looked small and fragile under the pale light of the lantern. Shion lowered his gun, but his expression was unrepentant. He glanced off to the side, clearly disinterested in the little girl who was still staring at him like she would give anything to have him console her.

“Where’s your mom, Lili?” Safu asked.

“There.” She pointed behind her, and Safu caught a shift in the dark as Renka slipped out from underneath the bed.

“Where is Shion going?”

Shion had wandered over to the door he had indicated before the interruption. Safu felt another chill creep over her skin as she watched him melt into the blackness beyond it.

“We just came here for some… supplies. We aren’t staying long,” Safu told her, hoping her voice sounded soothing.

Lili’s eyes were wide as she stared into Safu’s. “What’s happening? We heard stuff. Scary sounds from outside…”
“There’s some trouble downtown. It’s dangerous outside, so be a good girl and stay here with your mom, okay?”

Lili’s face was grave. “Are Daddy and Uncle Yo out there? Did you see them?”

Safu shook her head.

“Daddy told us to hide, and then he left. Mama’s scared.” Lili’s voice tapered off and she turned to look back at her mother. Renka was curled up against the bed frame, looking more a child than Lili with her loose clothing, and her face pale and drawn. Her eyes were swollen from crying, but she was calm at the moment.

“What was that sound earlier?” the woman asked quietly. “It sounded like an explosion.”

“There was an accident,” Safu said carefully. “It’s best to lie low for now. You’ll be safe here.”

Rather than reassuring the woman, the comment made her more distraught. “It’s No. 6, isn’t it? It’s the Hunt. Are you fighting? Is my brother—?” She broke off, looking toward the blackened window and wringing her hands. A tear escaped from the corner of her eye.

“The Resistance isn’t fighting.”

Safu said this firmly, but volunteered no further information. She didn’t need to be particularly observant to tell that Renka was on the verge of a breakdown. She didn’t need to know about what was going on outside, and since Safu had no definitive answers for the woman about her brother or her husband, there was nothing left for her to say.

Renka hugged herself and whimpered. “I can’t do this again. My husband… Yoming… They’re all I have left.” The tears ran freely down her face now.

“There’s no need to panic, ma’am. I’m sure they’re—”

“Shion?” Lili squeaked, and there was enough terror in her voice to make Safu turn and step so that her body shielded the mother and child.

The blood drained from her face. Shion had an assault rifle in his hands. A sleek, powerful machine, capable of 10 to 75-rounds, depending on the magazine—and from the looks of the cartridges Shion was slipping into his coat, he was well supplied. The shotgun she had strapped to her back was a peashooter compared to what Shion had. That other door must have lead to Yoming’s private weapon collection.

Safu wet her lips. “Lili, go sit by your mother, okay?” She heard shifting behind her, and waited until it quieted before she spoke again, this time to Shion. “Can I speak to you out in the hall, please?”

Shion cocked his head a little at the slowness of her words. Safu swallowed, her eyes darting to the assault rifle. There was no magazine locked in yet.

What am I doing? Of course it isn’t loaded. Shion wouldn’t hurt us. But even so, her heart raced, and she stood a little straighter.

Shion walked out into the hall.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, once there was a door between them and the couple in the other room. “You scared the crap out of Lili and Renka. Why do you have… that?” She gestured
uneasily to the gun.

“This will help us get Nezumi back.”

Nothing. Not a flicker of emotion. It was like he wasn’t even there anymore. Safu opened her mouth to yell at him, but thought better of it. So far Shion had taken down everything in his path. What would happen if she tried to stand in his way?

*What happens if I don’t?*

“Do you even hear yourself?” she said desperately. “You’re acting crazy. Calm down and think —”

“I’m done thinking. I need to *do* something. No. 6 has Nezumi, and every second we waste sitting here, our chances of getting him back lessen.”

“This is the Correctional Facility we’re talking about. You can’t just,” her gaze flicked to the gun, “shoot your way in. It’s suicide. We need to at least *attempt* to make a plan. Do you even know where to go?”

“I memorized the map a long time ago. But we both know it’s not up to date; we won’t be able to sneak in undetected. They’ll try to stop us, and we needed a way to make sure they won’t.” He slung the gun over his shoulder by its strap. “We’ll go in through the service entrance. There should be less people, and less security. There’s a door into the main building.”

“Yes, but it’s probably locked,” she countered, forcing all the weight of logic behind the words.

Shion paused and dropped his eyes to think. The relief that rushed through her when his gaze fell away pained her. Safu realized that Shion kept using the word “we.” Her emotions wavered between apprehension and reassurance, but neither managed to take hold, so she pushed the observation away.

Safu swallowed. *He’ll see reason. He will.*

“There’s a trash chute in there. We could try climbing it.”

“That’s a long shot, Shion. We don’t know how big it is, or what kind of traction it’ll have. Don’t you see? You can’t rush blindly in; we need to think about this.”

Shion’s face darkened, and she could see she had lost him again. “I’ll figure something out on the way over, but right now we have to move.” He pushed past her.

“Shion—”

“Why are you trying to stop me? Don’t you care about Nezumi at all?”

“That’s not what I’m saying—”

“You don’t have to come.”

Safu’s mouth went dry. “What?”

“You don’t have to follow me.”

Safu flushed at the words. She shouldn’t have; he didn’t mean it the way she heard it, but it still stung. It felt like he was dismissing her and all the effort she put into watching over him these last
two years. She had never felt so small and pathetic.

“You can make your own decision. But I’ve made mine.”

*Don’t go.*

Shion turned. The gun shed the light’s reflection as he descended the stairs. Shion was lost. He was unpredictable and on the warpath, and nothing she could do would stop him—and now he was armed. People were going to get hurt. She didn’t want to see it, and she feared she would be one of them. If she were any kind of smart, she would stay here with Renka and Lili and wait out the Hunt.

*But I can’t let him go.*

Shion was standing by the car out front when she came out of the house. He glanced back at her when she approached, but she couldn’t tell whether he was relieved or surprised or didn’t care at all. She couldn’t read anything in his expression.

“You drive,” he said unceremoniously.

“We don’t have the keys,” she tried.

Shion reached into his pocket and brought out the car keys. When had he picked them up? He unlocked the door and handed them over. The metal felt heavy in her hand.

Her heart wanted to believe Shion knew what he was doing—but she knew what he was capable of, and her brain was screaming at her to take the keys and run as far as possible.

A guttural squawk interrupted her indecision. A bird circled overhead, and Safu recognized it as Yoming’s crow. She could just make out the glint of the camera secured around its neck. It banked and swooped in a streak of black feathers to alight on Shion’s shoulder. He wrinkled his nose and shrugged. The bird flapped its wings to keep balance.

Shion swiped at its legs. “Not now. Get!”

The bird cried shrilly, but no matter how many times Shion waved it away, it came back, clicking and cawing insistently. The gun had begun to slip off Shion’s shoulder in the excitement, and Safu felt a sudden dread for the bird.

“Let’s just take him with us.”

Shion huffed in frustration. “Fine. Get in the car, then.”

He pulled the back door open and shooed the bird in. It went willingly enough, accustomed as it was to riding with Yoming. Shion climbed into the passenger seat next, and Safu took her place at the wheel. She eyed the huge gun as Shion fixed it across his lap, thankfully pointing away from her. She hated this, feeling caged in this little car with the boy who on any other day she would’ve trusted with her life.

*I shouldn’t do this. It’s not too late to back out.*

Shion was staring impatiently at her. “We need to go. We’ll lose him.”

Safu bit her lip. She thought she might’ve heard something familiar in his voice. A bit of pain or anxiety, the barest shred of humanity.
Safu latched onto it and put the keys in the ignition.

Chapter End Notes

yeeeeeexaaaahhhhh…
Special thanks to Curiousscarleteyes for helping me get the right feel for Shion's part
^o^/
Nezumi’s mind was racing, desperately combing through his options. They would arrive at the Correctional Facility soon, and he had until then to come up with a strategy for escape.

There wasn’t much he could do with such a large armed entourage, especially when he was bound and disarmed. He wasn’t completely without resources, though. He still had the drive and Tsukiyo. If he could orchestrate a way to release the mouse into the Facility, it could do all the sabotaging for him. Nezumi would just have to try and stay alive while the virus took effect.

*Not exactly a failsafe plan.*

And there was still the issue of a safe escape. Imprisonment wasn’t a problem, since the virus would open all the doors, but the officers had guns, and there would be other prisoners running amuck in the Correctional Facility. Even though most were probably innocent victims, it was likely that some of the inmates deserved to be locked up.

Nezumi didn’t even know if he would be imprisoned. He had no idea what they intended to do with him in the Correctional Facility.

*It’s not even me they’re after. It’s Elyurias.*

They only needed him because he was connected to Her.

Except, he wasn’t. Not anymore.

Nezumi glanced out the back window, but the only thing he could see was the West Block dwindling in the distance. How much did they know about Elyurias’ effect on the human body? Would they be able to tell that the connection had been severed? Nezumi thought about his bleached hair. *I should have dyed it when I had the chance.*

The sound of the explosion rocked through the car. Nezumi clenched his teeth and tried not to feel anything. Black smoke billowed out above the spires of West Block. It did not escape Nezumi that this was the second time he’d been apprehended by the Security Bureau and an explosion followed—but this time there would be no violent rescues.

“Tsukiyo.”

Nezumi kept his voice low, despite being the only one in the back of the van. The back was spacious, far too large for one person. He remembered the night he first learned about the Hunt, when Kaze and Shion had told him that it was typical of No. 6 to take hordes of people back to the Correctional Facility. It was likely this vehicle was designed for such purposes.

It was unwise of the officers to have left him unsupervised.
The black mouse leapt out of the superfibre about Nezumi’s neck and cheeped. Nezumi rubbed the top of its head with the tip of his finger. “I have a job for you.”

Tsukiyo squeaked louder, as though exclaiming his eagerness for the task. Quietly, he briefed the mouse on his mission, pulling the drive out of his boot to show it. There was a time when Nezumi would’ve called himself crazy for giving instructions to a mouse and expecting it to understand, but he had spent enough hours with Shion’s mice to know that they were not ordinary. Tsukiyo had helped him with the computer parts before and Nezumi had no doubt that the mouse would understand what he was asking of it.

When he finished explaining, Tsukiyo took the drive from his hand and burrowed into his boot. Nezumi scrunched his nose at the sensation.

That took care of it, then. There was nothing else to do.

Unless... Nezumi frowned thoughtfully. Any chances Elyurias would agree to assist him were negligible. He had burned that bridge pretty thoroughly the last time they’d spoken. Then again, She was hell bent on destroying No. 6, so perhaps She would be willing to sacrifice pride for that purpose, provided he could do the same in asking Her.

But did he even want Elyurias’ help?

Her help always came with strings attached, and ones She had meant to hang him with. The longer he thought about it, though, he could see more pros than cons in the arrangement. Elyurias had no power over him now, and having someone on his side that could eliminate his enemies through sheer willpower was definitely an asset. It was worth a shot.

Elyurias.

No answer. He tried singing the first verse of the Singer’s song, but the air around him didn’t so much as stir. The only thing he could feel was the rumble of the van rolling over the bumpy terrain. He waited a little, called out mentally a few more times, but it was silent but for his own thoughts. If She could hear him, She wasn’t going to respond. He would receive no assistance from Elyurias.

At least She’s consistent, he thought wryly. Although...

Even if Elyurias wouldn’t help him, She could still be of use. It was a crazy idea, but it was odd enough that it might be worth the chance. Tsukiyo poked his head out of Nezumi’s boot and chittered for attention. Nezumi was too busy getting into character to have heard.

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A few minutes later the van slowed to a stop. The doors swung open and Nezumi was coaxed quietly out. Rashi watched him wriggle to his feet with amusement. Nezumi’s plan required that he remain serene and impartial, and he managed to be so outwardly, but inside he was imagining all a manner of grisly scenarios involving the officer.

The Correctional Facility loomed over them. It was a gray structure composed of several large rectangles stacked one on top of the other. The style was disjointed, like a massive upended spider. It made Nezumi uncomfortable just to look at it. Nothing that went on in that monstrosity of a building could be good.

His handlers watched him closely, but after a few minutes of staring threats at his profile they relaxed some. They seemed relieved that Nezumi had grown more sedate during the car ride. They rewarded him by releasing their vice grips on his arms. Rashi took his new freedom as an
opportunity to give him a little shove as they stepped through the doors of the Facility. Too much time must have passed between his last display of pointless cruelty.

No prisoner who had stepped foot in the Correctional Facility had ever been seen again, and Nezumi was morbidly curious about whether the building’s interior would somehow reflect the evils rumored to happen within its walls. Unfortunately, remaining in character required looking haughty and uninterested in his surroundings, so Nezumi didn’t have the freedom to look around. But from what he could tell, the design and décor were nondescript: a regular corporate layout with office cubes, obscenely bright lighting, and white walls. Then again, it would be in poor taste to cage and experiment on prisoners in plain sight.

As he was dragged down several clinical hallways, he caught glimpses of people in lab coats, and computer rooms. He had been pulled past three computer rooms before he felt Tsukiyo wriggling in his boot. Nezumi fought the feeling of discomfort from showing on his face and walked steadily between his escorts, even as he was keenly aware of the mouse slipping out. He wasn’t able to see where Tsukiyo scurried off to, but he didn’t hear any gasps or screams, so he assumed the mouse had not been spotted.

It’s up to you now, he thought grimly. The drive better work.

Nezumi quickly smothered the doubt. The drive would work.

The officers steered him out a security door into another maze of white hallways, and Rashi held up a hand for them to stop.

“That will be all, boys. You’re dismissed.”

The two officers didn’t question him or even hesitate. They promptly turned around and went back out the way they came. Typical No. 6 citizens; not a curious bone in their bodies.

Rashi turned his dark eyes on Nezumi. “Where you’re going is need-to-know. The higher-ups have been waiting a long time for this moment, so they wanted it to be as… private as possible. They mean to take their time now that they’ve got you.”

Nezumi understood that the man meant to unnerve him. It wasn’t working. He fixed Rashi with his loftiest look. “I’ve been waiting just as long to meet with these higher-ups of yours. You are not leading me towards any doom I have not already anticipated.”

Nezumi could imagine no greater pleasure than seeing the look of bewilderment on Rashi’s face at his detached tone and stilted language. Having once been on the receiving end of it, he knew just how quickly the pompous diction perplexed and aggravated its listener. He hoped the officer would continue to taunt him, so he could continue to answer in such a manner. It would be welcome practice for the performance ahead.

Unfortunately, Rashi brushed the confusion off and led him down the hall. He stopped and stood expectantly in front of the wall at the end of it. Nezumi didn’t understand what was so interesting at first, but then a harder look at the wall revealed that there was a rectangle of space that was a slightly lighter shade than the rest.

A door, Nezumi realized. There were no protrusions that would alert the ordinary passerby to its existence. Only those who already knew it was there were likely to notice the subtle difference in the color of the wall. A moment later there was a faint mechanical creak and the doors slid open.

An elevator? It must react to some special ID chip. Good thing I won’t need to open any doors
The entire back wall of the elevator was a mirror, and in it Nezumi could see his reflection staring calmly back at him. He was a little disheveled, but no less striking for it. The bright lights glared off his white hair and bleached his skin, making his eyes look dark in comparison. Nezumi raised his chin a little, checking the aloofness of his expression.

*Good,* he muttered internally. *I look good for it.*

They stepped into the elevator and the doors slid quietly shut around them. The inside was as smooth and unmarked as the outside. The lights glittered off its pristine surfaces, cold and completely sterile. A faint unease stirred in the pit of Nezumi’s stomach. He had no idea what lay waiting for him on the floor above.

The doors opened onto a glossy black hallway. Nezumi stepped out and the temperature seemed to drop ten degrees. There were three doors before him, evenly spaced and unremarkable. Nezumi wondered which was the one he would be entering, and what the others kept behind them.

*Wolves or tigers, perhaps?* The flash of humor was just that—a flash. A weightiness settled in its wake.

“This way,” Rashi hummed. He ignored the doors and turned down the hallway, heading straight for the wall again.

*Another hidden doorway?*

The wall split in two when Rashi was a few feet from it, revealing a crimson door. Nezumi’s skin prickled. Every nerve in his body sang with warning and it was all he could do not to bolt. Something horrible lay beyond the crimson door, something he did not want to see. But it was too late to turn back now. The momentum leading up to this moment had been building too long, and there was no way to stop it.

Rashi paused in front of the door, a slight frown tugging at his mouth. It didn’t look like he was too keen on whatever was beyond either. He glanced down at Nezumi and forced a droll smile.

“Let’s take a look at what you have to look forward to, shall we?” Rashi placed a hand on the door and it swung open.

Nezumi would’ve blown his cover right then, if his voice didn’t get stuck in his throat. The room was lined with rows of transparent columns, filled with clear liquid, and inside every one of them floated a brain. The brains were attached to numerous tubes, which anchored them to the base of the pillars.

*What the hell is this?*

But a second later the answer came to him. This was No. 6’s attempt at recreating the Godly Bed; this was proof of the experiments that he and the Resistance members had theorized about. And then a second realization hit him: this was how every Hunt ended. Nezumi clenched his teeth so hard his jaw cracked.

*No wonder no one was ever seen again.*

He knew Rashi would be watching him closely, to savor the shock and panic that the horrific display was apt to inspire. Nezumi would not give him the satisfaction, but he did allow a little of his revulsion to show through. Elyurias might pupate in brain tissue, but She would be disgusted.
that No. 6 was arrogant enough to try and manufacture Her on a mass scale. They’d destroyed Her home and made a mockery of Her existence, and all they had to show for it was an assembly line of wasted lives and failed product.

“Who is responsible for this?” Nezumi demanded of Rashi, pushing all his outrage into a low hiss.

Rashi opened his mouth to reply, but then the far wall opened up and in swept a man in a white lab coat. He was tall and gaunt looking, even from a distance, and he had stringy white hair. When the man paused several feet away Nezumi could discern several more important characteristics: the man looked to be somewhere in his mid-forties, old, but not old enough for hair that white. Nezumi swallowed. He could make out red scar bands on the man’s face, one around his chin and another slicing its way up under the gauze bandage he was wearing over his left eye.

It was a bad sign. The man in the lab coat must know that something went wrong with Elyurias —how could he not, being a victim of the same physical changes?

*My job just got a little more complicated.*

The lab-coated man gaped at him. “No…”

The man rushed forward and Nezumi couldn’t help but take an instinctive step back.

“No. No,” he hissed under his breath. He circled around Nezumi, a hand pressed hard against his mouth, groaning. “Your hair. Oh… Oh no. All that time, all that planning, and you… What did you do?” He jerked to a stop in front of him. “It was you. You had Her, didn’t you? I knew it! I knew it had to be you. You were perfect from the start: the right heritage, meticulous upbringing, strong, healthy, young… There was no way She could resist taking you as host.” His voice grew into an agonized whine. “I had Her! What did you do? What did you do to Elyurias?”

*Man, is this guy a prize. If these are the people running No. 6 behind the scenes, it’s no wonder the city is fucked up.*

Nezumi tipped his head, a wry smile floating to his lips. “How foolish you sound. This boy is no more capable of harming me than you are of owning my existence.”

The crazed man was just as baffled as Rashi had been when he heard the superior voice issue from his mouth. This time, though, he had to drive his point home. Nezumi searched his mind for the right words.

“A power as vast as mine is beyond all comprehension. It cannot be created or bent to one’s will, especially not by a race as weak and flawed as humanity. I answer to no one.”

There was a brief silence. Nezumi was scowling inwardly. That wasn’t quite right. He would have to do better than that.

“The man seemed to catch on at least. “You claim to be Elyurias?”

Rashi made an incredulous noise, but Nezumi ignored him. He gazed steadily at the man before him.

“I do not answer to any one name. I simply am.”

*There. That sounds just annoying and vague enough to be Her.*
“Preposterous,” the man muttered, scrunching his face up.

Nezumi kept his eyes trained on him. This man wanted Elyurias desperately, and that meant he would be more willing to believe the impossible. He had already lost Elyurias once, and if there were even the slightest possibility that Nezumi was legitimate, he wouldn’t want it to go unchecked.

The lines in the man’s face deepened as he frowned. “It’s not possible. My experiment was ruined. All the larvae hatched prematurely. That would only occur if something happened to Elyurias or damaged the Godly Bed.”

“You are arrogant. You do not control me, nor do you control my children”—were they Her children?—“I released them to show you your impotence. And to serve as a warning.”

The man in the lab coat narrowed his eye. “A warning of what?”

“Your demise.”

“You plan to destroy us?” The man in the white lab coat looked incredulous. “If you planned on that, why did you wait so long? And why not kill all of those infected with the larvae? Surely one of your capabilities could do so.” He seemed almost excited about the prospect, despite his doubt as to the veracity of Nezumi’s claims—and despite the fact that he would’ve been one of the casualties if Elyurias had used Her powers to cull the infected No. 6 citizens.

“I was not ready until recently,” Nezumi drawled. He let his gaze wander disinterestedly at this point. Staring too long at the man unnerved him. “Resources in the West Block were not ideal, and my host was not cooperative.

“It was always my design to come here. No. 6 has grown conceited. You have been allowed to pollute this land for too long. You must be eliminated. You have made the execution of my plan very easy. You gave me form. And you,” he cocked his head slowly to peer at Rashi, “guided me safely to the source.”

The lab-coated man wet his lips. There was a steadily growing hunger in his eyes. This should have made Nezumi glad, since it meant he was convincing enough to buy himself some time, but it only made his stomach clench. The man began to pace, his white lab coat swishing restlessly behind him.

“Well, if what you say is true… Yes, I think there’s a way we can figure it out for sure,” he muttered. “The Mother would know.” He glanced at Nezumi, an odd smile tugging at his lips. “I’ll just have to hook you up and see, won’t I?”

*Like hell I’m going to let you touch me. I have no desire to be a brain in a jar, thank you.*

“I do not intend to be hooked up to any of your machines. But I will consent to an audience before I rid this land of your infection. A private audience.” He turned another haughty look on Rashi. The officer was smirking at him, and Nezumi knew he hadn’t sold the room with his performance.

The lab coat stilled as the man drew to a halt. “Why would I agree to that? If you are who you say you are, I’ll need protection.”

Nezumi sneered. “Your fears are unnecessary. My vessel is only a child, and he has no weapons. He cannot harm you, and if I wish to harm you, this…” he paused to scrutinize Rashi with cold distain, “soldier would not be able to stop me. If you wish for us to speak, it must be
“Hm…” The man tilted his head in deliberation. “True. Rashi, you are dismissed.”

That wiped the shit-eating grin off Rashi’s face.

“Sir, I think that would be unwise. You can’t possibly believe this boy’s Elyurias. It’s absurd.”

“It is absurd,” the man consented, “but if there’s a chance I can salvage my experiment, I’m willing to suspend my disbelief. Even if he is lying, I’ve always wondered what made the Forest people so special.” Nezumi went cold under the ravenous look on the man’s face. “At the very least, I can open him up to see how he ticks.”

_Fuck. Maybe being alone with this guy isn’t the best idea._

But it was the only chance he had at controlling the situation. Besides, it wasn’t like Rashi was going to stop a live autopsy from happening if he stayed.

_What’s taking Tsukiyo so long?_

The man in the lab coat took a step towards Nezumi. “Come,” he coaxed. “Let me introduce you to the Mother.”

Nezumi sidestepped his groping hands with a look of affront. The man hummed with an odd little smile.

“I will go nowhere with you until you remove the boy’s restraints.” Nezumi dipped his head to indicate the handcuffs.

“Sir,” Rashi said lowly.

The man waved off Rashi’s warning and held his tight-lipped smile. “I will free you from your bonds, but only when I see fit. You must forgive us humans for being such fearful and suspicious creatures. Never fear, I wouldn’t dream of harming Elyurias.”

Nezumi didn’t miss the conditional tone.

The man approached Rashi and prompted him for the cuffs remote. The Bureau officer bristled, but handed it over.

“Come now.” The man in the lab coat turned back the way he had come.

Nezumi felt Rashi’s scowl on his back the entire walk down the corridor of brains. He tried not to look at them, but he could see the tubes in the columns pulsing blue and white in the corners of his vision.

The far wall opened on a stark white, brightly lit room. There was not an inch of space that wasn’t illuminated, and there was nothing in it except a thick column. The upper half of the structure was transparent, and inside Nezumi could see a silver sphere with numerous flashing projections. It was something like a spiny disco ball, blinking reds and blues of many shades. Thready, clear tubes sprouted from some of the projections, looping upwards in a tangled mass until they disappeared into darkness. A clear control panel was fitted to the front of the column with unmarked white keys.

Like everything else in the building, the structure was a hideous monstrosity.
“She’s beautiful, is she not?” crooned the man in the lab coat. “There’s nothing else like her in
the world; the Grandmother in the Moondrop doesn’t even come close. And she only responds to
me.”

He oozed pride. Nezumi smothered a caustic retort and looked instead for a weapon or some
other means of putting this creep out of commission. Unfortunately, there was nothing but them
and the computer.

If I can get close enough, I can strangle him with the cuff wire… He wasn’t thrilled with the
prospect, but he wouldn’t hold back if the opportunity presented itself.

“I’m happy Elyurias chose you.”

Nezumi whipped his attention back to the man. His unbandaged eye was sharp and glittering as
he surveyed him from a few feet away. If not for his dark, penetrating eye the man would be
almost indistinguishable from the walls. He was wearing more white than any other color, and the
bright lights bleached his skin so that he looked like some ghoulish specter.

“You were always my favorite specimen.” Nezumi’s skin crawled. There were actually traces of
adoration in the man’s voice. “Young, spirited… I always knew you would flourish under the
treatment. And you’ve performed brilliantly, even though you were in adverse conditions in the
West Block. When did you realize you were host to Elyurias?”

“I do not care for your tone or the topic of this conversation,” Nezumi seethed.

The man’s lips curled up, showing the slightest bit of teeth. “You can stop pretending now. I
know you’re not Elyurias. But I wanted to be alone with you, too. To chat. I’ve wondered so long
about the Forest People. I regret now that we destroyed them all before I was able to do a proper
study. It was a stroke of luck that we found your parents hiding within the city. I should have taken
them in for tests as well…”

The man’s words flowed without pause, each filthier than the last. Nezumi was having trouble
thinking, paralyzed as he was by hatred and disgust. His instinct to stay as far away from this
sadistic bastard as possible was mercilessly at war with the urge to rip him limb from limb.

“How did you get rid of Elyurias? Did She obey you because you’re a descendant of Her
followers? The white hair looks good on you, by the way—you’re even more beautiful than
before. Do you have a scar, too?”

He looked like he wanted to approach, and Nezumi watched him coolly in case he did. They
stared each other down, and in that moment each was the predator and the prey.

“I’d like to get to know you better,” said the man.

“Why don’t you come a little closer, then?”

“Ah. You are angry.” He chuckled. “Lovely. I want to study every aspect of you, good and bad.
But I can’t have you trying to kill me at this juncture, so…” The man reached into his pocket.
Nezumi’s heart sank, expecting him to have a gun. Instead, the man pulled the cuffs remote out and
clicked it.

It turned out this was far worse than a gun.

Nezumi’s wrists jolted with pain, and then the twinge of electrical current spread rapidly from
the contact points, up his arms, all throughout his body, and down into the toes of his boots.
Suddenly, his limbs felt like lead, and he had to lean a little on the back wall in order not to topple over.

“A little nerve stimulant to keep you compliant.” The man in the lab coat grinned. “Elyurias wouldn’t have been fooled by the trick cuffs.”

“You’re a fucking freak.” At least his mouth still worked.

The man was undaunted, and reached into his other pocket. This time his hand came out with a syringe. “Very sorry, but I’m going to have to transfer you now.”

Shit. Shit. Tsukiyo, what the hell is taking so long?

The man in the lab coat took a menacing step forward. The control panel on the Mother lit up without warning. The man jolted backward as a horrible blaring filled the room.

Emergency alert. Emergency alert.

Level 5, Level 5.

Emergency evacuation. Emergency evacuation.

“That’s not possible,” the man gawked, looking back and forth between the flashing lights. “Why are all the programs launching!”

The burst of relief that raced though Nezumi’s veins was dizzying. He full on smirked. “Game over, old man.”

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There wasn’t a soul in sight when Safu pulled up to the loading station. Logically speaking, this was no cause for alarm. What sane person would try to get into the Correctional Facility? There was little reason why No. 6 would try to safeguard this entrance, but Safu still felt a sense of foreboding at the lack of human presence.

She cut the engine and slipped out of the car, adjusting her gun so that it was more readily available. She would need to be vigilant and unhesitating from this moment forward if she planned to get herself and Shion in—and out—of the building alive. Shion was already stalking toward the door into the building.

His sinister mood had not dissipated. The ride over had been a slow torture of anxious silence that built with each mile. Shion had been simmering a long time, and she knew he must be close to boiling point now. Even she felt packed with restless energy. Safu locked the car, shoved the keys into her coat, and trotted to catch up with Shion.

The door had a keypad, but they tried it anyway. To her surprise, it was unlocked. Even Shion broke his impassive demeanor long enough to raise an eyebrow at the laxness of security.

I have a bad feeling.

It’s not that she thought it was a trap. There was no reason for anyone in the Correctional Facility to suspect an attack. But the whole situation had Safu on edge.

Shion creaked the door open and they crept inside, guns at the ready. The room was small. There was a monitoring booth to the right and a few cleaning robots in the corner. The trash chute
they had speculated about was at the far end, spilling garbage into a bin. The security in this part of the Facility was even more negligent than they had guessed; a quick sweep of the room revealed that there were no alarms or security cameras.

There was a single woman in the room, shoveling trash onto a conveyor belt so it could be disposed of in the incinerator. Her back was to them, and she had a pair of ear buds that were blasting music loud enough to be heard from where Shion and Safu were standing, so she had yet to realize their intrusion. Safu couldn’t believe their good luck.

Shion did not make any attempt to sneak up on the woman. He strode forward, quick and sure, and poked her in the back with the muzzle of his gun. Safu flinched nearly as hard as the woman.

The worker whirled around and gasped, her mouth forming a perfect startled O. She didn’t scream, and Safu wondered if she had lost her voice from shock, or if she had enough wits to stay quiet in the face of a firearm.

Shion nodded at the door into the Correctional Facility. “Open it.”

Her eyes darted to where he indicated. “I—I can’t.” Shion narrowed his eyes and the woman choked, “No, really, I can’t! There’s no button to open the door from this side. I can only come in if they let me. Please, don’t hurt me.” The woman looked pleadingly at Safu, as if appealing to their shared gender would make her more liable to pity.

Safu did pity her. This woman was no mastermind or murderer; she was just the lady who shoveled the trash.

“Let her go, Shion. She can’t help us.”

Shion frowned. “We can’t just let her go. She could alert the officers.”

“No, I won’t,” the woman blurted. “I won’t say a thing. I swear. I’ve got no one to tell. They won’t even let me in the building, like I said.” She tried to smile, but it was too watery with fear to look anything like one.

Shion considered her for a moment. “You left the door unlocked. We were able to get in because of your carelessness. If you went to the Security Bureau and they found out the intruders got into the building because you didn’t lock up properly, how do you think they’d react?”

Any color remaining in the woman’s face evaporated at the mention of the Security Bureau.

“Do you have a car here?”

The woman nodded stiffly.

“Get in it and drive away. If I see you come back, I won’t hesitate to shoot. I doubt you’d get off so leniently with the Security Bureau.”

The woman fled so fast, she didn’t even bother to shut off the power shovel she was using. Safu flipped the switch on it and peered at Shion out of the corner of her eye. He was fiddling with his gun. Safu was a little relieved that he had used logical manipulation on the waste disposal worker over a bald-faced threat. Shion may have gone off the deep end, but he hadn’t lost his wits, and he was still liable to use more nuanced tactics before resorting to violence. There was some kind of reassurance in this.

*Only the people inside the building are not going to be as harmless as that woman. It’ll be split*
decisions from now on. Safu checked her gun. Not enough shells to cover Shion in the firefight to come. She would need to pick up another gun almost immediately once they got inside.

Shion and Safu approached the trash chute to inspect it. They had proposed it as a possible entrance into the Facility, and now that they knew the door would not open from their end, it was practically their last hope for a quiet infiltration. The inside wall of the chute sloped sharply upwards, and the metal was sleek.

*There’s no way we can climb this,* Safu realized with a pang.

Shion slammed his fist against the side of the chute. “Dammit!”

“Shion…”

“Why is it that every time someone needs me, I can’t do anything?” He hit the side of the chute again. “I’m sick of it! I’m tired of being so goddamn powerless!”

Safu knotted her fists in her coat. “We’ll figure something out.”

“Figure what out? There’s nowhere to go.”

Shion spread his arms out to show off the expanse of the room. She didn’t need to look to know everything was sealed tight. There was no way to go but back outside. They couldn’t even shoot the door’s lock out; there was no doorknob or lock to be seen. Safu found herself thinking a little angrily of how little the employees inside the Correctional Facility must think of the waste disposal worker.

*Everything and everyone outside the building is trash to those inside.*

Shion dropped his arms and dragged his fingers through his bangs. “Nezumi’s just beyond this door, and I might never see him again…”

A buzzer blared.

The sound was not particularly loud or frightening, but Safu and Shion started. They both turned to the door that led into the Correctional Facility. There was a light above the door that they hadn’t noticed when they came in, but it was now blinking gold.

And then the door began to roll up. Safu’s mouth was dry as she watched it retract all the way, revealing a pristine white hallway beyond. She could hear loud, frantic voices from somewhere not too far down the hall. She glanced at Shion. He had an odd look on his face, a mixture of hope and suspicion.

“Come on.” Shion raised his gun and took a step toward the voices.

A few silent steps into the hall and Safu started to make out words in the frenzied buzz of conversation.

“I don’t know! The computers are going berserk! Everything is turning on.”

“The prisoners on the fourth floor are loose!”

“Oh God… We need to—”

An emergency evacuation warning drowned out the next few seconds of conversation.
It worked. Nezumi’s drive worked.

How he managed to get the drive into the system she couldn’t guess, but it appeared to be doing its job perfectly. They crept up to a slightly ajar door and peered into what looked like a monitoring room. The employees were in chaos, darting back and forth between the computers and babbling aloud.

“Did you hear that? Level 5, it said! We have to evacuate right now.”

“I need to get my things from the locker.”

They scrambled every which way to gather their belongings. Safu slipped by the door and waved Shion forward. These people were likely to flee out the way they came in and it’d be better to disappear down the hallway before they did so. They passed by several other rooms as they padded down the corridor, all without incident. The No. 6 citizens were too absorbed with their individual meltdowns to be worried about intruders or even about the alarm’s constant call for immediate evacuation. Safu would’ve scoffed at their antics, if she weren’t so terrified that they would run into an armed officer any moment now.

Maybe the officers will be flustered, too, she thought without assurance.

As they edged toward a turn, Shion moved to take the lead. Safu knew there was more tactical advantage if he was in front—his gun was much faster and more powerful than hers—but she quailed at putting him directly in the line of fire.

There were stairs around the corner, and they raced up, their shadows flickering against the wall among the flashes of the orange emergency lights. When they reached the top, they stumbled upon a livelier scene than the one below. People filled the hallway, moving in a ragged mass toward a door that Safu assumed must be some designated fire exit.

She and Shion had no chance of making their way through unnoticed. The guns were impossible to ignore, and they were a mess, smudged with soot and dirt from the fire. They were spotted immediately.

A portly man stared wide-eyed at them for but a second before squealing, “Intruders!”

Shion leered at him and the man squeaked and forced his way through the crowd to escape. The damage had been done. What had been a messy, but relatively civilized evacuation became a full on panic. People screamed and pushed, and the fire exits clogged with bodies. Safu and Shion held up their guns and tried to clear a path through threat of violence.

“Get down!” someone roared.

Safu didn’t know what made her focus on this voice out of all the voices in the space, but she turned in its direction and spotted a man in a dark uniform. He stood out like a stain in the writhing sea of white lab coats. He locked eyes with her and raised his arm, pointing a beefy black handgun at her.

Is he insane? There are too many people! There was wall of bodies between them, two rows deep, but this man didn’t seem to care about that.

Two quick gunshots cracked through the air like thunder. The officer spun and dropped out of sight, under the feet of the masses. Shrieks erupted, from those closest to the man, and from those standing near Shion.
Did both shots hit the officer? Safu couldn’t tell, but no one else seemed to be wounded. Did Shion kill him? She didn’t know. It had happened too fast. This was all happening too fast.

People scrambled out of their way, pressing against the walls where they had no chance of getting to the doors. It sickened Safu to see the raw fear in their eyes. She never liked No. 6, but she was different from the Resistance members who seethed with murderous intent towards the city. She had no particular desire to do its citizens harm.

And this scene… People screaming, cowering, running for their lives with tears streaming down their faces… It was all too familiar. How was this terror any different than what they had left behind in the West Block?

Shion led them up another staircase. This floor was less populated. Five officers were herding the last handful of people out the side doors. One yanked his gun out when he saw them coming. The other men quickly followed suit.

“You! Stop, or I’ll—”

Shion loosed several rounds. The men fell, one by one, no match for the rapid fire of Shion’s rifle. He didn’t stop. He shot and kept going. Safu trailed behind him, glancing from victim to victim. Shots to the leg on one—not fatal; a spray of bullet holes in the stomach and upper torso of another—in need of immediate attention; she froze as she came upon the next man. Headshot. She averted her face and checked the other two. More leg and arm wounds.

Messy.

It was apparent Shion was firing haphazardly, with no sure intent to kill. He wanted the officers out of his way, and he didn’t care whether that meant injured or dead.

He’s not a killer. He’s just… trying to get Nezumi.

Safu swallowed her fear and inched around the dead man to pry his handgun from his fingers. Bodies were a dime a dozen in West Block, especially in the winter, so she shouldn’t have been squeamish, but it felt dirty to take from the dead. She was careful not to touch the body any more or longer than was necessary.

She was instantly glad she took the gun. Shion was peering around the corner, scanning for enemies ahead, but he was neglecting the ones he had left behind. One of the men wounded in the legs had pushed himself up and he aimed his gun at Shion’s back.

Safu snapped her own gun up and fired. The bullet tore through the man’s hand. He shouted and his weapon clattered to the floor. Shion whipped his head around and traded glances between the whimpering man and Safu.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, so quietly she wondered if she had imagined it.

None of the other injured officers looked ready to retaliate, so Safu slunk to the corner.

“They must know we’re here by now.”

Shion nodded. “We need to be careful.”

They snuck up the stairs, sticking to the wall and keeping low. The moment their heads crested the top stair a volley of bullets launched toward them. Safu dove down, and Shion flattened himself against the wall, a pained look on his face. For a moment, Safu feared he had been hit. But she
couldn’t see any wounds.

“Only two,” Shion informed her. “But they have big guns.”

Safu’s heart sputtered. A shoot out of automatics. It would be a bloodbath.

Shion raised his rifle to return fire, but the next moment there was an eruption of screaming and cursing from above. She and Shion exchanged a look before they peeked over the top stair. The officers were on the floor, fighting frantically with a skinny man who had them pinned, and was clawing furiously at their faces.

And then the hall was suddenly flooded with people. Most were gaunt and wild-eyed, with stringy, unkempt hair. None wore shoes, but they all wore matching dark green shirts.

*These must be the prisoners.*

They roared with excitement as they stampeded into the hall.

“Freedom!”

“Escape!”

The mob stopped to cheer on the man scratching at the officers. A couple snatched at the officers’ guns and tried to rip them from the men’s grasps.

“Get them! Scratch their eyes out!”

“Kill them!”

One of the officers tore his arm away from the groping hands and fired his gun. A spray of blood hit the wall. A white-haired man crumpled to the floor. The prisoners backed away from the body, hissing and spitting like beasts. The officer tried to scramble away in the confusion. A young woman pounced on him with a feral snarl. She was foaming at the mouth, and the man howled as her teeth sunk into the exposed flesh of his arm.

“Shion, get over here, now.”

Safu snatched Shion’s coat sleeve and dragged him into the first room she saw. She swung the door closed behind them and crouched down so she would be out of sight if any came looking. She knew most of the prisoners in the Correctional Facility were hapless victims, whose only crime was speaking out against the city. But whatever had happened to them in this building had destroyed their minds. There was no reason in them now, and nothing to do but wait until they’d gone.

Several gunshots rang out. More screams and jeers. The clamor of footsteps.

“Shion, get over here and hide.”

Shion didn’t move. He was standing at the opposite end of the room, looking through a glass window.

“What… is this?”

His voice was barely a whisper, and Safu was shocked at the fear in it. It felt like it had been years since she had heard any trace of emotion in his voice. Carefully, she rose and walked to him. Shion’s face was white as a sheet. Safu swallowed and turned her gaze to the window.
Two conveyor belts were running a floor below. There were humans on them. Bodies. Dozens of men, women, and children, of all ages, sizes, and ethnicities. The top halves of their heads had been sawed off and were capped with a clear dome. They rolled in a silent procession down the belt and into a half-moon shaped device, disappearing without a trace or sound.

This is what No. 6 was doing? This is their experiment? Safu’s throat closed up. What kind of sick experiment is this?

“Samples,” she heard Shion say. “For the Godly Bed.”

Safu stared at him. What was he talking about?

“They’re monsters.” His voice was crisp and clear again, his eyes hard. “No human could do this.”

“What—”

“Brains, Safu,” he sneered. “They cut out their brains, and now they’re disposing of the unnecessary parts.”

Safu understood that at least. She felt like she was going to vomit. She covered her mouth and turned away from the window—and caught an officer trying to slip in behind them. He had the door open just enough to fit through and his gun was already half raised.

“Shion!”

Even while she screamed, she raised her own gun and pulled the trigger. Safu felt the white-hot bite of a bullet graze the top of her shoulder and heard the crash of glass shattering behind her, but her eyes were fixed on the officer. He careened backward and slid against the wall with a groan. Safu stood there, trembling, watching the dark bloom of blood flower in the center of his chest.

Shion went out into the hall and stood over the man. She thought she could see him breathing, it was slow and labored, but he was breathing. Shion kicked the gun from the officer’s hand.

“It’s clear. Let’s move.”

They ran. Rooms and people, stairs and hallways flitted before Safu’s eyes, seen but hardly processed. The deafening report of guns, the too bright splatters of blood on the walls, on the floors—it all began to blur. The scenes played out like fragmented pieces of a tape, nauseating in their abruptness. The sprinkler system sprang to life as they skidded down the corridor of the sixth—seventh?—floor.

Everything was going so fast, and while she was struggling to keep up, Shion was matching pace—maybe even beating it. It seemed like the moment an officer appeared, Shion was already firing.

Is it self-defense if they’re on the ground before they have time to raise their guns? They would hurt us if they had the chance. We can’t hesitate. Rationalizing it didn’t make the metallic taste in Safu’s mouth go away.

Another officer fell, clutching his shredded hand. Blood seeped through his fingers and mingled with the water from the sprinklers, swirling in rivulets along the floor. Shion paused to replace his magazine.

“You’ve made quite a mess, haven’t you?”
A broad shouldered man with a black buzz cut was sauntering down the hall, gun arm outstretched and a droll smile on his face. Safu knew immediately that this officer was different than the others. There was a seasoned atmosphere about him. This man knew violence. Safu trained her weapon on him to allow Shion the time to get his magazine inserted.

Unperturbed, the man continued to approach. “Neither of you have been wounded, either. Impressive. Although, I’m a little disgusted with my men’s performance. I thought I taught them better than this.” He glared down at an officer trembling by his feet. “The spread of your hits show a gross lack of respect for your opponents. The least you could do is kill them quickly… Unless you’re an amateur shot?”

Shion pointed his gun at the man. “Who are you?”

“My name is Rashi. And judging by your mangy appearance, you two must have scurried in from the West Block.” He tilted his head. “Have you come for your friend? Nezumi… was it?”

Shion stiffened.

“How sweet. I didn’t know the little rat had any friends left.”

“Where is Nezumi?”

“By now? Hmm. An operating table, perhaps?” Rashi shrugged. “My employer is an eccentric man.”

Shion loosed half of the new magazine at the man, but he was already ducking out of the line of fire.

Rashi chuckled. “Such youth.”

A single shot rang out. There was a sharp whoosh, and by the time Safu realized it was the sound of the air leaving Shion’s lungs, he was already sprawled on the tiles.

Time ceased to exist.

“SHION!”

Safu threw herself down. He wasn’t moving. He wasn’t breathing.

“Shion!” The name came out as an agonized choke.

Stop the bleeding. I have to stop the bleeding.

Tears streamed thick and hot down her cheeks. She couldn’t see straight. She couldn’t find where he was hurt. Safu fumbled with Shion’s coat, groping desperately for a way to save him.

“Where are you hurt? Shion, please. Please open your eyes.”

The rest of her pleas were lost in sobs. A pair of black boots stopped next to her.

“He fought well, so I made it quick,” the cold voice said. “I at least respect one’s efforts in battle enough to give them that.”

Safu didn’t answer. Her hand had finally found the frayed hole in Shion’s jacket, directly over his heart.
“I’ll give you the same courtesy.” A light draft wafted over her cheek, and she felt the threat of Rashi’s weapon trained on her.

No. Her survival instincts kicked weakly at her grief. *You can’t die. Fight. Fight, and maybe you can save Shion.*

Safu raked her hand over the tiles, but she couldn’t find her handgun.

And then it was there in front of her, suspended in the air. She stared at it, perplexed, and heard Rashi grunt in surprise. He wasn’t staring at the gun, but beyond it, at Shion. Safu gasped. His eyes were open, glaring bright, icy daggers at Rashi.

Shion sat up and pulled the trigger in the same fluid motion, sending the bullet directly into Rashi’s gut.

The officer stumbled back, hit the wall, and slid down. “How…” He coughed, the sound shocked and wet. “You should be dead…”

“Superfibre,” Shion intoned blankly.

He rose to his feet, keeping the gun out in front of him. Something tinkled on the tiles and Safu stared dumbfounded at the bullet, slightly dented at the tip.

*Superfibre. Where…* But then she knew he must have taken it from Yoming’s house. The man had a few items made of the material, paranoid as he was of attempts on his life.

Shion rubbed the hole in his coat irritably, a grimace of pain flitting over his face.

Rashi grimaced back, his wry amusement infused with a more enduring look of pain. “Should’ve aimed for your head.” He pressed his hand tightly against his stomach, and Safu could see red was starting to seep between the crevices of his fingers.

Safu realized she was still kneeling on the floor. She pushed herself up and stepped away from Shion. For the first time, she faced the full extent of her terror—and now betrayal. Shion used her. He played dead, listened to her sob and beg; he manipulated her anguish to lure the enemy closer. She didn’t even know this person.

The officer pried his hand from his abdomen and looked down. He groaned. “Amateur… Why couldn’t you… aim for a fatal spot?”

“You’re more useful alive.” Shion took a step toward Rashi. “Now, I’ll ask you again: Where is Nezumi?”

Rashi trembled. “…Top floor.”

“Is he hurt?”

The man made a face. “This hurts… I’m in pain. Please—”

“Answer the question.”

“… No… Not when I left him.”

“Not when you left him?” Shion echoed bitterly. “What do you mean? What’s happening to him?”
“I told you,” he gasped. “My boss. He… likes to… experiment. Anything could have happened.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I don’t know. I don’t know… any more.”

There seemed to be tears forming at the corners of his eyes. Safu gnawed her lip. Shion stared Rashi down for a long moment. Then he turned and held Safu’s gun out to her. She didn’t take it immediately, just looked at it. He kept holding it out, but he fidgeted a little. A miffed, urgent ripple. She took the weapon from him and held it limply at her side.

Shion scooped his rifle off the floor, where it had lain since he faked death. “Let’s go.”

Reluctantly, Safu followed.

“Wait!” Rashi cried. “Kill me!”

“You’re not worth another bullet.”

“But… I’ll suffer!”

Shion didn’t seem to care.

“The building is set to detonate!” snarled Rashi.

Shion and Safu came to a halt.

Safu twisted around. “When?”

“Any minute now.”

Shion tossed a disdainful look his way. “And you didn’t think to mention this sooner?”

Rashi shrugged, a pallid smile on his lips. It was quickly wiped away by a tremor of pain. He curled in on himself and pressed harder on his stomach. “There… I helped you. I warned you. Now kill me.”

Shion narrowed his eyes and turned away to continue his trek down the hall.

“Wait!” Rashi sputtered. “I—

I killed your leader!”

Shion froze and angled back toward Rashi.

Rashi spoke quickly. “Yoming and… all your other comrades! I killed everyone in that basement.”

Shion’s face twisted in rage. His hand tightened around the grip of his rifle. Rashi smiled a little, and for a moment Safu, too, believed that he was going to grant Rashi’s death wish.

But Shion only growled, his voice low and venomous, “Then you can burn like they did.”

He swung around and hastened down the hall. Rashi’s eyes widened with fear and then agony as he gripped his stomach.

Safu watched Shion disappear down the hall. She looked down at Rashi. He had gone very pale, and the area of his uniform over his stomach and legs was saturated with blood.

She couldn’t be sure how long it would take for the injury to prove fatal, but it was apparent the man would not be able to escape before the building detonated. He would either bleed out or be
decimated in the explosion to come. Either way, death would not be quick.

Safu should feel no pity for this man. He was a murderer, he had terrorized West Block time and again, and he had enjoyed doing it. He had tried to kill Shion, and he would’ve killed her. She should despise him; leave him to die, slowly and painfully, and utterly alone.

Rashi’s eyes met hers. Their darkness was muddled. “Please,” he managed. “Save me…”

Safu’s hand trembled as her finger slipped over the trigger. Rashi blinked once, slowly, and then closed his eyes.

The sound of that shot chased her up the next two floors.

****

It was torture. Nezumi knew the doors behind him were wide open. He knew the elevator would be traveling mindlessly up and down. And here he was, slumped against a wall, glaring at the man in white as he scrambled to save his data. The man had completely lost interest in him—a godsend, but the real godsend would be to ditch the cuffs and escape.

Nezumi tried again to muster the will to move. He had managed to twitch his hands so far, but that was a long way from crawling out the door.

“What did you do?” a low voice rumbled.

Nezumi glanced up at the man’s distraught expression and smirked. “Oh, just a little experiment of mine. I planted a bug in the brain of this Facility. The results seem promising so far, wouldn’t you say?”

“Don’t you understand?” The man yanked at his hair. “Everything and everyone will be obliterated!”

As if to drive the point home, the floor trembled beneath them.

“You’ve destroyed it. Everything I’ve worked for.”

“It’s all well and good if you want to have a meltdown, but deactivate my cuffs first.”

The man’s gaze sharpened. “You. You can speak to Elyurias.” Nezumi ground his teeth as the man stalked toward him. “I may have lost my research, but I still have you. There are secrets in you that may lead to Elyurias, I just need time to extract them.”

He pulled out a miniscule handgun. It was a peashooter, laughable almost, except that it was lethal and Nezumi was in no laughing mood.

The man took a second step forward and froze, staring past Nezumi into the hall. A small, strangled noise escaped his lips.

The next moment was red. Nezumi blinked as a spray of red painted over the white of the floor. It was only a glimpse, before the man in the white lab coat pitched backward over it, gasping and clutching his thigh. Nezumi heard the soft tap of footsteps. A bead of sweat rolled down his back. He couldn’t turn to see who was approaching; he was trapped watching the pain on the fallen man’s face morph into a grimace of terror. The man scrambled back toward the Mother, leaving a smear of blood behind his injured leg.
The footsteps grew louder, and Nezumi listened harder, thinking he heard a second, lighter tread mixed between the steady steps of what must have been the shooter.

“So this really was just an experiment to you.”

Nezumi’s eyes widened.

He knew that voice, and it was one he had not expected to hear, now, in this place—and sounding like *that*. The voice was familiar, but it was the wrong kind of familiar. It turned the initial spike of relief into a stab of dread. A glimpse of rusty red appeared in Nezumi’s peripheral, and then Shion stepped fully into view.

He looked like he had just journeyed out of hell. His face and hands were smudged with black dirt, or maybe soot, and the left side of his face showed evidence of a brutal beating. Nezumi’s gaze didn’t rest long on Shion’s face, though, drawn as it was to the large black gun hanging at his side.

*No…*

“Shion…?”

Shion didn’t seem to see him. He kept walking, slow and utterly focused on the man. “Is it fun, playing with people’s lives?”

The injured man quavered as Shion advanced on him.

“Tearing them from their homes, their families, to bring them here to be ripped apart and thrown away like garbage?”

The man’s eyes darted around, resting with horror on his small handgun in the corner, too far for him to reach.

“P-please. Wait,” the man stuttered, backing as far as he could against the Mother’s mainframe. “I beg you.”

“You beg me? I wonder how many of those people down there begged you?” Shion’s shoulders shook. “Do you even see them as people?”

Nezumi’s mouth had gone dry. *Shion, stop. This isn’t you.* He wanted to say it—he needed to say it—but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get his tongue to form the words.

“You came for the boy—right?” The man in the lab coat flicked his eyes to Nezumi. “Take him. Here.” He reached into his pocket and held out the remote. “The keys to his cuffs. Take them.”

Shion stopped walking. He was nearly on top of the man now, so close he towered over him. The man’s offering went untaken, and his hand began to shake from the stress.

“I hope all this was worth the lives of my friends.” Shion tilted his face up to look at the Mother. “It hurts, doesn’t it? Having everything you hold dear taken from you, and you can’t do a thing to stop it.”

“You—” the man choked, but this time it was angry, not fearful. “You think destroying this place will achieve anything? My work will live on, and the city will continue to thrive. Destroying this place won’t save any of them.”
Shion stared up at the Mother for a long moment. “You’re right,” he said quietly. “I couldn’t save them.” Shion’s right arm rose slowly. “I can’t save anyone.”

“Shion, stop!”

A gunshot rang out.

Chapter End Notes

Well this is familiar...
The Happy Prince

Chapter Notes

Cue sads.

The sound of the gunshot filled the room, so loud that Nezumi hardly knew if he had screamed at all. The air smelt strongly of gunpowder and blood, and the stench was powerful enough that he almost gagged. The man in the lab coat—he didn’t look. He didn’t need to see.

Shion’s shoulders slumped, and all was still.

“Shion…?” Nezumi’s voice came out painfully quiet.

Shion raised his head and turned.

“Nezumi!”

Nezumi flinched. Shion was beaming at him, his face a disorienting mixture of relief, concern, and affection. He rushed over. There was blood spatter on the bottom of his coat—fresh, not Shion’s.

Shion threw himself down and hugged him tightly. Nezumi swallowed. He met Safu’s eyes over Shion’s shoulder and her face was flat and emotionless.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” Shion murmured. He squeezed Nezumi a little tighter and then let go. “Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m alright. I wasn’t hit.”

“Shion… You just killed a man.”

Shion’s smile slipped a little. His eyes lowered, and Nezumi thought he saw them dart toward the body. “Oh… Yeah… But he wanted to hurt you. He needed to be punished.”

A sharp pain shot through Nezumi’s chest. Don’t say that. Please don’t say you did that for me.

This was all wrong. Shion didn’t hurt people. Shion didn’t want to hurt people. Hadn’t he told Nezumi that he never wanted to take another life? Maybe he wasn’t perfect, but Shion was gentle and kind and more human than anyone Nezumi had ever known. He wasn’t a killer.

And yet there was the gun, next to Shion. There was the blood, on Shion. This is wrong. Nezumi stared, and for once he didn’t hide his emotions.

I wish you never came.

Shion fingered the cuffs on Nezumi’s wrists. “We should unlock these. The key I think…” He trailed off as Safu stepped up beside him, holding out the small remote for Shion to take.
The little piece of machinery looked very clean. Nezumi tore his thoughts away from the boy in front of him and latched onto this mystery. He knew that the man’s hands had been covered in blood from his leg, so the remote should at least show some traces… There were some, rimmed around the buttons, and streaked along the sides, as if it had been wiped.

As Safu handed it off, Nezumi caught the smudge of red-brown on the underside of her coat sleeve. They locked eyes. Safu’s face was still blank, but he realized now it wasn’t devoid of emotion. Her eyes were dark and pleading.

What had she seen? What had happened before they reached this room?

*It must have been hell.*

The cuffs sprang open, and feeling returned to his limbs instantly. Every muscle ached, but Nezumi wasted no time climbing to his feet.

The sound of an explosion rumbled below, and the ground shook more violently than ever before. The evacuation lights became more insistent.

*Emergency alert. Emergency alert.*

*All personnel, evacuate immediately.*

*Level 5. Level 5.*

“The detonation’s started,” Safu said, fear creeping into her voice. “We need to get out of the building.”

All pain and confusion was shoved to the backburnner as they ran for the elevator. Nezumi remembered vaguely that an elevator was the absolute worst place to get caught in during an emergency, but it was a little late for those kinds of thoughts.

They were just about all the way down, when the elevator jerked, making everyone inside stumble. Nezumi’s blood ran cold.

*You’ve got to be kidding…*

The doors popped open, but they were misaligned with the floor, too high up, and the doors opened barely wide enough for a single person to slip through. The hallway beyond looked dim and fragile.

“You first, Nezumi,” Shion said.

Nezumi was acutely aware of the gun still in Shion’s hands. He glanced at him, but there was nothing in his expression to arouse immediate suspicion, and given the circumstances, a closer study was unwise. He squeezed through the doors, and Safu slipped out after him.

The floor was wet, and Nezumi skidded a little on it as he landed. He steadied himself against the wall and looked up. There was a body in the hallway, a man’s. It was slumped over and he knew they were dead. The evidence was all over the floor and the wall. The profile of the man looked familiar. Nezumi’s heart lurched, and he turned away.

The same moment, a thunderous explosion rocked through the building. Shion leapt from the elevator, just as it gave an irritable screech and plummeted downwards. Nezumi realized then that the air in the hall was thick, and although this floor seemed to be intact, he knew that something
was on fire somewhere close.

Shion and Safu took the lead, moving as one toward the staircase at the end of the hall. Nezumi trusted that they knew where they were going. In order to get to the end of the hall, though, they would need to pass the body, and Nezumi couldn’t help but look—and confirm.

=Rashi=

His death was no tragedy, but it brought him no pleasure. A headshot… The shot was perfectly placed, instantly fatal. Either his executioner had been merciful or had really wanted him dead. He was wounded in the stomach, too, and that both complicated the motive and yet changed nothing.

But he had to know. With what feelings and intentions was this man killed? He gazed at Shion’s back. How bad is it? Nezumi noticed that although Shion kept his course down the hall, Safu made a marked effort to circumvent the body.

Gray wisps were drifting up the stairs, so Nezumi thought he was prepared before they reached the bottom. The floor was littered with shards of glass, and here, too, there were traces of a violent encounter, but he could find no bodies. Smoke billowed out of nearly every room and there were flames flicking out of a few at the end. Somewhere, people were screaming.

Why is everything exploding?

The emergency alert boomed overhead. Another room blew outward, throwing glass and plastic into the air. Of course. All the computers were connected, to and from, the Mother. This being a top security building, the Mother would have an emergency detonation program, in the event that it was compromised. The virus had infected one computer and reached the Mother, setting off a chain command to self-destruct. All the computers would explode—and there were tons of them in this building, on every floor.

They needed to get the hell out before the entire building came down around them.

Something moved in the smoke. An officer bolted out of the now smoldering room, wheezing, dirty, and bleeding. It looked like he had been caught in the shrapnel burst from the shattered computer, but his injuries were by no means fatal.

He squinted at them and coughed. “Y-you… Evacuate…”

Nezumi tilted his head. The man must have been very disoriented if he had mistaken them for employees. Shion’s arm twitched and something in the movement set off an alarm in Nezumi’s head. Before he fully knew what he was doing, he darted in between the man and the gun that Shion had just raised to shoot.

“Shion, stop!”

“Nezumi!” Shion jerked the gun to the side, and, thankfully, it did not fire.

There was a clipped shout from behind Nezumi, followed by the hard slap of footfalls across the tiles.

“Don’t do that!” Shion yelped. “This gun is very sensitive. I could’ve hurt you.”

“Well then you better be extra careful, because I’m not moving until you calm down. What gives? That man wasn’t even a threat.” Shion bit his lip and looked over Nezumi’s shoulder, presumably to where his target had escaped. Nezumi narrowed his eyes. “If you want to shoot
someone so badly, shoot me.”

Shion snapped his attention back to him. “Nezumi... Why would you—”

“You came here to protect me, right? You’ve done it. It’s over.”

“It’s not over. We need to destroy the Correctional Facility.”

“It’s already self-destructing without your help. There’s no need to shoot every person you come across.”

Shion was looking at him like he couldn’t understand a word he said. Nezumi’s stomach twisted. Had he always been so stubborn and illogical?

“Didn’t you say you never wanted to do this again?”

This affected Shion for a moment. His face pinched and he seemed to wrestle with his thoughts. But then he shook his head fiercely. “I have to. They’re monsters, Nezumi. They’ve killed so many people, and for what? Experiments? To fulfill some kind of sick need for power? They murdered Yoming, Yamase, Kaze—everyone! They kidnapped you! If I don’t get rid of them, it will never stop!”

Nezumi would be lying if he said he didn’t on some level agree. The Correctional Facility was rotten and the people who worked in it, knowing the atrocities perpetrated there, deserved some kind of retribution. They cared only for themselves and their own advancement. Other people were just a means to an end, data in a chart or blood in a vial; they were things to be studied and picked apart.

*But Shion doesn’t think like that.*

Spiteful words and condemnation were for other people, people like him, who had never thought highly of humanity and who had never known a hand that wasn’t withdrawn when he needed it the most. But Shion was better than him and all the people in No. 6 put together.

Shion reached his hand out whether you asked for it or not, and he held fast. He treated people with respect and kindness, and people loved and respected him in return. It was he who argued for a positive solution where there was none to be found.

*This isn’t you, Shion. How can I make you remember?*

“What about your Mama?”

Shion stiffened.

“What would she think if she saw you? Do you think this is what she would want? You’re better than this, Shion.”

Shion’s eyes widened, and finally Nezumi caught a glimpse of the person he knew.

“Nezumi…” Shion sucked in a breath and lowered the gun. “What—What have I—”

The hope in Nezumi’s heart flickered and died. This was not what he wanted either. All the anger and disgust was gone from Shion’s expression, leaving only a small, terrified boy behind. Shion had only been able to run on that hatred, and now, stripped of it, he was crumbling.

Nezumi closed the gap between them and hooked a finger under Shion’s chin. “Shion, you’ve
got to keep it together. You can’t shut down. Not here.”

“I killed…” Shion was shaking so hard it was difficult to keep a hold on him. “I killed—oh god…” His breathing grew too erratic for him to speak, and he trailed off with a whimper.

Nezumi felt close to panic himself. Shion was less dangerous now, but this was not better.

“Shion, listen to me. You… you were protecting me. You did what was necessary—” Nezumi choked on the last word. It felt rotten in his mouth. He didn’t mean to say that; he didn’t want to say any of this.

*But what else can I do? How can I make this okay?*

Nezumi didn’t think he could. He pried the rifle from Shion’s grip, and after a moment of deliberation, put it on the floor. There was no need for it now.

“Safu, can you cover us?”

She had been watching him and Shion intently, her expression almost as distraught as Shion’s. But when Nezumi asked the question, she gnawed her lip and nodded with a fair amount of composure. He was relieved at her ability to compartmentalize.

Nezumi turned back to the petrified boy in front of him and tried to sound firm. “Hold on until we’re out, Shion. I know you can do it…”

Shion didn’t respond. Nezumi repeated his name, softer, but he just stared wide-eyed at the floor, without seeming to see anything. He reached out and grabbed Shion’s hand. He came forward without resistance when pulled, but that faraway look remained. Nezumi nodded minutely to Safu, and, swiftly, she led them through the maze of corridors and stairs.

Every floor they passed through was chaos. Smoke and flame billowed out of the open doorways, and somehow there always seemed to be people screaming from far away.

Shion was dragged along behind him, a constant, distressing weight at the end of Nezumi’s arm. The current crisis was a welcome distraction, a reasonable explanation for why he kept his eyes always forward, but he knew he would have to face Shion eventually. They would all have to face what had transpired and… and then what? Learn to live with it? Try to forget? These were nothing but clichés that had no idea what they were talking about, stock lines, provided for bystanders so they could feel like they had some wisdom to impart about the healing nature of time. Such vague advice could never make a dent in the experience of real tragedy. It was like putting a band-aid on a wound that needed stitches.

Nezumi squeezed Shion’s limp hand in his, and he had never felt so helpless.

The instant they crossed the threshold into the loading bay, the Correctional Facility exploded. Nezumi was thrown bodily forward and landed hard on the dirt. For a moment, he couldn’t hear anything but a low buzzing.

_Elyurias?_

But no. His ears were only ringing. He carefully pushed himself up onto his knees.

*Shion.* He searched, and found him just a little off to the side, looking dazed, but unharmed. He checked for Safu next. She had already scrambled to her feet and was running headlong for a car. Sound returned to Nezumi’s ears with a painful pop, and he almost didn’t notice, because the roar
in his ears only changed in pitch. He glanced behind him.

The Correctional Facility was a pillar of smoke and fire. The heat rolled over him in waves, making his skin itch. He squinted at the wreckage and only one thought came to his mind: Elyurias wouldn’t need to come. He had fulfilled his end of the bargain. The center of the injustices against Her and the Forest People would be nothing but cinders soon. An appropriate end; what started in flame ended in flame.

“I can’t go back,” said a small voice.

Shion had pushed himself up onto his knees, and he stared at the car Safu was heading for like it was a death sentence. He was fiddling with something at his side, but Nezumi couldn’t see what. The heat from the burning building made it hard to keep his eyes open. He crawled closer to Shion, meaning to grab him and drag him over to the car.

“I’ve hurt so many people... How can I ever be forgiven?”

Nezumi froze. Shion had a gun in his hand.

_How? Where?_

These things didn’t matter, because Shion had it, and he was lifting it up and up.

“How can I ever face her?”

_Shion, what—_

Shion raised the barrel toward his head.

Nezumi crashed into him.

_“What the fuck, Shion?!”_ He ripped the gun from Shion’s hand and chucked it as far as he could. Shion stared up at him numbly, as if the loss of his weapon was nothing, as if he was already dead. Nezumi buried his fists in the collar of Shion’s coat. “You think killing yourself is going to make anything better? You’re just killing another person!”

“I’m not as strong as you, Nezumi…”

“That’s bullshit! Don’t you dare—” His throat constricted and he felt the telltale burning behind his eyes.

_Why?_

He hadn’t felt like this in years, not since he was four. He didn’t remember it hurting this much. Shion’s eyes watched him, but they were so far away and Nezumi didn’t know how to reach them.

Shion turned his face aside. Nezumi fist ed his hands tighter in Shion’s coat. He wanted to hit him. He wanted to shake him for trying to do something so stupid, for making him feel like he was choking. But Shion looked so small and broken already, and he wasn’t even trying to defend himself. The cheek he’d turned to face Nezumi was purpled with bruises, and Nezumi’s heart ached.

Why did Shion come for him? He had never asked for his loyalty, for his devotion. But Shion had pledged these things to him despite everything he did to push him away. He never asked Shion to storm the Correctional Facility in search of him, to protect and kill for him. But he had, and in
the end he still turned, blackened, bloodied, and bruised, and smiled with that naïve innocence Nezumi knew so well. It was too much to bear.

*Shion, I don’t know how to fix this.*

Dirt crunched close by, and the car pulled up alongside them. The driver’s door slammed and Safu was standing over them in seconds.

“What happened?” Her voice was uneven. “Shion?”

Nezumi didn’t answer. She might’ve seen what happened, or she might not have. Either way, he wasn’t going to say anything.

Nezumi tried to swallow the brewing emotion and gripped Shion’s arm. “Help me get him in,” he said, his voice sounding dry and cracked despite his best efforts.

Together they maneuvered Shion into the backseat of the car, and Nezumi climbed in next to him. A small guttural purr came from the far side of the car, and Nezumi spotted Yoming’s crow nestled in the corner, watching them with glistening black eyes. How it came to be in the company of Shion and Safu, he didn’t much think about, but it reminded him.

*Tsukiyo.* He looked back at the Correctional Facility. Had the mouse escaped? He had to assume it had; it had plenty of time to do so.

Safu began to drive and Nezumi returned his attention to the boy beside him. He had lapsed back into an unresponsive state. The blank expression of Shion’s face scared him, and he could think of nothing else to do but pull Shion to rest his head against his shoulder. Shion’s dark hair tickled his neck, and it smelled of smoke.

“How is he?” Safu said quietly.

It was a waste of a question, considering Shion had fallen catatonic, but Nezumi couldn’t blame her for asking it. Instead of answering, he tried speaking to Shion. He said his name, but to no effect. He needed to fill the silence, though. It wouldn’t do any of them good to be left with just their thoughts, Shion most of all. A distraction was necessary, and Nezumi knew only one that worked almost every time he’d used it: literature.

He searched his mind, but the longer he thought about it, the more distressed he became. Most of his reading hours had been reserved for Shakespeare. *I can recite Macbeth and Hamlet, but those are horrible choices. Why did Shakespeare have to write so many tragedies about madness and death?* Reciting a comedy felt like an equally insensitive decision. Nezumi grit his teeth.

*What else? Come on; think!*

“‘High above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince,’” Nezumi began unsteadily. “‘He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt. He was very much admired indeed…’”

Here he faltered. He hadn’t memorized this one. He had read *The Happy Prince* only twice, and he had only read it a second time because Shion had scoffed at his poor comprehension of the characters and plot. But he felt like he had to use this story. Shion had told him his mother read it to him often, so Nezumi knew if anything was likely to reach him, it was this book.

*If I don’t butcher the story completely,* he thought miserably.

“One night there flew over the city a little Swallow. His friends had gone to Egypt six weeks
earlier, but he had stayed behind… and after they had gone he felt lonely. He planned to fly over to Egypt, too, but he decided to rest at the feet of a statue for the night. As he lay, water dripped on his head, and thinking it was rain, he looked up angrily. The eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears, and tears were running down his golden cheeks. His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little Swallow was filled with pity.”

Nezumi swallowed. *Maybe this is a bad idea. The Prince and Swallow’s story isn’t exactly a happy one either.*

“The Prince was crying because he had lived and died a pleasurable and happy life, but, as a statue, he could now see how many people had suffered, and still suffered, in his city while he was oblivious. He wanted to help them, but could not move from his pedestal. He asked the Swallow for help.”

Nezumi caught Safu eyeing him in the rearview mirror. Her gaze was grateful. He forced himself to continue, filling in as best he could the portions he couldn’t remember well.

“The Prince told the Swallow of a struggling seamstress. She needed to finish a rich lady’s dress for a ball, but the seamstress’s young son had a high fever, and she had spent all her time and money to nurse him back to health. The Prince begged the Swallow to take the ruby from his sword to her, so she might gain the means to help herself and her son. The Swallow did so, and prepared to leave for Egypt the next day, but the Prince begged him back.

“He told him of a playwright who was struggling to write a play for the king. ‘I have no ruby now,’ said the Prince; ‘my eyes are all I have left. Pluck out one and give it to the playwright, so he might buy food and firewood enough to finish his play.’ The Swallow could not refuse the sadness in the Prince’s voice, so he obeyed, and even brought the Prince’s remaining sapphire eye away to a match girl, who had failed to sell her wares, and would be beaten by her father if she came home empty-handed.”

This retelling had no poetry or grace, but Nezumi reminded himself that he wasn’t trying to impress anyone. Shion would appreciate that he tried, and he might even find the amateurish storytelling amusing. *That is, if he’s hearing a word I’m saying…*

“The Swallow took the last jewel to the match girl, and watched her skip away happily. Then the Swallow came back to the Prince. ‘You are blind now,’ he said, ‘so I will stay with you always.’ ‘No, little Swallow, you must go away to Egypt,’ the Prince protested, however, the Swallow insisted. But there were still more poor and miserable people, and the Prince asked the Swallow to give them his gold gild so they might have a piece of happiness. Leaf after leaf of the fine gold the Swallow picked off, till the Happy Prince looked quite dull and grey. Leaf after leaf he brought to the poor, and the children’s faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played in the streets. The winter grew colder… but the Swallow would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well...”

A lump was starting to form in Nezumi’s throat. Shion hadn’t moved or reacted the whole time. He decided not to finish the story, and the car lapsed into terrible silence.

“Are we supposed to be going somewhere?” Safu said at last. “I’ve just kind of been… driving…”

Nezumi glanced out the window. Safu had made a straight getaway through the front of gate of the Facility, and if they didn’t change course they’d drive straight into the wall of No. 6. He didn’t know where they should go. The West Block was probably in shambles. The recent disaster should have calmed the murderous mobs, and he doubted they—or rather he, since it had started because
of him—would be in much danger if they returned. He didn’t want to take Shion back to that, though. He had seen enough tragedy for one day; they all had. What they needed was somewhere quiet.

Something moved at the corner of Nezumi’s vision, and he caught the crow sidling up to Shion. It pecked his coat a few times and then climbed its way up onto his arm to start preening his hair.

Nezumi wrinkled his nose and was about to shoo it away, when he remembered the camera it wore. If it hadn’t been damaged, it contained some damning evidence against the Security Bureau. Nezumi narrowed his eyes at the little piece of machinery, vengeful thoughts playing at the corners of his mind. He had always wanted to see the city burn, but so far he had only seen part of it go up in flames. It was time to finish the job.

He met Safu’s eye in the mirror. “The Information Bureau.”

“…In No. 6?”

Nezumi nodded.

“Why?”

“We have a message to deliver to the city.”

“Right…” she said slowly. Nezumi wondered if she thought he had somehow lost it, too. But the possibility of two of her friends being unstable was a terrible thought, so she continued as though she considered him sane and in the process of hatching a plot. “Okay. But how do we get in?”

“How’d you get in last time?”

“The sewers.”

Nezumi made a bit of a face. That wouldn’t do. Shion would be impossible. “The same way we got out last time?” he suggested as an alternative.

He saw Safu raise her eyebrows. “That’s hardly inconspicuous.”

“We don’t really have time for inconspicuous.”

Safu didn’t say anything, but Nezumi could hear the hum of the car grow louder as they accelerated toward the wall of No. 6.
Both Nezumi and Safu knew that crashing through the gates of No. 6 was not a good way to get in. It was suicidal and a one-way ticket to danger, and they couldn’t afford to be arrested now, not after all they went through.

Although, it’s not like there’s anywhere to throw us, now that the Correctional Facility’s kaput.

But it seemed luck had decided to visit them at the last possible moment. When they drew nearer to the gate, there was a string of cars outside, and the security posted there were scrambling to calm the people who streamed out, crying and yelling about the Correctional Facility disaster. Safu pulled up behind the last car and rolled down her window. The terrified tones of the No. 6 citizens drifted in, and Nezumi could tell Safu was listening and looking very closely.

“You have an idea?” he asked.

“Maybe… It’s a long shot, but if it doesn’t work, we have Plan B.”

Nezumi didn’t have to ask what Plan B was; he could see it, sleek and lethal, in Safu’s hand, out of sight just below the open window. He really hoped they would not need to use it.

A security officer was making his way down the line, talking briefly with those still in their cars, and herding loose persons back into their respective vehicles. Safu tensed as he approached and Nezumi tightened his grip on Shion’s shoulder. The man glanced at Safu and then leaned to see inside the car. His eyes dragged over Nezumi and lingered on Shion long enough to make Nezumi clench his teeth.

The officer settled back on his heels. “You’re young to be employed.”

“This is our first assignment, sir,” Safu muttered in a frightened and uncharacteristically meek voice.

It appears I’m not the only actor in the car.

“We just graduated from the Gifted Curriculum,” Nezumi added. “Safu was the top of the class. Neuroscience major.”

The officer grunted. “Identification?”

“O-oh… Um…” Safu glanced down at her lap and then back the way they had come in a nervous flutter. “I didn’t grab it. The Correctional Facility was attacked.”

“I’m aware, Miss.”

“Yes, yes of course you are. But, you see, we were told to evacuate immediately, so I just ran…”

It was a good act, and it would have been a good cover story—except there was a glaring flaw in it, one that a West Block citizen couldn’t have known. The officer pointed it out the moment Nezumi realized this.
“I understand if you forgot your keycard, Miss, but I’m asking for your ID.” He raised his wrist, and tapped the metal band, the one that No. 6 citizens were forbidden from removing. Nezumi could feel the tension rolling off Safu. Her arm shifted beneath the window.

“Sir,” he said, trying to sound urgent, which was no real challenge. “The work we conduct in the lab involves the use of harmful chemicals. We remove our IDs for safety purposes.”

The officer’s face creased with disapproval. “You are never to remove the bracelet, no matter what you’re doing. I should write you up for neglect.”

Everyone in the car was very still.

“I’ll let you off with a warning,” the officer said at last. “But go to the Census Bureau and apply for new IDs immediately, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Safu and Nezumi murmured in unison.

The officer nodded and then his eyes dropped again. “Is that boy ill?”

Nezumi reflexively drew Shion closer. Sickness was not a good thing to admit to outside the walls. No. 6 was suspicious of contamination of any kind.

“A piece of debris fell on his head,” Nezumi answered. “I think he has a concussion. Please, sir, we need to get through…”

The officer waved his hand dismissively. “You’ll get through, but you’ll have to wait your turn like everyone else. Make sure you pick up new IDs the moment you’re inside.” He gave them a final hard look and continued to the next car.

Safu rolled the window up and let out a ragged breath. “That was nerve-racking.”

“Welcome to No. 6.”

They crept at a snail’s pace toward the gate. The alarm whined up ahead, and Nezumi realized they were not the only people to be without an ID. Not surprising, given how annoying and bulky the bracelets were—people were bound to remove them and liable to forget them in crisis—but Nezumi was grateful that they had not been alone; repeated disappointment had made the officer lenient. The guard at the gate ignored the alarm as they rolled over the threshold.

And easy as that, they were inside No. 6.

Safu looked around as she drove, an expression equal parts curious and critical on her face. They were in enemy territory now and she was not letting her guard down for a second. Nezumi felt a familiar restlessness settle in his bones at the sight of the pretty white buildings and neat flowerbeds. A perfect façade, constructed to mask the horrors beneath. “Serpent heart hid with a flowering face.”

Twelve years he had spent penned up in here, fighting for his life while the city did its damnedest to crush and mold him to its standards. He had sworn to himself that once he escaped he would never return.

And yet... Nezumi sighed.

“It’s safe to peel off now.”
Safu’s voice cut through his brooding, and he was thankful for the distraction. He quickly gave her directions to the Information Bureau. It was located at the city center, impossible to miss.

As they drove, Nezumi stared at the people. It was just barely evening now, and the streets were filled with citizens, finishing up their last minute dinner shopping, or heading back from work. They were clean, well-dressed, and well-fed, smiling brightly and chattering to each other like there wasn’t a thing wrong in the world. He caught a few pointing to the sky, likely at the smoke rising from the Correctional Facility wreckage. They shook their heads and checked their ID screens for answers that they would never receive. Or at least, what they received would never be the truth.

*They must know something’s going on. That was two explosions in one day. Aren’t they even curious?* People tossed glances back at the smoke pluming over the wall, but finding nothing on their IDs to explain it, they just shrugged it off and went about their business.

The worst of it was they wanted to be lied to. They had no idea what lay beyond the wall, and they had no desire to find out. Everything was good and clean and fun, and they were all so happy and healthy inside the best city in the world.

Nezumi hated them.

Safu pulled up outside the Information Bureau. Nezumi stopped her as she was about to get out.

“Leave the gun. We won’t need it here.”

Safu’s brow pinched, but she laid the handgun next to the shotgun on the floor of the passenger’s seat. It looked like it took considerable effort. For her, going weaponless in No. 6 probably felt a lot like walking naked through a briar patch.

“How will you tell me what we’re doing here?”

“We’re going to give the crow’s video to the head of the Information Bureau.”

Safu’s eyebrows shot up. “You trust them? How do you know they won’t destroy the video and turn us over to the Bureau?”

“He won’t. At least, I don’t think he will. He was a friend of Shion’s mama, and I’m told he owes Shion a debt.” The corners of Safu’s mouth drooped, and even Nezumi couldn’t help the frown that tugged at his mouth. “Let’s get this over with,” he said, maybe a little more sharply than was necessary. “I’ll take Shion, you take the crow.”

Safu went to retrieve the bird without protest and Nezumi felt the unease in his stomach grow. Ever since they left the Correctional Facility, Safu had been delegating authority to him wherever Shion was involved, and even though she still expressed concern in her friend, she always did so at a distance. She hardly looked at him now.

Nezumi felt a prick of anger at Safu. Whatever she saw Shion do, did it really justify her coldness? Shion needed her support. But he knew Safu, and she wasn’t one to abandon her friend when he was in need. Not without a damn good reason. Something more was going on.

*She thinks Shion needs you more than her.*

The thought startled him—but only for a second. He bit the inside of his cheek, and pushed the car door open to slide out.
“Shion, get out of the car.” Shion lay crumpled against the seat, lifeless and uncomprehending as a broken doll. “I’m not going to drag you around in there. It’ll draw too much attention.” He kept his eyes locked on Shion’s, suppressing the discomfort he felt at the dull look in them. “Come here,” he said, and extended his hand.

*This is all I can offer, Shion. We both know I’m no good at comfort, but I can support you. You don’t have to carry this burden alone.*

Nezumi extended his hand with these feelings, and some inexplicable part of him believed Shion would be able to understand. The slack expression on Shion’s face flickered. The corners of his eyes tightened, so slightly, Nezumi wasn’t sure if it was just wishful thinking. But it was real. Shion’s throat contracted with a swallow and then his hand was laid on top of Nezumi’s.

There was no grip, but it hardly mattered; Nezumi was relieved that he had managed to get this much of a reaction. He stretched his fingers and enclosed Shion’s hand in his. From there, it was easy to draw him from the car.

Nezumi dragged his gaze over Shion’s person. He had not ceased to be a mess on the ride over. The higher ups in the Information Bureau were likely aware of some incident outside the wall, so the soot and overall dishevelment was excusable, but the rest… He stared at the blood on Shion’s jacket. That needed to be done away with. Immediately.

“My?”

He glanced back at Safu. She had the camera in her fist, and he couldn’t find any visible traces of blood on her. The blood on her sleeve couldn’t be seen unless she lifted her hand, and even then, it could probably pass for a smudge of dirt. No adjustments needed to be made there.

“You go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

Safu didn’t go, though. He knew she wouldn’t. They had better go altogether; otherwise it’d look suspicious, and Shion was the piece they needed to get in. Nezumi cleared his throat, and turned to Shion. The boy was reacting too slowly and there was no time to coax him into doing what he wanted.

Nezumi freed his hand and began unbuttoning Shion’s coat. He tugged his arms out of it and tossed it on the back seat of the car, before starting on untying the gold bandana from around Shion’s neck. He was about to throw this into the car as well, but he paused to study the dried blood on Shion’s face. His own blood, from his own injuries. Nezumi drew in a deep breath through his nose and used the cloth to rub at the stains. Shion flinched, but submitted without complaint.

Nezumi managed to scrub most of it away, and he decided that was enough. He couldn’t do anything more with Shion’s appearance.

*Actually, it can help us.*

He took Shion by the elbow and guided him up to Safu. “Follow my lead.” Nezumi waited for her nod of confirmation, before saying, “Move quickly, now.”

He swiveled to the glass entrance and burst through the doors, dragging Shion at a light jog behind him. There was a single person in the lobby: a woman, nestled behind the front desk. Nezumi called out to her in a hoarse, desperate voice.

“Miss! Please help us. We need to see Mr. Rikiga right away. His son, he’s been in a terrible
bicycle accident.”

The woman looked up from her computer, confusion coloring her face. “Mr. Rikiga’s son? I didn’t know he had a—” The woman’s mouth fell open in shock at the sight of Shion. “Oh my goodness! Is that boy alright?”

“Miss, please, he needs to see him. Tell Mr. Rikiga, Shion’s here.”

“W-well…” She raised her hand to her mouth and nibbled her thumbnail. “Well, yes, all… all right. Shion, you said?” She grabbed at the phone and dialed. “Hello? Mr. Rikiga? Yes, I know you’re busy, but there are children here to see you. Your…”

She glanced at Shion and then at Nezumi and Safu in quick succession. Nezumi had a sense that she thought they were some kind of thugs, or maybe that they had beat Shion up and were now coming to threaten Rikiga for money.

“… Son,” she finally choked out. “Shion, his friend said his name was. He’s been hurt.” The woman paused. Nezumi could hear the muffled buzz of a voice on the other end. “Yes, that’s right, he—” She blinked and her face relaxed. “Oh. Of course. Thank you, sir.” She placed the receiver down and smiled sympathetically at Shion. “Your father is very worried about you. He’s coming down to get you now.”

Nezumi’s shoulders sagged in relief, and he could hear Safu’s soft exhale behind him.

“Thank god…” Safu muttered, and Nezumi silently agreed.

The woman pointed out some chairs, in case they wanted to sit while they waited. When they refused, she offered Shion free use of anything readily at her disposal, which, for all Nezumi could tell, consisted of tissues, a bowl of mints, and a tube of hand lotion. The woman was very attentive to Shion, seeing as he was the son of the head of the Information Bureau. Shion, though, didn’t seem to feel the compliment.

It took only a few minutes for the elevators to ding the arrival of their contact, but it felt long under the desk attendant’s nervous, smiling attentions. The elevator opened and a man rushed out. He was tall and broad-shouldered, a little overweight, and he sported an unflattering mustache. His eyes did a rapid sweep of the faces presented to him, and settled rightly on Shion.

“Shion! Are you all right? What happened?”

Nezumi stumbled back as the man accosted Shion, seizing his shoulders and looking him over with excessive concern.

Either this guy is a great actor, or he’s legitimately worried about Shion’s well being. The level of consideration he showed was a bit strange, considering he had never met Shion before. It was evident that Rikiga had felt very strongly about Shion’s mother. He must have been in love with her… Maybe he is actually Shion’s old man?

Nezumi furrowed his brow and compared Shion with this loud, doting man. No. Not a single resemblance. This relieved Nezumi; he had just met the man, but already he got the feeling he wasn’t going to like him all that much.

Nezumi was distracted by movement near the elevators. A second person had slinked out behind the man, but was obviously not as excited by Shion’s presence as Rikiga was. Nezumi’s eyes widened.
“Kaoru?”

Kaoru had been making a face at the ruckus Rikiga was causing over Shion, but they looked up at the sound of their name. They froze and stared back.

“—How the hell did you get back here?”

The woman at the desk tutted, but Nezumi would have expected nothing less as a greeting from Kaoru.

“No, scratch that,” they hissed. “Why the hell are you back here?”

Nezumi’s mouth went dry. He understood the deeper insinuation of the question. It resonated with the part of him that he was trying to repress for the sake of their mission, and it itched at him now. He quashed the impulse as best he could and placed a smirk on his face.

“I never thought I’d find you in a place like this, Kaoru. Since when was it your dream to become a corporate sellout?”

Kaoru’s face shifted back into neutral—which was to say they reverted to glaring at him like he wasn’t worth the dirt on the bottom of their shoe. Their gaze drifted to Shion and Safu.

“Whose life did you fuck up now?”

Kaoru was pulling no punches today, and Nezumi felt that one. He tried not to show it on his face, but he knew Kaoru noticed by the way their eyes narrowed a fraction.

*I’ve got to stop hanging around perceptive people…*

Rikiga finally realized Shion wasn’t in the best of shape, and it might be in the best interest of all to take this somewhere private. He straightened, and tossed a look at Nezumi and Safu, respectively.

“Thank you for bringing Shion to me,” he said in a businesslike tone. “Why don’t you come up to my office for a cup of coffee?”

Safu and Nezumi nodded, and Rikiga motioned them toward the elevators. Once the doors closed, the questioning began.

“Are you crazy?” Rikiga whisper-yelled. “What is Shion doing in the city? And why does he look like he just went a few rounds with the Bureau? Who are you kids, anyway?”

“We’re Shion’s friends,” Safu answered. “I’m Safu, and this is Nezumi.”

Rikiga turned in Nezumi’s direction. “Nezumi, huh? I think I remember that name…” He leered at him. “You’re a bit rough looking, but I can see you’re a real beauty underneath all that dirt. Shion’s friend, huh…”

Nezumi drew his eyebrows together. “You into teenaged boys, old man?”

Rikiga flushed up to his ears. “Now listen here, kid,” he spluttered. “That is not what I meant. I was merely making an observation.” Nezumi hummed flatly in response. Rikiga cleared his throat noisily and turned toward the elevator doors. “Well, You already know me, apparently, seeing as you asked for me by name. This is my assistant, Kaoru.”

Nezumi smiled, and Kaoru took turns murdering him and Rikiga with their glare.
“Assistant doesn’t even begin to cover it,” Kaoru spat. “Me and his secretary practically do everything while he locks himself in his office doing god-knows-what.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I’m doing very important work in there. I can’t afford any distractions.”

“You’re doing something in there. Whether it’s work or not depends on how long they play coy.”

The elevator became very quiet then, and the air had a decidedly judgmental weight to it. Rikiga loosened his tie.

“You kids want to explain why you’re here?” he managed. “And why you smell like a fireplace?”

Rikiga directed the question at Safu, probably because she was the only one who hadn’t openly criticized him yet. Keywords: openly and yet. Nezumi was well acquainted enough with her disapproval to recognize it in her posture, and right now she was projecting pure disgust.

“Has news of the Correctional Facility made it to you?” she said with reasonable composure.

Rikiga’s face contorted in shock. “You were in there? What happened?” Safu opened her mouth to answer, but Rikiga waved a hand. “No, actually, don’t answer that here.” His eyes shifted to the upper right corner of the space. The bright eye of a camera winked back at them.

The doors opened onto a spacious lobby. There was a set of glass double doors across from the elevator, and Nezumi could see several people milling about behind it. Rikiga led them to the room. He moved in surprisingly brisk strides for a man of his bulk. Perhaps a habit he had adopted when he actually had to do the legwork for his stories.

The moment they pushed through the doors, a black and white streak raced forward and trotted happily around Kaoru’s legs—Pup.

No big surprise there. I wonder how Rikiga swung it, though.

Pup made a beeline for Nezumi next, and he petted his head a few times while the dog lapped excitedly at his hands. He bore this for a few seconds before straightening and wiping his hand on his pant leg. Pup moved on to greet Safu just as lavishly.

The people in the room stared at them as they came in. They were all dressed impeccably, with round, clean faces and carefully styled hair. What a shock it must have been to see their boss storm in toting a band of ragged, dirty teens. Nezumi was looking forward to what excuse Rikiga would give for this. Being in the business of obstructing the truth, the man ought to know how to tell a convincing lie.

Nezumi didn’t know if he was impressed or disappointed when Rikiga made no excuse at all, and just barked a short, “Conk, Yumi, stay. Everyone else, you’re dismissed for the evening.” No one moved for a second, and Rikiga scowled. “Now.”

Slowly, the dismissed employees collected their papers and shuffled out, tossing curious and perplexed glances behind them. The remaining employees, an ape of a man and a shrewd-looking middle-aged woman in glasses, hovered by the table. The ape twitched nervously, but the woman only looked grave, in the way that indicated a chronically grave personality.

Rikiga addressed his employees. “It’d take too long to tell you who these kids are—partly
because I don’t even have a clear idea of who they are—but they say they’re Shion’s friends, and if he trusts them, so can we. Same to you, kids. Conk and Yumi here are safe. Anything that’s said in this room stays in this room.”

A few heads nodded in agreement.

“Now… You said you came from the Correctional Facility?”

Safu took charge of the conversation again. “We were on a rescue mission. Nezumi,” she gestured, for those in the room who hadn’t been introduced, “was taken in the Hunt.”

She paused, but no one in the room stirred. There was not a trace of recognition on the No. 6 citizens’ faces. Nezumi smiled bitterly.

“Shion and I went to the Correctional Facility to get him back,” Safu continued. “Afterward, we destroyed the Facility.”

“You… destroyed the Correctional Facility?” Conk said slowly, tasting the words cautiously, as if saying them aloud could cause an explosion of its own.

Safu nodded. “Yes. It was actually Nezumi’s doing. He wrote a computer virus and caused a chain detonation—or so I guess.” Nezumi shrugged to show he’d deduced that that was what happened as well.

“Blew up the Facility, did you?” It was Yumi that spoke, and she sounded very interested. She appraised Nezumi, her eyes shining with a strange light behind her glasses. She had some deep-seated grievance against the city; that much was obvious. Perhaps she had lost someone to the Security Bureau. “Good,” she spat. “Good riddance.”

Conk didn’t look as psyched about the news, but he didn’t seem shocked or disapproving either. Kaoru growled indistinctly under their breath. Overall, it was a trustworthy reaction.

“Was Shion…” Rikiga trailed off, a heavy layer of dread laced into the words. “Was he imprisoned in the Facility? Is that why he…”

Every eye turned on Shion. He was standing just outside the group, head inclined toward the floor, like a thoroughly scolded child. As they watched, Pup frisked over to him and wagged his tail.

“He’s…” Nezumi’s jaw tightened. He couldn’t begin to describe to these people what had happened in that building. They wouldn’t even be able to comprehend it if he could. “It’s complicated.”

The room was quiet. The air hummed with uncertainty.

“We didn’t come here to talk about the Correctional Facility,” Nezumi said. “We have something we need you to broadcast. Safu.”

Safu dug the camera out of her pocket and held it out. Conk flinched at the sight of it and even Yumi went a little pale.

“Relax,” Rikiga grunted at his subordinates. “They’re not spies… Right?”

“We’re not,” said Safu, a smidge testily.
Rikiga plucked the camera from Safu’s hands and studied it. “Crafty little device… What’s on it?”

Nezumi’s mouth curved into a feral smirk. “Something that, if released to the public, would shatter No. 6’s reputation beyond redemption.”

Rikiga’s eyes grew sharp. “Really. That bad?”

“Complete and utter destruction. I wouldn’t be surprised if the citizens staged a revolt.”

The older man’s mouth curled up at the corners. The smirk didn’t look as vicious on his face, but it was plenty greedy. He clenched the camera in his fist.

“Well.” He glanced back at Yumi and Conk. “Let’s get this hooked up to a screen, shall we? Step into my office.”

Rikiga and his coworkers turned as a group toward a room at the back. Safu and Kaoru moved to follow. Nezumi glanced back at Shion. Pup had begun to slather Shion’s hand in greeting, as he had done to the rest of the party. Nezumi moved to shoo the mutt away, but he stopped short when Shion raised a hand and began stroking the dog’s head. Nezumi’s heart leapt to see it.

That’s right. Shion likes dogs. The remembrance sounded foolish to him after he’d thought it, but he had to admit now that he was desperate. If anything could get a reaction from Shion, he was going to use it. He reached out and tapped Kaoru’s shoulder as they passed by, and they halted with a suspicious look on their face.

“Kaoru, I need a favor—”

“Oh, no. No, I’m not doing you any more favors. You still owe me big time for that last stunt you pulled.”

“It worked out well, didn’t it? You weren’t arrested, and now you have a job. A sleazy one, I grant you, but then you were never a straight arrow.” Nezumi shrugged. “Looks like a win to me.”

“Are you kidding me? Your old hag almost had me! I had to pick up her friggin’ cat to get her to stop being so damn suspicious! You’ll be paying me back for the rest of your miserable life for all the emotional damages I suffered.”

There was an odd sort of comfort in squabbling with Kaoru. It was familiar, stabilizing. He always knew where he stood with Kaoru.

“Well, if I’m to be paying the rest of my life, then there’s no harm in adding a little more to my tab. I need you to stay out here and keep an eye on Shion.”

“What? Why the hell would I do that? I don’t even know the guy.” Kaoru looked at Shion. He was still petting Pup, and the dog had sat down to more comfortably enjoy the attentions.

“Kaoru, please.”

Kaoru’s head whipped around like they had been slapped. Nezumi held their gaze coolly. He could see Kaoru was trying very hard to read his face, and with a considerable struggle, he allowed them to. Kaoru’s eyes widened.

“What is it with this Shion person? First the old man, and now you, too…” They peeked at Shion with a new wariness.
“Kaoru.”

Kaoru bit down hard on their lip and twisted their face stubbornly. “Pup seems to like him.”

It took a moment, but Nezumi finally realized that was their way of saying, “Fine—but only because my dog approves.” Kaoru dragged themselves over to the edge of the table and sat, watching Shion with a calculating look. Nezumi didn’t thank them; he simply nodded. It was best if they stayed out here; neither of them needed to see what was on the tape.

_Especially not Shion._

He moved to the room everyone else had disappeared into. Rikiga had acted quickly. Yumi and Conk had already managed to get the camera hooked up to the display screen.

He closed the door behind him and approached the group. “Fast forward.”

Conk pressed a button and the feed streamed by in bleary browns and blacks. Nezumi leered at it, searching for the scene he wanted.

“Stop.”

Conk jabbed a button and the video jumped and began to play.

“You gullible, fucking idiot! People are going to die because of you!”

“N-no. That’s…”

He had stopped it a little early, but it had what he wanted: Rashi, standing tall and smug and completely unmistakable in his crisp navy uniform. Whereas Nezumi had to listen blindly down in that safe house, Yoming’s crow had a front row seat to Rashi’s betrayal. He had imagined a smarmy smile on the officer’s face while he pulled Getsuyaku’s strings, and he could see now he had guessed right.

Getsuyaku continued to sputter about Nezumi’s whereabouts, and Yoming answered venomously, his voice booming over the audio because of the proximity. Safu shot a look at Nezumi, but he paid it no notice. The first execution was coming up. The group’s attention was rapt on the screen as Rashi warned Getsuyaku not to waste his time. The man trembled.

“He’s probably hiding somewhere; you just have to look. I’ve done my job, I’ve brought you to where the boy is, so… The reward…”

“Ah. You’re quite right. You’ve done what was required of you.”

There was barely a blip of sound on the tape when Rashi shot Getsuyaku, but the gun, complete with silencer, was plain to see. Out came the weapon, and down went Getsuyaku, reduced to a lifeless heap on the floor. A gasp and a few hisses filled the room.

“What the hell?”

Nezumi jumped and spun around.

Kaoru was standing in the doorway, their face betraying a rare look of abject horror. Shion was next to them, a hand on the doorknob and his gaze fixed on the screen behind Nezumi. Nezumi knew by the sound of clinking metal that Rashi was pouring the gold over Getsuyaku’s body. Shion turned abruptly and walked away.
Nezumi rushed forward. His heart was hammering, and his first response was to lash out.

“Dammit, Kaoru! I told you to watch him!”

“I was watching him!” Kaoru shouted back, hackles raised. “You never said anything about keeping him out of this room! I don’t even know what the hell is going on! What is that?” Kaoru stabbed a finger at the screen just as an explosion of shots rang out—Yoming and Rashi’s showdown.

Nezumi growled and shoved them aside. Kaoru threw some choice words at him, but he hardly heard them as he raced down the hall after Shion.

He had fled more quickly than Nezumi would have thought possible; he had only been able to discern which way Shion went by following the slowly closing doors left in his wake. Nezumi pushed open the second door and felt a brush of cold air over his knuckles. It opened onto a small balcony, directly facing city hall. Even though they were on the tenth and uppermost floor of the building, the Moondrop loomed large and ominous before them.

Shion was leaning against the railing, hunched over so he could rest his forehead on the chilled metal. Nezumi took a step toward him.

“I’m not going to jump.”

Nezumi paused at the utterance. Shion sounded tired, but it was his normal voice, not tinged with anger or fear.

“I’m just getting some air.”

Nezumi nodded, but took another step toward Shion nonetheless. They stood silently for a moment, breathing in the frosty air. There was a breeze blowing, and Nezumi could feel it even through his jacket. He wondered if Shion was cold in just a sweater and jeans. Some kind of precipitation was brewing in the sky, and Nezumi hoped it was snow rather than rain.

Such were the mundane thoughts that ran through his mind as he tried his best not to rush Shion into speaking, or to blurt out something himself. Things were finally starting to seem like they could get better, and he was afraid of shattering that fragile hope with a careless word or action.

At last, Shion lifted his head to look at the Moondrop. He had his good side to Nezumi, and his profile set against the icy skyline was poignant in its blankness.

“It looks like a blister,” he said. The words were a consideration, not unkindness. He even sounded a bit bewildered. “I can hear it crying sometimes, you know. On quiet nights. Crying—that’s the word my mom used to describe it. I always thought it was an interesting choice. It made it sound helpless, pitiable… But it’s ugly.”

“I would cry, too, if I were that ugly.”

The joke was unobtrusive, made to be swept away by the breeze the moment it was uttered. Shion’s brow furrowed. His hands slipped off the railing and he turned to face Nezumi.

“I’m that ugly.” His dark, purplish eyes bored into Nezumi’s for a full second before he dropped them to begin a listless study of his hands. “You were right; I’m just like them. I thought I wasn’t, but… I hurt people. A lot of people. And I didn’t care.”
Nezumi was angry; angry that something he had said so long ago in bitterness was now being used as ammunition in Shion’s self-condemnation. “You’re not like them, Shion. You never were. The way you’re acting now is proof of it. No. 6 doesn’t have a heart; it doesn’t feel remorse, but you…”

The words felt weird on his tongue, like he was speaking a language he had once known but hadn’t practiced in years. He questioned every sound that came out of his mouth, and even though he knew what he wanted to say, he couldn’t force the words to convey what he was feeling.

No. 6 had helped him build a thick skin, and every experience since then added fortification to the barriers he built. They kept him numb and that kept him safe. But he had poured so much energy into the walls he placed between himself and others that he had been too blind to see that he had been constructing a cage all along. Emotion thrashed desperately within him, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t find the way to release it.

Shion drew in a breath, and his body shuddered with the effort. “I wanted to hurt them, Nezumi. I wanted them to feel pain. I’m not a good person. I’m selfish and—” he wrung his hands harshly, his speech flowing fast and thick, “—angry. I’m angry all the time. I’ve tried to be better, but I still feel that way, even now. I know my mom would want me to let it go. I know you…” His voice cut out, but he pushed through it in a raw whisper, “I know you think I’m better than this, but I’m not… People are dead because of me. Kaze’s dead.”

“How is what happened to Kaze your fault?”

“I sent him to die, Nezumi. And now Yuichi has lost the only family he had left, and Yuki…” He swallowed thickly.

Nezumi pressed his lips together. It was true Shion had hurt people. He had killed people. But he had also saved more lives than anyone Nezumi had ever known. He had joked once that Shion was a prince among paupers, but it was hardly a joke. He was revered and respected by everyone who knew the importance of kindness. Shion had done real good in the West Block, and people trusted him—with their problems, their children, and their lives.

*He saved my life. More than once.*

“Shion… Do you regret saving me?”

“No!” Shion’s head snapped up. “I would never regret that!” He suddenly dropped his eyes to the ground again, embarrassed. “I would always save you… No matter how selfish it is.”

Nezumi thought he had expected an answer like this, but his heart jumped at the impassioned confession. *Had I actually believed Shion would resent me?* He realized that, yes, he had. It wasn’t unreasonable. If he had done as Elyurias wanted, the lives of the West Block residents might have been spared.

*No. That’s not true. With or without me, No. 6 would’ve attacked the West Block and people would’ve died—likely more than the number today.*

But they couldn’t have known that then. They had a chance to destroy No. 6 once and for all, but Shion had chosen to save his life instead. And he had risked his life to rescue him again in the Correctional Facility. Shion called it selfish, but to Nezumi it was the most selfless thing anyone had ever done.

“Shion. Back there you said you couldn’t save anyone. Do you really believe that?”
Shion balled his fists at his sides. “…I couldn’t. Kaze is dead because of what I did. And you were almost hurt, too.”

“No. None of that is your fault. The Correctional Facility, that doctor, they were just sick. There’s nothing anyone could’ve done.” Nezumi realized he was getting heated. He quickly checked his emotions. “Shion… You want to know what I think? It’s not because you can’t save anyone; it’s because you can’t save everyone.”

Shion was very still.

He wouldn’t meet his eye. It put Nezumi on edge to see him so subdued. Shion had always been fearless when it came to speaking his mind, and he always looked people in the eye when he wanted to prove a point. Nezumi himself had been pinned under that clear and earnest gaze more times than he would admit. It was never threatening or uncomfortable, but it was insistent. When Shion looked you in the eye, it was to establish you as an equal, to convey that he wanted you to hear his side, and to hold you responsible for the actions you took afterward. It was a symbol of respect and a sign of strength.

But Shion wouldn’t look at him now, and it was clear to Nezumi that it was still a matter of respect. Shion felt ashamed, unworthy. Shion had always been as easy to read as a book; the only issue was that he was a book with many footnotes and amendments in the margins, and while the plain text told one story, there was a completely different one woven around it. It made Nezumi dizzy to try to puzzle him out—but right now Shion’s thoughts were plain.

He thinks I’m disgusted with him.

Nezumi took a step toward Shion.

“Shion, look at me.”

The command was firm, and he didn’t miss Shion’s flinch. Nezumi waited while the teen fidgeted, more and more as the seconds ticked by. Shion raised his head in increments; a painfully slow process that might have once annoyed Nezumi, but now it only filled him with regret.

Nezumi studied the person before him. He took in the bruises that purpled his cheek and eye. They were angry welts, the result of exceptional force and no doubt anger. His lip was split in the corner as well. The violence was so complete Nezumi considered it a miracle Shion hadn’t broken something. He had long assumed these wounds had been earned trying to bide time for his escape. Who knew how many more injuries he had sustained, hidden beneath his clothing.

Nezumi’s gaze went to Shion’s chest next. There was a hole in the fabric of his sweater. He had dismissed it as just a tear when he removed Shion’s coat, but looking at it more closely, he suspected it was a bullet hole. The coal black of a Superfibre cloth was poking out above Shion’s collar. He had expected the worst, and it had happened. If he hadn’t been prepared, it would have been Shion bleeding out on the tiles, not those officers, and Nezumi… Where would he be?

He met Shion’s eyes last. A feverish light burned in them, a warning and a plea intermingled. He was trembling, slightly but continuously. Nezumi studied him for a long moment, this frightened, thin boy, who had risked everything for him.

“Shion…” Nezumi took another step. “You look like shit.”

He reached forward and pulled Shion to him. He could feel the startled intake of breath as Shion froze against his chest. Nezumi pressed his mouth to the spot just above his ear.
“Thank you.”

These words were the stone that shattered him. Shion melted into the embrace, wrapping his arms around Nezumi’s waist and clinging like he was his only salvation.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The shocked gasp had turned into hiccupping sobs. Nezumi slid his arms around Shion’s back and held him silently. He felt small and fragile, but his grip was fierce, and his body burned with warmth. They went into hell and had come out—scarred, but alive.

We’re survivors. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.

Nezumi pressed his cheek against Shion’s hair, rubbing small circles into his back with his thumb. Shion kept sobbing apologies in a broken litany. Nezumi wasn’t sure which sins he was apologizing for, but, staring at the sunlight fading behind the Moondrop, he forgave every one.

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They stood like that for a long time. The sobs eventually subsided to sniffles, but Shion’s arms stayed curled around him, his face tucked against Nezumi’s collarbone. Nezumi had long since turned off his mind, focusing on sensation alone. The soft pulls of breath, in and out of their lungs, the thrum of Shion’s heartbeat in tandem with his own. There was a strange sort of meditation in it.

It started to get hot after a while, though, and Nezumi wasn’t sure what to do about it. He had initiated the hug, and he did it to comfort Shion, so it seemed like he should let Shion break the embrace.

He’s already calmed down. Just let go if it makes you so uncomfortable, he grumbled at himself. Seconds passed, but still he held Shion. He swallowed. Why am I so fricking awkward?

Just then, Shion shifted and gingerly detached himself. There was a rush of cool air between them, and while Nezumi felt relieved to be released, he also experienced a sense of regret at the loss of warmth.

“Feel better?” he asked, in order to distract himself from the irrationality of his emotions.

Shion’s eyes flicked up and then down sheepishly. “Sorry…” he mumbled.

He pulled the sleeve of his sweater over his hand and began rubbing at Nezumi’s shoulder. Nezumi realized there was a wet patch on the leather of his jacket, which Shion was doing his best to mop up. His mouth twitched into a smile, but Shion was too focused to have seen it.

“You’re alright, then?” Nezumi tried again.

“Yes. I think so…” Shion wiped at his eyes and nose with his other sleeve, and Nezumi pretended not to notice. “We should head back.”

Nezumi hummed in agreement.

When they got back to the office, Rikiga and his group were huddled around the monitor, speaking in low tones with Safu. Kaoru was perched atop Rikiga’s desk with Pup lounging at their feet. Kaoru cast a look at them, dark eyes darting from Shion to Nezumi in a furtive way.

Safu looked up next. She nodded slightly when she caught Nezumi’s eye, before turning to
Shion and asking how he was doing. Shion mumbled a “fine,” and she didn’t push him to elaborate.

Rikiga took a step forward. “Shion.”

Shion blinked up at him. Apparently, this was the first time he had actually registered the man. “Mr. Rikiga,” he said quietly, respectfully. “Thank you for getting the drives for Nezumi. If it weren’t for you, we never would have destroyed the Correctional Facility.” Shion bowed at the waist, very low. “I’m in your debt.”

“S-Shion…” Rikiga’s face went bright red. “No, please, you don’t owe me a thing. It was the least I could do, after I failed you and Karan… Please, stand up. I don’t deserve that…”

Nezumi realized that the man actually had tears shining in his eyes. Shion straightened and tried out a smile. It was weak, but more than enough to bring Rikiga closer to crying.

“You’re just like her,” Rikiga whispered. “I’m just a pathetic loser who can’t get anything right, but you still…” He sniffed. “You’re such a good kid, Shion—an angel, just like your mother.”

Shion turned to Kaoru next. “You’re Nezumi’s friend, right?”

Kaoru flinched at the question. “Hell no.”

“Oh… But you helped get the drives?” Shion glanced at Rikiga.

“He helped,” the man grunted.

“Helped?” Kaoru barked. “I did the whole thing!”

They snapped their mouth shut, however, when Shion bowed to them as well. “Thank you. You saved our lives.”

Kaoru didn’t blush like Rikiga had, but they were definitely embarrassed; Nezumi could tell by the way they stayed quiet and began to paw at Pup with their foot. No one seemed to know where to go with this. After making his thanks, Shion closed up again and retreated to the shadows just behind Nezumi.

Safu was the one to break the stalemate. “We’ve started broadcasting the video.”

That caught Nezumi’s attention. “Where?”

“Everywhere,” Yumi answered, a little smugly. “People are not happy. They’re mobbing the Moondrop.” She was smiling as if this was the best news she had ever reported. If ever he needed a buddy with which to watch No. 6 destroy itself, he knew exactly who to call.

“We had to edit it a little,” Rikiga added, “but the executions…” He nodded gravely. “They’re doing their job. Citizens are already demanding answers.”

Nezumi allowed himself a smile. “Perfect.”

Safu nodded. Her approval wasn’t as vocal, but there was a satisfied look about her. This was justice. The citizens deserved to see what their precious city was really like. About time someone ripped the wool from their eyes and exposed them to reality.

“Sir,” a voice choked. It was Conk, and he was staring down at his ID, his face ashen. “You need to check your ID alert.”
“What? Another threat?”

Rikga and Yumi glanced down at their blinking IDs. A message popped onto the screen, and their eyes went wide as they read, lines of trepidation etching themselves into their faces.

“What?” Nezumi said lowly.

“The mayor…” Yumi began, but her voice failed her.

“The mayor just shot himself fatally,” Rikga finished. He dropped his hand, looking stunned.

Nezumi raised his eyebrows. Well. Safu frowned a little, and even Shion looked nervous.

“Do you think it’s a miscommunication?” Conk said faintly. “He couldn’t have. No one ever… does that… Right?” He searched the faces for answers, but there were none.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Kaoru scoffed. “If I were the mayor, and videos of the Security Bureau straight up murdering people came out, I’d kill myself too.”

“Kaoru, you shouldn’t say things like that,” Conk hissed.

Kaoru cocked an eyebrow. “Why not? Who’s gonna punish me? The mayor?”

Conk twisted his face in disapproval.

“What are we going to do?” Yumi asked. “Do we… do we cover it up?”

Rikga rubbed nervously at his mustache. “Well…”

“Absolutely not,” Safu snapped. The words were said so sharply, every eye turned on her. “Why would you cover it up? The citizens are howling for blood. They need someone to blame, so give them the mayor.”

“But he’s dead.”

Safu glared at Conk, and the man shrunk back. It was almost funny, seeing the man cowed by a girl half his size.

“Yes, he is. Even better. Tell them the mayor has accepted responsibility for the corruption and ended his life out of shame. That’s probably close to the truth, anyway. With the object of their hatred eliminated, the citizens will lose momentum, and they’ll be more open to discussion.”

Rikga’s brow furrowed. “Discussion?”

Safu nodded. “Yes. Of the city’s future.” She pursed her lips in thought. “We need to hold a city-wide meeting as soon as possible.”

The Information Bureau employees exchanged nervous glances. Nezumi smiled ruefully. It was sad how lost the No. 6 citizens were when they were expected to make their own decisions. Safu sighed at their blank looks.

“Let me show you.” She wedged herself between the group and turned to Yumi. “Can you give me access to the feed?”

*Leave it to Safu to take charge of the situation. Might want to keep an eye on her, or she’ll elect herself as mayor.* Nezumi moved to Kaoru’s side, watching Safu instruct the dazed news team on
what steps needed be taken.

“You sure picked up a lot of weirdos,” Kaoru remarked without turning to him.

Nezumi just shrugged, a faint smile on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Next two chapters are epilogue. ;w;
Safu, Shion, and Nezumi were to spend the first night in No. 6 in Rikiga’s office. It was no five-star hotel, but he had a couch and they would be relatively safe while Rikiga and his team took the temperature of the world outside. Just looking out the window, Nezumi knew the city was in shambles.

Safu had prepped Rikiga for how he should break the news about the mayor to the citizens. It had to be him; Safu had thought that as the head of the Information Bureau, the people would be quicker to accept his explanations.

At first, the crowd in front of the Moondrop was nothing but ripples of shock. The mayor? Dead? How could this happen?

Then came the wave of anger. How dare the man kill himself! He had a duty to his people! But nothing could be done; the citizens could sweat and rage all they wanted, but there was no one in front of them to blame. Some had taken to screaming at and insulting the officers that had come to quell the mob, but these men and women were not satisfying targets. They were just as terrified and confused as the rest of them.

After Rikiga announced that a citywide meeting would be held at the end of the week, the crowd lapsed into silence. With fresh orders from an authority, many were content to return home to suffer their anxiety in private until the appointed date.

There were still a few stranglers in the square, though, talking in small, furtive groups. Occasionally, they glanced up at the broadcasting screens or the Moondrop. These people made Nezumi tense. They had the stench of ambition about them. He had an inkling that these were citizens that had grown discontent with city over time, but had kept quiet and obedient for the sake of their lives or families. Now that the city was vulnerable, they were beginning to stir.

Nezumi traded a glance with Safu. Her face was grave, but dauntless. There would be no more overthrows so long as she was around. Nezumi’s uncertainty edged away. The citizens plotting below better watch out. He had a feeling Safu would be a loud and formidable voice in the upcoming meeting.

It would be hard to get anyone to listen, though, at least at first. As residents of the West Block, Safu and Shion would be regarded with suspicion and hatred. They would be called criminals by the ignorant, terrorists by the fearful, and scum by the prejudiced. But Nezumi had no doubt that if anyone could make the citizens see reason it was Safu and Shion. Safu had the drive and Shion had the charisma.

Well… If Shion’s up to it by then.

Nezumi looked back at the couch where Shion was sitting. He looked beaten, in every sense of the word. He kept staring at his hands and rubbing them. Nezumi was well enough acquainted with
Macbeth to guess the reason. He crossed the room and sat on the other end of the couch.

“You should get some sleep.”

“I know. I just…”

Nezumi sighed. “You’ll drive yourself crazy if you keep this up. Stop.” He pried Shion’s hand away from the other and pressed it down on the couch between them.

“Nezumi…”

“I’m going to find food.”

Nezumi jolted at the sound of Safu’s voice. Shion drew his hand out from underneath Nezumi’s, almost guiltily. Safu didn’t acknowledge either reaction.

“I’ll be back soon.”

Nezumi’s eyes followed her from the room before he turned back to Shion. But the boy had clammed up again, and his hands were now balled into fists in his lap.

“Shion,” he groaned. Actually groaned. He needed to sleep ASAP.

“I screwed everything up,” Shion said quietly. “Safu won’t even look at me anymore.”

Ah. Well. Nezumi shifted, and decided the best and only response he could offer was a vague one. “She’ll get over it eventually. You’ll work it out.” Shion shook his head and Nezumi sighed. He hadn’t enough energy to console Shion, and Shion hadn’t enough to be comforted. He pushed up onto his feet. “We’ll figure it out.”

“...We?”

Shion’s eyes lifted and Nezumi read the question—and hope—in them. His stomach twisted.

“Sleep,” he said, both as a command and a deferral.

Shion seemed to accept this and got to his feet as well. “Safu can have the couch.”

In spite of himself, Nezumi felt a pang of fear. He didn’t mean to sleep by him, did he? It shouldn’t have been cause for alarm, since they had shared a bed these past few weeks, but… Things felt too delicate right now. Shion was wrecked, and he was looking for something to hold on to.

Not me. I can’t. You know that, Shion.

Nezumi clenched his jaw, uncertain as to what he should do, or if anything should be done at all. Then came the guilt. Shion was hurting; he should stop thinking about himself for a few hours and let him take what solace he could…

Shion watched him for a moment. Then, he smiled, faint and bittersweet. “Good night, Nezumi,” he said, crossing the room to curl up in the corner.

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After that first night in Rikiga’s office, Nezumi was looking forward to settling back into the relative quiet of the bunker. It was strange; West Block was dirty and loud and dangerous, but
Nezumi preferred all that to the quiet cleanliness and safety of the city. He just wanted to be left alone to read. Living in the bunker with Shion had turned him into a hermit, he realized, but Nezumi was not as bothered by this as he might’ve been.

Unfortunately, the bunker they returned to was a ruin.

The books were all over the floor. Some barbarian had gutted the shelves, probably looking for money or other valuable hidden objects. Nezumi had seen horrors in the last few hours, but this was sacrilege of a different kind, and it hurt in different, but no less painful ways.

Worse still, the pots and bowls were gone. The chopsticks and glasses were gone. The space heater was gone, dragged out of the room, if the grooves in the dirt were anything to go by. Nezumi assumed the thieves had come in the hopes of claiming No. 6’s bounty, and finding the residents absent, decided to take whatever they could carry for compensation.

But while Nezumi regretted the loss of the practical objects, the only things in the room that were irreplaceable were the books, and he didn’t think many, if any, of those had been taken. Many West Block citizens probably couldn’t read, and wouldn’t value books for anything more than kindling for their fires.

Unfortunately, literature doesn’t feed or warm you. The pillows and blankets were among their losses, so Shion and Nezumi spent the first few nights curled on the bed with their coats and shoes on. The only thing good thing to come out of it was that some poor fool had taken the wall clock. At least they suffered through the cold nights in silence.

Those first few nights were long. Shion hardly slept. When he did, he had nightmares. Nezumi spent several early mornings staring out into the pitch dark while Shion whimpered behind him.

It frustrated him, because he didn’t know how to fix it. He didn’t even know how to help. He could see how hard Shion struggled to cobble together some sense of normalcy in the waking hours, but he fell apart again at night.

Which part should he tend to? Should he pretend not to notice Shion’s difficulties and encourage his attempts at strength, or should he acknowledge his pain and comfort him? Logic advised the former, but emotion—these terrifying, suffocating feelings that crept up on him and now refused to lie dormant—screamed the latter.

Was he even capable of being comforting? If he let Shion lean on him, what would happen when he wasn’t there to hold him up?

Don’t be ridiculous, his inner voice scoffed. He can take care of himself.

He knew Shion was stronger than he looked; he could survive without him. It wasn’t like he was Shion’s only support, either. There was Safu and Renka, and even Rikiga and Kaoru could be counted as possible sources of comfort.

Shion wasn’t even clinging to him like he had feared. He used him as a point of reassurance, he was more relaxed in Nezumi’s presence, but he didn’t fuss when Nezumi left to go out into town or the city. Some days Shion could even be convinced to shadow him like a silent, nervous ghost. He was healing, slowly, but certainly.

Nezumi thought often of leaving, but the weeks rolled by and he never managed to get farther than the thought. His plans hadn’t changed—he was going to strike out and explore the world outside No. 6—but he needed to make sure things were stable first. He would stay until he was
sure Shion could stand on his own.

The days wore on, and by the second week, Nezumi needed to get a job. No offense to the bunker, the books, or Shion, but he would go stir-crazy if they were all he saw every day. Besides, since the Resistance no longer had a purpose, its members were no longer paid and provided for. Which meant he and Shion were broke.

It took a while to find something suitable. Nezumi was picky, he knew this, and he half-expected he’d end up settling for something mediocre. That is, until he came across the playhouse.

It wasn’t much to look at, but it attempted to not look like a dump. The graffiti on the door was half-rubbed out, as if someone had went at it with a cloth, and there were tarps and plastic bags spread tight over the holes in the windows. Someone obviously cared about the place.

He went in and eventually ferreted out the owner, a squat mustached man. Nezumi hadn’t so much as said a word when the man’s eyes widened and he practically pounced on him.

“Takashi? Is that you?”

Nezumi almost stabbed him out of shock. Who was this weird hobo and how in the world was he calling him by that horrible name? The man pawed at him, his eyes wide and searching, as if he were looking at a ghost, and Nezumi felt something like recognition scratching at the back of his mind.

“It is you, isn’t it, Takashi? You look different… but I’m sure…”

Nezumi swept the man’s hands off him. “How the hell do you know that name, old man?”

The man seemed to finally gain some of his self-possession back. “Oh.” He laughed. “I guess you wouldn't recognize me. I must look like a filthy street urchin to you, eh? The years haven’t been very kind to me—although they look like they’ve done you favors abound. You’re quite a long way from the grumpy little squirt I knew.” He laughed again, a hearty sound that Nezumi suddenly knew he recognized.

Wait… Nezumi’s eyes widened. “Hiro?”

“Ah hah! You haven’t forgotten me! What, did you think No. 6 guillotined me for putting on a play? No sir. I was locked up for a while, sure, but then I just got banished.” The man grinned impishly. “I always fancied myself a Romeo, but the banishment really helped the delusion along.”

Hiro kept on talking and talking, and Nezumi just stood there, dumbfounded. Of all the people he would meet again, Hiro? It was bizarre and confusing and just a little bit amazing.

I guess I can stop blaming myself for getting him disappeared.

Hiro was dirtier and skinnier and, Nezumi suspected, a little kookier than before, but he didn’t seem to lament his circumstances, and certainly didn’t blame Nezumi for anything. And he had a theater now, like he always dreamed.

By the time Nezumi tuned back in to what Hiro was rambling on about, the man had started fussing over how handsome he had become, how he had thought he saw an actor in him when he was younger, but now he looked the part too, and why hadn’t he shown up before he had done the casting? Nezumi didn’t even have to audition; he would have a job at the theater whether he wanted it now or not.
He knew he had made the right career choice when he saw the look on Shion’s face.

“The playhouse?” Shion sat up straight, his eyes flashing. The fire in Shion’s eyes had dulled in the weeks after the Hunt, but slowly, he was gaining the spark back. “You’re going to act?”

“Don’t get too excited. I just started; I probably won’t be cast in any good roles for a while.”

Shion’s eyebrows drew together. “No way. I’ve heard you read, and the actors there are horrible, anyway. You’ll be the lead in no time.”

Nezumi secretly agreed. He had sat in on the cast’s practice run and it wasn’t pretty. They were preparing for a performance of *Hamlet*, and although Nezumi was initially intrigued, the excitement died quickly. There wasn’t a single person in the troupe whose acting was not an offense to the Bard.

Hiro had apologized in private for the state of the performance. “You see what I have to work with. I can only play one role, sadly—Polonius. Yes, I know, perfect for me, eh? But now I’ve got you, too! Between us, we can make this show into something worth watching.”

Unfortunately, Hiro had already promised the role of Hamlet to one of his more… seasoned performers, and he explained that stripping him of the role was a headache best avoided. Besides, he had a very particular role in mind for Nezumi, one he knew he would be perfect for the moment he laid eyes on him: Ophelia.

Nezumi couldn’t complain; she was just as prominent a character as Hamlet, and he would get to be dramatic, which he was good at. And he didn’t even have to pretend to feel bad about stealing the role; the thirteen-year-old boy from whom he took it couldn’t run out of the theater fast enough when he heard.

Nezumi grumbled about Shion coming to see him, but these protests were half-hearted. He was grateful that his work at the theater drew Shion out of the bunker. Shion attended his performances without fail, and, after a reasonable amount of time, Nezumi stopped protesting. He had many fans now, but he always enjoyed seeing Shion tripping over himself to describe how much he enjoyed his acting.

“The whole audience was crying, did you notice?” Shion gushed as they walked back from his latest triumph. “Your portrayal of Ophelia is so… so pure. I don’t know, I can’t even describe it, but you’re amazing, Nezumi! A natural!” Shion grinned at him, his face flushed with admiration and secondhand pride.

The expression made Nezumi’s stomach tighten. It had been so long since he’d seen Shion smile with such abandon. He had become thinner since the incident at the Correctional Facility, alarmingly thin, but the grin lit up his face, making it look fuller and healthier. The way it was supposed to look.

And then Nezumi remembered that it was him that put that smile on Shion’s face, and suddenly it was a little too bright to look at. He turned away, as if distracted by some nighttime noise, and tried to sound dismissive when he huffed, “You’re the natural.”

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He’s doing it again.

Shion lay very still in bed, watching Nezumi. There was a novel in his lap, but it was closed, and Nezumi was staring hard at the wall. From where he lay, Shion could make out the tiniest
furrow in his brow and the slight downturn of his mouth.

These days, Shion almost always woke to this sight. Most times Nezumi noticed his wakefulness immediately. He would turn with an arched eyebrow or disapproving frown and mutter some droll variation of “it’s about damn time,” maybe with some reference to Sleeping Beauty thrown in. But there were also times like this, when Shion would catch him unawares.

He liked these moments, because he was able to look all he liked at Nezumi without having to see the strain reflected in his eyes. Shion knew how difficult it was for Nezumi to show compassion towards others, and it made his chest swell with gratitude, knowing how hard he was working to be supportive.

But there was pain, too.

It had already been a month. If it weren’t for him, Nezumi would’ve been traveling the world, reveling in the freedom of a life unburdened. But he was here, and it was all his fault.

I’m holding him back.

He could feel Nezumi’s longing on these early morning vigils, plain in the unguarded tragedy of his face. He looked so soft and sad, and it made Shion’s heart ache.

Leave, don’t let me hold you here, I can’t bear to see that look on your face when you think I’m not watching—he wanted to say these things to Nezumi, even scream them at him. But Nezumi never said a word about leaving, and no matter how loud the voices in his heart cried Shion didn’t dare bring the topic up himself.

I’m so selfish.

Shion scowled into the blanket. It was a small movement, completely soundless, and yet somehow, at that exact moment, Nezumi broke out of his reverie, as though he were attuned to Shion’s fits of self-loathing. He zeroed in on Shion, his eyes narrowing to sharp grey slits.

“About damn time,” he rumbled.

Shion couldn’t help but smile, and just like that his melancholy retreated into the corner of his mind. It was hard to dwell in misery when Nezumi looked miffed.

This was why it was so hard to tell him to go. He felt peaceful with Nezumi near. When he had his full attention like this it seemed that nothing else mattered, no matter how selfish that was.

“I already told you that you can wake me up whenever you want. I’d prefer not to sleep in.”

Nezumi grunted noncommittally.

Shion rose to a sitting position and pet the mice that rushed to greet him. Tsukiyo was the first to push his way into Shion’s hand, basking in the attention. Both he and Nezumi were relieved when they got back to the bunker and found the little black rodent squeaking along with the others.

They owed their lives to the mouse, and so he had taken to lavishing Tsukiyo with extra affection as thanks. It didn’t take long for Biscuit and Hamlet to get jealous. They chirped in a peevish chorus and Shion laughed a little as he doled out ear scratches.

“I’ve been thinking,” Nezumi said suddenly, and something about his tone made Shion go still. It was the pensiveness, the slight hesitation, as though he was afraid of Shion’s reaction.
He’s finally going to say it.

“I’m going to cut my hair.”

What?

“It’s too long now,” Nezumi continued, running a hand through the pale strands as if to demonstrate. “It gets in the way. And it’s annoying to have to yank it out from under your elbow all the time when I want to get up.” Nezumi glared at him like he had been doing this on purpose.

“But it looks nice long.”

Shion liked it, and he knew for a fact that many others did as well. Nezumi’s new boss was besotted with his long white hair, and it was a favorite attribute of Nezumi’s steadily growing fanbase. Nezumi had wondered whether he would have to dye it to a more conventional color for his roles, but his boss insisted that his looks gave a pure and otherworldly aspect to his Ophelia that made her seem all the more tragic.

Shion agreed and was pleased it would stay as it was. He had grown fond of the color, such a stark contrast to Nezumi’s stormy demeanor.

“But…” Shion said after a moment, finally managing a mental image of Nezumi sans his shoulder-length hair. “You would look good with short hair, too.”

“I look good no matter what,” Nezumi said, half-sigh, half-brag.

“That’s true.”

Nezumi narrowed his eyes. This was something he also did a lot lately. It wasn’t unfriendly, but it was guarded, as though he suspected Shion of… something. Something he dare not call him out on.

It made Shion feel shy and more than a little nervous. He bowed his head toward the mice, hoping his own unkempt hair would hide his expression from Nezumi’s scrutiny.

“Is your barber friend still around?” Nezumi said finally, and Shion’s stomach gave a sharp, unpleasant twist.

“You mean… Yuichi?”

“Kaze’s brother… right?” And here Nezumi went quiet.

Kaze. Shion still thought about him often. His memory was a wound that had healed imperfectly. So many lives had been lost in a moment: Kaze, Yamase, Yoming, Getsuyaku.

Poor Renka.

Shion had been there when Safu broke the news, and… devastation was too common a word for the way Renka shattered. Shion hadn’t known Getsuyaku well, and he and Yoming often clashed, but he had known them, and he had fought for the same future with them. He mourned the injustice of their deaths as deeply as he mourned for his friends.

He had witnessed Renka’s grief, but he hadn’t seen Yuichi since before the Hunt. He wanted to, he knew he should, but he couldn’t. Guilt and fear had prevented him, and it took a long time—almost the entirety of a month—to convince himself he wasn’t to blame. After that, shame held
him back. Did Yuichi blame him? Would he be angry Shion hadn’t come by earlier?

*But…*

Shion’s eyes drifted to the double barrel shotgun in the corner. Safu had given it to him after things calmed down and charged him with returning it. It felt like spite at the time, but he had come to understand Safu only wanted to help him. She knew him better than anyone, and she knew he would need a catalyst to make him reach out to Yuichi.

*Maybe she’s not the only one who realized I’d need an excuse…*

Shion glanced back at Nezumi. His face was composed, but as always his eyes told Shion what he really wanted. There was feeling in them, simple, but startling in its beauty, like the glimmer of light on water, or the sight of the sun’s rays breaking through a storm ravaged sky. It was warmth, and wariness, and the promise of protection.

Nezumi wouldn’t push the issue if he wasn’t ready to face Yuichi. The realization made Shion’s chest tighten. Tears pricked at his eyes and he hastened to turn away before Nezumi noticed.

“Shion?”

“Let’s go,” he said quietly. “I’ve been meaning to see him anyway.”

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Yuichi had changed since the last time Shion had seen him. Shion’s childhood memories conjured up images of the tall, bearded and mustached man coming into his mother’s bakery, buying bread and complimenting his mother in a calm, baritone voice. After Shion had joined the Resistance, his memories changed to reflect the frustrated man Yuichi had become. The amusement dancing in his eyes had transformed into anger and desperation as he berated Kaze time and again, trying to convince him to stop wasting his time in the Resistance, that he was going to get himself hurt.

They were far apart in age, and after their parents were taken in the Hunt, Yuichi had to serve as both brother and father to Kaze. But Kaze hardly ever listened. He believed he was doing the right thing, for his family and for West Block, and no amount of shouting or begging from Yuichi deterred him.

The man in front of Shion now was altered yet again. Time and misfortune had streaked his beard and hair with white, and made him appear gaunt and shrunken. His dark eyes stared unwaveringly at Shion, but he could not discern what it was now that they reflected.

“I was wondering when you’d show up,” he finally said, his baritone flat but not unfriendly.

Shion ducked his head. “I’m sorry, sir. I meant to…”

Yuichi held up a hand. “Please. I know.”

His eyes settled on the gun Shion had slung over his shoulder and his brow pinched in recognition. When Shion handed it to him he held it gently, and a glimmer of the old Yuichi flashed over his face, the warm, passionate one from his mother’s bakery. Yuichi stared at the gun and Shion and Nezumi watched him with the reverence that only shared loss can instill.

Finally, Yuichi drew in a measured breath. “Thank you.”
Shion bowed his head. Yuichi cleared his throat and moved to the other side of the room to tuck the gun out of sight.

“Yuki is well,” he said as he came back. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen her?”

Shion mumbled a negative and glanced over at Nezumi. There was guilt in his expression as well, but he covered it better.

“She left the hotel. Now she does odd things, keeps busy. She helps out here from time to time.” Yuichi shrugged and glanced toward the door, as if he expected her any minute now. “She’s a good woman. She was too good for Yuji; I used to tell him that all the time.” A wry smile twisted his lips. “Kid never listened to a word I said.”

There was grief in Yuichi’s looks and words, but it was unobtrusive, as if he were being careful not to burden others. The loss of Kaze was only a month old tragedy, but already Yuichi had managed to heal enough that his memory was bittersweet.

_He’s lost as much as I have, and yet he keeps pushing forward._

Even Yuki, it seemed, had conquered her feelings enough to get out and try to reclaim her life. Instead of retreating into their grief, Yuichi and Yuki had chosen to extend themselves outward, getting involved in the community, and even finding solace in each other’s company.

_Everyone deals with grief differently_, Shion reminded himself, but he couldn’t help but feel ashamed at the way he’d folded in on himself and alienated the ones who cared for him.

Nezumi stepped up beside him, and Shion felt a light touch at his back. He didn’t look at him, but it was reassuring all the same. Tentatively, Shion leaned into the touch, and he was relieved that Nezumi’s hand didn’t withdraw.

Nezumi offered Yuichi a shallow nod. “I didn’t know Kaze for very long, but he helped me out. More times than he needed to. He was a good man.” Shion noticed the way Nezumi tensed and tucked his chin in as he said this.

_This is the first time I’ve seen him act shy._

Yuichi accepted his words with a soft agreement. “I never approved of the Resistance, but I won’t say there weren’t good people involved in it.” He glanced between them. “I know he could be a handful sometimes, but I can’t thank you enough for taking care of my brother.”

Shion’s face burned. Yuichi was thanking him? Even Nezumi shifted uncomfortably at the words. This wasn’t right. It would be an insult to reject Yuichi’s thanks, but he could not accept that gratitude and not offer something in return.

“Safu is demanding an official apology from the city. For the Hunt, and… and for the way No. 6 has treated us. For everything they’ve done to us, and all we’ve lost.”

It was clumsy attempt, but it was all Shion could manage. He wanted desperately for Yuichi to understand that what had happened to his brother, to his friends, and to his parents years before was not going to be forgotten. Their murderers would not go unpunished, and No. 6 would be held accountable for its actions and for its ignorance.

Already the other cities were getting involved. Outcries from No. 2 were loud and condemning. Being the closest to No. 6, geographically and politically, they were not pleased to learn about its secret weapons cache. Within a few days after the Hunt footage’s release and the mayor’s suicide...
there were representatives from No. 2 on the Moondrop’s doorstep, demanding that No. 6 disarm. Delegates from the other four cities were swift to follow.

There was a heated debate now about how No. 6 should be penalized for violating the Babylon Treaty—or whether they could be, since the main parties responsible were already dead.

Surprisingly, the citizens of No. 6 were the most adamant about punishment for those involved. There were movements to round up the higher ups in the Security Bureau and Correctional Facility, and try them in a court of their peers, something that had never happened in No. 6’s history.

“And she’s working to get the wall torn down. It’ll take time, but there are already motions to lessen the restrictions between West Block and the city. They’ve let Safu stay inside the wall—and Renka and Lili, too.”

They offered Nezumi and Shion a place as well, but they refused. Safu reserved a place for them both anyway, in case they ever changed their minds.

“I know it’s not much, but it’s something. It might take a while, but one day… maybe…”

Yuichi furrowed his brow a little at this news, but whatever he thought about it he didn’t say. Shion knew none of these changes were enough to bring back the ones West Block had lost, but he hoped that once the city started moving in a more positive direction, and with one of their own in the leadership committee, that Yuichi and others like him would begin to heal. Perhaps even learn to trust again. Shion wished this most for himself.

“Well. Thank you for returning Yuji’s gun.” Yuichi cleared his throat, and his eyes roved to Nezumi and rested there a long moment. “Sorry, but… Your hair, is that its real color?”

Nezumi smirked. “You like it? Well, it’s your lucky day, because I want you to chop it all off.”
Nezumi had joked about Safu making herself mayor. Well, she didn’t, because the city had voted against having a single ruler. Instead, the community decided on a committee, persons handpicked based on experience, trustworthiness, and, in all honesty, likeability. Safu might not have been mayor, but she was definitely one of the key members of the so-called Restructural Committee.

The No. 6 residents hadn’t been as unwelcoming to the West Block citizens as Nezumi feared. They were wary, but Safu made a strong case for having an outside opinion within the city’s leadership, and it was not beneath her to mention that West Block deserved a voice in the committee, since No. 6 had mistreated its people for so long. There were no arguments against that, although the jury was still out on whether the Committee would give a formal apology to the West Block.

Shion, too, was offered a spot in the Restructural Committee, but he refused.

“I’m not fit to lead anyone,” he told Safu, and she simply nodded.

“Take your time, Shion,” she said, before heading off to yet another meeting with the other five city-states.

While Safu was striving to minimize the fallout of governmental collapse and make the transition to liberality as smooth as possible, Rikiga was reveling in the chaos. After the novelty of the Correctional Facility incident had died down, and the subsequent unveiling of the disturbing nature of its research lost its sting, the Information Bureau turned its eye to the Restructural Committee. The reports speculated on the other cities’ reputations and motives, detailed the Committee’s efforts to clean up the corruption, and especially enjoyed broadcasting when another crooked official had been indicted. The news in No. 6 had never been more eventful.

Kaoru suffered Rikiga’s ego, doing much of the legwork for his stories, while the jerk got to report them. They complained often of mistreatment, but, in truth, they enjoyed the work. Kaoru never wanted to find themself cooped up in an office from nine to five, so they relished the opportunity to wander around the city, prying into people’s business and getting paid for it.

Rikiga begrudgingly admitted that they had a good nose for sniffing out leads, and Kaoru began to entertain a future in information gathering. In the No. 6 of old such a career aspiration would not have been tolerated, but the Restructural Committee promised new order and a freer future. Anything was possible.
“Welcome back.” Shion flicked his eyes up from his book to the bags in Nezumi’s arms. “What’s all that?”

Nezumi grunted and dumped the bags on the coffee table. “Food, mostly. I ran into Renka in the market and she forced me to take some cookies she made back for you.”

“ Forced you, huh?” Shion closed his book and rummaged through the bag to find a cookie. Snickerdoodle. His stomach rumbled greedily. It tasted even better than it looked.

“That reminds me. Rikiga and Kaoru stopped by.”

Nezumi arched an eyebrow. “Kaoru? I didn’t realize they were buddies now.”

“I wouldn’t say they’re buddies…”

Shion couldn’t recall much of what was said during the visit. There was a lot of cursing and disparaging comments thrown between Rikiga and Kaoru, and Shion almost began to wonder why they had come. But after he had offered tea and got them to sit down, apart from each other, things had become more agreeable.

As usual, Kaoru had brought Pup along, and Shion spent the time equally divided between petting the energetic dog and warding off Rikiga’s compliments and suggestions as politely as he could manage.

Eventually Kaoru intervened, “No one wants to live with you, old man. You’re creepy as hell and you smell like cigarettes and booze.”

Rikiga turned red and struggled unsuccessfully for a response. Shion felt a little bad for him, even if he silently agreed with the latter half of Kaoru’s statement.

Kaoru glared at Rikiga another second before turning a grave look on Shion. “The old man doesn’t know when to shut up, but he’s right about one thing: you should ditch Nezumi. He’s a piece of shit.”

Shion didn’t mean to, but he laughed.

Kaoru frowned. “I’m serious, Shion. That guy is as shiftly as it gets. He’s a rat for a reason.”

Shion only smiled. It wasn’t that he thought it laughable that Rikiga and Kaoru were trying to warn him away from Nezumi. Nezumi’s personality rubbed people the wrong way—Shion understood this, for even he got frustrated with him sometimes—but it was funny because the way they spoke made it seem like he was better than Nezumi, which was not true. Shion had his flaws, and Nezumi his, but Kaoru and Rikiga didn’t understand just how much Nezumi had sacrificed these last two months.

But he thanked them for the warning anyway, and promised not to let Nezumi bully him.

Shion liked Kaoru’s no-nonsense demeanor, and he knew that any person who managed to get into their good graces was bound to earn a loyal and protective companion. He hoped in time they could become friends.

“Oh,” Shion said, coming back to himself, “and Rikiga’s going to buy us a new clock.”
Nezumi made a face and Shion gave a sympathetic shrug. “Why’d you even tell him about losing the other one?”

“I didn’t. He saw it was missing, and insisted… He brought gifts.” Shion motioned to a brown paper bag, which Nezumi immediately speared with a suspicious look. “It has vegetables and bread and cheese in it. And wine!” A smile twitched at his lips. “Rikiga didn’t want me to share with you. He doesn’t like you very much.”

Nezumi snorted. “So the old man condescended to visit our humble abode, did he? And with such high-quality gifts. He’s wooing you in earnest. You sure you won’t grant his wish and become his adopted son?”

Shion’s face pinched a little. “Please don’t joke about that.”

Nezumi smirked. “You said wine?”

“Yes. From No. 3.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I could use a drink.”

Shion put his book down and hopped up to retrieve their mugs. Even though they had managed to replace all their stolen goods—the new heater was especially welcome—their utensils were still as eclectic as ever.

No matter. Drinking wine out of mugs seemed just their style.

They split the bottle between them. It was good, which was no surprise considering No. 3 was well known for its fine wines. By the time they had finished their last mugful, the bunker felt comfortably warm and its inhabitants were in the best spirits they had been in a while.

“Please, Nezumi! Just this once!” Shion waved the book in his face, and Nezumi swatted it away.

“For the last time, no.”

“C’mon, just this one scene. I’ve wanted to read with you ever since you recited that *Macbeth* soliloquy.”

“You’ve fantasized about this for that long? You need to find yourself a hobby, Shion, and fast.”

“Nezumi,” Shion huffed. He jabbed at finger at the table. “You’re making the mice upset.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

Nezumi glanced at the mice and realized that all three were surreptitiously eating the corners of the cheese and bread. They started guiltily and darted into the brown bag to hide.

“If you don’t read the scene with me, I’ll bite off your nose.”

Nezumi’s attention snapped back to Shion. “What the hell?”

“That’s right.” Shion shifted on the couch with a menacing look. “I wouldn’t even feel bad about it, ’cause then you’d never be able turn your nose up at me again.”
Nezumi pressed his lips together to suppress a smile. “I can’t believe you just said that. Even I’m embarrassed.” He shook his head. “You’re lucky you’re drunk, otherwise I’d have to swear off all contact with you.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“Why do you always deny it?”

“Am not.”

“You’re acting like a child, like you always do when you’re drunk.”

“If I’m drunk, you’re drunk. We had the same amount!”

“I thought you were supposed to be smart. Regardless of the amount, I have a higher tolerance.”

Nezumi definitely felt the alcohol, but he was confident that he was still in control. He might be a little less reserved than usual, but he was by no means Shion.

Shion narrowed his eyes and got up. Nezumi shifted uneasily as he bent over him and stared into his eyes in that intense, skin itching way that he did.

Nezumi pressed as far back against the couch as he could. “If you even try to bite my nose, I’ll head-butt you.”

Judging by the pout Shion was wearing, he had been considering something along those lines. He soon recovered, though, and smirked. “Hey, Nezumi, did you know…”

He dragged the last word out and paused, perhaps waiting for Nezumi to ask him to continue. Nezumi would give him no such satisfaction. Realizing this, Shion finished.

“Your eyes are the color of silver coins,” he said smilingly. “Do you know that color?”

“Ugh. Stop,” Nezumi chuckled, and pushed Shion’s face away. “Just remembering that depresses me.”

Shion nodded. “It was pretty awful. That description doesn’t even do your eyes justice.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to wax poetic about my eyes.”

“Well, not if you’re going to be so ungrateful about it,” he scoffed. “It’s fine. I’ll just hoard my poetry and publish it when you leave—”

Shion’s jaw snapped shut with an audible clack. Nezumi felt a flash of heat spread through him.

“Shit,” Shion muttered, pulling back sharply. “Can we just… You’re right; I’m drunk. I didn’t mean to… Could we just forget that? Please?”

“Actually…” Nezumi straightened against the back of the couch, drawing himself up for what was to come. “We should talk about this. It’s been a few months.”

Shion’s shoulders hunched and Nezumi had the sick feeling that he was kicking a wounded animal. *He’s not broken*, he reminded himself.

“You’re doing a lot better now. So…”
“So…” Shion echoed quietly.

Nezumi pressed his lips into a firm line. He had stayed too long already. He knew, because this was harder to say than it should’ve been.

“Soon.”

Weak, Nezumi growled at himself.

“Within the next two weeks,” he amended.

“The next two weeks.” Shion toyed with a string on his sleeve, but finally managed to look at him again. “That is soon.”

It was. But it was also not soon enough. Every day Nezumi’s longing to leave grew. He couldn’t help but feel like there was something missing. He didn’t know what it was, but he knew in every fiber of his being that he couldn’t gain what he needed by staying here.

Shion dulled the longing’s ache, though. Nezumi couldn’t help but be amazed by this discovery—and intimidated.

And it was moments like that, when he felt the uncomfortable clash of emotions inside him that he knew there was something missing. It was easier to keep still around Shion, easier to ignore the pressing urge to run, but it wasn’t enough.

I’m never fair to you, am I, Shion?

Nezumi couldn’t help the bitterness in his mouth when he spoke again. “Shion… I can’t stay forever.”

This was answered with an agitated hair ruffle. “I know. I know. But… You’ll say goodbye, right?” Nezumi stared at him. Shion’s brow furrowed. “When the time comes, you’ll say goodbye.”

“Yes.”

“Promise.”

“You really think I’d leave without telling you?” Shion frowned, but he continued to try to extort the promise with his earnest look. Nezumi sighed. “Yes, Shion. I promise.”

Shion relaxed, and Nezumi felt some of his own tension ebb away.

“Two weeks,” Shion murmured. His gaze drifted down to the table laden with groceries. Nezumi watched as he cleared the empty wine bottle off, pulled a few potatoes out of Rikiga’s bag, and began to chop them.

“What’re you doing?”

“Let’s make soup.”

Nezumi cocked an eyebrow. “You wanna make soup?”

“I do.” He glanced up. “It’s a soup kind of day.”

If Nezumi knew Shion any less, he would’ve been surprised by how quickly he bounced back,
but he knew Shion well enough to realize this was coping, and Nezumi would be damned if he did anything but encourage it.

“Are you sure? The last few times we’ve had soup it was… disastrous, to put it kindly.”

“That’s not putting it kindly. But I guess you’re right,” Shion conceded. “How about I help you cut up the ingredients, and you can take care of the actual soup.”

Nezumi smiled. “Good boy.”

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Convincing Shion was proving to be a lot more difficult than Nezumi anticipated. He had been so gloomy and quiet the last few months, he had forgotten that Shion was perfectly capable of not being a push over.

He started to resort to guilt tripping for his ends. “You like Renka and Lili, don’t you?”

Shion looked away. “Of course I do. It’s not that. It’s just…”

“Renka could use the help. It’s just her and Lili now—and isn’t the baby due soon? They might need you.”

“Not for another month or so. Besides, No. 6 has state of the art medical facilities, doesn’t it? She’s in good hands. I’d rather stay where I am.”

Nezumi swiped his bangs away from his face. Even with his hair shorter it still gave him trouble now and again. He switched tactics. “You’d be closer to Safu at Renka’s.”

“I don’t mind the walk.” Shion drew to a stop and gave Nezumi a look. “The bunker’s my home, Nezumi, I don’t want to live anywhere else.” His look turned grumpy and suspicious. “You don’t even like No. 6, why are you trying to get me to move here?”

Nezumi clenched his teeth. *Damn it, Shion, you’re going to make me say it, aren’t you.*

“I don’t want you living in that room alone after I’m gone.” Shion blinked at him, and Nezumi barely resisted the urge to snap something demeaning at him. “If you don’t want to live with Renka, fine, then live with Safu. Or Rikiga, I don’t give a shit, but you’re living with someone.”

Nezumi’s glare dared Shion to refuse. Shion frowned and dragged his eyes over the park. There was an unease in them that Nezumi could identify with.

They stood facing each other, flanked on both sides by the bright plumes of flowers, all in full and everlasting bloom. The air smelt sweet, but crisp, like a bouquet on ice. Nezumi couldn’t remember a time when the Forest Park was not rampant with flora. They didn’t seem to know that seasons existed. He hoped the Restructural Committee would remedy this.

“I can’t live in No. 6, Nezumi. You know why.”

“Don’t be a child, Shion.”

A look of hurt flitted over Shion’s face and Nezumi clicked his tongue.

“You’re not the only one who’s suffered at the hands of No. 6. I don’t think there’s a person inside or outside the wall who hasn’t. But if you want things to get better—if you want to get better—you can’t keep blaming everyone.
“What happened to all that idealist crap about tearing down the wall and brokering peace between the West Block and No. 6? It’s never gonna happen if you keep seeing everyone within the walls as a villain. You need to see that there are good people in No. 6, too.”

Shion’s eyebrows rose, and a smile was short to follow.

“What?” Nezumi said, suddenly self-conscious.

“Nothing. It’s just… It’s rare to hear you speaking so… optimistically. You almost sounded like me.”

Nezumi tried to keep his face neutral, but despite his best efforts he felt his face grow hot. Shion’s eyes widened.

“Shut up,” Nezumi growled. He pivoted smartly on his heel and strode on, but Shion just chased him with a laugh.

“Are you blushing?” Nezumi ignored him and Shion laughed again. “When did you become so wise, Nezumi?”

“I said shut up.”

“I’m serious, though.”

Shion reached out and tugged his sleeve to signal him to stop. Nezumi wanted to pull loose, but he realized how ridiculously childish that would look. He had to settle for coming to an abrupt halt so that Shion nearly collided with him, which was almost satisfying enough.

“You’re right, Nezumi,” Shion said after a moment to find the words. “It’s hard for me to see this city as anything more than a villain. I’m still not ready to forgive what No. 6 did. It’s not just the Hunt, it’s… it’s everything No. 6 stands for. It’s years of neglect and suffering.” Shion’s smile was just a shadow of the grin it was moments ago.

“But I’m trying. I know it has potential, especially with Safu and others like her on the Committee, and every day I see them working to fix the wrongs, I feel a little more hopeful. And if even you say that No. 6 can be something worth believing in, then… I’ll give it a chance.”

Nezumi didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t that he really believed in No. 6, not yet. But there was a possibility that it could become a place worthy of living in, and for some reason, Nezumi felt that it needed Shion’s support in order to become so.

Shion bit his lip. “I’ll live with Renka. After. You don’t have to worry about me, Nezumi.”

“Who said anything about being worried?” And now Nezumi did pull his arm from Shion’s grip. “It’s obnoxious to think of you living like a recluse for the rest of your life. And Safu’s been hounding me about your health. She’s as bad as you—worse.”

“Safu’s a good friend,” Shion said, like the airhead he was.

“Come on,” Nezumi grumbled. “We’re already late. Kaoru’s going to bitch at me as soon as we show up. I don’t know why I even bother coming anymore.”

“I thought you liked hanging out with Kaoru.”

“That’s like saying I like smelling like wet dog, which is exactly what I smell like after I ‘hang
out’ with Kaoru. We’re lucky they only have one dog.”

“One Pup is enough. I think Kaoru would have more, though, if they could. Could you imagine if Kaoru had a whole pack of dogs?”

“No, and I don’t want to.”

****

Nezumi left on a cool spring afternoon.

He had a bag packed with a few food items, a canteen, an extra set of clothes, and nothing more. Nezumi brushed the fringe of his bangs back, more out of habit than anything, and took a last look at the warehouse that marked the bunker.

When he imagined leaving four years ago, he was certain he wouldn’t grieve for anything. But he would miss this. The trove of books, the sound of rain on quiet evenings…

Shion was watching him with his dark eyes. The look was earnest and familiar, and Nezumi was relieved by it. Shion had been dodging eye contact constantly the last few days and he dreaded it would be a sullen parting. But he needn’t have worried; Shion had always done right by him.

Nezumi knew why it was hard for Shion to face him. He had probably known for a long time, but he pretended he couldn’t see it. It was easier that way, for the both of them. He had dreamt of escaping ever since he could remember, and his mind had tied itself so tightly around the notion he couldn’t imagine anything could have a stronger lure. And yet…

*Shion.* There was something about this boy that pulled. His goodness, his strength, even his brokenness.

*Come with me.*

The words were on his tongue, but he didn’t say them. Shion could not come with him. Shion needed stability, and Nezumi needed escape. They needed to be apart for both their sakes.

Shion was biting down on his bottom lip; any harder and he would certainly draw blood. Looking at him now, desperately trying to hold down his desires and support his decision, Nezumi felt a stifling warmth flood his chest.

“Shion…”

A hundred endings to that sentence were poised on his tongue, but none meant anything. So instead Nezumi cupped Shion’s face and pulled him into a kiss.

It was a chaste kiss, little more than the meeting of lips, but it was everything. There was possibility in it that made Nezumi’s stomach twist and his heartbeat quicken.

Shion stilled at first contact, but the shock didn’t last long. He gripped Nezumi’s wrists and kissed back.

The kiss changed when he started to reciprocate. Shion kissed with abandon, passionate and intimate, and just short of forceful.

*Oh.*

Nezumi pulled back. Shion let him slip away, but there were tears streaming down his cheeks
where they hadn’t been before.

“Was that a goodbye kiss?” he whispered.

Nezumi brushed a tear from Shion’s cheek with his thumb while he considered the question. “It was a promise. I’ll come back one day... But you have to promise me something in return.” Shion’s brow furrowed at the hardness in his voice. “Promise me that I’ll have something to come back to. Promise me that you’ll still be here.”

The color drained from Shion’s face at the implication in the words. “I’m not going to—” He swallowed and wiped away his tears. “I won’t do something like that again. I promise. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Nezumi nodded.

Neither Nezumi nor Shion would say goodbye. “Goodbye” was too final. But any other variation of the sentiment sounded too flippant for such a weighty moment. They could do nothing but stare at each other, Shion memorizing every feature of Nezumi’s face, the wisps of hair curling over his ears, the sheen of his eyes, cataloguing every memory and storing them away for the days to come, knowing that Nezumi was doing the same.

The stillness was broken by a small squeak.

“Tsukiyo?”

Nezumi blinked as the mouse leapt up onto his pant leg and climbed onto his shoulder. The mouse bobbed its head at him. Nezumi frowned and glanced at Shion.

“Take him,” he said. “He wants to go with you, and I’d feel better if he did.”

Nezumi couldn’t deny this request. They had been through a lot together in the last few months, and he was fond of Tsukiyo. The mouse twitched its nose at Shion and chittered softly before burying into the superfibre shawl.

“Shion—” Nezumi tried, but then Shion was kissing him again, this time soft and lingering and —

_Hell._

Nezumi knew better than to entertain this kind of weakness. They were making it harder on themselves. But even as he reasoned, Nezumi leaned into the kiss, letting whatever words he planned to say melt in the space between them.

And this time it was Shion who pulled back. He pushed Nezumi gently, but firmly, away, far enough that they each had to take a step back to keep balanced. There was an apology in Shion’s eyes, but he was smiling, as though he wasn’t at all sorry.

“I’m not going anywhere, Nezumi. I’ll always be here, so… you’re welcome to stop by any time. I’ll be ready.”

Nezumi’s answering smile was impudent. “Will you? Well then, don’t be surprised if I climb in through your window one day. You know how I like to be dramatic.”

“Like Peter Pan?” Shion’s eyes shined. “I’ll keep the window open.”
“Give Safu my regards. And Kaoru, too, I suppose… Though I’ll probably get no thanks from them.”

“I will.”

Nezumi flashed a second, more genuine smile and turned away.

He did not look back. He knew Shion would still be there, now and ever, however long.

*It’s just me from now on.*

The prospect was terrifying and exhilarating and everything he hoped it would be. It was up to him now, whether he lived or died, starved or thrived, settled or wandered indefinitely. He could do whatever he wanted, and go wherever he pleased with no respect to anyone else.

*And then… One day…*

But he let that thought slip away. The far future was not to be dwelt on. There was no guarantee he’d even live until tomorrow. That was reality, and he embraced it head on. Tsukiyo chirped softly against his neck and Nezumi felt a smile twist his lips.

He walked on. The noon sun hung high above, and its soft rays cast no shadows.
A compilation of all the awesome character sketches Ayemae made throughout the story's development. These were too good not to post--I don't know why I waited this long to show them off!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
You can your sense of right and shove it up Righteous.

Wow. I'm an ass.
I can't believe you, I really can't.
IN THE SHADOW OF
NO.6

YOU GREEDY BASTARD!
YOU LIVE IN CHRONOS!
Kaze is short for 'kamikaze'.
This
is Yuki, btw

Chapter End Notes

Want more? See the continuation of this story: Beyond the Shadow of No. 6 in my Works!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!